12 Inclusive narratives of suffering

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One important step towards rebuilding social relationships between former adversary groups in the aftermath of collective violence may entail overcoming the mindset that loss and suffering was confined to one's own exclusively defined community. A decade of research (for reviews see Noor et al. 2017; Vollhardt 2009, 2015) has shown how inclusive victim consciousness – the view that the losses and struggles endured by one's group are similar to those endured by other groups – is linked to support for reconciliation, reparation and prevention of further injustice. Such findings open new perspectives on transitional justice as an inclusive process during which people may discover commonalities in grievances, beyond the boundaries of communities they are conventionally associated with. For example, every year since 2005, many Israeli Jews and Palestinians hold an Alternative Memorial Day event to recognize and support families on both sides who have lost loved ones during the intractable conflict (Corry and Khatib 2019; Shnabel et al. 2017). However, there are also risks associated with overly inclusive narratives that fail to acknowledge power differences and resultant inequalities in experiences between groups – just as calls for reconciliation and harmony may serve to maintain, rather than to challenge, existing inequalities and power relations and therefore may be more problematic than they appear at the surface level (Dixon et al. 2012; Saguy et al. 2009; see also Chapter 11 in this volume). Accordingly, the meaning and consequences of (seemingly) inclusive victim consciousness can differ depending on the power relations of the groups involved. This chapter addresses both the promises and the pitfalls of inclusive narratives of suffering in transitional justice processes, and emphasizes that inclusive victim beliefs, just like any construal of conflict or of victimization, are used rhetorically to serve specific political or social purposes (McNeill and Vollhardt 2020).

What are inclusive narratives of suffering?

Inclusive narratives of suffering communicate inclusive victim consciousness, which is defined as the recognition of similarities between the suffering of the ingroup and other groups (Vollhardt 2012). This can involve groups in other

parts of the world that have suffered in different conflicts due to different oppressors, i.e. *global inclusive victim consciousness*, such as the perceived similarities between Palestinians and African Americans, or between Jews and Tutsi. It can also involve perceiving similarities between two groups that are in conflict with each other, i.e. *conflict-specific inclusive victim consciousness*, such as when Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland see their suffering as similar (Vollhardt 2015). Conflict-specific inclusive victim consciousness is psychologically more challenging (see also Warner et al. 2014). In some cases – especially those characterized by strong power differences, which we discuss in more detail later in the chapter – inclusive victim consciousness may entail mere acknowledgement that the other group has also suffered, rather than explicit statements on perceived similarities. Acknowledgement of the other side's suffering and their inclusion in who counts as a "victim" is rare and is often contested in conflict narratives (Hameiri and Nadler 2017; Noor et al. 2012). Therefore, acknowledging the other group's victimization without explicitly stating similarities is also an important form of inclusive victim consciousness. It may also often be factually more accurate than claiming similarities in experiences between groups with different histories of oppression or different degrees of power, thereby inviting less reactance and backlash.

What inclusive victim consciousness is not

Inclusive victim consciousness should not be confused with the assertion that experiences of suffering are the "same" (Nair and Vollhardt 2020). Although this is one way in which people may express a sense of shared grief and loss with other groups, claiming that two groups suffered in the same way or to the same degree often disregards power relations and different histories of oppression (Vollhardt and Twali 2016). Therefore, such statements are often strongly rejected by members of victimized groups who assert that no two experiences are ever the same (Vollhardt et al. 2021). In fact, a study of Jewish Americans reflecting on the Holocaust found that communicating both similarities and differences between the victimized ingroup and other victim groups worldwide resulted in more prosocial outcomes towards other victim groups compared to overly inclusive construals of the ingroup's suffering as a "crime against humanity" that did not acknowledge distinct groups and their respective fates (Vollhardt 2013).

Inclusive victim narratives are also not merely general perceptions of similarity regarding two groups' cultures or another superordinate identity (Garagozov 2016). For example, in a study of Jewish Israelis, perceived shared regional identity as "Middle Easterners" did not increase willingness for reconciliation with Palestinians, while a shared victim identity did (Shnabel et al. 2013). We discuss these effects of inclusive victim narratives on intergroup relations and policy support in more detail below. Here, we simply wish to emphasize that, although the effects of inclusive victim

consciousness can be understood theoretically as prosocial effects of shared, superordinate identities on intergroup outcomes (Dovidio et al. 2009), the inclusion of other groups in a shared category of “victims of violence and oppression” may be particularly powerful in the context of ongoing violent conflicts and in post-violence transitional justice settings, in comparison to other superordinate identities and social categories that practitioners may use in interventions aimed at fostering peace and social change. In other words, it is not just the boundaries of the group identity that matter but also the content of this shared identity (see also Reicher et al. 2006; Twali 2019).

Challenges in defining the reference points for inclusive victim narratives

It is crucial to critically examine the reference points and identities that create the basis for inclusive victim narratives. Most research examining this topic focus on singular identities such as ethnicity, nationality, religion or race, which are also often the fault lines of conflict and group-based violence (Nair and Vollhardt 2019; Twali 2019). However, social identities as well as social roles within identity groups are complex and fluid.

First, people have multiple intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, gender and social class, that together inform peoples’ experiences of victimization and oppression (Cole 2009; Rosenthal 2016). Some group members may be acutely aware of the impact of these intersecting identities and, based on this “intersectional consciousness” (Greenwood 2008), compare experiences of suffering *within* the broader social group instead of focusing on comparisons with *other* ethnic or religious groups’ suffering. For example, in a qualitative study among Muslims and Dalits in India, participants discussed the experiences of female versus male Muslims, or Dalits who lived in slums versus those who had obtained middle class status (Nair and Vollhardt 2019). This intersectional consciousness also shaped inclusive victim consciousness (and other comparative victim beliefs such as perceiving that others suffered more, or less than the ingroup) between group members with different intersecting identities (ibid).

Second, group members take on different roles during conflicts, and participate to varying degrees in violent resistance movements and perpetration of violence against the adversary. For example, in a qualitative study on perceptions of collective victimhood among Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Ferguson et al. 2010), some participants stressed that there were members of their group who had been involved in paramilitary groups and committed violence, in addition to generally belonging to a victimized group. This led some to perceive of “hierarchies of victims” *within* their group as opposed to just *between* groups, which is commonly referred to as competitive victimhood (Noor et al. 2012). Moreover, they insisted that only those who did not commit violence were “true” and “innocent” victims (Ferguson et al. 2010). Conversely, other participants in this study emphasized the commonality of suffering among all members of their group,

without making such distinctions. Thus, both intersecting identities and different roles in conflict can result in the same dynamics *within* groups that occur *between* groups, and people may recount inclusive victim narratives revolving around different reference points.

Third, some conflicts redefine the boundaries and identities of the groups involved, thereby creating a new basis for comparisons of suffering (Elcher-oth and Reicher 2017; Twali 2019). These transformations occur when alliances between some groups facilitate new superordinate identities, or when internal conflicts and competition for resources create factions among pre-existing groups. New social identities transformed through conflicts in this way may thereafter supplant the social identities that existed before the conflict. They may also be more salient and relevant when people construct inclusive narratives of the suffering they experienced during the conflict. For example, interviews with South Sudanese diaspora members about the civil wars in Sudan revealed that the transformation of various groups into larger superordinate identities cut across ethnicities and religion based on these groups' shared experiences of suffering (Twali 2019). Consequently, inclusive narratives of suffering accommodated the experiences of previous outgroups who were now part of a post-conflict superordinate ingroup (for example, Dinkas and Nuers within a transformed South Sudanese superordinate identity) that rarely included other outgroups who did not share their conflict experiences (e.g. Sudanese Arabs).

Fourth, conflicts often make the group identities involved in conflict particularly salient even when they were previously considered insignificant within a country's social, economic and political discourse. This creates challenges in the construction of inclusive victim narratives. Sri Lanka during colonial and post-colonial times provides a good example of this phenomenon. The "divide and rule" policies of the British colonizers (often characterized through territorial segregation and division of populations along linguistic, religious and ethnic fault lines; see Christopher 1988) entailed that minority Tamils were favoured over the Sinhalese majority. For instance, despite being a minority of only 11% of the population in 1946 (while Sinhalese made up 70% of the population), the Tamils were represented in the prestigious Ceylon civil service and university admissions at 33% and 31%, respectively (de Silva 1984; Schwarz 1983; DeVotta 2002). In the wake of Sri Lanka's independence, Sinhalese-dominated governments eliminated previous disparities but did so by engaging in clientelist policies and diversionary war politics that created new disparities. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956, for instance, which instituted Sinhalese (spoken by the majority) as the official language and discouraged Tamils from entering state employment except in the north and east where Tamil was accepted as the administrative language, or the 1971 policy on education standardization which replaced a merit-based system of university admission with one based on district quotas that curtailed the number of Tamil students receiving free university education provide examples of such practice. These policies transformed Sinhalese

and Tamil ethnic identities into frozen, exclusive ones with conflict-exacerbating boundaries that fed the three-decade-long civil war (see Abeyratne 2004; DeVotta 2002, 2005). Due to such identity transformations – and considering the different conflict experiences that each group was exposed to, their varied roles in the conflict and levels of power – perceiving similarities in suffering across ethnic group boundaries became psychologically challenging.

Inclusive narratives of suffering used in the transitional justice process should pay attention, therefore, to the scope of comparison – that is, whose suffering is included in these post-conflict narratives. For example, are inclusive narratives of suffering only those that feature former outgroups who are now part of the newly created ingroup based on their experiences of victimization during the conflict (Twali 2019)? What about the narratives that (only) mention those outgroups that suffered at the hands of the same perpetrator (e.g. Muslims in Sri Lanka who were victimized by both the state military and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and therefore could be part of both Sinhalese and Tamils' inclusive narratives of suffering, while other outgroups may be excluded (Haniffa 2007)? Or should inclusive narratives of suffering acknowledge the experiences of everyone involved in the conflict, including members of the perpetrator group? Depending on the scope of these narratives, we can expect different outcomes in the transitional justice process (see also Cohrs et al. 2015). Moreover, the inclusion of some groups' experiences may have seemingly paradoxical effects on intergroup outcomes, as discussed below where we explore the functions and consequences of inclusive victim narratives which hold both promises and pitfalls.

The promise of inclusive victimhood: effects of inclusive victimhood on harmonious intergroup relations in the aftermath of conflict

Several studies have demonstrated the prosocial effects of inclusive victim narratives on intergroup relations, both in ongoing conflicts and their aftermaths (Vollhardt 2015). For example, among Jewish Israelis, perceptions of shared experiences of loss and suffering with Palestinians due to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict predicted involvement in peace activism – above and beyond the effects of political ideology, demographic variables and personal experiences of victimization (Shnabel et al. 2013). Among Burundians, Rwandans and people living in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (members of all ethnic groups in the respective regions), inclusive victim consciousness – specifically, agreement with the statement “[t]he victimization other groups in Rwanda [Burundi/DRC] have experienced is similar to what my group has experienced” – predicted various prosocial intergroup attitudes (Vollhardt and Bilali 2015). This included the self-reported willingness to speak up for outgroup members in need, and support for inclusive political leaders who consider all ethnic groups important, not just the participant's ingroup (Vollhardt and Bilali 2015). Overall, these studies in

different contexts suggest that people who see that other groups involved in a conflict have also suffered are more likely to support views and actions that contribute to harmonious relations between different groups. Moreover, inclusive victim consciousness entails recognition of others' suffering, which is central to victim-centred measures of transitional justice in the aftermath of conflict (Auerbach 2009).

However, some studies also suggest limits to these effects of inclusive victim consciousness. One such study was conducted among Protestants and Catholics in post-accord Northern Ireland. For some participants, inclusive victim consciousness was associated with low levels of competitive victimhood. This is theoretically expected and in line with findings reported above. However, for other participants inclusive victim consciousness was, counter-intuitively, associated with *high* levels of competitive victimhood (Cohrs et al. 2015). Moreover, the positive relationship between inclusive victim consciousness and support for reconciliation with the other group in the conflict was only present among participants who perceived low levels of competitive victimhood. Among participants who expressed both high levels of inclusive victim consciousness and high levels of competitive victimhood there was less support for reconciliation.

How can we explain these seemingly contradictory findings? Notably, in this particular study (Cohrs et al. 2015), the researchers assessed global inclusive victim consciousness rather than conflict-specific inclusive victim consciousness, asking participants whether they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "[m]any other groups in the world have suffered in similar ways to my group". This means that participants came up with their own choice of groups which they thought were similar to the ingroup in terms of experiences of oppression and victimization. Different participants may hence think of different groups when the items do not specify the context such as in conflict-specific victim consciousness. In a follow-up study (Cohrs et al. 2015, Study 2), content analysis of open-ended answers to the question of which groups participants were thinking of when they completed these items revealed two different levels of inclusivity. Some answers indicated a broad, *universal* sense of inclusivity where victims of different types of violence, with different positions of power in the conflict, and/or living in different parts of the world were described as having suffered in similar ways as the ingroup. For example, a Protestant participant in Northern Ireland noted: "Any group that has suffered as a result of violent conflict ... The trauma of violent conflict is the same for everyone" (Cohrs et al. 2015, Table 4). A Catholic participant similarly stated: "Both sides of any conflict or wars that are going on. I believe each side has its own stories to be told" (Cohrs et al. 2015). Conversely, other participants expressed a more *selective* sense of inclusive victim consciousness that was limited to other victim groups who had the same role or position of power in their respective conflict, and/or groups that had suffered from the same type of violence and oppression. This resulted in distinct answers for Catholic versus Protestant or

Loyalist versus Nationalist participants, due to their group's role in, and dominant framing of, the conflict. For example, a Protestant participant – i.e. a member of the majority and high-power group in the conflict in Northern Ireland – wrote that they thought the following groups had suffered in similar ways as Protestants in Northern Ireland: “South African, Spanish, Iraqi communities ... They have been terrorized by anti-government political groups” (Cohrs et al. 2015, Table 4). In contrast, a self-identified Nationalist participant – i.e. a member of the minority with lower power in the conflict – wrote that “Aborigines, Indian people, Black South Africans, American Indians, Palestinians [were similar to their own group] ... They have had their native countries taken and been murdered and persecuted” (Cohrs et al. 2015). These examples show the potential boundaries of inclusive victim consciousness which does not always include the other conflict party or all types of victim groups. Additionally, in some cases inclusive victim narratives may not even focus on the outgroup's interests and well-being, but instead may be used merely rhetorically to strengthen the ingroup's conflict position and strategic alliances (McNeill et al. 2017).

The pitfalls of inclusive victimhood: power differences, silencing and demobilization

Although the effects of inclusive narratives of suffering on establishing harmonious intergroup relations are fairly well documented, these processes may fail or even have conflict-enhancing consequences in post-conflict societies. What are often deemed to be “harmonious” intergroup relations may sometimes serve to maintain power differences and impunity, as well as mask inequality (Dixon et al. 2012; Saguy et al. 2009; see also Chapter 11 in this volume).

First, inclusive narratives of suffering can take on different forms as discussed earlier (i.e. selective or universal inclusive narratives; Cohrs et al. 2015) and can incorporate the experiences of different groups (e.g. adversary versus unrelated victim groups; Warner et al. 2014). Some forms of inclusive victim consciousness involve ignoring or silencing certain groups' experiences while privileging others. For example, overly inclusive victim narratives that are abstract and do not specify any group (e.g. “All Lives Matter”; “Crimes against Humanity”) deny or diminish the unique experiences of victim groups (Vollhardt 2013; Leach and Allen 2017; Solomon and Martin 2019). Additionally, they can reduce empathy and raise undue expectations of forgiveness among the perpetrator group (Greenaway et al. 2012), while demobilizing collective action among the victim group demanding justice (Greenaway et al. 2011).

Furthermore, the outcome of inclusive victim narratives depends on the power of the group shaping the narrative. For high-power groups, narratives of suffering that incorporate both the ingroup and outgroup's suffering can be used strategically to justify ingroup violence and gain further legitimacy

(McNeill and Vollhardt 2020). Inclusive narratives of suffering by high-power group members can also be viewed as a form of denial especially when the experiences of the (high-power) ingroup and low-power outgroup are equated (Twali et al. 2020). For example, in a speech to commemorate the 99th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that it was important to remember and understand this violence in the context of the “suffering for Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, Armenian and millions of other Ottoman citizens” during and after the First World War (*Armenian Weekly* 2014). Although on the surface this narrative appears to be inclusive, by strategically using it on the anniversary of a genocide that is actively denied by the Turkish state, Erdoğan was, in effect, denying the unique experience of the Armenian genocide and the role of the state in perpetrating the violence. Suffering is portrayed as a universal human experience during war, and more specifically as a shared experience of the region, without differentiating targeted violence intended to destroy a specific group and violence carried out in the context of military confrontations, which affected many groups in the region. Moreover, Turkey under Erdoğan continues to support policies that harm Armenian Turks and other minorities in Turkey (Bilali et al. 2019), showing that seemingly inclusive construals do not always go along with prosocial actions.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, leaders from the Sinhalese majority group have historically utilized an inclusive narrative of suffering that focuses on terrorism (perpetrated by the LTTE) to delegitimize the political efforts of the less powerful Tamil minority, while legitimizing violence committed by the Sinhalese government and evading domestic and international criticism for human rights abuses committed in the process (Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah 2005). Specifically, since the end of the civil war in 2009, after the state’s military secured a unilateral victory by annihilating the LTTE, an official ethos of triumph and an inclusive narrative of victimization has been maintained by the Sri Lankan state. This narrative focuses on defeating a terrorist organization that plagued the country for 26 years, causing mass destruction to both Sinhalese and Tamils alike (Jayakody and Penić 2021; Nadarajah 2018; Cronin-Furman 2020). However, this seemingly inclusive narrative is silent on claims that violence was carried out by state forces specifically against the Tamil minority or it can be used to legitimize such violence, thereby circumventing questions of accountability (Bala 2015; Cronin-Furman 2020).

As these examples show, inclusive victim consciousness does not always go along with prosocial attitudes or behaviours towards the other party/parties in the conflict. For example, among Jewish Israelis and Americans in the United States, inclusive narratives of suffering only increased support for policies benefiting Palestinians and Pakistanis, respectively, when participants were not concerned about losing support from other nations if they acknowledged the adversary’s suffering (Adelman et al. 2016). Similarly, in a nationally representative survey study conducted in post-war Sri Lanka, different motives underlying inclusive victim consciousness predicted varied

intergroup outcomes among the former parties to the war, particularly in relation to accountability (Jayakody and Penić 2021). Specifically, among the high-power Sinhalese ethnic group, inclusive victim consciousness predicted greater support for impartial prosecutions (conducted both domestically and with international involvement) of human rights violations of both parties only when they acknowledged crimes that their ingroup committed against the Tamil minority. In the absence of acknowledging such ingroup crimes, inclusive victim consciousness predicted less support for prosecutions, which appears to highlight the potentially strategic and defensive nature of inclusive victimhood claims made by the high-power majority (Jayakody and Penić 2021). These findings need to be understood in the context of what the justice process means for both parties. For the Tamil minority, the historical oppression suffered, and the way in which the war ended with high civilian casualties attributed to the actions of the state military, are important (OHCHR 2021). Accordingly, for Tamils, accountability measures are crucial and international involvement is necessary to ensure their fair implementation. Conversely, for many Sinhalese, the ending of the civil war and the violent separatist claims of the LTTE are important and accountability measures are seen as undermining the heroic actions of their state and military (see Lecamwasam 2016).

Among low-power groups, inclusive narratives that incorporate both the ingroup and high-power groups' suffering may inadvertently demobilize resistance efforts. For example, Kurds from Turkey who hold inclusive victimhood narratives were less likely to support policies that challenged Turkey's dominance (e.g. "bring lawsuits against Turkey in the European Court of Human Rights", "Kurds should support resistance organizations"; Adelman et al. 2016). Similarly, Sri Lankan Tamils who hold inclusive narratives of the suffering of all civilians irrespective of ethnicity or religion, are less likely to support impartial prosecutions of human rights violations (Jayakody and Penić 2021). These effects can, again, be explained by the lack of attention to power differences that overly inclusive victim narratives in asymmetric conflicts entail.

Conclusion

In conclusion, inclusive narratives of suffering are commonly found in post-conflict societies and need to be considered in the transitional justice process. Several studies reviewed in this chapter indicate the potential of inclusive victim consciousness to foster reconciliation and justice and other outcomes commonly deemed to be positive in post-conflict settings. In line with important critiques of these approaches (see, for example, Chapter 11 in this volume; Penić et al. 2020), however, and of the focus on "harmony" as a goal of intergroup relations (e.g. Dixon et al. 2012; Saguy et al. 2009), we caution against uncritically utilizing (overly) inclusive narratives in post-conflict societies due to the risk of masking power differences between groups, legitimizing violence and silencing the narratives of individuals whose experiences

are not included in their ingroup's official narrative. Instead of assuming that inclusive victim narratives are inherently positive and constructive, their specific function in each given context needs to be considered, given the power relations and status differences between the different actors involved. Transitional justice researchers and practitioners therefore have to engage in a nuanced, contextualized analysis of each conflict when constructing or drawing on inclusive narratives of suffering.

First, the scope of inclusive victimhood narratives that are to be utilized within transitional justice processes requires careful consideration. Social identities are complex and fluid, and it is easy to overlook nuances such as intersecting identities, intragroup disagreements concerning the boundaries of identities or the role of civilians' suffering versus that of combatants. Excluding certain experiences from seemingly inclusive narratives can endanger the success of the transitional justice processes that are to be implemented.

A second factor that can affect the success of a transitional justice process involves the specific framing of any given inclusive victimhood narrative. As stated before, when the framing is too abstract, it can diminish the uniqueness of a group's experience and ignore oppressive hierarchies, thereby contributing to the status quo and failing to address the roots of conflict. Inclusive victim narratives can also be more selective and, for example, focus on other groups who hold an analogous role to the ingroup, but within a different conflict setting. These narratives can take into account the interests and well-being of other groups to varying degrees and/or be used strategically to defend the ingroup's initial position. Hence, one might infer that inclusive narratives of suffering will only be successful in the transitional justice process if they are nuanced and effectively framed. As high-power groups often have the upper hand in framing narratives, the role of alternative media, education and other independent civil society organizations is important in creating, disseminating and contributing to the perception that nuanced inclusive victim narratives are morally right and widely accepted in a given society (Bilali 2014).

Finally, there are clear ethical boundaries and limits to inclusive narratives, such as when perpetrator groups in asymmetric conflicts and genocides attempt to construct inclusive narratives to relativize atrocities, justify impunity or maintain oppressive social relations. In such cases, resistance *against* inclusive narratives of victimization is informative about the political controversies in a conflicted setting (see Chapter 11 in this volume). Additionally, in such contexts resistance against inclusive victim narratives can be morally just as important as it might be to promote them in some other contexts.

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