

The Colombian Truth Commission Final Report (2022): Challenges and Opportunities for Social Sciences

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According to Priscilla Hayner, a human rights activist and founding member of the International Center for Transitional Justice, truth commissions are institutions created to look into a country's history of human rights violations, which may have involved military, other government, or armed opposition forces (Hayner, 1994). Truth commissions have four main characteristics: 1) they emphasize past rather than present events; 2) they seek to present a comprehensive picture of various violations of international humanitarian or human rights law over time, rather than focusing on a single incident; 3) they only operate for a short period of time, ending with the delivery of a report summarizing their findings; 4) they always exercise some kind of authority, granted by their sponsors, usually state actors, which gives them access to more information, greater security or protection when investigating sensitive issues, and allows them to have more influence from their report (Hayner, 1994, p. 604).

Truth commissions are, therefore, one of the possible answers to how states deal with violence incurred by one or more parties as more nations transition to peace, leaving war and conflict. Arguably, the best-known case is that of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Skaar, 2018). Nonetheless, Latin America is widely known as a geographic area where the truth commission concept was crucially refined. Since the 1980s, 13 different countries in our region have established 11 official and 5 alternative/

nonofficial commissions, including the cases of Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia (Skaar et al., 2022). In the Colombian case, the 2022 final report condenses, at least, 785 reports, 121 cases, 25,419 transcribed testimonies and external sources approaching one million judicial resources and 372 databases from other public and private organizations (Velázquez-Yepes et al., 2022).

Reports issued by truth commissions are addressed by the academic literature in a variety of ways. The social sciences, for example, have studied the historical, specific and contextual nature of truth commissions as victim-centered institutions (Jelin, 2016) and the contrasts between truth commissions conducted in different places and times (Gutiérrez et al., 2013). Social science research has also examined the power relations that influence final reports, which involve state representatives (Rauch, 2005). Likewise, other studies address the challenges of truth commissions in revealing the responsibility of private companies in armed conflicts (Sánchez et al., 2018), and how a discursive approach can vindicate survivors, who are sometimes stripped of their agency by the same testimony-gathering techniques employed by truth commission investigators (Espinosa et al., 2017; French, 2009). Truth commission reports, thereby, articulate a complex set of relationships clashing and coexisting in the discourses contained in the reports, as well as in the fieldwork that nurtures such work. From this perspective, truth commission reports are

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Political Technologies of Memory (Bernasconi et al., 2018) which, like other objects such as official records of victims (Mora-Gómez, 2016; Taberero, 2020), inform, record, and denounce human rights violations and open spaces of questioning official versions of violence.

Given that truth commissions attempt to develop a long-term picture of specific human rights violations or transgressions of international humanitarian law, the final reports are expected to be followed by public debates and political tensions between various groups. Such is the current situation in Colombia, where opposing and supportive views of the Truth Commission report have been widely disseminated in various media outlets. Despite the ongoing debates, some aspects of the report stand out in comparison with previous official narratives of the armed conflict. These include, first, the explicit acknowledgment of the active participation of the Colombian state and the sponsorship of former state representatives of paramilitary groups (e.g., members of the military leadership). Second, there is a more precise and extensively documented description of the specific forms of vulnerability associated with different class, gender, and ethnicity categories. And third, a significant effort to make the report widely available is evident, using various dissemination strategies as well as digital platforms and social networks.

As a *Political Technology of Memory*, the final Truth Commission Report recently released in Colombia presents opportunities and challenges for the social sciences in a variety of fields. Although enumerating these obstacles and opportunities is undoubtedly a difficult and important reflective process that must take place in collective discussions among social scientists, I will now briefly describe some of these potential obstacles and opportunities in domains such as teaching, conducting research, and participating in public debates.

The narratives presented in the recent report call for a change in the way our recent history is taught in schools and universities. It is essential to generate spaces in our universities for students and teachers to actively discuss the implications of the Report, the revelations about the actors mentioned as active participants, the consequences of the war for people, particularly in rural areas, and the situationalities of these effects, which are not limited exclusively to specific identity categories such as gender,

power, and ethnicity. In psychology, this has implications for how teachers encourage and facilitate discussions about how subjectivity is undeniably embedded in socio-political relations. The reconstructions depicted by the Truth Commission Report also have important implications for the training of psychologists working in various professional fields. For example, the conclusions of the Report call attention to the need for mental health policies grounded in the conditions of populations affected by the violence of the armed conflict. The report also questions possible labor insertion strategies and social integration policies for ex-militants of guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Similarly, the Report offers inputs to confront discriminatory imaginaries about victims and former militants coming from rural areas and red zones communities.

With regard to social sciences research, the Truth Commission Report challenges traditional understandings of the state as a monolithic entity, an argument already put forward by anthropologists and sociologists of the state (Aparicio, 2012; Passoth & Roland, 2010; Sharma & Gupta, 2009; Thelen et al., 2014). At the same time, the content of the report fleshes out the multiplicity of roles that state representatives can adopt when engaging with communities (Franco Gamboa & Franco Cian, 2020; Mora Gómez & Brown, 2019), and how new forms of statehood can be produced in concrete participatory strategies. The Truth Commission Report is also an invitation for psychology scholars and practitioners to explore and acknowledge the existing psychosocial strategies long used by communities to cope with the everydayness and aftermath of war violence. This is an important starting point for rethinking the very notions of *research*, *design*, and *intervention* from bottom-up, reflective, participatory, and contextualized points of view.

The publication of the Report challenges us to consider the value of the social sciences at a time when STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields are widely recognized as socially relevant sources of knowledge. Some ways to advocate for the value of our disciplines include analyzing with our students and research collaborators the truths presented in the report; transforming the implications of the Truth Commission recommendations into specific social change strategies; promoting a realistic understanding of the report as a technology of memory with possibilities and limitations; and reflecting on the truth offered

by the report as a sociopolitical mechanism for reparation. As social scientists our participation in public debates will eventually make the contributions of our disciplines more visible and, more importantly, it will allow us to connect our expertise more realistically to the current concerns of the society in which we live in, as we join in the task of imagining and remaking Colombia otherwise.

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