Kate Lonergan

Roads to Repair

Extraordinary and Everyday Pathways to Reconciliation after Civil War
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Abstract

How do societies emerging from civil war envision micro-level reconciliation across enduring relational divisions and conflict-related harms? This is a pressing question after civil war, which reshapes social processes and further entrenches societal divisions. Previous research seeks to address this question by documenting grassroots perspectives on reconciliation and highlighting the ways in which macro- and micro-level visions differ. This dissertation contributes to the literature by advancing an understanding of reconciliation as occurring both through extraordinary moments of repair between former adversaries and through everyday practices of relational repair embedded within daily life. The five essays which comprise this dissertation each investigate a different aspect of extraordinary and everyday reconciliation across multiple levels of analysis and in different empirical contexts. Essay I evaluates the impact of a time-limited contact-based reconciliation intervention in Sri Lanka, finding that participants’ already reconciled attitudes remain stable even as they become more aware of potential ingroup tensions arising from intergroup reconciliation. Essay II draws on in-depth interviews with participants in a truth and reconciliation commission in Sierra Leone to identify the specific process through which patrimonial modes of mobilization set unrealistic expectations of what the commission would provide. Essay III introduces an analytical framework to identify between whom and in what direction everyday reconciliation can occur. Essay IV applies the analytical framework to a novel dataset of everyday indicators of reconciliation collected in war-affected communities in Sri Lanka and finds that localities diverge in how they envision reconciliation within daily life. Essay V draws on in-depth interviews with Tamil citizens to understand how they envision everyday reconciliation with the state and the extent to which differing experiences of wartime order shape expectations of reconciliation. The dissertation reaches three broader conclusions of relevance to scholarship on postwar reconciliation. First, it demonstrates that greater conceptual attention to everyday reconciliation reveals a more dynamic understanding of the ways in which relational divisions can be bridged, including ways in which elite and grassroots actors and extraordinary and everyday processes interact. Second, the dissertation demonstrates that perspectives on reconciliation vary across grassroots actors within a country, highlighting the need for more comparative micro-level analysis. Finally, by attending to multi-level engagement in different empirical contexts the dissertation emphasizes the need to consider macro-level context in our understanding of micro-level reconciliation. Taken together, the essays in this dissertation shed light on the complex challenges of reconciliation and social repair after civil war.

Keywords: civil war, reconciliation, everyday reconciliation, everyday practices, social repair, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, intergroup contact, field experiment, truth commission, everyday indicators, transitional justice, rebel governance, wartime order

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To my family
List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.


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Introduction

Addressing the social and relational devastation of civil war is one of the most complex challenges to building sustained, quality peace. Civil war profoundly reshapes social processes in numerous ways that carry over into the post-war period (Wood 2008). Divisions along identity-based lines do not only arise after war breaks out, they often fuel underlying grievances that escalate into armed conflict and become more virulently polarized and salient over the course of war. Once fighting ends, the legacies of civil war continue to shape postwar society. Memories of loss and suffering do not disappear, nor are the relationships with those responsible for past harm easily healed. This plays out on the national stage as a country seeks to reconcile and rebuild, but also at the micro-level, amongst ordinary people as they go about their everyday lives. In this way, civil war both further entrenches deep societal divisions and damages micro-level relationships, compounding the challenge of social repair after conflict. This predicament leads to the overarching question that guides this dissertation: How do societies emerging from civil war envision micro-level reconciliation across enduring relational divisions and conflict-related harms?

Reconciliation, as understood in this dissertation, is concerned with the challenge of social repair after civil war and mass violence. I define reconciliation as the development of positive, mutually respectful relationships to repair harm across divisions developed during civil war or mass violence (Brounéus 2003; Mitchell 2023; Rettberg and Ugarriza 2016; Ugarriza and Nussio 2017; Verdeja 2009). Reconciliation is often conceived of as happening through an “extraordinary” intervention or event set apart from ordinary routines and daily life. Examples of extraordinary reconciliation can include a public truth commission hearing in which visiting dignitaries and assembled crowds listen to testimonies of wartime violence, or an inter-ethnic exchange program, which intends to catalyze better relations across identity divisions into the future. Literature studying extraordinary reconciliation interventions reaches contradictory conclusions. Some studies argue that interventions such as truth commissions (Gibson 2004) or intergroup contact (Hewstone et al. 2008) can facilitate reconciliation, while others critique extraordinary interventions for taking a “top-down” approach to reconciliation that does not reflect community needs (Baines 2010; Millar 2011b; Shaw 2007).
I contend that focusing on extraordinary events alone provides an incomplete picture of reconciliation after civil war and mass violence. In this dissertation, therefore, I expand the analytical horizon by focusing not only on extraordinary reconciliation but also on everyday reconciliation as aspects of ordinary, daily life that bridge conflict-era divisions, repair past harm, or signal mutual respect. In so doing, the essays within this dissertation contribute to developing everyday reconciliation as a concept in its own right, rather than as a counterpoint raised where extraordinary reconciliation mechanisms fall short. My thinking is inspired by scholars within the broader peacebuilding field who increasingly turn to the study of everyday interactions as a potential contrast to the prevalent focus on extraordinary events and interventions to bring about peace (Brewer et al. 2018; Firchow 2018; Mac Ginty 2021; Millar 2020; Richmond 2009a; Richmond and Mitchell 2011). Substantial empirical work explores everyday peace practices at the grassroots level, some of which highlight relevant issues overlapping with reconciliation and reparation (Dixon and Firchow 2022; Firchow 2017). Despite the overlap between peace and social repair, less attention has been devoted to developing the concept of everyday reconciliation—a gap I seek to bridge with this dissertation. Specifically, I build on initial considerations of everyday reconciliation (Eastmond 2010; Kingsolver 2013; Lee 2022; Obradovic and Howarth 2016; Sokolić 2020), to focus on the ways in which reconciliation outcomes manifest in everyday life, and how grassroots actors prioritize these outcomes in varying ways.

In this dissertation, I also open a novel line of inquiry by examining how everyday reconciliation practices and related preferences unfold across different actor levels. Conceptual scholarship on reconciliation often acknowledges that it is a multi-level and multi-valent process (Chapman 2009; Hamber and Kelly 2009; Lederach 1997; Rettberg and Ugarriza 2016; Verdeja 2009). However, empirical studies tend to explore grassroots and elite perspectives on reconciliation separately, although some seek to integrate these different perspectives into a multi-level framework (Hughes 2018; Kostić 2007; Madisson 2017; Strupinskiène 2017). Critiques of everyday peace have also noted that empirical work tends to focus solely on interactions between grassroots actors (Randazzo 2016). Therefore, the time is ripe to now merge these separate levels of analysis, by looking at micro-level interactions vertically across levels, such as between grassroots citizens and the state.

This dissertation comprises five independent essays, each exploring a different facet of reconciliation after civil war and mass violence. Taken together, the findings of the essays expand our understanding of fine-grained, micro-level reconciliation between actors situated at previously separated analytical levels. The essays also highlight areas of everyday life where unexpected or previously overlooked opportunities and challenges arise to build relationships across conflictual divisions. Essays I and II explore the micro-level impact of interventions designed to create an extraordinary moment to catalyze
reconciliation between former adversaries. Essay I tests a common intervention to foster reconciliation through intergroup contact in a new empirical context in Sri Lanka. Essay II demonstrates that patrimonial mobilization processes for public truth-telling hearings in Sierra Leone established expectations amongst participants which could not be fulfilled by a time-limited, national-level truth commission. Essay III, IV, and V then turn attention towards the ways that micro-level reconciliation manifests in everyday life. Essay III introduces an analytical framework to identify between whom and in what direction everyday reconciliation can occur. Essay IV applies this typology to grassroots everyday indicators of reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Essay V delves further into how and why two regions populated by Tamil citizens in Sri Lanka, who experienced different forms of wartime order, envision reconciliation with the state.

In this introductory chapter I situate the dissertation in relation to existing research and identify the questions and discussions to which the findings contribute. I then discuss the empirical material I draw on to answer the research questions posed in the dissertation, including key ethical considerations that arise when studying the long-term impacts of violence and social relations after war. Thereafter, I present each of the essays separately, before ending by discussing general conclusions of this dissertation and avenues for future research.
Reconciliation is a central concept which stretches across all essays in this dissertation. Scholarly literature emphasizes that reconciliation is conceptually complex, variable, and difficult to universally define (Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza 2008; Bennink and Bar-Tal 2004; Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse 2003; Hamber and Kelly 2009; Rettberg and Ugarriza 2016). It is often framed as a spectrum, ranging from minimal peaceful coexistence between former enemies to maximal goals of mutual acknowledgement, apology, and forgiveness (Rettberg and Ugarriza 2016; Verdeja 2009). Despite this contestation, I draw on existing conceptual discussions of reconciliation (Brounéus 2003; Hamber and Kelly 2009; Mitchell 2023; Rettberg and Ugarriza 2016; Verdeja 2009) to offer an overarching definition which guides the research and contributions of this dissertation.

I define reconciliation as the development of positive, mutually respectful relationships to repair harm across divisions developed during civil war or mass violence. Below I elaborate on three central elements of this definition—mutual respect, repairing past harm, and transforming identity divisions—and connect them to different strands of literature that make up the multidisciplinary landscape of reconciliation scholarship.

The first definitional component of reconciliation is the development of positive, mutually respectful relations between former adversaries. While positive relations is a broad term, I follow Verdeja (2009) in focusing on the development of mutual respect across relational divisions as the most important component of positive relations after civil war and mass violence. Mutual respect includes peaceful coexistence as opposed to violent encounters but does not go so far as to demand harmony or complete dissolution of societal divisions. Mutual respect also involves accepting the former adversary as a legitimate member of a shared universe of responsibilities and rights. This is particularly important where former adversaries must move forward within shared political, economic, and national systems after civil war.

The second component of reconciliation is repairing conflict-related harms. This definitional feature centers active and mutual acknowledgement of past harm and commitment to non-repetition (Brounéus 2003; Hamber and Kelly 2009). Importantly, this component emphasizes that reconciliation should not amount to glossing over past harm in the name of harmony and unity. This is a critical distinction in light of arguments that reconciliation can be used as an
“empty universal” (Renner 2014) to silence debate and reinforce an unequal status quo (Evans 2018; Kochanski 2021; Schaap 2005). Repairing past harm, and specifically the focus on the past, differentiates reconciliation from other aspects of sustainable peace which also focus on relationships (Jarstad, Söderström, and Åkebo 2023; Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad 2021) and respectful contestation (Murphy and Walsh 2022; Strömbom 2020; Strömbom and Bramsen 2022). Numerous mechanisms have been suggested to repair harm and address the past, which I discuss in more detail in the next section in relation to transitional justice.

The third component of my definition is the transformation of relationships across conflict-era social identity divisions. This notion builds on the foundations of social identity theory, whereby group identities become meaningful through a process of social construction, categorization and comparison (Tajfel 1974). Categorizing and comparing group identities creates an “in-group” of similar members who share some positive identity characteristics in comparison to an “out-group”. Membership in a social identity group contributes positively to one’s self-image and self-esteem, and becomes an integral part of one’s self-identity (Brewer and Kramer 1985; Hewstone and Cairns 2001; Horowitz 2000). Over the course of protracted civil war, group identity divisions take on deep emotional resonance and become polarized to the extent that the concern for the group’s well-being temporarily takes over the concern for individual well-being, in part, as a psychological coping mechanism (Coleman 2003; Staub 1989). Groups develop shared negative societal beliefs about the out-group, which become entrenched to a degree that both perpetuates conflict and inhibits its resolution (Bar-Tal 2000, 2007; Kelman 2004).

Reconciliation thus involves transforming negatively polarized identities and building positive relations across identity-based divisions. Bar-Tal (2000) describes this as a transformation from a conflict ethos to peace ethos. Transforming divided identities bridges the stark division between “us” and “them” to create a more inclusive social identity. A large body of scholarship grounded in social psychology explores different pathways to transform social identities and bridge divisions between identity groups (Nadler, Malloy, and Fisher 2008). Three pathways are theorized to contribute to reconciliatory identity transformation: instrumental reconciliation, which facilitates direct contact and cooperation between divided identity groups; socio-emotional reconciliation, which addresses emotional and psychological barriers arising from past harm; and distributive reconciliation, which addresses inequalities and asymmetric power relations between divided identity groups (Aiken 2013; Nadler, Malloy, and Fisher 2008; Nadler and Shnabel 2015).

It is frequently noted that reconciliation is both a process and an outcome (Bennink and Bar-Tal 2004; Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huysse 2003). In other words, reconciliation can refer both to an ongoing process of building more positive and respectful relations across conflictual divisions, as well as the
outcomes that signal that positive relations are successfully built. Empirically, the essays in this dissertation primarily measure and evaluate reconciliation as an outcome, but also contribute to our understanding of underlying processes that explain why certain reconciliation outcomes emerge.

Each of the different essays focuses on reconciliation as an outcome in distinct yet important ways. Essay I assesses the extent to which intergroup contact can bring about attitudinal reconciliation outcomes. Essay II focuses on truth commission participation as a presumed process to facilitate reconciliation as an outcome and investigates why participants’ expected reconciliation outcomes were unmet. Essay III conceptualizes a specific type of reconciliation outcome occurring within ordinary day-to-day interactions and identifies different dimensions along which this outcome varies. Essay IV analyzes everyday indicators of reconciliation outcomes along vertical and horizontal dimensions. Essay V further investigates how and why particular subsets of Tamil citizens in Sri Lanka envision everyday reconciliation outcomes with the victorious state. Taken together, these essays contribute to our understanding of how to define reconciliation outcomes within the broad conceptual boundaries delineated above.
Situating the dissertation

Scholars theorize numerous different pathways to facilitate reconciliation after civil war. In the following section I situate the contributions of this dissertation within existing scholarly work and relevant debates, focusing on three key perspectives. From one perspective, societal reconciliation can be achieved through building legitimate, inclusive, and trustworthy institutions after war. From a second perspective, societal reconciliation can be achieved through transitional justice measures. Both perspectives include strands of scholarship focused on macro-level processes and elite actors, as well as micro-level processes and grassroots actors. A third perspective considers how reconciliation efforts are viewed from the grassroots level. However, I argue that existing work from these three perspectives has not sufficiently considered points of intersection across different levels, nor has it sufficiently considered how reconciliation emerges from everyday practices embedded within daily life after civil war. The five papers included in this dissertation advance knowledge on reconciliation by articulating specific intersection points in a multi-level view of reconciliation, and investigating how these intersections manifest in everyday life.

Reconciliation through legitimate, trustworthy, and inclusive institutions

One perspective on reconciliation focuses on repairing relationships between citizens and the state. Multi-level conceptions of reconciliation often consider state institutions (Chapman 2009; Gibson 2004), rule of law (Verdeja 2009, 2009), and democratic reforms (Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse 2003) as an important dimension of societal repair after war and violence. In a more abstract sense, this approach considers the need for the state to re-establish legitimacy after civil war. Civil war disrupts a state’s presumed duty to provide security and stability to citizens. More specifically, citizen-state relations are of central importance when the state has perpetrated violence against its citizens throughout the civil war, or when unequal distribution of power and resources by the state fuels core conflict grievances. Scholarship centering reconciliation with the state overlaps with broader strands of scholarship that consider how to rebuild relations between citizens and the state after civil war.
One branch of scholarship explores state legitimacy as an important component to repair citizen-state relations after civil war (Holsti 1996; Themnér and Ohlson 2014). This approach considers not only whether institutions are strong and technically sound, but that they are trustworthy, inclusive, and equitable in the eyes of citizens. Trust in state institutions is an important component of legitimacy. A large body of evidence shows that civil war, and violence exposure in particular, damages institutional trust and trust in the state (Cassar, Grosjean, and Whitt 2013; De Juan and Pierskalla 2016; Deglow 2016; Deglow and Sundberg 2021; Grosjean 2014), even as some evidence shows that political engagement and activity can increase (Blattman 2009; Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii 2014).

The state’s ability to provide goods and services is another central component of trust and legitimacy (Brinkerhoff 2005; François and Sud 2006; Milliken and Krause 2002). However, trust and legitimacy in postwar contexts is not only a matter of providing services, but the quality of the process and whether the local population attributes services to the state (Krampe 2016; Mcloughlin 2015; Wong 2016). Building trust through service provision after civil war goes beyond material or instrumental needs, it is also a matter of how the process plays out at the grassroots level.

Other literature explores resilient social contracts after war at both elite and everyday levels (Belloni and Ramović 2020; McCandless 2020). Another strand of literature delves further into how state legitimacy and national belonging are grounded in grassroots realities and particular contexts (Kappler 2013; Kostić 2007; Lemay-Hébert 2009). Locally-grounded analyses argue that state legitimacy rests on a more fundamental process of nation-building, to build an inclusive and cohesive identity that transcends wartime divisions (Lemay-Hébert 2009). Kostić (2007), for example, considers how different ethnonational communities in Bosnia evaluate symbols of the overarching national identity imposed by external peacebuilders after the war, finding that acceptance of these symbols diverges substantially between different groups due to perceived exclusion from the process. While grassroots perspectives on state legitimacy and nationbuilding direct greater attention to how macro-level processes are perceived at the micro-level, less attention has been devoted to understanding the citizen-state relationship from a perspective of reconciliation through relational and identity transformation. This dissertation seeks to bridge these related perspectives in the context of postwar reconciliation.

Reconciliation through transitional justice

A second perspective considers transitional justice measures as a mechanism to achieve reconciliation (Aiken 2013; Seils 2017; Skaar 2012). Transitional justice contributes to reconciliation by addressing and repairing the enduring legacies of past harms which inhibit the development of positive relationships
across conflictual divisions. A United Nations definition (2004) illustrates a widely-held outlook that reconciliation is a central goal of transitional justice:

The notion of transitional justice … comprises the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation.

The processes and mechanisms of transitional justice commonly include vetting, judicial proceedings, truth commissions and reparations (Bakiner 2016; Gibson 2004; Minow 1998; Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006). These are typically carried out on a national level and through formal institutions, although it is also possible to pursue transitional justice without state involvement (Quinn 2021). More recent developments propose a shift to transformative justice, broadening the scope of transitional justice to address unequal power relationships and address structural and everyday violence (Gready and Robins 2014, 2019; Lambourne 2009). Trials and truth commissions are two transitional justice mechanisms with the most direct theoretical links to reconciliation.

Transitional justice measures are expected to contribute to reconciliation in three ways. First, they are theorized to strengthen and legitimize post-transition institutions. This is in part through a more abstract process of publicly acknowledging past harms and charting a vision for a different type of relationship between citizens and the state in the future (Andrieu 2010; Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse 2003; Hayner 2011; Minow 1998). More specifically, empirical evaluations of transitional justice efforts find that trials and truth commissions contribute to respect for human rights, democratization, and rule of law (Dancy and Montal 2017; Kim and Sikkink 2010; Olsen et al. 2010; Sikkink and Walling 2007). These institutional norms signal to citizens that the post-transition state is both willing and capable of addressing past harms and breaking a cycle of impunity.

Transitional justice, and truth commissions in particular, are also seen to contribute to reconciliation by facilitating healing and forgiveness. This view of truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness as mutually reinforcing elements draws heavily from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) experience in the mid-1990’s, which was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Much of the early normative literature arguing for the benefits of transitional justice reflects the mutually reinforcing view of truth and reconciliation as championed in the South African TRC. However, Hamber (2009) points out that reconciliation is not a linear process that can be expected to necessarily result from truth-telling. Other research finds that truth-telling without sufficient support can contribute to psychological ill-health (Brounéus 2010), even as it can have a more positive communal impact (Cilliers, Dube, and Siddiqi 2016).
Despite the theoretical links between reconciliation and transitional justice, studies from a grassroots perspective have raised many challenges to this relationship. In the following section, I review literature which highlights this tension and connect it to the focus of this dissertation on everyday perspectives on reconciliation.

Reconciliation from the grassroots to the everyday

A third perspective focuses on reconciliation from the grassroots level. Numerous studies evaluate the impact of top-down transitional justice processes against reconciliation outcomes at the grassroots level (Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza 2008; Hinton 2010; Lundy and McGovern 2008; Shaw, Waldorf, and Hazan 2010). This body of grassroots transitional justice and reconciliation research has largely reached a skeptical conclusion, questioning the extent to which trials and truth commissions are relevant to those they are designed to benefit (Baines 2010; Fletcher and Weinstein 2002; Kostić 2008; Mannergren Selimovic 2010; Shaw 2007). Other studies argue for the adoption of more culturally embedded practices as an alternative approach (Babo-Soares 2004; Baines 2007; Brounéus 2019; Guthrey 2016).

Much of the critical and grassroots reconciliation literature contrasts bottom-up perspectives against top-down, often externally-driven mechanisms designed to facilitate reconciliation through a brief but transformative encounter. I argue that while these studies make important contributions and introduce a necessary grassroots perspective to earlier waves of literature focused on institutions and states, they have not sufficiently conceptualized how and why reconciliation manifests in everyday life or how grassroots perspectives can vary across different localities within a country. I contribute to furthering knowledge on grassroots reconciliation by differentiating between extraordinary and everyday reconciliation, and exploring new aspects of each process.

To understand everyday reconciliation, I turn to a parallel research field which looks at everyday practices of building peace, highlighting how grassroots actors build peace in their daily lives (Brewer et al. 2018; Firchow 2018; Mac Ginty 2021; Millar 2020; Richmond 2009a, 2009b; Richmond and Mitchell 2011). This approach developed from earlier research which contrasted local, bottom-up perspectives on peace in contrast to peacebuilding interventions led by international institutions (Autesserre 2010; Björkdahl et al. 2016; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). Everyday peace moves beyond contrasting local needs against international interventions to instead explore how grassroots actors exercise agency and build peace in their own communities and everyday lives. These everyday interactions are more likely to arise organically and out of view of outsiders representing the international community, or even more direct authority figures (Mac Ginty 2021). While an everyday perspective has gained traction in
peacebuilding scholarship, less research has focused on everyday reconciliation as a specific concept (Eastmond 2010; Kingsolver 2013; Lee 2022; Obrradovic and Howarth 2016; Sokolić 2020). The studies within this dissertation contribute to developing the concept of everyday reconciliation processes both theoretically and empirically.

Further, much of the existing literature on everyday practices, both of peace and reconciliation, focuses narrowly on the grassroots level, looking only at everyday interactions or practices carried out between grassroots actors within a particular context. This approach has been criticized for homogenizing local actors, locking them into a hierarchy and ignoring instances where local influence leads away from peace rather than towards it (Randazzo 2016). Moreover, by leaving the focus on the grassroots implicit rather than motivating this focus, it leads to a falsely narrow view of how everyday practices occur. They are not solely the purview of grassroots actors; elite actors have everyday interactions as well, as do grassroots and elite actors engaging vertically. While existing research on reconciliation often considers both the grassroots and elite levels (see e.g. Kostic 2007), each level is typically considered on its own. Fewer studies look specifically at the points of interaction across levels (Hughes 2018; Maddison 2017; Strupinskienė 2017). In this dissertation I consider the ways in which everyday reconciliation bridges across different levels, to establish a more concrete understanding of points where different levels intersect.
Empirical approaches

The essays that comprise this dissertation draw on diverse empirical material, both quantitative and qualitative, to build theory and draw conclusions. Further, they utilize different methods and methodological approaches to answer their respective research questions. Two features characterize the empirical material featured in the dissertation. First, it is grounded in extensive fieldwork in contexts with a history of civil war. Essays I, IV and V focus on Sri Lanka, while Essay II focuses on Sierra Leone. Second, the empirical approaches focus on the micro-level. The papers in this dissertation draw on individual survey responses (Essay I), in-depth interview data (Essays II and V) and indicators of reconciliation within micro-level localities (Essay IV). Micro-level data can shed light on the specific processes and points of inflection at work in larger, macro-level processes. Essay III takes a different approach, presenting a novel conceptualization illustrated by empirical information from secondary sources. I expand on the concepts developed in Essay III with novel empirical material in Essays IV and V. In the following section I discuss the different types of empirical material I have collected onsite in war-affected counties for this dissertation, and conclude with reflections on overarching ethical considerations that cut across all essays.

Individual-level survey and experimental intervention

Essay I draws on an individual-level attitude survey, conducted in the context of a randomized field experiment in Sri Lanka. This empirical material contributes new insights to the way an established assumption—that intergroup contact reduces prejudice and facilitates reconciliation—occurs in an under-researched setting of military victory after civil war in Sri Lanka. Survey data is well-suited to evaluate specific hypotheses, particularly when existing data on the population of interest is not available (Eck 2011; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). Surveying individual-level attitudes towards other ethnic groups is a relevant issue in Sri Lanka in part because of the salience of ethnic divisions in driving conflict grievances. Between 1983 and 2009 Sri Lanka experienced a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Tamil separatist group, and the predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lankan military. The underlying grievances driving the escalation to war centered
around identity-based inequalities between minority ethnic Tamils and majority ethnic Sinhalese, and identity-based divisions continue to divide society after the end of the war.

Further, Sri Lanka presents a new empirical context in which to understand established assumptions that intergroup contact will foster reconciliatory attitude change. The war culminated in 2009 in a victory by the Sri Lankan military, amidst alleged war crimes committed by both sides against Tamil civilians. The top leadership and military capacity of the LTTE were completely decimated at the end of the war, and the Sri Lankan military was able to retake full control of previous LTTE territory. Incumbent military victory is an important new empirical context because it challenges some of the foundational assumptions of reconciliation theory, which often presumes a negotiated settlement and builds theory based on empirical cases following formal peace agreements (Bar-Tal 2000; Kelman 2004).

In-depth interviews

Essays II and V draw on in-depth interview material to explore processes and meanings of reconciliation outcomes. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, asking open-ended questions organized under broad topics of interest as determined by the research question (Brounéus 2011). Open-ended questions and flexible sequencing allow the researcher to respond to new topics in dynamic and flexible ways and explore interesting new information. In-depth interviews are well-suited to uncovering unique perspectives, understanding nuances, and discussing sensitive or politically charged topics that respondents may be reluctant to discuss openly in a larger group (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015).

My co-authors and I base our analysis in Essay II on 36 in-depth interviews with past participants in the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC). I conducted interviews included in this analysis in Freetown and Makeni over a six-week period in January and February 2019. The empirical material presented in this essay sheds light on the long-term impacts of participating in the SLTRC. Sierra Leone experienced a civil war between 1991 and 2002, and is one of the paradigmatic cases of internationally-led, formalized transitional justice and reconciliation interventions (Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony 2015). Transitional justice efforts centered around two simultaneous processes: a hybrid criminal tribunal to prosecute crimes committed during the war, and the nation-wide SLTRC intended to engage with grassroots victims and perpetrators. Both processes took an extraordinary approach, creating high-profile, public events intended to facilitate reconciliation. I conducted interviews with participants in the SLTRC more than fifteen years after the commission ended in 2004. The long-term reflections of participants
highlight the issues which have occupied their everyday needs and struggles after the end of war.

Essay V reflects a different empirical perspective, that of citizens belonging to the constituency of the LTTE rebel group during its existence in northern Sri Lanka. More specifically, I study two war-affected regions: the Vanni region, where the LTTE established consolidated governance institutions between 2002–2009, and the Jaffna peninsula which was under Sri Lankan military control during the same period. I draw on 45 in-depth individual and group interviews conducted over a two-month period in September and October 2022 to explore how and why Tamil citizens envision reconciliation with the state.

In-depth interviews allow me to tease out nuanced narratives and reveal ways in which the extensive governance structures, institutions, and symbolic nationalism the LTTE enacted in the Vanni region (Mampilly 2011; Terpstra and Frerks 2018) continue to shape how Tamil citizens in that area view the state. The empirical material featured in this essay conveys subtle differences in how respondents make sense of and seek to repair past harm. Understanding these subtle differences are particularly important in the post-war context in Sri Lanka, which has given little space to ethnic minority Tamil perspectives. Demands for transitional justice have seen limited credible progress, and the postwar regime placed greater emphasis on material development and reconstruction, largely facilitated by the military, while severely limiting engagement around reconciliation, accountability, or discussion of past violence (Fonseka 2017; Goodhand 2010; Herath 2012; Thaheer, Peiris, and Pathiraja 2013).

Everyday indicators

Essay IV analyzes a dataset of everyday indicators of reconciliation collected in war-affected localities in Sri Lanka. This empirical material was developed using the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) methodology, which uses a participatory process to collect and analyze measurable indicators of a complex concept as it appears in everyday life for grassroots communities (Dixon and Firchow 2022; Firchow 2017, 2018; Firchow and Mac Ginty 2020; Firchow and Urwin 2022; Levy and Firchow 2021; Mac Ginty 2013). The EPI process first generates indicators through focus group discussions and then ranks this long list through a participatory voting process. These indicators can then be used to develop survey questions to quantitatively measure progress (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2020), although the essays presented in this dissertation do not utilize survey data.

I analyze a sub-set of everyday indicator data collected as part of a larger research project in collaboration with the EPI project, funded by the United States Institute of Peace and the United States Agency for International
Development. The larger project collected everyday indicators of reconciliation in thirty localities across Sri Lanka, and I select twelve localities directly affected by civil war violence to analyze in Essay IV. I worked with Sri Lankan colleagues to collect this empirical material, during in total five months of fieldwork in Sri Lanka, between September to December 2018 and August 2019.

Investigating everyday practices of reconciliation reflects the limited formal engagement with accountability and reconciliation after the civil war in Sri Lanka. A domestic accountability process, known as the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) was initiated in 2010. Although the commission documented numerous wartime harms, it was largely seen as biased and insincere, and few recommendations have been implemented (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2014; de Mel 2013). A brief period of hope amidst political change in 2015 saw the establishment of an Office of Missing Persons and Office of National Unity and Reconciliation. Since then, national-level efforts towards reconciliation and transitional justice have again stalled and subsequent governments have returned to a hostile stance against justice and accountability (Cronin-Furman 2020). The lack of macro-level progress means that most efforts towards reconciliation have centered at the grassroots level. This creates a unique environment to explore grassroots priorities outside of an overarching narrative of reconciliation implemented within a top-down and formalized institutional setting. It also presents a unique perspective for everyday reconciliation, absent widespread experience of extraordinary reconciliation moments.

Ethical considerations

Field research and data collection in post-war environments and with communities most affected by civil war violence requires careful attention to ethical considerations and continual evaluation of risks and benefits of conducting research. While each essay addresses specific ethical considerations, I reflect here on some of the larger questions of ethical engagement that cut across the dissertation.

A first consideration is whether collecting data directly from human subjects is necessary to answer the research question (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Kapiszewski and Wood 2021). Wherever possible, secondary sources were sought out before collecting data in the field. Given the limited secondary sources on everyday reconciliation, it was critical to conduct specialized data collection to address the research question guiding this dissertation.

An important ethical concern for any research on conflict and violence relates to psychological or emotional stress for respondents. Discussing civil war experiences and reconciliation may bring up difficult memories for respondents who experienced traumatic events related to the conflict (Brounéus
The overarching ethical principle has been to “do no harm”, both when considering the effects on those who participate in the interviews, but also those who facilitate access for the researcher such as local research assistants and gatekeepers and the researchers themselves (Sriram 2009; Wood 2006).

Further, reconciliation, transitional justice, and the legacies of civil war are sensitive topics in many post-war contexts. This was a particularly relevant concern when conducting research in Sri Lanka and similar settings characterized by “bunkerization of access” (Fisher 2017), where the government has been wary of peace and human rights activities in the past (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić 2017). To mitigate risks of both emotional distress and topic sensitivity, participants were briefed that the research topic related to conflict, violence, and civil war as part of the recruitment and informed consent process. All participants voluntarily elected to continue the interview after a thorough discussion of the research project and question topics. Participants also had the option to skip particular questions, request that certain answers were not recorded, or to end the interview at any time without consequence. I framed interview questions in a way that did not directly reference sensitive issues and allowed respondents discretion over sharing personal details or discussing certain topics.

A related reflection concerns my position as a white, female, Western researcher conducting research in Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone. The observations I make and conclusions I draw are thus from an outsider’s perspective, which both illuminates and obscures in different ways. In some ways, my outsider status allowed me to ask more direct questions about everyday practices and relational divisions which an insider might have been expected to understand. In other ways, however, it placed boundaries on what respondents were willing to discuss with me. I am aware, for example, that respondents in Sri Lanka shared limited information about their personal affiliation or experience with the LTTE, and I made a conscious methodological choice to avoid direct questions of this nature to limit risk to my respondents and myself. I have endeavored to keep these boundaries in mind when analyzing my data and drawing conclusions.

As an outsider conducting field research I relied heavily on colleagues and interlocuters in Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone to navigate access and enable me to collect data (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019; Themnér 2022). The most fundamental way in which I relied on my colleagues was for translation support, as I do not speak Sinhala or Tamil (Sri Lanka), nor Krio or any of the many local languages spoken in Sierra Leone. This also presents an obvious methodological limitation, as I was not able to communicate directly with respondents. I kept the inevitable loss of nuance in translated text in mind while analyzing my data and draw conclusions based on broader sentiments reflected across multiple interviews rather than relying on specific phrasings or individual statements.
Presenting the essays

This dissertation consists of five independent essays which, taken together, contribute to our understanding of micro-level reconciliation after war. In this section I present each of the essays separately, highlighting their key conclusions and contributions.

Essay I

Essay I, entitled “Reconciling after a Victor’s Peace: Experimental Evidence on Intergroup Contact in Sri Lanka,” uses an experimental research design to assess the common assumption that intergroup contact after civil war can facilitate reconciliation between members of formerly conflicting groups. Despite extensive research on intergroup contact, few studies explore this question in a context where civil war terminates through incumbent military victory. To address this gap, I assess the impact of a contact-based intervention on reconciliatory attitudes of university students in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a relevant setting in which to raise this question, as the postwar period is characterized by a “victor’s peace” dynamic where the majority Sinhala state continues to dominate in social and political power even after the end of civil war. This dynamic creates unique challenges for grassroots reconciliation, which are not yet fully understood in relation to intergroup contact theory.

The study finds that participants in a contact-based reconciliation intervention begin with high levels of trust, empathy, and willingness to engage socially with members of an out-group. In addition, participants developed a heightened awareness of in-group threat after the program, likely reflecting the power asymmetries between majority and minority groups in Sri Lanka. These findings emphasize the need for greater nuance in common reconciliation practice, to carefully consider the target audience and to adjust expectations for transformative attitude change. These insights contribute to our knowledge about reconciliation through contact in a new empirical context, where war ends through an incumbent military victory.
Essay II

The second essay, “Patrimonial Truth-Telling: Why Truth Commissions Leave Victim and Ex-Combatant Participants Aggrieved,” co-authored with Ibrahim Bangura and Anders Themnér, explores a specific process through which participants in the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC)—an example of an extraordinary reconciliation intervention—developed expectations which ultimately were not fulfilled. The unmet expectations and grievances of truth commission participants is increasingly acknowledged in existing research, but few studies have been able to pinpoint the processes that gave rise to diverging expectations. We draw on in-depth interview data with victim and ex-combatant participants more than fifteen years after their participation in the truth commissions to reflect in more detail on the ways in which patrimonial modes of mobilization shaped divergent expectations at the time of the truth commission.

The essay moves beyond a broad contrast between top-down or elite institutions and bottom-up perspectives of grassroots participants to instead draw out a specific connection point which shaped expectations. The internationalized truth commission often relied on local brokers to mobilize witnesses and displayed the power of the institution through large spectacles like motorcades, a common way to demonstrate power in Sierra Leone. Operating within a patrimonial and clientelist environment, this approach raised expectations of a reciprocal debt which could later be called in. The lack of subsequent attention to everyday needs and economic stability has led to a sense of grievance and disillusionment with the reconciliation process, even as the country experiences a minimal level of negative peace. This essay illustrates how extraordinary reconciliation processes filter through everyday experiences and practices to leave participants aggrieved.

Essay III

The third essay, “Everyday Reconciliation: Horizontal and Vertical Pathways to Living Together” contributes to conceptualizing the idea of everyday reconciliation and understanding different ways in which reconciliation outcomes manifest in everyday life. Many studies contrast top-down reconciliation mechanisms such as trials and truth commissions, which create an extraordinary moment to confront past harm, against everyday or contextually-specific needs of victims. I build on this argument to consider not only how everyday realities differ from extraordinary moments, but to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of the ways in which reconciliation can vary in daily life. This speaks not only to research on grassroots reconciliation but to the broader interest in everyday practices in peace studies and international relations.
I develop an analytical framework which reflects how everyday reconciliation outcomes vary across two dimensions. The first dimension is the actor level, or whether the actors involved in reconciling are situated at the grassroots or elite level. The second dimension is the direction of the relationship to be reconciled, and whether it is oriented horizontally, between actors at the same level, or vertically across the grassroots and elite levels. The interaction between these two dimensions produces three distinct types of everyday reconciliation outcomes: inter-elite horizontal reconciliation, inter-grassroots horizontal reconciliation, and vertical reconciliation between the grassroots and elite. The typology opens up new avenues for research, allowing researchers to more precisely identify points of interaction between levels and reveal where progress along one dimension may differ from progress along another.

Essay IV

The fourth essay in my dissertation, “Everyday Understandings of Reconciliation in Sri Lanka”, applies the analytical framework developed in Essay III to a dataset of everyday indicators of reconciliation collected across twelve war-affected communities of different ethnicities and in different regions in Sri Lanka. While Essay III conceptualizes everyday reconciliation across multiple societal levels, Essay IV focuses on everyday reconciliation from a grassroots perspective. I contribute to existing research on grassroots reconciliation by applying a novel methodology to collect contextually-specific indicators which can be systematically compared across sub-national localities. The empirical material presented in this paper reflects a total of five months of fieldwork and close collaboration with Sri Lankan colleagues to collect everyday indicators of reconciliation.

Analyzing everyday reconciliation indicators along horizontal and vertical dimensions reveals variation across localities both in the types of everyday reconciliation outcomes prioritized as well as how those outcomes manifest in daily life. Sinhalese and Muslim communities placed greater emphasis on horizontal reconciliation across grassroots ethnic divisions. Tamil communities, on the other hand, focused more on signs of vertical reconciliation with the state. Comparing vertical indicators across Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese communities further shows that not only do different communities look to reconcile relationships in different directions, they also value different actions to signal successful everyday reconciliation outcomes. This pattern empirically demonstrates that the relational harms which need to be reconciled cannot be assumed to be the same across localities within a country. Understanding greater nuance in which relationships remain divided after war, as well as the way that enduring harms manifest in daily life, can contribute to a more responsive approach to postwar reconciliation.
Essay V

Essay V, “Reconciling Rebel Rule: Wartime Order and the Social Legacies of Rebel Governance in Sri Lanka” focuses on everyday reconciliation perspectives of an even more specific group, citizens previously considered as part of the constituency of the LTTE in Sri Lanka. I explore a specific predicament after an incumbent military victory, when citizens previously claimed by a defeated rebel group must navigate a return to the victorious state’s control. In this essay I consider how and why Tamil citizens with different experiences of wartime order envisage reconciliation with the state. I investigate the legacies of the LTTE’s statebuilding and governance efforts as one factor with relevance to postwar citizen-state relations. I draw on original data from 45 in-depth interviews with Tamil-minority respondents from two war-affected regions of northern Sri Lanka, one where the LTTE established consolidated governance institutions between 2002–2009 and the other that was under Sri Lankan military control during the same period.

I highlight a subtle but important legacy of the LTTE’s competitive statebuilding project on local-level understandings of the social contract, which influences expectations of reconciliation between citizens and the state. The findings demonstrate that Tamil respondents across both areas focus on reconciling a divided relationship with the state, which they measure through progress on transitional justice issues as well as inclusive and equitable state services in their communities. However, when explaining why transitional justice and state services were important for reconciliation, those who lived under consolidated LTTE institutions focused on these actions as signs of mutual respect following from their expectations of a reciprocal social contract between citizen and state. Citizens who lived under military control instead view transitional justice and state services as a form of repair and restitution for wartime harms. The subtle differences in why certain communities prioritize reconciliation with the state contributes to knowledge on rebuilding citizen-state relations in the context of an incumbent military victory.
Conclusion

The overarching interest of this dissertation inquires how societies emerging from civil war envision micro-level reconciliation across enduring relational divisions and war-related harms. I advance theory by differentiating between extraordinary and everyday reconciliation, and further developing everyday reconciliation as a distinct idea (Eastmond 2010; Kingsolver 2013; Lee 2022; Obradovic and Howarth 2016; Sokolić 2020). Further, I build on the common argument that reconciliation plays out at different levels (Brounéus 2003; Kostić 2008; Lederach 1997; Maddison 2017; Strupinskienė 2017; Verdeja 2009) to consider more granular ways in which actors at different levels intersect through both extraordinary or everyday practices. The contributions of the dissertation together offer three broader conclusions about societal repair and reconciliation after civil war, which further knowledge and open new avenues of inquiry in the future.

First, I conclude that reconciling across enduring relational divisions and war-related harms requires a broader view of the ways in which relational repair manifests in everyday life. This dissertation demonstrates that concentrating only on extraordinary reconciliation mechanisms, even to critique their shortcomings from a grassroots perspective, highlights only one part of the full picture. The practices and patterns of everyday life that signal repair and mutual respect can reveal new insights into how reconciliation can be achieved after civil war. Considering everyday reconciliation directs attention to pathways of repair that might otherwise be overlooked. This insight corroborates the important point made throughout scholarship on grassroots reconciliation that war-affected communities and individuals are not simply a “blank canvas” onto which external aspirations can be projected (Mac Ginty 2011). Grassroots participants interpret the call to attend a truth commission hearing through their own lens of existing expectations. Intergroup contact requires integrating new and potentially challenging realizations into an existing worldview. Former rebel constituents approach their postwar relationship with a victorious state differently in light of wartime experiences. The grassroots canvas needs to be brought into even sharper focus for reconciliation to be realized, and research needs to investigate more systematically what, how, and why existing practices contribute to reconciliation in everyday life and how these practices interact between different actor levels.
Second, I conclude that perspectives on reconciliation are more varied and
diverse within a postwar country than is often acknowledged. Numerous stud-
ies highlight grassroots perspectives on reconciliation and transitional justice
(Hinton 2010; McEvoy and McGregor 2008; Shaw, Waldorf, and Hazan
2010). I take this observation further and investigate how perspectives on rec-
conciliation also differ across communities within the same country. The pat-
terns that emerge raise important questions about the way in which postwar
societies negotiate a vision of a shared future. Restricting reconciliation to
only what is broadly agreeable risks reducing the term to an “empty universal”
(Renner 2014) which rings hollow to all involved. This dissertation shows that
scholarship on reconciliation can contribute to our understanding of how per-
spectives diverge in surprising and contradictory ways. Considering divergent
perspectives can reveal both overlooked aspects which support and reinforce
reconciliation, as well as additional challenges to relational repair or underes-
timated ways in which wartime harm endures.

Third, research on reconciliation should consider how social repair plays
out in different configurations of postwar power dynamics. Sri Lanka and Si-
erra Leone, while both experiencing the devastation of protracted civil wars,
present different trajectories of postwar repair. Extensive international peace-
building operations in Sierra Leone often center an asymmetric power rela-
tionship between external interveners and grassroots Sierra Leoneans (Ainley,
Friedman, and Mahony 2015; MacKenzie and Sesay 2012; Millar 2011a,
2011b; Shaw 2007). This hierarchy of power is consequential because it ori-
ents the study of reconciliation in Sierra Leone around a particular set of mech-
anisms and their shortcomings rather than considering multiple forms of soci-
etal repair. In Sri Lanka, the postwar regime took a decisive military victory
over their secessionist challengers as a mandate to consolidate power and re-
ject further compromise around key underlying conflict issues, creating a cen-
tral power asymmetry between the ethnic majority state and ethnic minority
citizens (Åkebo and Bastian 2021; DeVotta 2010; Höglund and Orjuela 2011;
McCargo and Senaratne 2020; Thiranagama 2013). The limited international
involvement in the postwar process allows sub-national contrasts and every-
day practices to come to the fore.

The ideas presented in this dissertation open avenues for future research.
One line of inquiry can investigate why certain preferences and patterns of
everyday reconciliation emerge, and the extent to which different factors can
explain these patterns. Better understanding of why everyday reconciliation
outcomes matter can illuminate the extent to which insights may travel from
one context to another. A second line of inquiry can explore in greater detail
the extent to which extraordinary and everyday reconciliation can reinforce
each other, and where they contradict. Further conceptualizing everyday rec-
conciliation can provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses, as well as
appropriate sequencing or overlap, between extraordinary and everyday ap-
proaches. Finally, further research can also investigate everyday
reconciliation in different empirical contexts and from the vantage point of different actors. Studying everyday reconciliation after rebel victory or where former adversaries share institutional power can help to further knowledge and refine conceptual development. Studying everyday reconciliation between elites can further strengthen the evidence base of everyday engagement beyond the grassroots.

On a final note, as this dissertation shows, the social legacies of civil war endure and emerge in complex ways. Most of the time, there is unlikely to be a well-marked or straightforward road to repair after civil war. Instead, navigating this sensitive process requires both attention to contextual nuance as well as a view of the bigger picture. This dissertation emphasizes that pathways to reconciliation unfold through both practices embedded within everyday life as well as extraordinary moments which, if working together, can push the boundaries of entrenched relational divisions after civil war.
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