

# Chapter 8

## Cultivating Sympathy and Reconciliation: The Importance of Sympathetic Response

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**Abstract** It is generally assumed that societies emerging from abuse will necessarily be receptive to programs of acknowledgement and reconciliation. Yet often they are not, and efforts to promote reconciliation fall on unreceptive audiences at the national level and below. This paper traces the factors that hamper the uptake of reconciliation and the acknowledgement of past events, and develops the following hypothesis: *thin sympathy must be developed or acknowledgement will not occur*. The paper considers the importance of building a critical level of understanding or “thin” sympathy in the population through exposure to the “other” and helping people see through new lenses about the other’s experiences. It argues that reconciliation efforts fail when there is not even “thin” sympathy or basic understanding of the experiences of the other within civil society. Through the lens of Canada, a number of factors that obscure this kind of knowledge translation are explored: lack of national identity, and the strategy of self-preservation single-mindedly pursued by government.

**Keywords** Transitional justice • Acknowledgement • Sympathy • Canada

### Introduction

Mass atrocity, including the atrocities of colonialism, leaves individuals and families shattered. More broadly, it devastates whole societies. When these impacts are not addressed in the short-term, their legacy is felt even many years on. As such,

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even in cases of historical atrocity, much is required. To rebuild the social infrastructure, and to help people in the communities hit hard by violence—or by the residue of that violence—begin to grapple with the consequences of their lived experiences, those societies increasingly turn to the pursuit of accountability and redress for survivors and for inter-generational survivors.

Much of the transitional justice literature assumes that post-conflict, decolonising societies will embrace programs and processes that address social needs in a comprehensive and substantial way, and ultimately work toward rebuilding social trust, repairing a fractured justice system, and building a democratic system of governance, through the acknowledgement of past human rights abuses. But often this is not the case, and social rebuilding processes are met with indifference or outright hostility. Survivors are left to pursue social reconstruction alone, while the perpetrators of the violence disengage completely—ultimately ‘let off the hook’ by the disinterest of others in pursuing justice. Bystanders and outsiders, then, can easily ignore the situation in which survivors find themselves, and they commonly do. In contemporary settler colonial societies, this neglect, benign or otherwise, is manifested in deep inequalities that may have persisted for decades.

The Canadian case illustrates this point. It has been reported that about 150,000 aboriginal, Inuit and Métis children were removed from their families and communities and forced to attend one of the schools in the Indian Residential Schools system (CBC 2011), which ran from the early 1800s until the last school closed in 1996. Under that system, Aboriginal children were required to attend schools that would ‘take the Indian out of the child (Churchill 2004), a form of ‘aggressive assimilation’ (CBC 2011) exacerbated by psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse. The impact of these policies has been extensive:

It is generally accepted that the forced removal of children from their families was devastating for Aboriginal individuals, families, communities and cultures. This is regularly being confirmed by researchers today.

[As a direct result,] First Nation communities experience higher rates of violence: physical, domestic abuse (3× higher than mainstream society); sexual abuse: rape, incest, etc. (4–6× higher); lack of family and community cohesion; suicide (6× higher); addictions: drugs, alcohol, food; health problems: diabetes (3× higher), heart disease, obesity; poverty; unemployment; illiteracy; high school dropout (63 % do not graduate); despair; hopelessness; and more (IRS Survivors’ Society).

The residential schools were a part of a broader set of policies that have greatly affected Canadian Indigenous communities. These include continued near-universal regulation under the Indian Act, legislation that dates to 1876 and effectively sets Indigenous Canadians apart from the rest of Canada; the Indian Act has resulted in social inequalities including unequal access to health care, justice, and education, inadequate housing, and increased rates of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, child deaths and suicide. There are also a number of unresolved treaty claims—treaties that were signed between the British Crown and Indigenous nations at the time of colonisation—against the government that have given rise to illegal mining and other occupations. And Indigenous peoples continue to be left out of Canadian governance and decision-making.

In early 1998, in reporting on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, then-Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Jane Stewart, offered ‘a solemn offer of reconciliation,’ which acknowledged the role of the Government of Canada in the Indian Residential Schools (Notes 1998). Although there was significant negotiation between Aboriginal groups and the churches that had, in many cases, run the schools, the Government did very little until it finally signed the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* in 2006 (A Condensed Timeline 2008, 64–65). The Settlement Agreement is touted by the Government as ‘the largest class action settlement in Canadian history... Implementation of the IRSSA began on September 19, 2007’ (INAC). The Settlement Agreement included a common experience payment for Indian Residential Schools survivors, an independent assessment process to investigate claims of sexual and other abuse, a truth and reconciliation commission, and other commemorative activities.

And in 2008, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a ‘Statement of Apology’ in which he recognised the negative consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy and further recognised the impact that a lack of apology had had on conciliation processes. His lack-lustre apology was this: ‘Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this Chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada’s role in the Indian Residential Schools system’ (Prime Minister 2008).

For the Harper government, these minimal efforts were seen as a final solution to the claims that had been swirling about, claims that Indigenous communities were unhappy and seeking a solution. Harper saw the settlement concluded between the government and claimants in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement as the furthest limit of what government was prepared to do, without recognising that the issues that the IRSSA represented were merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg. In response to a question about how an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women would be handled by his government, for example, Harper said, ‘It isn’t really high on our radar, to be honest’ (quoted in Maloney 2015). Harper’s government, further, refused to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Canada elected a new government in late 2015, under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Trudeau’s government seems much more open to considering these issues, and it is possible that perceptions, too, are changing. Immediately upon being elected, Trudeau pledged to pursue ‘nation-to-nation’ relations with Indigenous communities, and to follow up on five election promises, including the launch of a public inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women; investment in education for First Nations; lifting funding caps for First Nations programs; implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and repealing all legislation unilaterally imposed on Indigenous people by the Harper government (Mas 2015).

In this chapter, I argue that such efforts are ultimately much less successful when they are convoked without at least the very basic engagement of bystanders and outsiders. It is critically important for post-conflict and/or decolonising societies to acknowledge the past, no matter how painful. But without a basic understanding of

the needs of the ‘other’ (the survivor)—what I refer to, below, as *thin sympathy*—bystanders and outsiders, let alone perpetrators, simply do not engage in the healing process. The utility and influence of these kinds of processes is greatly diminished without the way having been paved first for bystanders and outsiders to cultivate thin sympathy.

## Methodology

This chapter is a theoretical exploration of the role of sympathy, and in particular, of thin sympathy, in the process of acknowledgment. It seeks to clarify the process by which that thin sympathy develops—or not. And it focuses largely on what sympathy, acknowledgement, and reconciliation could mean for bystanders and outsiders, because of the critical role they could play. It is based in part upon the situation in which Canada currently finds itself: after the completion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, waiting for more to be done to address the inequities that make up the lives of Indigenous peoples.

Before getting to the argument, it is useful to define what I mean, here, by ‘bystanders and outsiders’: I define bystanders and outsiders as those people who were not directly involved in the violence. They are distinct from survivors and their families, and from perpetrators. In many cases, bystanders and outsiders were separated from the violence by time or by space. But at the same time, they are also members of the society that has been torn apart. Or they may be bystanders and outsiders to inequalities that stem from both broad, systemic and/or specially targeted violence—resulting in widespread structural discrimination—put in place as part of a program of historical violence. As such, bystanders and outsiders bear a responsibility to set things right.

I have been working in post-conflict contexts—notably, Uganda, Haiti, Fiji, and Solomon Islands—for almost 20 years. My work there has focused on truth commissions, and on traditional practices and customary justice, as mechanisms that could foster acknowledgement, and, ultimately, reconciliation. My interest in Canada, however, stems from my curiosity as to whether the lessons I have learned in post-conflict contexts could reasonably be applied not in a ‘post-conflict’ society, *per se*, but in a consolidated democracy that is struggling with what decolonisation looks like, and how to correct the centuries of inequity that have existed between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadians.

Traditionally, decolonising societies were not considered by the field of transitional justice. Transitional justice was concerned with post-conflict, democratising and transitional societies (Arthur 2009). Yet by now it is abundantly apparent that even in established, consolidated democracies, redress is needed—particularly with reference to violence committed by the state against Indigenous communities (see, for example, Winter 2014).

## Acknowledgement and Reconciliation

Acknowledgement is the ‘spelling out [of] facts, publicly stating facts... a kind of avowal or marking out of what we know’ in the aftermath of gross violations of human rights and repression (Govier 2003, 70–71). This kind of admission of fact about the past must culminate in a public admitting to and accepting a knowledge of events that have taken place. As I define it, acknowledgement itself is the accretion of a number of personal and interpersonal processes that begin with an emotional response to the recognition of what has taken place, and subsequently coming to terms with the details, then a conscious remembering, followed by the commemoration of past events. It is my hypothesis that acknowledgement is the one stage through which any successful process of societal recovery must pass.

As I have argued elsewhere, this kind of acknowledgement is a necessary but not sufficient condition in the process of social rebuilding that must take place in communities that have suffered harms through gross violations of human rights, repression, and so on (Quinn 2010, 15–33). As I have previously pointed out, ‘[t] here is a strong and causal relationship between acknowledgement and forgiveness, social trust... and reconciliation’ (Quinn 2009a, 178). That is, it seems that societies, and the individuals who make up those societies, must engage in a process of acknowledgement before any of the other acts of social rebuilding, like forgiveness and reconciliation, can take place (Govier 1999).

In many communities, however, the events of the past are simply never discussed. Rather, the history of the events themselves and the many consequences of those events are left to bubble beneath the surface—allowing perpetrators, bystanders, outsiders, and others in the broader community to move forward, seemingly oblivious to what has taken place, while survivors, and their descendants, often remember in excruciating detail. In Canada, this can be seen in the manner in which missing and murdered Indigenous women have been largely forgotten—by everyone, that is, except their families and friends and their *Gemeinschaft* communities.<sup>1</sup> Until the 2016 federal election, it seemed doubtful that any public inquiry would be launched, or that the details would be brought to light. I argue that unless these atrocities are both privately and publicly acknowledged by individuals within a society, including survivors and perpetrators, bystanders, and outsiders, the society cannot move forward on the continuum of social rebuilding (Quinn 2010).

Individually, acknowledgement is accomplished through deep introspection and confronting the past. The growing awareness of details of abuse and harm often sets off an emotional response. This causes a person to begin to accept and deal with details that can be difficult or unpleasant to admit. Putting this information into context often causes it to come sharply into juxtaposition with what was previously

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<sup>1</sup>Ferdinand Tonnies divided societies into two distinct groups: “*Gemeinschaft* society is one in which people live together in primary groups, tightly wound around the institutions of kin, community and church.” See Howard (1995), 25–26.

assumed, and this can be difficult to face. But once the individual, through both personal development and interpersonal awareness, has admitted the past, he or she is compelled to remember it.

Publicly, acknowledgement may be carried out through the establishment of mechanisms of transitional justice: The testimony offered at a hearing held by a truth commission, for example, can assist in establishing a narrative account of what has taken place once it is disseminated, which can lead to the official recognition of what happened. Likewise, a public apology offered by a head of government to a group that was wronged can constitute an admission of these events and the suffering that occurred as a result. The literature is replete with descriptions and evaluations of all sorts of modalities that can result in the public acknowledgement of past events.

## Sympathetic Response

Conventional theories have assumed that societies emerging from abuse and harm are necessarily receptive to programs of acknowledgement and reconciliation almost as soon as they are offered. Pablo De Greiff, for example, presupposes that individuals have an implicit understanding of the value of truth-telling and support it (De Greiff 2006, 199). More than thirty-five truth commissions have been established around the world since 1974, and millions of dollars have been spent on their operation. Yet the literature increasingly demonstrates that the mechanisms themselves are not trusted by the population, and that they often have very little impact because the population as a whole fails to engage in them (Chapman and van der Merwe 2008; Kiss 2006; Quinn 2009b; UN Secretary General 2011, 7). The same has been said for other kinds of social rebuilding processes the world over.

I want to argue here that this failure results when the foundational requirements for real success are not firmly in place when such processes are implemented. Horticulturalists, for example, amend soil that is not suitable for growing particular kinds of plants to make that soil more hospitable to those plants, and to increase their viability. In the same way, I think, the conditions for success need to be put in place for repairing and rebuilding strategies to thrive. Without any ‘amendment’ to the ‘soil’ of post-conflict or decolonising societies, the effective purchase of these processes is substantially weakened. The mechanisms simply cannot gain any traction, and so cannot flourish, and nor can they make any change. I posit that the needed amendment is *thin sympathy*.

Sympathetic response is the key intervening variable that stimulates the impulse to acknowledge. The use of the term *sympathy* here does not refer to the more popular, colloquial meaning, ‘to feel sorry for’. Rather, I utilise the technical definition of sympathy as something approximating ‘understanding, awareness, recognition, and appreciation’.

First defined by Smith (1759), sympathy entails ‘acquiring detailed knowledge about the way [the ‘other’] lives,’ (Eisikovits 2010, 60) while its counterpart, the more dynamic *empathy*, is understood as a ‘full-blown curiosity and emotional openness towards another’ (Halpern and Weinstein 2004, 570). These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, although incorrectly. Sympathy is considered to be ‘an other-oriented, emotional response that is based on the... comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition’, whereas empathy is ‘a state of emotional arousal... which is similar to, or congruent with, what the other person is feeling (or should be expected to feel)’ (Losoya and Eisenberg 2001, 23, 22). Scholars including LaCapra (2004, 1994, 2000) and Gobodo-Madikizela (2013a: 217–226, 2013b) argue that empathy influences how a person comes to terms with another’s experience (Gobodo-Madikizela 2013b), and is required to deal fully with past events (Daye 2004; LaCapra 2004; Regan 2010; Gobodo-Madikizela 2013a, b).

Before that can occur, however, the most basic step toward either sympathy *or* empathy is a kind of ‘thin sympathy,’ which involves a simple understanding of what has happened to the other, and reflects a rudimentary recognition of both his humanity and his needs (Quinn 2015). That is, a person needs to at least become aware of the situation that has befallen the survivor and/or his family and/or the wider community. Govier allows that this awareness may be ‘implicit’ (Govier 2003, fn. 11). This awareness, you will remember, is the first step in any process of acknowledgement. And while it might seem obvious that this kind of awareness is a prerequisite to dealing with the problems that exist, it is surprising just how often this basic comprehension just does not exist. For example, near the beginning of the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, I had a conversation with a dear friend—a middle-class, middle-aged, non-Indigenous Canadian woman—about the Indian Residential Schools. We talked about how the work that I have done on truth commissions in other parts of the world, including Uganda and Haiti, could be at all relevant to what had taken place in Canada. As I described the abuse that took place in the schools, my friend responded by saying, ‘I don’t think so. I am a Canadian. If those things had happened here, I would know.’ She then went on to lament that she had only been able to go to a public school in rural Manitoba, and had not been ‘lucky’ enough to go to a private school like the Indigenous kids. My friend clearly had no idea about what had taken place in the Residential Schools. And her misunderstanding not only obscured her understanding of events, it also created a sense of anger and resentment toward the people who had attended those schools, without any understanding of the abuse many suffered there, or of the sub-standard quality of education they received. Likewise, Canadian broadcaster Shelagh Rogers said of her own experience: ‘Like many Canadians, I thought I knew our history. But many of us grew up on the “Milk of Amnesia” approach to the story of Canada. I don’t recall ever learning about residential schools. Or the Sixties Scoop. Or the Indian Act’ (Rogers 2014).

In Canada, as in Australia (see Sarah Maddison and Angelique Stastny’s chapter in this volume) non-Indigenous Canadians have been prevented from engaging in any understanding of both what happened in the residential schools and beyond. As

Ry Moran notes in his chapter, not many non-Indigenous Canadians had even heard about what took place before the TRC. As the TRC Report made clear, ‘The beliefs and attitudes that were used to justify the establishment of residential schools are not things of the past: they continue to animate much of what passes for Aboriginal policy today’ (TRC 2015, 4).

‘Thick sympathy’ takes this a step further, and involves the development of a simple compassion toward others. Had my friend more deeply understood the nature, let alone the scope and scale, of abuse that happened in the residential schools, or understood the impact of that abuse on survivors and their families, she might have begun to feel an emotional response to their harm. That feeling, what I define as ‘thick sympathy’, is simply the ‘the act or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings or interests of another’ (Merriam-Webster 2016). Simon postulates that this kind of learning happens ‘within the disturbances and disruptions inherent in comprehending these events’ (Simon et al. 2000, 3). In his chapter in this volume Peter Read speaks of something similar when he discusses the need to find a way to ‘thicken’ non-Indigenous feelings.

Empathy is the densest of the categories, and is only rarely achieved among post-conflict, decolonising populations in divided societies, except in a handful of instances. Brecht defines empathy as a ‘feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other’s experience to the self’ (2005, 5). It has been described by Eisenberg as the ‘retrieval of relevant information from memory that fosters an understanding of the other individual’s feelings or situation’ (Eisenberg et al. 1991). LaCapra argues that experiencing trauma can ‘upset expectations and unsettle one’s very understanding of existing contexts,’ a shock to the system that can cause an individual to ‘explore in a telling and unsettling way the affective or emotional dimensions of experience and understanding’ (2004, 117–118, 132). For LaCapra, the experience of trauma may be primary, as in, experienced by the individual him- or herself, or secondary, through hearing another person’s story, whether as testimony or even as a fictional account. The jarring experience of trauma—whether first- or second-hand—is enough to prompt what LaCapra calls ‘empathetic unsettlement... [that is] affective involvement in, and response to, the other’ (La Capra 2004, 135).

Thin sympathy, thick sympathy, and empathy can be seen as being on a continuum from the least engaged (thin sympathy) at one end, to the most engaged (empathy) at the other. I argue that unless there is at least basic understanding (thin sympathy) there can be no acknowledgement, and that reconciliation cannot be achieved without the more robust empathy (Quinn 2015). As such, thin sympathy is a fundamental building block of acknowledgement, and must be in place for both thick sympathy and empathy to occur. More to the point, while it is perhaps too optimistic to hope that everyone in any society could feel empathy toward people affected by harm and abuse, I argue that empathy makes individuals much more open to becoming involved in the healing process of the community.

To be clear, thin sympathy is not the least desirable. It is simply a pragmatic recognition that it might never be possible to achieve more than this. The thinner things are, the more brittle they often are, which is problematic. If a proper



engagement, to paraphrase the now-famous idiom used by American and South Vietnamese governments during the war in Vietnam to win the support of the Vietnamese people in defeating the Viet Cong, is about ‘hearts and minds’ then thin sympathy is the engagement only of the mind. Thick sympathy engages both the mind and the heart. Empathetic response goes still further and engages the mind and the heart and the hands. That is, thin sympathy implicates only a superficial cognition of the past. Thick sympathy translates that basic awareness into a feeling of concern. Empathy, though, is the capacity to recognize or even share the emotions being felt by another.

Indeed, those individuals who become empathetically involved in the stories of the ‘other’ and begin to engage with them in the healing process often become *champions* for social reconstruction. That is, they take up the cause and seek to better the situation for survivors and their families. In referring to what he calls ‘policy entrepreneurs,’ Kingdon writes of ‘people who are willing to invest their resources in pushing their pet proposals or problems, are responsible not only for prompting important people to pay attention, but also for coupling solutions to problems and for coupling both problems and solutions to politics’ (Kingdon 1984, 21). Kingdon’s policy entrepreneurs are, in fact, empathetic champions.

One example, in the Canadian context, is broadcaster Shelagh Rogers, who serves as an ‘Honorary Witness’ to the TRC. Rogers is among 44 exceptional Canadians who have agreed to take on the role of bearing witness to the truths revealed at the TRC, some of whom have also gone on to found an organization called ‘Canadians for a New Partnership’ (The Story 2016). Rogers has been an unrelenting champion for the TRC, and a voice for Indigenous Canadians. While Rogers herself was not a victim of the residential schools, she has very obviously been touched deeply by them. This squares with LaCapra’s understanding of second-hand trauma. Rogers recounted her experience at the Northern TRC National Event, where she was inducted as an Honorary Witness:

I was the first of a group to be inducted at a ceremony in front of 800 people, mostly residential school survivors. I got up and promised I would share the stories and statements I would witness at every opportunity. My induction was followed by that of a Holocaust survivor; then a person who had seen his village destroyed in Bosnia. He was followed by an Australian who had helped set up a group to support largely Aboriginal, people affected by past policies of “forcible removal”; then there was a man who had survived torture in Guatemala. I had a strong sense of ‘one of these things is not like the other’: What is the white middle-aged woman doing in their company? I came to understand that I could use my voice to speak to Canadians the length, breadth and height of this country...

Those who accept the invitation to bear witness have a responsibility to remember and to take the story forward. It means opening yourself to the truth, allowing yourself to be changed by it. Everyone who attends these events is a witness. We share a collective responsibility to make things better. To act. Because if we do nothing, nothing will change (Rogers 2014).

Rebuilding initiatives are almost always impelled by exceptional advocates, empathetic champions, who push for things to happen. Often, those people are survivors. But sometimes they are bystanders to the violence, or outsiders who have

no particular or direct history with that past, except through a second-hand encounter. These outsiders are particularly able to push for change, and to sway opinion and policy.

The literature provides some hypotheses about why these extraordinary people choose to act: Staub has written that ‘to reduce their own distress, passive members of the perpetrator group tend to distance themselves from victims... This reduces empathy’ (Staub 2006, 872). The same, I think, applies to bystanders and outsiders. Eisikovits argues that as bystanders and outsiders become geographically more removed from the perpetration of violence, their ‘context becomes thinner’ and there is less impetus to acknowledge survivors’ circumstances (Eisikovits 2010, 63; Mencl and Ray 2009, 206). As is sometimes argued, ‘We can care deeply, selflessly, about those we know, but that empathy rarely extends beyond our line of sight’ (Interstellar 2014). Others, however, argue that bringing people closer together produces a kind of thin sympathy that will open the door for acknowledgement (Donnelly and Hughes 2009). Certainly, Nusso et al. contend that ‘countries in which there is greater social proximity between survivors and perpetrators as well as weak group membership may reduce mutual distrust, facilitate an understanding of the other’s perspective as well as greater willingness to engage in conciliatory activities, and produce shared frames of social reference’ (2015, 353). Thin sympathy, then, is the basis for acknowledgement (Quinn 2015).

This hypothesis seems to be validated by parallel work taking place in the cognitive neurosciences. In particular, the role of mirror neurons in the building of empathy has fostered significant debate. Ramachandran (2000) found that a form of imitation of the behaviour of others can precipitate an empathetic response (see also Oberman et al. 2007). This happens in the medial temporal cortex of the brain, when neurons called ‘mirror neurons’ cause a person to mimic a particular behaviour. Iacoboni et al. have argued that “[u]nderstanding the intentions of others while watching their actions is a fundamental building block of social behavior’ (2005, 1). Others contend that ‘a dysfunctional “mirror neuron [network]” may underlie... social deficits’ (Dapretto et al. 2006, 28–30). Canada’s TRC attempted to harness this type of response by appointing Honorary Witnesses like Shelagh Rogers, whose own response gives an appropriate basis upon which to model subsequent bystander and outsider behaviour. The physiological response must not be discounted in understanding a person’s capacity for thin sympathy.

Two lessons are important here: First, without people like Rogers, people whom I think of as ‘empathetic champions’, there would be no impetus to intervene on behalf of survivors and their families. Second, beyond those empathetic champions, the development of thin sympathy among a critical mass of the population—that is, the smallest number of people needed to make something happen—is essential. In its absence, empathetic champions will find no uptake of their ideas, and processes of social healing will ultimately break down, if they begin at all.

## Social Reconstruction Blocked

Efforts at this kind of social reconstruction tend to be obscured or even blocked by two distinct factors. These factors demonstrate a decided lack of even thin sympathy, and in fact prevent the building blocks of thin sympathy from forming. Two factors that are of importance here are a lack of national identity and the failure of government to model thin sympathy. Each of these is discussed, in turn, below:

### *Lack of National Identity*

One of the arguments to be made about how and why non-Indigenous Canadians are not paying more attention to the stark issues confronting Indigenous communities is the question of national identity. Without paying attention, the basic building blocks of thin sympathy cannot even form. While the ‘two solitudes’ analogy in Canada originally described the perceived lack of communication, and, frankly, a lack of will for communication between Anglophone and Francophone people in Canada, a demonstration of the failure of thin sympathy to form in another Canadian context—today it might more usefully apply to the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadians.<sup>2</sup> The two communities are separate in so many ways.

In fact, a substantive racism exists. The Final Report of the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation to the Ipperwash Inquiry includes a report entitled ‘Encountering the Other: Racism Against Aboriginal People.’ The report looks at the ‘particular kinds of racism that First Nations’ people face all the time—the kind that they must deal with because simply because they are Native and the kind they must deal with because they are members of a group (a Native Band) that is collectively asserting land claims and/or constitutionally recognised aboriginal and treaty rights’ (Chippewas of Nawash 2005, 1). That bias is deeply felt: ‘There is a very strong perception among urban Aboriginal peoples in Toronto [and also in other cities] that non-Aboriginal people hold a wide range of negative and distorting stereotypes of Aboriginal people’ (Enviroics 2010, 36).

Keeping the groups separate, without any useful interchange between the two groups, does nothing to facilitate thin sympathy. The groups must begin to interact with one another—even through media reports or joint activities—that will help them to understand the history of what has happened.

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<sup>2</sup>The term is credited to author MacLennan (1945).

## *Failure of Government to Model Thin Sympathy*

While it appears that Canada sits on the precipice of change, it is clear that successive past governments have served to impede progress on the Indigenous relations file in Canada. Governments, including the Harper government, and also Liberal governments before it, stopped progressive changes that were being proposed, including the Kelowna Accord that would have improved education, employment, and living conditions for Indigenous peoples through governmental funding and other programs; the Kelowna Accord was never endorsed by Prime Minister Harper.<sup>3</sup> Even Jean Chrétien, former Prime Minister and, before that, Minister of Indian Affairs, recently stated that taking action on the Indigenous file will take time, meaning that the process of reconciliation will be stalled further (Chrétien 2016).

In many ways, governments are constrained by what they perceive to be mandates from their electorates. As such, in responding to the perceived opinions of the electorate, governments make decisions that are carefully designed to keep them in elected office. This was certainly the case when Prime Minister Harper, who responded to the claims made by Indian Residential Schools survivors with some reluctance. He was determined to do only as much as was absolutely necessary, and no more.

Appreciating these blockages is important because they help to explain the lack of uptake of ideas in post-conflict and decolonising societies. More significantly, however, they are important because they have blocked the development of thin sympathy throughout the country. This helps to explain the extent to which such strategies have failed to gain popularity or acceptance among the general population. The effectiveness and impact of any effort is significantly less without at least thin sympathy.

## **Fostering Thin Sympathy**

If the hypothesis that I have laid out above, that thin sympathy—defined here as a basic understanding or general awareness—is essential to acknowledgement, and that acknowledgement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for social rebuilding, is true, then it is essential that thin sympathy be developed in post-conflict or decolonising societies. This is not a new concept. The Truth and

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<sup>3</sup>The Kelowna Accord was a 2005 initiative to ‘close the gap’ on the standard of living between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. With a budget of \$5 billion, the plan would have targeted health, education, housing, infrastructure, economic opportunity, accountability, and the relationship between Indigenous Canadians and the Government of Canada. A change in government in early 2006 meant that the plan was never really implemented (The Canadian Encyclopedia).

Reconciliation Commission itself had a fairly specific mandate in this regard. In seeking to ‘inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools’ (TRC ‘FAQs’), the TRC was ‘to provide for wider dissemination of the report pursuant to the recommendations of the Commissioners’ (TRC ‘Our Mandate’).

Efforts to bring about ‘thin sympathy’ within a population may be systematised in a progressive, three-step trajectory that includes the following: 1. The gathering and dissemination of information; 2. Sensitising the population to the information; and 3. Educating the population about how the pieces of the bigger picture fit together. Each of these is explored below.

First, factual information must be disseminated. That is, details about what has happened need to be made publicly known. Even with the 15 December 2015 release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, entitled ‘Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,’ a great number of Canadians continue to know little or nothing of the abuses that took place within the residential schools. It seems likely that few have even read any or all of the 94 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, let alone the whole report. Media outlets including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation have taken up the call to begin to regularly report on matters dealing with the history of abuse. More needs to be done.

Second, the population must be sensitised to that information. Sensitisation causes a person to respond to certain stimuli, and makes them sensitive to the information they hear. Sensitising Canadians, for example, to the violence that has taken place in nearly every corner of the country, I am convinced, would spur a simple recognition of the humanity and the vulnerability of the survivors of the abuse and their families, and of people, generally, from whatever background. The value of sensitisation is discussed at length in the scholarly literature on genocide, with particular reference to the genocide in Rwanda, where President Kagame’s National Unity and Reconciliation policy—for better or worse<sup>4</sup>—has focused on sensitisation as a social good. Properly utilised, a sensitisation campaign could begin to change hearts and minds by making them more sensitive to the experiences of people from elsewhere in the country.

The third step, then, would be to help people understand how the pieces fit together. That is, while people might be aware of factual details, and may even have developed a sensitivity to that information, they may not understand that the discrete events they understand are, in fact, part of a broader system or structure of abuse. This appears, at least on the surface, to be true in all post-abuse situations. The Haitian truth commission report was one of the first truth commission reports to develop a quantitative database that allowed for detailed analyses of patterns of abuses that happened in specific geographic areas or to certain types of people (Quinn 2010, 82). Understanding that the abuse was not merely confined to one

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<sup>4</sup>Kagame’s policy also includes *Ingando* solidarity camps that are little more than forced political re-education camps. See Thomson (2011).

small area, but is part of a broader pattern of abuse, can help to cement the development of thin sympathy, and open the process of acknowledging what has taken place.

Making information available to a population, whether through dissemination, sensitisation, or by drawing clear lines between abuses to establish patterns and systems, is important. People need not only to know what happened, but also to understand it clearly. This holds true for survivors, who might know only their own story. It is also true for perpetrators who might come to understand how the small role they played contributed to a bigger whole with more egregious consequences. But it is critically important that bystanders and outsiders are engaged in the building of thin sympathy. They make up the bulk of the population, and are often the deciding factor in whether or not a particular program or process will be implemented—particularly in democratic or nominally-democratic systems. Their understanding is critical to furthering social rebuilding processes.

For people like Shelagh Rogers, learning about what happened in the residential schools has not only stoked her awareness of the subject, it has caused her to want to do something in response. This has not necessarily been the case for others. An Angus Reid poll completed in June 2015, at the close of the TRC's final event, found that 70 % of Canadians recognise that what happened in the schools was cultural genocide (CBC 2016). Awareness of the residential schools has 'risen by 15 points since 2008 to 66 %,' and that awareness of the specific consequences of that system and of the connections between those abuses and the residential schools has grown to 73 % (Adams 2016). The President of Environics, the firm that conducted the latest polling, says 'these results suggest that Canadians would rather be moving along the path to progressive change, even if we stumble, than standing still or moving backward' (Adams 2016). As Maddison and Stastny's chapter in this volume points out, there may be no basis to assume that this will translate into practical change, and from the 'learning' frame into mobilisation. Perhaps, in the Canadian case, it is too soon to tell.

## Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated the location of thin sympathy in the broader context of sympathetic engagement. Thin sympathy is a very basic step, and requires only a straightforward understanding of the events of the past, and the effect on the other. Further along on the continuum of sympathetic response is thick sympathy: that is, compassion. An even thicker engagement consists in 'full-blown curiosity and emotional openness towards another' (Halpern and Weinstein 2004, 570).

The hypothesis regarding thin sympathy is simple: *thin sympathy must be developed or acknowledgement will not occur*. In the Canadian case, thin sympathy was not developed and so acknowledgement did not occur. We know that acknowledgement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effectively dealing with the past. As such, for bystanders and outsiders, particularly, the small act of

learning what has happened to the other and recognising his suffering—without any further emotional attachment or action—is extremely important. The effectiveness and impact of social reconstruction efforts is significantly less without thin sympathy.

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