

Abstract

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Reconciliation between the parties in the aftermath of a violent conflict increases the possibility for sustainable peace. The aim of this thesis is to study reconciliation in South Africa with a focus on factors that facilitate or hamper reconciliation between black and white South Africans at grass-roots level. Thus, the focus is to identify, explore and analyse issues and processes of importance for grass-roots reconciliation. In addition, understandings of the concept of reconciliation among ordinary South Africans are studied. The focus is on reconciliation between 'ordinary' people, since this dimension has received little attention in research. In this thesis, reconciliation is understood as a process, which includes the reduction of animosity and of negative, derogatory or hostile attitudes and feelings, as well as the enhancement of positive, peaceful, non-violent attitudes and feelings (among which trust, tolerance and respect are particularly important), between the parties after a conflict has caused a rupture in their relationship. The thesis is based on extensive fieldwork conducted in the Matjhabeng municipality in the Free State province between 2004 and 2006. The main methods used were qualitative interviews and observations. The theoretical framework rests on two legs, namely reconciliation theories and intergroup relations theories.

The thesis shows that reconciliation is a complicated and long-term process and that there are no simple blueprints. Therefore, a broad perspective on reconciliation needs to be taken, both when it comes to research and to practice. A wide range of, often closely interrelated, factors affecting grass-roots reconciliation in South Africa are identified and explored, including intergroup contact, justice, the salience of the racial categories, discrimination, affirmative action, crime, threat perceptions, alienation, poverty and inequality, as well as cultural and symbolic issues. The importance of everyday life in facilitating or hampering reconciliation is emphasised. Even though national events or processes are often critical, unless reconciliation is built and consolidated at grass-roots level, such as in people's daily interactions, the possibilities for creating deep and sustainable reconciliation are slim.