

**Chenai Matshaka**

Centre for Mediation  
in Africa, Department  
of Political Sciences,  
University of Pretoria.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3595-4248>

E-mail:  
[cgmatshaka@yahoo.com](mailto:cgmatshaka@yahoo.com)

First submission: 30 January  
2024

Acceptance: 28 February  
2024

Published: 31 July 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v56i1.8010>

ISSN:0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica -  
2024 56(1): 103-120

© Creative Commons  
With Attribution (CC-BY)



# Narratives as a gateway to transitional justice: reflections on research methodology

In many ways transitional justice is a battle of narratives. Both at the conception and implementation stages, it is contested in part by different meanings of what justice is, how harm is understood, and who the victim and perpetrator are. All these determine the trajectory the processes will take. How we reach deeper understanding about these battles and their implications is a result of our choice of research methodology. In this article, I reflect on the use of narrative as a philosophy of understanding the world, as a data source, a lens, and a method of investigation in relation to understanding the trajectory of transitional justice in Zimbabwe between 2000-2013. While the findings of the research have been presented in other outputs, this article gives insight into the research methodology. It argues that using narratives of violence as a gateway to transitional justice research is key to understanding the nuances that determine the trajectories transitional justice processes may take in any context.

**Keywords:** transitional justice; narratives; content analysis; research methods, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Transitional justice refers to processes, mechanisms, and practices set out for societies emerging from violence, repression, war and other epochs where violations of human rights and international law have occurred (Roht-Arriaza 2006). These processes

include both judicial and non-judicial measures aimed at punishing perpetrators, establishing the truth about the violent occurrences, or reforming institutions and structures that may have perpetuated the violence, among others. Transitional justice is centred on narratives of violence. That is, the manner in which experiences and perceptions of violence are expressed or suppressed in recollections of it. These narratives shape the development of transitional justice policies, and subsequently the manner in which groups in society interact and perceive each other. Transitional justice is therefore a contestation of narratives that occurs in the policy-making spaces as well as in the arena of narrative research. For this reason, it is imperative for the qualitative researcher using narrative as a tool for researching transitional justice to be cognisant of the contestations in each context of narrative development.

These contexts are shaped by the various histories, political contestations, and bargaining in the policy-making spaces that seek particular agendas for various role players in the transitional justice process. To illustrate some of these intricacies, this article discusses using narratives to understand how the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe has been shaped as well as the challenges of using narratives of violence as a lens for understanding and unpacking the trajectory of a particular context essentially due to the many battles of narratives that emerge in the aftermath of violence.

In a monograph titled *Civil Society Narratives of Violence and Shaping the Transitional Justice Agenda in Zimbabwe* (see Matshaka 2022), I show how narratives, and in particular the understandings of political violence by civil society in Zimbabwe, have fashioned the transitional agenda in the country. I show how the concerns of transitional justice can be politicised and fail to address the needs of those affected by the violence.

In this article, rather than rehash the findings in Matshaka (2022), I reflect on the ways in which narratives of violence can be used to understand how transitional justice agendas have emerged, and their trajectories. I focus on the methods used in the research and how, through exploring the narratives of political violence presented by four civil society organisations in Zimbabwe between 2000–2013, I was able to discern some of the influences shaping the transitional justice process in Zimbabwe. By unpacking key methodological and philosophical assumptions, an insight (however slight) was gained into the shaping of Zimbabwe's transitional justice trajectory, and this article will try to understand the key factors that shape transitional justice processes, as well as the challenges and limitations.

The following section focuses on the context of political violence in Zimbabwe and the emergence of transitional justice as one of the recommended options for dealing with this violence.

## Political violence in Zimbabwe and the transitional justice question

Zimbabwe has a long and deep-rooted history of political violence, a continuing stain on the country's politics. Some scholars including Maringira and Gukurume (2022) contend that violence defines the politics of Zimbabwe. Hence the narrative of politics in Zimbabwe is that of violence. The deep-seated culture of violence has left many unresolved conflicts and a need for redress among many Zimbabweans in all walks of life (Matshaka 2022).

The Zimbabwean state has a dismal record in providing redress for political violence, characterised by some civil society organisations in the post-2000 era as 'human rights violations' (Matshaka 2022). This history of violence includes the genocide termed *Gukurahundi*<sup>1</sup> (1982-1987) in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions of the country, for which there has been no official acknowledgement and accountability from the state as the findings of official enquiries into the violence have not been released (Eppel and Raftopoulos 2008). It also includes a string of violent elections in the post-independence era, with varying intensity, similar modus operandi and blatant disregard for justice. The policy of letting "bygones be bygones" (see for example, Eppel and Raftopoulos 2008; Boshia 2014) has left a festering wound among the victims of these periods of violence and such experiences remain firmly entrenched in the story of the country's politics.

For some periods of violence there have been both official and non-official amnesties to silence victims and their advocates. Chabvuta (2006) cites official amnesties by the state which include the Clemency Order (1) of 1995 that officially pardoned those who perpetrated the politically motivated beatings and destruction of property during the violent 1995 elections, including those who had been convicted for these crimes. Clemency Order (1) of 2000 was also declared following the violent and disputed 2000 elections. These responses by the state have perpetuated impunity for state-sponsored politically-motivated violence thus the recurrence of electoral and other forms of political violence in the country.

---

1 *Gukurahundi* is a Shona term that refers to the first rain of summer that washes away the chaff from the previous season. It refers to the killing of an estimated 10 000 people belonging to the Ndebele ethnic group by the state's Fifth Brigade allegedly to suppress dissident activities in the South of Zimbabwe during the early 1980s (Nyarota 2006).

The need to end the unending cycles of political violence in Zimbabwe has been expressed in the lives of Zimbabweans across the board (see for example Sachikonye 2011). It is a difficult task as the setting of the transitional justice agenda for the country has remained a contested space (Matshaka 2022). A shift in the narrative of violence remains elusive, exacerbated by an increasingly polarised political order and society post the 2017 coup that saw the removal of the late former president Robert Mugabe.

The question of a transitional justice process for Zimbabwe has centred not only on how to end the cycles of violence, but also on what to do with the perpetrators of the violence, how to provide redress for the victims, and how a peaceful and just political culture can emerge. These concerns are not unique to Zimbabwe, but to many states seeking to move away from a violent past into a more peaceful and accountable system through acknowledging the past and providing redress where it is due. Advocating for transitional justice has been the labour of civil society in Zimbabwe as it has been in many other countries (see for example Van der Merwe and Brankovic 2018).

Research carried out between 2014 and 2020 (see Matshaka 2022, Matshaka and Wielenga 2022) has shown a resilient civil society in Zimbabwe, that through various advocacy and lobbying initiatives has sought to challenge impunity, push for the reform of state institutions that have perpetuated violence, as well as push for effective and inclusive policies to address the concerns arising from the aftermath of political violence. They have also sought to change and influence structures that have promoted violence particularly in communities that have been most affected by political violence. In essence civil society in Zimbabwe has firmly placed the concerns of transitional justice on the national agenda. Where then does the narrative of civil society as 'enemies of the state' in Zimbabwe emerge?

Civil society's work on the transitional justice concerns of Zimbabweans has been carried out in an environment where civic space has continued to shrink, and violence against those seen as opponents of the state has increased (Matshaka 2022). Threatened by the prospect of having to account for past political violence and human rights violations, the political elite has fought against any genuine reforms of the state including structures established to do so such as the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC)<sup>2</sup>. While the narrative of 'enemies of the state' has emerged apropos of civil society formations calling for transitional justice in Zimbabwe, this is by no means a story about a 'bad' state and 'good'

---

2 Established under section 252 (a) of the Zimbabwe Constitution, the mandate of the NPRC is broadly to ensure "post-conflict justice, healing and reconciliation" (Bere and Maguchu 2014).

civil society. It is a much more complex phenomenon characterised by complex relationships and dynamics as shown in the data presented in Matshaka (2022) as well as Matshaka and Wielenga (2022).

Understanding the violence, the perceptions of the other, and their roles in such polarising contexts, that shape and influence any trajectories of moving forward, underlines the importance of using narratives, as outlined in this article, and this emerges as an important tool in understanding the complexities of societies such as Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe also illustrates an important dynamic in researching transitional justice, in that the cycles of violence have not ended, having an impact on not only the data collection process, but also on the understanding of past and present political dynamics. While the data collected for this research focused on the period between 2000–2013, critical political events such as the 2017 coup and the violent aftermath of the 2018 elections, among other key moments shaping the transitional justice agenda and trajectory of the country, also influenced the narratives given through the structured in-depth interviews. Although not the focus of this article, the narratives studied through the methods outlined in this paper showed that the status quo of violence and political intolerance has remained firmly in place over the years.

## Researching transitional justice

How we view and understand post-conflict societies is determined by the stories told about experiences of violence, trauma, and loss (Porter 2015). These stories are told in the context of the life stories and experiences of those telling the story. It is important to emphasise that the trajectory of transitional justice is shaped by the narrative of the dominant group in society at any particular time. This trajectory in turn has implications for any mechanisms put in place as policy to respond to the concerns of transitional justice, including redress for victims of violent conflict, accountability of the perpetrators of this violence, and ensuring the non-recurrence of such violence and conflict. The concerns of transitional justice may shift at different stages of the conflict cycle, thereby determining which mechanisms are dominant at a particular time, for instance, the gathering of evidence, prosecutions, truth-telling processes or memorialisation of the conflict. This is in tune with the shifting narratives about conflict at different stages of the conflict cycle, influencing what victims' demands are regarding redress at a particular time in relation to the interests of the political elites. However, where conflict and violence recur, these different stages may not be fully reached necessarily (McClelland 2014), with continuous digressions that hamper, for example, accountability of the perpetrators.

Research on transitional justice has largely conceived challenges in post-conflict societies as a policy issue so study of it has leaned toward this (Kritz 2009). Such research has been used to inform policy processes, but, given the long-term goals of transitional justice, much of this work has become a “snapshot of little pieces of a very long process” (Kritz 2009: 14). In order to gain a greater understanding of transitional justice as a peace-building measure, there is a need to look beyond its effectiveness in building sustainably peaceful societies, and to look at what informs its mechanisms as responses to the needs of post-conflict societies as drawn from the interpretation of experiences of conflict and violence. These interpretations then become the core narratives of the conflict, which shape the responses of mechanisms such as transitional justice.

Grørdum (2012: 10) contends that “transitional justice today is a highly institutionalized field” with its origins in legal institutions. Contrary to this, a narrative approach largely captures the experiences and interpretations of individuals about the violent events that transitional justice focuses on. It may be argued that narrative is thus not an appropriate lens for this, but on further examination, narratives and the institutions of transitional justice can hardly be separated. Importantly, the society that transitional justice seeks to repair is made up of individuals who are expected or intended to participate in the processes of transitional justice implemented through these institutions.

It is the experiences and interpretations of these individuals (perpetrators, victims, observers), making up their narratives, that will be used by the institutions of transitional justice as evidence for prosecutions and truth commissions, as well as for memorialisation of the conflict. These individual experiences and interpretations are also collated by those seeking to influence policymaking at the agenda-setting level of institutions. These actors include civil society and the media among others. Further, those expected to account for the violence during conflict through legal institutions established through transitional justice processes are individuals who may have acted on behalf of institutions for varying political reasons. In this way, narrative becomes an important and relevant lens through which to study transitional justice.

As argued by McCombs and Shaw (1993: 62), “agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience, both the salience of objects and the salience of their attributes”. Both the selection of matters for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about them are potent agenda-setting roles (McCombs and Shaw 1993) and are a critical role played by different groups in society including civil society through narrative. In transitional justice, as in other policy fields, the selection of matters for attention and frames from which to think about them

is critical, as it determines what mechanisms are put in place to respond to the challenges of the post-conflict society. These mechanisms will determine the success or failure of a transitional justice process.

Burd (1991: 291) contends that agenda-setting research is at its best when it is “empirical and cautious but also eclectic and congenial to multiple methods and different disciplines. At its worst agenda setting is mass media centric... and tied naively to a largely rational notion of human nature and the myth of an objective interest.” Concurring with this, this research is more interested in multiple ways in which the agenda is set, and uses various methods, including content analysis and in-depth interviews, to study the phenomena. The research carried out also took on an interpretivist approach, which does not assume a homogenous polity as was previously the case in most agenda-setting research (Burd 1991).

Contemporary agenda-setting research now recognises the polity as a space for competing views and interests and as such is in line with the growing realisation in the field of transitional justice of a contested space with different values and interests. Agenda-setting research is finding increasingly that informal communication outside of mass media may shape the agendas of policymakers as well as citizens (Burd 1991). This is true of civil society reports and publications that are not available to large sections of the polity but may be targeted at policymakers or specific narrative holders who are able to influence the agenda on a particular matter.

## The rationale for using narrative as a lens and method of investigation

Creswell and Poth (2016: 54) contend that “*narrative* might be the term assigned to any text or discourse, or, it might be text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research (Chase 2005), with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals”. Narrative can also refer to the study of successive happenings giving an account of an “event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (Czarniawska 2004: 17; Creswell and Poth 2016). These stories may be presented as written texts, visual or audio recordings. As argued here, narrative provides a critical lens through which to study violence and how it influences the agenda on transitional justice at the national level.

Narrative research can involve a number of different approaches. Polkinghorne (1995:12), for example, distinguishes between “analysis of narratives” or “narrative analysis”. Creswell and Poth (2016: 55) argue that with “analysis of narrative” the researcher uses “paradigm thinking to create descriptions of

themes that hold across stories or taxonomies of types of stories". With "narrative analysis" the researcher uses "descriptions of events or happenings and then configure them into a story using a plot line". The approach used in this research was the "analysis of narratives" and content analysis was used to carry out the process, as is described in more detail in following sections of this article. As with this research, narrative research may focus on a particular context such as a particular group of people or a particular organisation (Creswell and Poth 2016).

The term narrative has different uses and meanings, as does narrative research which has many forms, procedures and is rooted in many disciplines of study (Creswell and Poth 2016; Czarniawska 2004). Therefore, narrative research refers to any study that uses or examines narrative material (Lieblich et al. 1998). In carrying out narrative research, Lieblich et al. (1998: 2-3) contend that narrative can be used as "the object of the research or a means for the study of another question" or it may be used for comparison.

Narrative may be used as "the phenomenon being studied such as the narrative of illness" or it may be used as the "method used to study, such as the procedures of analysing stories" (Creswell 2012: 70). In my study narrative was used as the phenomenon under study, as it studied narratives of electoral violence as a gateway to setting the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe. This study therefore is not narrative research but rather a phenomenological study. As Creswell and Poth (2016: 57) highlight: "Whereas a narrative study reports the life of a *single individual*, a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon."

Some of the civil society reports used in this study capture the individual and collective experiences of electoral violence and interpret these experiences by drawing causality. The study focused on the meaning and experience of a common phenomenon for a collective rather than individuals. While these experiences were not captured by the researcher but rather by the civil society organisations' reports, these reports served the simple purpose of phenomenology, which is "to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence..." (Creswell and Poth 2016: 57). An object of human experience is identified (experience of electoral violence) and those who have experienced the phenomenon are the source of data, seeking to unearth 'what' they experienced and 'how' they experienced it (Creswell and Poth 2016: 57).

Graef et al. (2018: 2) identify three modes in which narrative may be comprehended: "as a lens to view the social world; as data that provides insights into that world; and as a tool for analyzing this data in a systematic and coherent manner", as presented below.



## Narrative as a lens to view the social world

Graef et al. (2018: 2) contend that “approaching the social world as a narrative world means to acknowledge that we live in a storied reality (i.e., that narrative is an ontological condition of life)”. Through shaping multiple events, people come to understand the world around them and interpret events and conditions around them. Therefore, individual events and experiences obtain their meaning only in relation to other events “through a process of employment that creates syntagmatic (i.e., discursive) links between isolated episodes” (Graef et al. 2018: 2). It can therefore be concluded that narratives are utensils to comprehend, negotiate, and understand situations we meet and are utensils for living (Adams 2008, Graef et al. 2018). In this way the study of narrative enables the “analyst” to consider the consequence of events, which other theories fail to do (Jacobs 2000: 8-9). In other words, as a lens, narrative allows people to think about an event, its meaning and the multiple consequences that come with each narrative. The ontological grounding of the study therefore was based on this premise of a storied or narrative based reality, or the stories told about organisations (Czarniawska 2004). Narratives may also be guided by a theoretical lens or perspective such as feminism (for example telling stories from a feminist perspective) (Cresswell and Poth 2016).

Graef et al. (2018: 3) contend that “temporality and contextuality, selectivity and multiplicity can thus be identified as key elements of viewing political violence and terrorism through a narrative lens”. In other words, time, setting, and background, perception and discernment, as well as a diversity of players and issues, are the main focus in the study of violence through narrative. These elements help analysts to draw out understandings of violent events as well as a better understanding of the narrative consequences as expressed by different groups. This study used this mode of narrative in grappling with how civil society narratives of violence shaped the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe.

## Narrative as data that provides insights into that world

Various studies gain their understandings into “narrative worlds” through different forms of narrative data that can be oral, textual, or visual. Graef et al. (2018: 4-5) identify “policy documents, police reports, court files, psychiatric evaluations, written material produced by activists ... interviews with key actors – perpetrators, victims, witnesses, and officials – collected by the researchers themselves ... news media and literary texts, films, posters, photographs, and social media comments”. Through a process of narration, these tools are used to make sense of different events and processes. According to Graef et al. (2018: 5), “while all of them tell stories by establishing temporal [sequential] and spatial

relations between multiple, heterogeneous events, the process of narration and its appropriation by the reader, listener, or viewer is shaped by the particular characteristics of their narrative genre". The way events are presented affect what interpretations are drawn about these events. It determines what is told or left untold, depending on the aims of a particular genre in presenting those events (Skultans 2002). For this reason, it is important to question the use of a particular narrative genre in presenting events and issues, as this determines the understandings drawn. As aptly described by Graef et al. (2018: 5),

It makes a difference if we apply the concept to, say, the study of literature, history, life story interviews, or social media conversations, because it implies fundamentally different understandings of narrative as an art form, a precondition for everyday existence and lived experience, or the representation of past events.

Civil society reports were used as narrative data in my study and were the main source of data for the enquiry, together with data gathered from in-depth interviews and other secondary sources of data, including academic texts. The presentation of individual experiences of violence in human rights reports creates a different narrative from those experiences documented in say, a newspaper article, or captured as a biography of that individual. The narrative genre of civil society reports often targets a specific audience, particularly policymakers who have the power to set the agenda. Therefore, it is important for these reports as data sources to be evidentiary and as comprehensive as possible. However, this is not always the case, due to limitations in resources and accessibility of data for these civil society organisations (Straus and Taylor 2009). These reports are also narrative texts that perform 'collective identities' (Gad 2012) of victims and perpetrators and are used to illustrate how electoral violence is constructed by these organisations.

As already highlighted in this article, my research used narrative as the object of research by analysing how individual stories of the experiences of electoral violence are condensed into the reports and analysis of civil society organisations to represent a collective interpretation. It did not study the life histories of individuals, but rather a series of events in a particular context and how the collective interpretations of individual experiences influenced agenda-setting in the transitional justice space in Zimbabwe. Civil society reports are documented from individuals' perceptions drawn from experiences of these events of violence and collated together into reports analysing and interpreting these events. These collations are then used as representations of the experiences of the collective.

## Narrative as a tool for analysing data in a systematic and coherent manner

There is often a lack of clarity as to how narrative data can be explored systematically, particularly in the case of non-literary narratives (Graef et al. 2018). Narrative data can be analysed through categorical content analysis. Narrative materials are handled methodically, by breaking text into moderately small components of content and “submitting them to either descriptive or statistical treatment” (Lieblich et al. 1998: 112). This is the conventional methodology to doing research with narrative material (Riessman 1993).

In my study, narrative was used as a means of studying transitional justice in order to illuminate the link between interpretations of violence and policy responses or debates by policymakers about what mechanisms are put in place to deal with the past. Narratives of past violence cannot be separated from the decision about what mechanisms are put in place to deal with the past. It is therefore important to explore issues of transitional justice from a narrative based perspective, which informs the framing of the transitional justice narrative and therefore the transitional justice agenda as well as ultimately the policy outcomes.

As argued by Grødum (2011: 12), “Interpretation is not a subjective internal reflection, but it involves inter-subjective mediated contexts of meaning that include history.” Hence understanding issues of transitional justice requires a combination of approaches that centre context and history, making narrative analysis an important approach in studying the phenomenon. In this study, narrative was selected as a means of studying transitional justice in order to give a clearer interpretation of the context of the discussion about it in Zimbabwe and the initiatives of both government and civil society. This permitted the research to explore how different narrative groups interpret not only the electoral violence presented in the sample of reports and articles analysed in the study, but also the transitional justice process in the country, independent of the term used for it.

## Content analysis

Krippendorff (2004: 18) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use”. From this definition of content analysis, it is clear that contextual meanings and interpretations are essential in content analysis, in alignment with the philosophical basis of the interpretivist paradigm used in the research that was carried out. The goal, therefore, is to link the results with the context in which they were produced (Downe-Wamboldt 1992; Bengtsson

2016; Lieblich et al. 1998). Czarniawska (2004: 17) suggests that “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected”.

Similarly, Downe-Wamboldt (1992: 314) argues that content analysis provides a systematic and impartial means to make valid interpretations “from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena”. The purpose may be of a descriptive or exploratory nature based on inductive or deductive reasoning using either qualitative or quantitative methods (Bengtsson 2016). Lieblich et al. (1998: 114) contend that the validity of the analysis should not be taken for granted, and when planning to undertake categorical content analysis, the most important consideration should be the concordance between the research goal and its method.

Narrative is interpretive in nature and hence subject to various biases, including those of the researcher. In order to describe the narrative of violence espoused by civil society, it was important for the researcher to use a method that was systematic and could be repeated with other texts from different organisations. This helped to deal with some of the biases based on the researcher’s own perceptions of the organisations and their work; hence content analysis was chosen as a method for this study. Content analysis also provided the researcher with a systematic manner of analysing the data collected through a narrative lens, as outlined earlier in this article.

The method of content analysis has many variations, depending on the purpose of the study as well as the nature of the material (Lieblich et al. 1998; Bengtsson 2016). It can be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies. Quantitative content analysis has its origin in media research, while qualitative content analysis has its roots originally in social research (Bengtsson 2016). In quantitative content analysis, facts from the script are presented as frequency stated as a percentage or actual numbers of key categories (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002). This method is useful when the researcher seeks to summarise rather than give details regarding the text and seeks to answer questions about “how many?” (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002). With qualitative content analysis, data is presented in words and themes, which makes it possible to draw some understanding of the results (Bengtsson 2016).

Lieblich et al. (1998: 12) have advanced a measurement that considers the unit of analysis and hermeneutical approach when developing an appropriate narrative research model. These units of analysis range from extracting a section from a complete text (categorical analysis) to taking the narrative as a whole (holistic analysis). My research made use of the *categorical-content approach* to collect and analyse civil society narratives of electoral violence from the reports

of the four NGOs. These reports, as highlighted earlier in this article, were selected from six months prior to a particular election and three months after the election date. These include monthly reports of violence, ad hoc reports presenting analysis of electoral violence, and workshop reports in which the violence that occurred in the period under review is discussed. The electoral periods under review in my study were the 2000 parliamentary elections, 2002 presidential elections, 2005 parliamentary and House of Assembly elections, and the 2008 and 2013 harmonised elections respectively. Ad hoc reports on transitional justice by these four organisations during the period under review will also be reviewed.

The narratives presented by civil society organisations in their reports and analysis seldom capture entire life stories (as would be of interest in a 'holistic analysis') but largely contain narrations of the violent occurrence that is of interest to the particular report. Hence categorical-content analysis in which "categories of the studied topic are defined, separate utterances in the text extracted, classified and gathered into these categories" is used in this research (Lieblich et al. 1998: 12).

While these reports and other sources of public engagement by the organisations provided an important overview of how civil society organisations have shaped the narrative of violence, it is important to note that the examination of these written texts was only a partial reflection of the narrative of electoral violence in Zimbabwe and this narrative is skewed by virtue of operating in the public domain and being designed for a particular audience (Christie 2012). For this reason, structured in-depth interviews were also conducted with employees of the organisations (former and current), and selected stakeholders, in order to better understand how these narratives of violence are constructed.

## The process of carrying out content analysis

According to Lieblich et al. (1998), there are four steps in categorical-content analysis, which are the *selection of the subtext*; *definition of content categories*; *setting of material into categories*, and finally, *drawing conclusions*. Similarly, Bengtsson (2016: 9-10) also outlines four stages in the content analysis process: *Decontextualisation* – *Identify meaning units* – create code list; *Recontextualization* – include "content" – exclude "dross" *Distance*; *Categorisation* – identify homogeneous groups and triangulation by investigators; and *Compilation* – draw realistic conclusions. For the purposes of the research that was carried out, the process outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998) was used as it provided the researcher with clearer descriptions and parameters as guidelines to carry out the study.

## Selection of subtext

In the first stage of content analysis, on the basis of a research question or hypothesis, all pertinent sections of a text are marked and assembled to form “a new file or subtext which can be seen as the content universe of the subject studied” (Lieblich et al. 1998: 113). In this study, sections talking about electoral violence, organised violence and torture, as well as redress, were highlighted and compiled. In the reports reviewed by the researcher, much of these categories were already highlighted through subheadings; hence very little text was discarded. These subsections were withdrawn from the total context of the life story and treated independently by the civil society organisations. However, interpretation of the results is validated or facilitated by parts of the material that remains outside of the selected subtext, including the political and socio-economic context at the time (Lieblich et al. 1998). When the research question leads the researcher to choose a source that enables the teller to focus on the relevant material (and not focus on the complete life story), all the obtained text can be taken as data for the content analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998: 113). This is the case for this study, as civil society reports focused on specific events of violence documented from individuals affected by violence, while drawing conclusions from their own analysis based on international norms of human rights and law.

## Definition of content categories

Bengtsson (2016) highlights that as part of the content analysis process, the researcher has to choose whether the analysis is to be a manifest analysis or a latent analysis. In a manifest analysis, the researcher describes what words the informants actually use in the text and describes what is clear and obvious in the text, while in latent analysis researcher seeks to find the underlying meaning of the text (Bengtsson 2016). The research I carried out largely used manifest analysis, highlighting the contents of the texts, which are largely perceived to be factual due to the nature of civil society reports. Some aspects of latent analysis may, however, have been used. These modes of analysis were used in the selection of content categories.

The content categories are the various themes or perspectives cut across the selected subtext (from the first stage) and provide a means of classifying its units. These can be words, sentences or groups of sentences that can be predefined by theories that may provide a reason to look for opposite claims (Lieblich et al. 1998). The research used both theoretical and empirical categories drawn from the text. By highlighting the dominant themes and concerns within these narratives, the research seeks to capture the dominant narratives on electoral violence presented by civil society, as well as understand the meanings these civil society organisations attach to violence.

## Sorting material into categories

According to Lieblich et al. (1998), at this stage, separate sentences and utterances are assigned to the relevant categories. These may include utterances from different sources of text. This process of defining content categories can be done by more than one researcher independently to allow for the calculation of “inter-judge reliability” where required, or it can be done jointly to allow greater understanding of the text (Lieblich et al. 1998: 114). For this research, it was done by one researcher who decided which units were to be considered. The biases inherent in having one researcher carrying out this purpose were largely managed by the violence, perpetrators and victims being clearly categorised in most of the reviewed reports.

## Drawing conclusions from the results

In content analysis, the sentences from each category can be counted, tabulated, ordered by frequency or subjected to various statistical computations in accordance with the research aims and nature of the question (Lieblich et al. 1998: 114). Each category can be used descriptively to formulate a “picture of the content universe” (Lieblich et al. 1998: 114). This “picture of the content universe” was presented as key themes that emerged in the narratives from the reports as well as in-depth interviews (see Matshaka 2022).

To reiterate, this reflection on the research process does not seek to rehash the key findings that have already been presented in other research outputs (for example, Matshaka 2022); however it is important to note that these findings reflected the importance of narratives in their multiple forms and uses to transitional justice research. Having gone through this systematic analysis of written narratives, through triangulation with in-depth interviews to unpack the unravelling of the transitional justice trajectory of Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2013, one of the key findings of the research was the key role played by narratives and the battles for narrative dominance in shaping the trajectory of transitional justice and the design of its policy responses to violence and trauma in society.

## Conclusion

In this article I reflected on the use of narratives as a gateway to the study of transitional justice using the case of Zimbabwean civil society narratives of electoral violence between 2000-2013. I reflect on the methods I used to analyse the individual experiences of political violence that have been woven together by civil society into a collective narrative and advocacy strategy for transitional justice. From the analysis of these reports by civil society organisations and in-

depth interviews carried out for the study, understandings of the trajectory of transitional justice in Zimbabwe were drawn, opening the research to the nuances that can only be drawn by understanding the context as part of a 'storied world'.

The importance of narratives to learn about transitional justice can be argued to be in the unlocking of the understanding of transitional justice beyond its policy relevance in transforming post-conflict societies. Beyond the policy aspirations of transitional justice, narratives, through interpretivist approaches to examining them, unlock the complexities of post-conflict societies by taking into account, histories, and relationships that exist in these societies. These are key concerns of transitional justice which may not be adequately captured by policy making processes and policy research that do not thoroughly engage with the storied lives of those impacted by violence. Narratives thereby present researchers with the opportunity to stitch together not only the stories of violence and coercion, but allow transitional justice research to question the root causes of violence, and project future trajectories for peace and resolution of past grievances, in more nuanced ways.

## Acknowledgement

This work is based on the research supported by the National Institute for The Humanities and Social Sciences.

## References

- ADAMS TE. 2008. A review of narrative ethics. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14(2): 175-94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800407304417>
- BENGTSSON M. 2016. How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlusOpen*.2:8-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001>
- BERE D AND MAGUCHU P. 2014. Unpacking the mandate of Zimbabwe's peace commission. *Justice Matters*. 18 September. Available at: <http://justicemat.terzimbabwe.blogspot.com/2014/09/unpacking-mandate-of-nprc.html>. [accessed 10 January 2022].
- BOSHA S. 2014. Addressing past injustices in a wounded Zimbabwe: Gukurahundi. *Beyond Intractability*. May. Available at: <https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/addressing-injustice-zimbabwe> [accessed 15 June 2022].
- BURD G. 1991. A critique of two decades of agenda-setting research. In: D Proress and ME McCombs (eds). *Agenda setting: readings on media, public opinion, and policymaking*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.



- CHABVUTA T. 2006. Exploring transitional justice for past human rights violations: the case of Zimbabwe. Unpublished Master's thesis. Institute of Transitional Justice, University of Ulster.
- CHASE SE. 2005. Narrative inquiry: multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In: NK Denzin and YS Lincoln (eds). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- CHRISTIE R. 2012. *Peacebuilding and NGOs: state-civil society interactions*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203096536>
- CRESWELL JW AND POTH CN. 2016. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- CZARNIAWSKA B. 2004. *Narratives in social science research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209502>
- DOWNE-WAMBOLDT B. 1992. Content analysis: method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International* 13(3): 313-321. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399339209516006>
- EPEL S AND RAFTOPOULOS B. 2008. *Political crisis, mediation and the prospects for transitional justice in Zimbabwe*. Cape Town: IDASA.
- GAD U. 2012. Concepts of dialogue as counterterrorism: narrating the self-reform of the Muslim other. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5(2): 159-178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2012.677250>
- GRAEF J, DA SILVA R AND LEMAY-HEBERT N. 2018. Narrative, political violence and social change. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43(6): 1-21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1452701>
- GRØDUM K. 2012. *Narrative justice: a study of transitional justice in Cambodia discussed on the basis of elements from Paul Ricoeur's philosophy*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Kristiansand: University of Agder.
- JACOBS RN. 2000. *Race, media, and the crisis of civil society: From Watts to Rodney King*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489211>
- KRIPPENDORFF K. 2004. Reliability in content analysis: some common misconceptions and recommendations. *Human Communication Research* 30(3): 411-433. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00738.x>
- KRITZ N. 2009. Policy implications of empirical research on transitional justice. In: H Van der Merwe, V Baxter and AR Chapman (eds). *Assessing the impact of transitional justice: challenges for empirical research*. Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press.
- LIEBLICH A, TUVAL-MASHIACH R AND ZILBER T. 1998. *Narrative research: reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412985253>

- MARINGIRA G AND GUKURUME S. 2022. Youth political mobilization: violence, intimidation, and patronage in Zimbabwe. *Political Psychology* 43(6): 1027-1041. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12799>
- MATSHAKA CG. 2022. *Civil society narratives of violence and shaping the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- MATSHAKA C AND WIELENGA C. 2022. Who is being served? How competing norms and values shape the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe. *Politikon* 49(1): 60-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2022.2031771>
- MCCLELLAND K. 2014. Cycles of conflict: a computational modeling alternative to Collins's theory of conflict escalation. *Sociological Theory* 32(2): 100-127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275114536387>
- MC COMBS ME AND SHAW DL. 1993. The evolution of agenda-setting research: twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. *Journal of communication* 43(2): 58-67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01262.x>
- NEUENDORF K. 2002. Defining content analysis. In: K Neundorf (ed). *Content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- NYAROTA G. 2006. *Against the grain: memoirs of a Zimbabwean newsman*. Cape Town: Zebra.
- POLKINGHORNE DE. 1995. Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 8(1): 5-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103>
- PORTER E. 2016. Gendered narratives: stories and silences in transitional justice. *Human Rights Review* 17: 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-015-0389-8>
- RIESSMAN CK. 1993. *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- ROHT-ARRIAZA N. 2006. The new landscape of transitional justice. In: N Roht-Arriaza and M Javier (eds). *Transitional justice in the twenty-first century: beyond truth versus justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511617911>
- SACHIKONYE L. 2011. *When a state turns on its citizens: 60 years of institutionalised violence in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Weaver Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk3gm03>
- SKULTANS V. 2002. *The testimony of lives: narrative and memory in post-Soviet Latvia*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203445013>
- STRAUS S AND TAYLOR C. 2009. Democratization and electoral violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007. In: S Chambers and BW Jentleson (eds). *American Political Science Association (APSA) 2009 Toronto Annual Meeting Article*.
- VAN DER MERWE H AND BRANKOVIC J. 2018. *advocating transitional justice in Africa: The role of civil society*. New York: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70417-3>