

## Self-Reported Psychosocial Consequences of Testifying in a War Crimes Tribunal in Sierra Leone

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Interviews were conducted with 147 witnesses (109 men, 38 women) after they had testified in the Special Court for Sierra Leone, a tribunal jointly established by the United Nations and the Sierra Leonean government to prosecute individuals accused of bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the country's civil war. Participants were asked to describe changes, for better or worse, they had experienced since testifying. Responses were examined using content analysis. More than 4 of 5 witnesses described the consequences of testifying as primarily positive (vs. negative or neutral). Further, more than 3 times as many positive as negative consequences were mentioned. The benefit mentioned most often was a feeling of having unburdened oneself. About 1 in 5 witnesses reported that testifying had resulted in long-term reductions in sadness, anxiety, anger, and/or intrusive posttraumatic stress symptoms. A small minority of witnesses portrayed the psychosocial consequences of testifying as primarily negative. Also, approximately 1 in 5 respondents mentioned concerns about safety, and 1 in 10 reported deterioration in a social relationship. Victims mentioned different types of consequences, and a greater number of positive consequences, than nonvictim witnesses. In contrast to the view that testifying about atrocities is inherently retraumatizing, the vast majority of respondents did not report retraumatization from having testified. Further, most respondents reported that testifying had yielded important psychosocial rewards.

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The past decade has seen a growing trend to establish war crimes tribunals as a method for holding wartime perpetrators accountable and for helping post-conflict societies reestablish the rule of law. Questions about the psychosocial consequences of testifying in these tribunals, however, have received scant attention. Such questions are important to explore, for ethical, pragmatic, and conceptual reasons.

Herman (1992, 2003) argued that although participation in trials may exacerbate sequelae of traumatic events, it may also yield important psychological rewards. In particular, victims may gain a sense of empowerment by helping to prevent future offenses, by challenging impunity, and from the public acknowledgment of their suffering. O'Connell (2005) presented a model for specific ways that prosecutions of human rights violators might yield psychological benefits for victims, but he also argued that in some instances testifying might be deleterious. Similarly, Henry (2009) asserted that "while valorizing the 'healing powers' of international criminal trials is problematic, dismissing the possibility that victims can derive positive benefits from testifying . . . is also problematic, serving to deny both victim agency and resiliency" (p. 5).

The relatively few empirical studies on the consequences of testifying in transitional justice settings (e.g., tribunals, truth commissions) have yielded inconsistent findings. Several researchers have described positive consequences (De la Rey & Owens, 1998; Hamber, 2009; Hayner, 2001; Minow, 1998), including the psychological benefits of being listened to, of obtaining public acknowledgment of victimization, and of having contributed to societal awareness about human rights abuses.

Stover (2005), in interviews with 87 prosecution witnesses from the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), found that for about three-quarters, the self-described impact of testifying had been primarily positive. Witnesses felt that their suffering had been acknowledged and that they had fulfilled a moral obligation to speak on behalf of those who were killed. Some, however, reported negative consequences.

Similarly, in a report based on retrospective interviews with 14 child witnesses from the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), and with child protection officials, the experience of

testifying was described as "primarily positive" (Sanin & Stirnemann, 2006, p. 36). Likewise, Stepakoff (2006a) argued that for most SCSL witnesses, the process of verbalizing traumatic experiences appeared to have psychologically reparative functions.

Stepakoff (2008) presented a case study of a SCSL witness who described the consequences of testifying in substantially positive terms. In an article based on an internal program evaluation at the SCSL (Horn, Vahidy, & Charters, 2011), most respondents reported that they had felt very secure, and were very satisfied with the security services they had received, at the time of their testimony. However, the evaluation instrument may have been biased toward eliciting positive ratings, because the items inquired about respondents' feelings of "satisfaction" and "security" but not about their "dissatisfaction" or "insecurity."

Ilic (2004), drawing on observations of victim-witnesses in war crimes trials in Croatia, asserted that testifying has a "healing function" and is essentially a "therapeutic process" (p. 379). He suggested that the trial, and punishment of perpetrators, helped witnesses regain feelings of power, yet he also cautioned that testifying could worsen the victim's psychological state.

Consistent with Ilic's caveat, some studies of witnesses in transitional justice processes have reported negative consequences. Byrne (2004), in semistructured interviews with 30 South African victims who had given testimony in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), found that only 7 felt they had benefited from testifying. The main benefit mentioned was the opportunity to tell their stories in a public forum. The negative aspects mentioned included the physical and emotional stress of giving testimony, frustrations with the TRC bureaucracy, and unfulfilled expectations.

Similarly, Brounéus (2008), in in-depth interviews with 16 genocide survivors who had testified in the Rwandan *gacaca* (community-based courts established in 2001 to promote truth-telling and justice regarding the 1994 genocide), found that for all respondents, testifying involved "intense psychological suffering . . . , and 5 could not complete their testimonies due to severe psychological ill-health. . . . None of the 16 interviewees viewed their participation as a healing experience" (p. 71). Brounéus

(2010) reported similar findings in a survey sample of 1200 Rwandans: *gacaca* witnesses suffered from higher levels of psychological ill-health than survey participants who had not testified in the *gacaca*, even when controlling for factors associated with depression and post-traumatic stress.

A more nuanced picture was presented in a later study of 8 women who testified in the *gacaca* (Funkeson, Schroder, Nzabonimpa, & Holmqvist, 2011). All reported having felt psychological distress while giving testimony. For a few interviewees, however, trauma and anxiety symptoms diminished the more times they provided testimony. Further, most described a sense of deep relief, and reported that they felt that they had undergone positive psychological change, as a result of telling their story in the *gacaca*.

Although a large-scale study of International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) witnesses has not yet been conducted, testifying in the ICTR may have had different psychosocial consequences than testifying in the *gacaca*. For example, Neuffer (2001) interviewed an ICTR witness who reportedly found it empowering to testify, despite having experienced some negative consequences.

Consistent with Neuffer's observations, most studies suggest that testifying has both positive and negative aspects. The Amani Trust (2002), in interviews with 33 witnesses who testified in the High Court of Zimbabwe regarding organized violence and torture, described many positive features (e.g., "I was happy to be afforded [the opportunity] to say out what happened to me and what I felt," p. 9), along with discomfiting aspects: fears of placing themselves or their loved ones at risk, and cultural beliefs that traumatic experiences should only be revealed in confidential settings. A mixture of positive and negative consequences was also described in a qualitative study of 10 victims of wartime sexual violence who either testified in the SCSL or were chosen to testify but later dropped because of a judicial ban on testimony about gender-based violence in one trial (Staggs-Kelsall & Stepakoff, 2007).

In focus group discussions with 70 victims of apartheid-era human rights violations who had testified in the TRC's public hearings, given a statement to the TRC, or had done neither, Backer (2004, 2006) reported that many wit-

nesses appreciated being able to tell their stories and document their suffering. In interviews with 27 apartheid survivors who had participated in TRC amnesty hearings, similar benefits were described (Phakathi & van der Merwe, 2008). In all three studies, respondents voiced disappointment that expectations for financial reparations and information about the fate of their loved ones had not been fulfilled.

One study of South African TRC witnesses showed an absence of any notable consequences (Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, & Zungu-Dirwayi, 2001). That study examined statistical correlations among measures (e.g., of depression, anxiety, etc.). It is possible that a different pattern of findings might emerge if witnesses were asked to verbally describe their thoughts and feelings regarding the consequences of having testified.

Beginning not long before the SCSL trials commenced, and for a period of time operating concurrent with the SCSL, Sierra Leone also had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC), intended to promote public truth telling, forgiveness, and reintegration of former combatants. The SLTRC was not vested with the power to investigate and prosecute offenses, nor punish perpetrators. Although the South African TRC has been far more extensively researched than has the SLTRC, in the few existing studies of the latter, each of which used ethnographic methods, researchers concluded that there were no notable psychosocial benefits from testifying (Kelsall, 2005; Millar, 2011; Shaw, 2005, 2007). All three of these researchers argued that the SLTRC process (e.g., verbal disclosures in public settings) was incongruent with Sierra Leonean cultural norms. These researchers argued that in the Sierra Leonean context, indigenous practices that promote forgiveness and social forgetting had greater value to the majority of the population than did public testimony.

Allen (2008), however, an anthropologist who has worked extensively in Northern Uganda and who conducted post-conflict research in that region, provided a trenchant critique of the view that indigenous accountability processes are preferable to juridical intervention (e.g., by the International Criminal Court). Allen argued that "the merits of reifying local rituals . . . have been oversold and the dangers under-appreciated" (p. 47). Further, he main-

tained that there was far greater support for prosecutions of leaders suspected of war crimes than proponents of traditional ceremonies had acknowledged.

Though the above-described anthropological and ethnographic studies constitute important contributions to the literature, most research on testifying in transitional justice processes is characterized by small samples and/or survey approaches using predetermined categories. We felt that a large study using content analysis of open-ended interviews would enrich existing knowledge. The present study was intended to meet this challenge by using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the self-reported consequences of testifying in a large sample of witnesses. Additionally, we sought to generate conceptual categories after first obtaining witnesses' narrative responses. Thus, we aimed to capture the wide variety of psychosocial consequences and some of the subtle distinctions among them.

Also, previous research on the self-reported consequences of testifying has focused on victims. By contrast, we sought to include both victims and "insiders." The insider witnesses were members of the armed factions whose senior leaders were on trial. This is an important issue given that in many war crimes trials a large proportion of witnesses are insiders (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2012). This is also important for theory. For example, significant differences in self-described motivations for testifying were found in a recent article focusing on reasons for testifying reported by 200 SCSL witnesses (Stepakoff, Reynolds, Charters, & Henry, 2014): victims were more likely to report that they testified to denounce wrongs that had been committed against them, whereas insiders were more likely to report that they testified to explain their involvement in the war. These differing motivations could, in turn, be associated with different patterns of perceived consequences of having testified. Lastly, many researchers who have argued that witnesses are retraumatized by testifying have focused narrowly on the period during which the witness is in court, and its immediate aftermath. We felt that a longer-term approach would yield new insights.

The purpose of this research was to learn about the psychosocial consequences of testifying in a war crimes tribunal, as perceived and

described by the witnesses themselves. The research questions were primarily driven by issues that are commonly raised in extant research and practice. More specifically, we were interested in whether witnesses felt that testifying had affected their psychosocial well-being adversely, and, particularly for victim witnesses, whether they felt that they had been retraumatized by testifying. We were also interested in whether witnesses might describe improvements in their psychosocial well-being as a consequence of testifying. We felt that the latter view was plausible in light of existing theories on the psychological importance of catharsis and of the verbal representation of memories and emotions (Laub, 1992; Simpson, 2007; Weine, 2006).

The specific research questions we examined were as follows: (a) What kinds of psychosocial consequences of testifying do SCSL witnesses describe?; (b) What are the relative frequencies of perceived positive versus negative consequences?; (c) Are there differences in self-reported short- versus long-term consequences of testifying?; (d) Do the self-described consequences of testifying vary by witness type (victim vs. insider)?; (e) Is there evidence that witnesses are "retraumatized" by testifying?; (f) Is there evidence that witnesses psychologically benefit from testifying?

## Method

### Participants

A total of 147 witnesses who had testified in the SCSL were interviewed between June 2005 and July 2007, representing nearly half of all witnesses who had completed their testimony. The original goal was to interview all witnesses who had completed their testimony, by scheduling follow-up missions to specific geographic regions of the country. The sequence of geographic regions was chosen based on practical exigencies, such as availability of interpreters for the relevant languages in the region, weather and road conditions, ability to combine the follow-up visits with other required tasks, and so forth. After approximately 18 months of data collection, the tribunal's priorities changed, such that it became increasingly difficult to mobilize the funds, vehicles, and staff needed to

complete additional interviews. Therefore, we were not able to interview all witnesses.

Interviewees were contacted in person or by phone, by SCSL Witness and Victims Section (WVS) psychosocial support officers whom they already knew and trusted. For security reasons, all interviews were conducted at specially arranged private indoor locations. Examples included safe houses in locations known only to support officers, WVS staff offices, and rooms in guest-houses that had contracts with the WVS. When necessary, witnesses were provided with transportation, or funds for self-transport, to interview locations. When appropriate quietness and privacy could be arranged, interviews were also conducted in the witness's home.

The data analyzed for this study consisted of responses from 160 interviews. Eleven witnesses were interviewed twice, and one witness was interviewed three times. For those 12 witnesses, duplicate responses given at different times by the same witness were excluded, whereas any new responses that shed additional light on the consequences of testifying were included. A total of 93 witnesses were interviewed between 2 and 24 months post-testimony, and 54 were interviewed within the first month after testifying.

We used a 1-month cut-off for the short-term interviews because most witnesses came to Freetown (the country's capital) from remote provinces to be housed by the SCSL for some weeks before testifying, and typically remained in the witness safe houses for some days after testifying, for practical and logistical reasons. Thus, in many instances, the first week after testifying constituted a time period that the witness was still housed by the SCSL, whereas by two months post-testimony, most witnesses had returned home, resumed their routines, and re-integrated into their communities. Further, drawing on the idea that shortly after testifying witnesses might experience acute emotional distress, we felt that a month constituted a reasonable period of time for such potential immediate reactions to subside, whereas those that persisted for more than two months could be conceptualized as longer-term reactions.

The demographic and witness-type variables are depicted in Table 1. As shown therein, 74% of the sample were men, and 26% were women. The sample contained a higher percentage of

Table 1  
*Sample of Witnesses for This Study Across Demographic and Witness-Type Variables*

Variable	%	n
Gender		
Male	74	109
Female	26	38
Age		
17-30	22	29
31-40	25	34
41-50	24	33
51 and over	29	39
Language of interview <sup>a</sup>		
Krio	65	95
Mende	12	18
Temne	4	6
Kono	1	2
Fula	1	1
Mandingo	1	1
English	6	9
Side		
Prosecution	57	84
Defense	43	63
Trial <sup>b</sup>		
CDF	30	44
RUF	27	40
AFRC	49	72
Witness type		
Victim	79	116
Insider	18	26
Child ex-combatant	3	5
Time since testifying		
30 days or less	37	54
More than 60 days	63	93

<sup>a</sup> Language of interview was not listed for 15 of the interviews. <sup>b</sup> A total of 10 witnesses participated in more than one trial. Nine witnesses testified in both the RUF and the AFRC trial. One witness testified in both the RUF and the CDF trial.

women than that which characterized the total number of witnesses who had completed their testimony at the time of the study. More specifically, of the witnesses who had completed their testimony at the time data collection was completed, approximately 82% were men and 18% were women. Of the total SCSL witnesses who testified in the three trials comprising this study, approximately 90% were men.

The sample included 116 war crimes victims, 26 insiders (former members of the armed factions on trial), and 5 child ex-combatants (the latter were conceptualized as simultaneously victims and insiders). Witness gender and victimization status were confounded in the data.

More specifically, all insiders were men and nearly all female witnesses were victims. This is congruent with the larger population of SCSL witnesses.

### Procedure

Stepakoff (first author) was the psychologist for the SCSL during the 26 months that the data for this study were collected. She designed a post-testimony interview measure, and supervised the administration of this measure. In addition to inquiring about the psychosocial consequences of testifying, the measure included questions about witnesses' overall physical and mental health, motivations for testifying, and views on the most positive and most difficult aspects of their courtroom experience.

As part of the WVS mandate, after completing their testimony witnesses were routinely administered an interview designed to assess their posttrial functioning. These interviews were conducted by a multicultural team of skilled Sierra Leonean support workers, under the close supervision of the first author. Her internal position allowed for access to witness contact information that would not have been available to external researchers.

Though the fact that the study was conducted by SCSL staff may be viewed as posing some disadvantages (e.g., that interviewers might unintentionally filter out negative perceptions), there was no other option for conducting extensive research with SCSL witnesses: the identities and locations of most witnesses were known only to WVS staff, WVS interns, and SCSL investigators and attorneys. For security reasons, persons from outside institutions or the general public were not permitted to obtain witnesses' contact information. Further, for witnesses to feel safe and confident enough to speak candidly, it was essential for the interviewers to be persons whom they already knew and trusted. Thus, the internal position of the interviewers could also be viewed as an advantage.

The WVS included staff with fluency in more than 12 local (ethnic) languages, comprising all languages spoken by respondents. All witness support workers were also fluent in English. The support workers were experienced and skilled in talking with witnesses and in providing language interpretation between English

and local languages, because before conducting interviews, they had spent at least several months providing interpretation for witnesses during initial contacts with investigators, in multiple preparatory sessions with attorneys, at safe houses, during medical appointments, and in meetings between witnesses and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the witness. In most instances, the interviewer was alone with the witness, though in some interviews, an additional WVS support worker was also present. As many local languages are primarily oral, and staff were generally more comfortable writing in English, the interviewer translated the response into English and wrote the response in English, question by question, as the interview progressed. Then, the interviewer read the response back to the witness in the witness's preferred language, and asked whether the written words had captured the witness's response accurately and completely. The witness then had an opportunity to correct any inaccuracies and to add any information that had not been fully captured. Most interviews lasted approximately 2 hours. Responses were written by hand rather than using audiotapes or computers to enhance respondents' level of comfortableness, given that most witnesses came from rural areas and were not familiar with audio-recording or computers.

Prospective participants were told about the dual nature of the interview (routine follow-up, and empirical research), and provided their informed consent. More specifically, witnesses were informed that their responses would be used to assess whether they had been harmed by their participation in the trials, as well as to generate knowledge about the experiences of witnesses in tribunals, to be published in the form of articles, reports, and/or books. All witnesses who were contacted gave their informed consent to participate. As part of the consent process, interviewers emphasized that witnesses were free to decline participation, and that the provision of psychosocial assistance would not be linked with participation or nonparticipation. Further, interviewers underscored participants' right to end the interview at any time, and to decline to answer questions they did not wish to answer.

In most instances, interviewing witnesses required that the support workers travel to remote areas of the country on difficult roads under challenging security conditions. Further, the 3 trials in which the witnesses had testified were all of long duration (i.e., between 21 and 48 months). Thus, the specific time between completion of testimony and post-testimony interview varied based on practical exigencies such as weather, availability of staff and vehicles, the schedule of trial recesses, and so forth. Data collection began in June 2005, with more than 90% of the interviews completed by February 2007.

Responses written on the interview forms were later typed onto a computer by the interviewer or by other WVS staff in consultation with the interviewer. When all of the responses had been entered, the first author read through all 160 interviews several times, and on this basis, created a preliminary coding scheme that contained a code for every type of positive, negative, or neutral psychosocial consequence mentioned. Then, the first and third author met several times, together with a Sierra Leonean research assistant, to further develop the scheme and to ensure that it was comprehensive and culturally sensitive. (See the *Supplemental Materials* online for examples of actual responses that corresponded to each code.)

Next, the first and second authors met for several hours, for the purpose of elucidating the meaning of each code. Then, the second author reviewed the coding scheme and some responses that had been completed at that stage. The first and second authors met again to further explicate the meaning of each concept, and to discuss whether all of the coding categories were conceptually distinguishable.

Next, the first and second authors spent approximately one year independently coding the interview responses. All coding was done in English, by native English speakers. While the second author coded the interview responses, he attempted to find whether there were any responses that did not fit into any of the existing codes. Such responses were coded as "other." Shortly thereafter, the first and second authors discussed the items that had been coded as "other." In that discussion, it became clear that some of the second author's "other" codings actually fit under existing codes. Accordingly, the second author recoded some of the "other"

codings. Each of the remaining "other" codings was unique.

### Instrumentation

As part of the above-described extensive, post-testimony interview, witnesses were asked several of the following questions designed to assess changes, for better or for worse, they had experienced since testifying:

How have you been in the months since you testified, and how are you currently?

What has changed for you as a result of having testified?

Has anything gotten better or easier for you since you testified?

Has anything gotten harder or worse for you since you testified?

Do you notice any changes in yourself as a result of giving testimony?

How has your mood been in the months since you testified?

Has being a witness had any impact on your emotional health?

Has anything changed inside your heart [cultural definition: your mind or emotions] as a result of giving testimony?

Compared to how you felt before you testified, are you now thinking about the things that happened in the war more often than before, less often than before, or the same amount as before?

Do you now feel more sad about these things than you did before you testified, less sad than before, or the same amount as before?

Do you now feel more angry about these things than you did before you testified, less angry than before, or the same amount as before?

The minor differences in wording across some of the closely related questions reflect the fact that over the course of the study, small improvements to the interview were made to more reliably tap psychosocial consequences of testifying. All witnesses who were asked whether anything had gotten better or easier since testifying were also asked whether anything had gotten harder or worse. All pertinent responses to the above questions were coded for psychosocial consequences of testifying.

Additionally, a variable designed to measure the overall valence of the psychosocial consequences of testifying described in each inter-

view was created by adding the number of positive consequences mentioned within the interview record and subtracting the number of negative consequences mentioned within that record and then categorizing the difference into three levels: negative, neutral, or positive. This *valence* variable reflected the predominance of positivity versus negativity of the consequences of testifying for each interview.

The interview also assessed several demographic and witness-type variables. These included witness victimization status, gender, and age. Age was categorized as less than 30 years old, 31–40, 41–50, and over 50. Using court documentation, each participant was coded based on witness type. *Insiders* were defined as witnesses who had been members of one of the three factions who were being prosecuted in the Court, and who had been involved in these factions' activities. In virtually all instances, insiders were admitted participants in war crimes but were not at risk of being prosecuted, because of a general amnesty combined with the fact that the Court's mandate centered only on "those who bear the greatest responsibility," namely, alleged senior commanders. *Victim-witnesses* were victims of one or more war crimes who were not perpetrators or insiders. *Child combatants* were defined as individuals who were abducted into one or more of the armed forces prior to the age of 15. In keeping with well-documented facts about the Sierra Leone conflict, child combatants were categorized as both victims and insiders, hence they were excluded from the analysis of victimization status. Because of the gender–victimization confound in the data and the absence of female insiders, witnesses were classified as female-victim, male-victim, or male-insider.

### Analysis Procedure

Based on the totality of responses, we created a coding scheme to represent the full range of psychosocial consequences. The first and second author independently coded all of the responses to the relevant questions. Cohen's kappa coefficients were calculated to estimate the coders' agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Psychosocial consequences of testifying are described in terms of the frequencies of responses in each category.

Response-code variables were created by assigning a code of 1 if the response was given during the interview and 0 if the response was not given. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to examine whether each of these response-code variables was independent of demographic and witness-type variables. Chi-square analyses were also used to analyze the associations between witnesses' perceived consequences of testifying and the time of interview. Independent-samples *t* tests were conducted to see whether the valence of responding differed across these demographic and time variables. On all of the statistical tests, alpha was set at .05.

## Results

### Intercoder Agreement

An estimate of intercoder agreement was computed using comparisons between every code given by both coders. The results showed a substantial amount of agreement (Cohen's  $\kappa = .63$ ). An alternate method of estimating agreement between the coders was computed, which entailed excluding extra codes from responses that were given more codes by the second coder than the first coder. In that computation method, the results also showed substantial agreement (Cohen's  $\kappa = .72$ ).

The valence ratings were then cross-tabulated to estimate the agreement between the two coders. This analysis indicated that there was an outstanding amount of agreement between the two coders regarding the determination of the positivity, negativity, or neutrality of the response (Cohen's  $\kappa = .87$ ). Given this substantial intercoder agreement, the results reported here are based on the first author's categorizations.

### Response Complexity

A total of 616 responses were coded from the 8 questions assessing self-reported consequences of testifying. Witnesses gave between 1 and 11 responses to the set of open-ended questions. Only 24 witnesses gave a response that was characterized by a single code. Most participants mentioned between two and five distinct consequences of testifying. Witnesses interviewed within one month of testifying gave



significantly fewer responses ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) than did witnesses who were interviewed more than 2 months after testifying ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ),  $t(150) = 6.12$ ,  $p < .001$ .

There were 65 coded categories of responses (including codes for "other, positive" "other, negative" and neutral responses). The categories, and their corresponding frequencies, are presented in Table 2. About two thirds (66%; 43 of 65) of the response categories comprised positive consequences of testifying, whereas only slightly more than a quarter (28%; 18 of 65) of the response categories comprised negative consequences. Additionally, there were 4 categories of neutral responses (e.g., self-reported absence of impact). Further, nearly four of five (78%; 479 of 616) of the total responses referred to positive psychosocial consequences of testifying, whereas only 15% (92 of 616) of the responses referred to negative consequences of testifying.

### Valence of Responses

Combining the short- and long-term interviews, 11 respondents reported an overall negative valence (i.e., 11 witnesses described a greater number of negative than positive consequences of testifying), 14 reported a neutral or mixed (ambivalent) valence, and 122 reported an overall positive valence (i.e., 122 respondents described a greater number of positive than negative consequences). Thus, for most witnesses (83%), the self-described consequences of testifying were primarily positive. Further, among respondents who did not report clear positive consequences, a greater number described the consequences of testifying in neutral or mixed terms than in clearly negative terms.

On the long-term interviews, respondents reported a significantly more positive valence ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ) than on the short-term interviews ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $F(1, 150) = 9.73$ ,  $p = .002$ . Also, victim witnesses reported a more positive valence ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 2.35$ ) than did insider witnesses ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ),  $t(155) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .017$ .

### Positive Consequences

The most common positive consequence, mentioned by 39% of the witnesses (57 out of 147), was a feeling of having unburdened one-

self, described as a sense of relief that resulted from overcoming previous silence and telling one's story. Examples included the following:

*I never had a chance to explain to anyone the difficulties I'd gone through—only the Court allowed me to go and express.*

*What makes me feel good is that when I was hurt by these people, at that time there was no chance to tell them that what they had done to me was bad. But when the Court gave me that opportunity to explain what my difficulties were . . . I felt good.*

*I know I have cleared up my mind. The things I stored in my heart for a long time I was able to tell the Court.*

*There is now a peace of mind in me having expressed my feelings by telling the court my experience. . . . I think all that was burdening me and troubling my heart have been poured out, so what remains in me is that of a mild and peaceful heart.*

Approximately one fifth of all the responses referred to improvements in specific aspects of psychological functioning. Namely, about 20% of the witnesses reported at least one of the following: increased happiness ( $n = 36$ ), greater peace of mind ( $n = 33$ ), reductions in posttraumatic stress (PTS) symptoms (e.g., nightmares/intrusive images/war-related memories) ( $n = 31$ ), less sadness ( $n = 30$ ), and less anger ( $n = 28$ ). Altogether, these self-reported reductions in depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and anger accounted for 26.5% of all the responses given to the questions on psychosocial consequences of testifying. Examples included the following:

*Now I do not think about it as often as I used to. Before, I was always sick because of the thinking [about the killing of my husband in the war]. Before, when I thought about my husband, I was tormented and was unable to do what I'm supposed to do. But now, it's much better, and I'm able to work in the market.*

*Before I testified, I had a lot of thinking [about what happened to me during the war], which caused me to lose weight. But after I testified I bucked up, due to the wealth of experience I have gotten from the court. I now feel relieved and I am myself once more. I now have peace of mind, putting behind me what I went through in the war.*

*Before the trial, I used to have these nightmares, terrible dreams, replaying these events. Memories would come back to me. But when I went to the Special Court, before testifying in the court, people were there to help me and encourage me. So when I returned back home again, I observed a great change in me; these terrible dreams, replaying these bad memories, stopped happening. It has not been happening any more since*

Table 2  
*Psychosocial Consequences of Testifying: Positive, Negative, and Neutral*

Category	Frequency	Percent of responses (N = 616)	Percent of witnesses (N = 147)
Positive response categories			
Feel unburdened, relief that my silence has been broken and my story has been told	57	9.25	38.78
Satisfaction/pride about having testified, sense of accomplishment	43	6.98	29.25
Increased happiness and hopefulness	36	5.84	24.49
Greater peace of mind, reductions in anxiety	33	5.36	22.45
Reductions in sadness/depression/emotional pain/tearfulness	30	4.87	20.41
Reductions in intrusive images/thoughts/nightmares/memories about the war	31	5.03	21.09
Less angry/irritable/hot-tempered	28	4.55	19.05
Relief that the testimony is over, and that it went smoothly	28	4.55	19.05
Confidence that the accused will be punished and that atrocities will not be committed again	19	3.08	12.93
Increased comfort with social interaction, increased self-confidence, increased feelings of courage/boldness/strength	18	2.92	12.24
Glad that the world now knows/cares what happened	11	1.79	7.48
Better quality of life due to medical assistance given by the court	11	1.79	7.48
Sense of being looked after and cared for by the court	10	1.62	6.80
Nonspecific positive effect (e.g., "I feel better than before," "I feel good about my testimony")	10	1.62	6.80
Better quality of life due to material assistance given by the court (Note: Material assistance includes relocation assistance, school fees, vocational training, housing assistance, etc.)	10	1.62	6.80
Improved sleep	8	1.30	5.44
Pleased about seeing the accused in custody	7	1.14	4.76
Increased ability to speak in public	7	1.14	4.76
Satisfaction/pride at having fulfilled my responsibility to my country	7	1.14	4.76
Relief at not having been arrested or detained	6	0.97	4.08
Feel good about having assisted the court (e.g., to learn about what happened, to reach a decision, etc.)	6	0.97	4.08
Increased participation in community organizations/activities	5	0.81	3.40
Better able to tell people what happened in the war, increased ability to tell my story without distress	5	0.81	3.40
Improvements in family relationships. If specified, indicate (a) Marital relationship, (b) Relationships with my children, (c) Relationship with my parent(s), (d) Other family relationships.	5	0.81	3.40
Sense of satisfaction at having spoken for, or fulfilled one's responsibility to, others who were wronged/hurt/killed in the war	5	0.81	3.40
Appreciate the way people from the court behaved toward me	5	0.81	3.40
Feel safer, decreased concerns about security	4	0.65	2.72
Reduced desire for vengeance, increased ability to forgive	4	0.65	2.72
Appreciate the interest in me shown by people from the court	4	0.65	2.72
Greater sense of responsibility for my actions	4	0.65	2.72
Fewer arguments/quarrels, get along better with people	3	0.49	2.04
Glad that I had the opportunity to explain/justify my behavior in the war	3	0.49	2.04
Other positive effect (I received many commendations; liked the change in environment; feel good the court is fighting my case)	3	0.49	2.04
Reduced feelings of shame/embarrassment/stigma	2	0.32	1.36
Sense of having cleared my conscience, feel less guilty for acts I committed during the war	2	0.32	1.36
Life has become more meaningful, feel more fully human	2	0.32	1.36
Improved ability to concentrate	1	0.16	0.68
Reduced use of cigarettes, alcohol, or other substances	1	0.16	0.68

Table 2 (continued)

Category	Frequency	Percent of responses (N = 616)	Percent of witnesses (N = 147)
Greater sense of connection to God, stronger religious sentiment	1	0.16	0.68
Feeling of having gained wider experience	1	0.16	0.68
Glad that I fulfilled my promise to testify	1	0.16	0.68
Feeling of triumph over wrong-doers	1	0.16	0.68
Relieved that I have not been subjected to threats or harassment	1	0.16	0.68
Negative response categories			
Feel less safe, increased concerns about security	32	5.19	21.77
Deterioration in relationships. <i>Specify:</i> (a) Friendships, (b) Relationships with neighbors, (c) Relationships with immediate family, (d) Relationships with extended family, (e) Former comrades feel betrayed, (f) Other relationships, (g) Spouse.	16	2.60	10.88
Increase in intrusive images/thoughts/nightmares/memories of the war	10	1.62	6.80
Disappointed with or concerned about level of material assistance provided by the court	7	1.14	4.76
Disappointment/frustration that testimony has not produced noticeable results (e.g., release of the accused, conviction of the accused)	6	0.97	4.08
Other negative effect	4	0.65	2.72
Negative effect on my ability to earn my living	3	0.49	2.04
Reduced participation in community organizations/activities	2	0.32	1.36
Disappointed that my contribution was not acknowledged	2	0.32	1.36
Financial loss	2	0.32	1.36
Increased tearfulness, crying	1	0.16	0.68
Worsened sleep	1	0.16	0.68
Reduced appetite	1	0.16	0.68
Anxiety about well-being of dependents or other relatives left behind when I came to testify	1	0.16	0.68
Nonspecific negative effect (e.g., "it made me become worried")	1	0.16	0.68
Disappointed by the way people from the court behaved toward me	1	0.16	0.68
Increase in body pains	1	0.16	0.68
Disappointed at not having been able to tell my story in my own way, or at not being able to talk about some things	1	0.16	0.68
Neutral response categories			
Nothing has gotten worse	33	5.36	22.45
Nothing has gotten better	9	1.46	6.12
No change, nothing has changed	2	0.32	1.36
Other effect (not clearly positive or negative)	1	0.16	0.68

then . . . When I went and expressed myself in the court, I felt relief, and I got better.

Before testifying, I used to become emotional about my problem, which made me shed tears when I thought of it. But all that has gone from me. I now feel lively and active, and do not think about my problem any longer.

Responses that were coded specifically for reductions in anger included the following:

I am less cross. My mind is now at ease. I'm not too hot-tempered anymore.

Before [I testified] I was so annoyed, I used to get angry quickly. After I testified, I felt relief, because I explained what was bothering me.

The greatest change I now experience is that of calmness and gentleness. . . . Before testifying, I was aggressive and quick to fight, but after the testimony I became gentle.

More than a third of the respondents mentioned a general sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. On average, more than 1 in 5 witnesses reported greater happiness/hopefulness, improved peace of mind, and reductions in emotional pain. Greater self-confidence was described by about 1 in 8 respondents. Examples of the latter:

I've noticed a great thing in my life. Before my testimony I was not very bold. When anyone would ask me

to talk in public, I'd be nervous. But after my testimony, where I was brave and talked in public—that is, in the court—I found that when I came back home, I found I was able to be bolder, to join skills training, and also to become more active in the mosque. I was able to take on more responsibility. I became able to address the public when we're in a meeting—I'm capable of that now.

The testimony made me bold to talk in public. Before testifying, I was not used to talking to many people, but after testifying I now feel bold. My testimony gave me the opportunity to become bold.

I used to be a quiet and shy person before. But after my testimony, I can now talk freely in open places and in front of elderly people, which in the past was difficult for me.

### Negative Consequences

The most common negative consequence of testifying was "feeling less safe, increased concerns about security." Slightly more than one fifth of respondents ( $n = 32$ ) reported this consequence. One in 20 (5%) of the responses described concerns about safety. In several instances, witnesses attributed this feeling to flaws in the mechanisms that were intended to hide their identities (e.g., voice-distortion technology). Examples included the following:

Sometimes I have this fear in me, about what if somebody discovers that I testified in the court. Because there was a man who testified, who was from this village, and people discovered that he testified for the court, and said some bad things about that.

I'm really afraid; when I came [home] initially I was really happy, and satisfied, and I felt relief. But since my friends came to me and told me that they heard my story on the radio, I've started developing this fear.

My experience after the testimony is that I'm not too free in my village, because there are some people in my village who know I testified in the Court, so I'm afraid about that.

I feel bad because I am expecting that things will one day change and people will start pointing fingers at me.

Slightly more than 10% of the respondents ( $n = 16$ ) reported that testifying had led to deterioration in an interpersonal relationship. Of those who specified which relationship(s) had deteriorated, half ( $n = 8$ ) mentioned neighbors, four mentioned extended family, and one each mentioned immediate family, friends, and former comrades. Examples included the following:

My relationship with my neighbors is less cordial than before [I testified].

When I came back I was summoned to the town chief by one of the elders who said I have talked against him, which tells me that people are not happy with me in the town. . . . Elders in the community no longer respect me or my views.

Most of my female peers were at peace with me before, but now, because they are the wives of [the faction on trial], they avoid me, because they say I have talked against their husbands in court.

My wife was angry with me for getting us into a threat[ening situation] . . . Sometimes she is afraid to sleep at night and she holds me responsible for her restlessness.

A small minority (6%) of respondents reported an increase in PTS symptoms ( $n = 10$ ) after testifying. Three of these 10 witnesses mentioned an increase in PTS symptoms during an interview conducted within the first month post-testimony, and seven mentioned an increase in PTS symptoms more than two months post-testimony. Thus, fewer than one in 20 witnesses reported long-term increases in posttraumatic stress symptoms as a result of testifying. Responses coded for an increase in PTS symptoms (short- or long-term) included the following:

What happened to me I had forgotten about it, I tried to forget it completely but when I testified it became fresh again in my memory.

That day [that I testified] I felt reminded of a traumatic event . . . Taking me back to the past is very traumatic as I am seeing the crime scene back again.

I have been seeing the image of my children [who were killed] a lot since [I testified] yesterday.

It has caused me to recall some of the ugly incidents that occurred in my community, like the mass killing and other inhuman treatment.

Four responses were coded as "other negative effect." Of these, one each mentioned having been asked to leave her home; having to relocate to a different neighborhood; the sensation of a "pounding heart" after testifying; and increased feelings of loneliness.

### Neutral Impact/Absence of Consequences

Two questions directly asked, respectively, what had gotten better and what had gotten worse for the witness after testifying. In response to either or both of these questions, some simply replied, "Nothing." Nearly four times as

many witnesses ( $n = 33$ ) reported that "nothing had gotten worse" than reported that "nothing had gotten better" ( $n = 9$ ). Additionally, 61% of respondents (90 of 147) mentioned no negative consequences of testifying, whereas only 5% of respondents (8 of 147) mentioned no positive consequences.

#### Short- Versus Long-Term Positive Consequences

With regard to positive consequences of testifying, 8 consequences were more likely to be mentioned in long-term (vs. short-term) interviews: increased comfort with social interaction (17% vs. 2%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 8.01, p = .005$ ; improvements in the ability to speak in public (7% vs. 0%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 4.04, p = .04$ ; reductions in sadness ( $n = 26$ ; 27% vs. 0%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 17.28, p < .001$ ; reductions in anger (27% vs. 0%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 17.28, p < .001$ ; reductions in intrusive posttraumatic stress symptoms (27% vs. 0%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 17.28, p < .001$ ; greater peace of mind (28% vs. 11%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 5.54, p = .02$ ; feelings of being looked after and cared for by the Court (10% vs. 0%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 5.90, p = .015$ ; and feelings of pleasure about having seen the accused in custody (7% vs. 0%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 4.04, p = .04$ .

Only one psychosocial benefit was more likely to be mentioned in interviews conducted within the first month post-testimony: feelings of relief that the testimony had been completed and went smoothly (30% vs. 11%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 8.07, p = .004$ .

#### Short- Versus Long-Term Negative Consequences

No negative psychosocial consequences were more likely to be mentioned in the short-term (vs. long-term) interviews, whereas 2 negative consequences were more likely to be mentioned in the long-term interviews. Namely, witnesses were far more likely to report feeling less safe and secure as a result of their testimony when interviewed more than two months post-testimony than when interviewed within the first month after testifying (28% vs. 4%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 12.82, p < .001$ . Also, a much greater proportion of witnesses reported deterioration in at least one interpersonal or social

relationship when interviewed more than two months post-testimony than in interviews conducted within the first month of testifying (13% vs. 2%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 5.42, p = .02$ .

#### Victimization Status

There were significant differences in the valence of responses across the three levels of the gender/victimization variable,  $F(2, 142) = 3.63, p = .03$ . Overall, victim-witnesses reported a significantly more positive valence than did insiders. Male-insiders reported significantly fewer positive consequences ( $M = .48, SD = .78$ ) than did male-victims ( $M = .82, SD = .47$ ) and female-victims ( $M = .76, SD = .62$ ). A post hoc comparison among men showed that male-victims reported significantly more positive consequences than did male-insiders,  $t(110) = 2.74, p = .007$ .

Some of the self-reported psychosocial consequences of testifying were mentioned with quite different frequency by insiders versus victims. Only 17% of the insiders ( $n = 5$ ) reported that as a result of testifying, they felt a sense of being "unburdened, relieved that their silence had been broken," whereas 36% of the male-victims ( $n = 30$ ) and 48% of the female-victims ( $n = 20$ ) reported this consequence,  $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 6.91, p = .03$ . A post hoc comparison of male-victims with male-insiders showed that there was an association between victimization and feeling unburdened,  $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 3.60, p = .05$ .

A total of 28 victims (29% of the female victims, 20% of the male victims) reported reductions in sadness/depression/emotional pain/tearfulness, whereas only 1 insider (4%) reported this consequence,  $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 7.11, p = .03$ . This difference between victims and insiders was also significant when examined only in male witnesses,  $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 4.18, p = .03$ . Likewise, 29 victims (26% of the female victims, 22% of the male victims) reported reductions in intrusive PTS symptoms, whereas 0 insiders reported such reductions,  $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 8.66, p = .01$ . This difference, too, was significant when examined only in male witnesses,  $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 7.49, p = .003$ .

Only two respondents mentioned that testifying had helped them clear their conscience and feel less guilty for acts committed during the

war. Both of these witnesses were insiders. Examples included the following:

I feel my conscience is very clear now. Since I testified I am not experiencing any difficulty as I used to be. . . . What matters is that I have cleared up my mind and my conscience by testifying, and that is what is important to me.

A third consequence of testifying that more insiders than victims reported was a sense of disappointment that the testimony had not produced noticeable results (16% of insiders,  $n = 4$ , vs. 1.7% of victims,  $n = 2$ ). Examples included the following:

I'm not feeling good yet, until these people are punished. (Prosecution witness)

Until now there is no announcement about the case that is positive. . . . I am anxious to see [one of the accused] released. . . . I know my evidence will make a big difference or else it will make me feel disappointed if it doesn't work positively. (Defense witness)

I am not feeling fine at all since the trial started up to this moment because I want to hear that the [faction on trial] indictees have been released. (Defense witness)

Only three witnesses reported that as a result of their testimony, they felt "glad that they had had the opportunity to explain or justify their behavior in the war"; none of these witnesses were victims. Examples included the following:

I was happy when I explained about the way we used to treat civilians when captured . . . One woman was captured by Kamajors . . . and they brought her to me, [and] . . . I took her to Freetown here, which is a praise to me [praiseworthy of me] because . . . people were saying that the Kamajors are responsible for all the atrocities.

I was able to explain the role of the CDF in restoring peace and the democratically elected government to power.

Almost one quarter of the women ( $n = 10$ ) reported increased comfort with social interaction, but only 4% of the male-victims and 10% of the male-insiders reported this as a perceived consequence of testifying,  $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 12.22, p = .002$ . This association is also significant when comparing female and male victims,  $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 12.21, p = .001$ .

### Age

Younger witnesses were more likely than their older counterparts to report having a better quality of life post-testimony as a result of ma-

terial assistance given by the court. Only 1 witness older than 40 (comprising 3% of that age group) and only 3 witnesses aged 31–40 (comprising 8% of that age group) reported benefiting from material assistance, whereas 5 witnesses aged 17–30 (comprising 15% of that age group) stated that their lives had improved because of receiving material assistance from the Court,  $\chi^2(3, N = 147) = 8.52, p = .036$ .

### Discussion

Most witnesses who testified in the Special Court for Sierra Leone reported that they had not experienced adverse psychosocial consequences. On the contrary, most respondents indicated that they felt that testifying in the SCSL had been psychologically beneficial. Many of the positive consequences that witnesses described were not evident immediately but emerged over time. Only a small minority of witnesses reported having suffered psychological difficulties (e.g., increases in PTS symptoms, sadness) as a result of testifying. Respondents' self-reports of a mixture of positive and negative consequences, with the former outnumbering the latter, are consistent with Stover's (2005) ICTY research.

Many witnesses described a phenomenon akin to psychological catharsis, for example they indicated that narrating their stories had resulted in feelings of unburdening and relief. This finding is consistent with the view that narration of traumatic experiences may be beneficial for survivors (van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007). Our findings suggest that there may be psychological benefits to verbal expression even in a limited way that takes place during a period of less than a year (i.e., from the time of giving the first statement to investigators, through the prepping with attorneys about a week before testifying, to completing the courtroom testimony over the course of a few hours or days).

Some theorists have suggested that repeatedly having to talk about painful experiences is "retraumatizing" (Brounéus, 2008, p. 55; Byrne, 2004), but we found greater indicators of catharsis (and, perhaps, desensitization) than retraumatization. Victim-witnesses in particular reported that they valued the opportunity to break their long-held silences, and that testifying helped to alleviate their symptoms of post-

traumatic stress and caused them to feel a sense of greater psychological freedom and relief.

The crimes tried in the SCSL were violent and destructive. After the war ended, many survivors retained distressing memories of the atrocities but did not have a suitable venue in which to cognitively or emotionally process these memories. The majority had to turn their attention to the challenges of day-to-day survival. Professional mental health services were virtually nonexistent. For most victim-witnesses, it was only in the context of their involvement with the Court that they narrated what happened to them during the war.

Although tribunals have been criticized because they do not allow witnesses to tell their stories in their own way (Dembour & Haslam, 2004; Henry, 2009), SCSL victim-witnesses nevertheless had substantial opportunities to narrate their experiences. In most instances, a witness would first tell his or her story to an investigator. Thereafter, s/he would again recount the experiences to an attorney. Subsequently, the attorney who was scheduled to lead the evidence in the courtroom would also meet with the witness on at least one (often, several) occasion(s) to prepare. Further, psychosocial staff also listened to the witness if he or she chose to talk about wartime experiences before or after testifying. Finally, when in the courtroom, most victim-witnesses would again narrate at least a portion of their experiences. The present findings, thus, may be partly illuminated by Funkeson et al.'s (2011) observation that for some *gacaca* witnesses, as the number of times they testified increased, their trauma and anxiety symptoms lessened.

The present findings contrast with most studies of the South African TRC (e.g., Backer, 2004; Byrne, 2004; Chapman, 2008; Kaminer et al., 2001; Phakathi & van der Merwe, 2008; van der Merwe & Chapman, 2008), in which there was little evidence that victims had obtained meaningful benefits from testifying. In some of those studies, the numbers of witnesses who had given public testimony (30 in Byrne; and 21 in Kaminer et al.) may have been too small to detect an effect. Also, the discrepancies may be partly explained by differences in the manner in which the samples were obtained. In particular, the characteristics of individuals recruited from programs serving trauma survivors may differ

from individuals selected to testify in war crimes trials.

Additionally, a major factor in Byrne's interviewees' negative TRC experiences was their having to listen to the perpetrator's remarks, which were often perceived as devoid of remorse. By contrast, SCSL witnesses did not listen to perpetrators: the accused were not allowed to speak except when testifying in their own defense. The extensive array of psychosocial support services that were provided to SCSL witnesses may also illuminate why they reported more positive consequences than did witnesses from the South African TRC.

Furthermore, it is possible that the lack of positive consequences among TRC (Sierra Leonean, as well as South African) participants may be related to the psychological importance, to victims, that war crimes be prosecuted and perpetrators punished. Bringing perpetrators to justice is widely believed to contribute to psychological well-being for victims (Shuman & McCall Smith, 2000). Orentlicher (2007) maintained that "human rights victims thirst for justice in the form of prosecutions, and trials are still the desired norm in most societies" (p. 22). Allen (2008), too, based on research in Northern Uganda, reported substantial local support for ICC prosecutions of leaders suspected of war crimes.

Consistent with these ideas, Hamber (2009), in seeking to explain the dissatisfaction expressed by many TRC witnesses, remarked, "the idea of attaining retributive and penal justice for human rights violations is centrally important to victims" (p. 188). Likewise, Backer (2004) reported that many TRC participants expressed disappointment that human rights violators had not been adequately punished. In an analysis of TRC victim hearings, van der Merwe (2008) reported that retribution was a key preoccupation for survivors, and that justice was mentioned as a concern more frequently than reconciliation or forgiveness.

The Sierra Leonean TRC had no investigative capacities, in contrast to the SCSL, which had numerous professional investigators working for the prosecution and the defense, tasked with uncovering and documenting wartime events. Considering these capacities, and in view of their main objective of obtaining retributive justice, it seems plausible that testifying in tribunals may yield greater psychosocial bene-

fits than testifying in truth commissions. The latter emphasize processes of disclosure, apology, and forgiveness but do not hold the promise of obtaining reliable evidence of the wartime events, nor imposing punishment on those perceived as responsible.

Participants in the present study also portrayed the consequences of testifying far more positively than was described in research on Rwandan *gacaca* witnesses (e.g., Brounéus, 2008, 2010; Funkeson et al., 2011). However, witnesses in Brounéus's *gacaca* research had reportedly been subjected to reprisals before, during, and after testifying. This may have been a key factor in their negative reactions. The SCSL witnesses, by contrast, expressed concerns about possible future threats rather than actual past or current threats. Moreover, there are important differences between the *gacaca* and UN-backed international war crimes tribunals. For example, *gacaca* witnesses were not provided with legal representation. Accused individuals were required to present their own defense, and victims were required to share their stories without the assistance of an attorney. Additionally, *gacaca* witnesses did not undergo an extensive preparatory process before sharing their stories aloud. By contrast, SCSL witnesses usually worked closely with attorneys and told their stories during multiple "prepping" sessions prior to entering the courtroom. Also, most SCSL victim-witnesses testified without their identities being disclosed, and, though visible to persons in the courtroom, had a screen that prevented them from being seen by the public.

Our finding that some witnesses reported that seeing the accused in custody had resulted in feelings of pleasure that persisted more than two months after testifying is consistent with the Amani Trust's (2002) finding that some torture victims felt empowered by the presence of the defendant in the courtroom; with Sanin and Stirnemann's (2006) observations that some child witnesses in the SCSL would have preferred to testify from inside the courtroom rather than by video-link; and with Power's (2003) remark that "seeing [the perpetrator] powerless in the [ICTY] witness box was a gratifying experience for [the witness]." In the Amani study, however, some witnesses felt intimidated by the presence of the accused,

whereas none of the SCSL respondents reported feeling intimidated.

Our findings suggest that the psychological value of seeing that the accused are in custody may increase with the passage of time. The courtroom provides an opportunity for witnesses to observe firsthand that individuals who were perceived as very frightening during the war are no longer in power, and in fact, are confined and guarded, and are only able to speak through their attorneys. It may take a few months to assimilate this new image of the accused. Similarly, it may be necessary for the witness to be back home for a certain period of time before discovering that as a result of testifying, s/he has become more confident in social situations and better able to speak in public, and/or has become less sad or anxious.

As with positive consequences, a number of months may need to pass before witnesses perceive some adverse consequences. For example, the passage of time post-testimony may be necessary before witnesses develop concerns about their safety, and/or become aware of ways that testifying may have had deleterious effects on a relationship. Many witnesses interviewed shortly after testifying were still residing in safe houses around Freetown. Some consequences probably only become apparent after witnesses return home.

For example, immediately after testifying, most witnesses assumed that the mechanisms designed to hide their identities were successful. In some instances, however, their neighbors learned they had testified. The emergence of concerns about security may also depend on sociopolitical developments. Though we completed data collection shortly before the 2007 national elections, the fact that the 2007 as well as the 2012 elections were successful and had no major security failures may have allayed some witnesses' fears. Conversely, the closing of the SCSL in late 2013 may have exacerbated their concerns.

Insiders and victims described different patterns of consequences. For insiders, the opportunity for self-expression, though mentioned by one in five, was considerably less salient than for victims. Insiders may feel guilty or ashamed about their wartime actions, and testifying may help to alleviate these feelings. Also, insiders may become dissatisfied if their testimony does not lead to noticeable results, whereas victims,



though often noting that they hoped that the accused would be punished, reported having obtained psychological benefits from testifying even when the outcome of the trial was not yet clear.

It should not be assumed that insiders have not endured traumatic events. On the contrary, many (perhaps most) combatants in the Sierra Leone war were subjected to events that could be viewed as traumatic, including violence, bloodshed, and situations in which they feared for their physical integrity and lives. However, most insiders testified about the structure and internal workings of the factions whose leaders were on trial, whereas most victims testified about atrocities they had experienced. Thus, if we consider that reductions in intrusive PTS symptoms may be partly attributable to the verbalization of traumatic events, it is not surprising that this benefit was more common among victims than insiders.

The finding that the positive consequences of testifying exceeded the negative in both quantity and variety may be partly attributable to the SCSL's sophisticated program of witness support. The details of this program have been described by the first author (Stepakoff, 2005, 2006b). Basic elements included the following: a team of skilled personnel dedicated to providing psychosocial support for witnesses; psychological assistance while "prepping" with attorneys; provision of language interpreters in witness safe houses and during prepping; pre-trial instruction in basic coping skills; pre-trial briefings to familiarize witnesses with courtroom procedures; the presence of a psychosocial counselor in the courtroom, and in the waiting room immediately before and after testimony and during breaks; post-testimony debriefing; referrals to NGOs and health care providers as needed; provision of medical care, lodging, and security; and periodic follow-up visits. These forms of material and practical support appeared to be particularly important for the younger witnesses, perhaps because the WVS usually paid for schooling or vocational training for younger witnesses during their involvement with the Court. It may be that some of the benefits described here were attributable not to the testimony process per se but to witnesses' access to care and support from WVS staff throughout their involvement with the SCSL. This interpretation would shed further

light on the reasons that psychosocial consequences such as those described here were not reported among South African or Sierra Leonean TRC witnesses.

### Strengths and Limitations

We conducted a cross-sectional study of witnesses who were interviewed after they testified in the Special Court. Because we did not use a control group, we cannot definitively conclude that the changes reported by the interviewees were caused by giving testimony, or even by their overall involvement with the SCSL. Research is needed that compares psychosocial functioning in witnesses with a group of persons who underwent similar wartime experiences but were not asked to testify about these experiences.

The lead researcher may have had an unintentional bias toward finding positive outcomes because she was also in charge of care for witnesses. However, the lead researcher has co-authored a different article in which a specific subset of respondents were highly critical of the SCSL (Staggs-Kelsall & Stepakoff, 2007). Further, the lead researcher was not even present for most of the interviews: psychosocial staff conducted the interviews and wrote the responses.

Another possible limitation is that witnesses may have felt reluctant to speak frankly about areas of discontent during interviews with WVS staff. This possibility, however, is not supported by available information. For example, witnesses were generally quite willing to complain to WVS staff when they were discontented about any aspect of their experience with the SCSL. Further, given that the WVS had a mandate to provide assistance to witnesses who were adversely impacted by their involvement with the SCSL, and funds were allocated for this purpose, some witnesses may have viewed a visit from WVS staff as an opportunity to express their needs for various forms of assistance. Thus, it was actually to respondents' advantage to overstate rather than understate any areas of dissatisfaction with the SCSL.

A question may be raised regarding whether the interviewers were truly able to write the respondent's words accurately without undue risk of a positive bias (e.g., writing

down positive words and omitting negative words). We believe that interviewers recorded the answers in an accurate and unbiased manner. First, the interview specifically included separate questions designed to elicit positive and negative consequences. Second, before being assigned to conduct interviews, all interviewers received extensive training and had also gained substantial practical experience working with and interpreting for witnesses. Third, although verbatim notes of a free-ranging interview may not be possible, these interviews were conducted as a series of questions, with each question generally yielding an answer of a few sentences. By asking the witness to repeat his or her response when necessary, and by reading the response back to him or her to check for completeness, it was possible to obtain written records that accurately reflected the witnesses' oral responses.

Tribunal witnesses may differ in important respects from witnesses in other types of legal/judicial proceedings, and/or of war crimes victims more generally. In particular, from among a very large number of individuals who had witnessed or experienced atrocities, only a small proportion were selected as witnesses, and of these, an even smaller proportion actually testified. In general, SCSL investigators and attorneys preferred witnesses who possessed sufficient resilience to withstand the rigors of preparing for and appearing in court, and whose narratives were relatively elaborated, confirmable, and coherent. Thus the generalizability of the findings may be limited, given that SCSL witnesses may have possessed greater pre-testimony resilience than witnesses in other settings.

A related issue is that of the total target group, we were able to conduct interviews with slightly more than half. Although we have no reason to suspect that the perceived consequences of testifying differed for those witnesses who were not part of our sample, we did not have the opportunity to test whether the consequences differed for witnesses who participated in our study versus those who did not.

Also, it is important to note that we conceptualized positive and negative valence according to the numbers of positive and negative consequences described by respondents.

It may be, however, that the number of consequences is less important than the intensity of each consequence. Some negative consequences (e.g., reprisals) may have major implications for the witness's quality of life even if they are greatly outnumbered by positive consequences.

The SCSL received support and legitimization from the United Nations. It was an international tribunal with a large number of expatriate staff from all over the world. It was generously funded, and its facilities were modern and well-maintained. The impact of giving testimony in such contexts may differ from the experiences of witnesses who testified in nonadversarial settings such as the South African or Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commissions or in community-based settings such as the *gacaca*. In particular, some witnesses may prefer the international recognition and protection available in a UN tribunal.

In contrast to most previous explorations of the topic of giving testimony, which were based on relatively small samples and/or explored only limited aspects of witnesses' experiences, we systematically examined the views of the witnesses themselves. We obtained a large sample, and we included victims as well as insiders. Further, we asked broad, open-ended questions and obtained witnesses' entire answers before endeavoring to categorize them. Admittedly, this is a descriptive study that relies on the accuracy of the respondents' perceptions. Further research is in progress to examine the psychosocial consequences of testifying more objectively, using SCSL counselors' assessments of witnesses' psychological well-being before and after testifying. Nevertheless, with the methods used, we were able to generate richly elaborated self-reports of the psychosocial consequences of testifying.

#### **Directions for Future Research and Practice**

Given that the negative consequence reported most frequently here pertained to feeling less safe, court personnel must be careful to maintain the confidentiality of protected witnesses' identifying information. Similarly, support officers should advise witnesses on

refraining from unnecessarily publicizing their involvement. Tribunal staff should make sure witnesses understand the protective measures, as well as the limitations of these measures, and should inform witnesses that after they return home, there are mechanisms for responding to threats or reprisals. Further, tribunals should make provisions for providing continued (or reactivated) witness protection services if needed.

The discrepancies between our findings and those of some previous researchers may be partly explained by the SCSL's provision of an extensive array of supportive services for witnesses. In settings where these types of services are lacking, the consequences of giving testimony may be far less positive than in this study. The provision of adequate protection and support for witnesses, as well as sensitivity training for attorneys, judges, and security officers regarding gender issues, trauma responses, and related matters may reduce the potential for harmful consequences of testifying in war crimes trials and enhance the possibility of psychosocial gains.

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