Chapter 14
Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Conflict in Northern Ireland

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Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel, 1981) and the Northern Irish conflict, or the 'Troubles' as the violence is locally known, have a long shared history. During the 1970s, local Northern Irish psychologists realised that biological deterministic or Freudian psychodynamic paradigms that explained political conflict as the result of individual differences, instincts, or abnormal behaviour did not explain the conflict they were witnessing in the streets around them (Cairns, 1982, 1987). Likewise, grand sociological, economic, and political theories could not account for the unconscious and often irrational forces clearly at work (Cairns, 1982). Thankfully, as local psychologists searched for a means to understand the conflict in Northern Ireland, Tajfel developed Social Identity Theory and it provided an approach that had more explanatory power than any other approach available to them.

The Northern Ireland Context

Northern Ireland represents the majority of the northern part of the island of Ireland, an island that lies beside Great Britain in the Atlantic Ocean. Since the Norman conquest of Ireland in twelfth century, the island has experienced invasion from Great Britain and, as a result, been plagued by intergroup conflict and sustained but not continuous violence throughout this period (Cairns, 1987). Arguably, one of the most notable events in the history of the island was in 1801 when the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was declared and subsequently when the war

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of independence ended. Another was when the Government of Ireland Act (1921) partitioned the island into the six counties that made up Northern Ireland, to be ruled under the British monarchy, and the remaining 26 counties into the Irish Free State. Since this time, conflict on the Island escalated and culminated in the 1960s when the Troubles began.

A common misconception is that the Troubles was primarily a religious conflict, but, in fact, it was a conflict incited due to differences in opinion surrounding the constitutional state of the island, with religious identity representing a badge of difference (Moxon-Browne, 1991) bound up in political and national ideologies. These ideologies are typically understood through the dichotomy Nationalist/Unionist, represented by the Catholic and Protestant communities respectively. According to Whyte (1991), the Nationalist perspective is that the people on the island of Ireland represent one nation and Britain is at fault for the division of the island and the people. By contrast, the Unionist perspective is that Ireland comprises distinct peoples, represented by the Protestant and Catholic communities, and that the Northern Ireland problem exists because Nationalists do not recognise this fact (cf case of Québécois identity in Lalonde, Cila, & Yampolsky, 2016). As a result of these differences, Northern Ireland continues to be at odds with itself and identity remains an issue of contention understood best through the lens of social identity theory.

The Troubles in Northern Ireland raged for 30 years, from 1968 to 1998, and led to the death of over 3600 people and the injury of an additional 40–50,000. Given Northern Ireland's small population of 1.68 million, and its small geographical area of 5456 mile^2, this conflict had a substantial impact on the population well beyond the casualty figures (Fay, Morissey, & Smyth, 1998). Undoubtedly, the Northern Ireland conflict gripped the world's attention; it was one of the first global televised conflicts (Rolston & Miller, 1996) and as a result, international actors provided funding for children from conflict areas in Northern Ireland to take part in a relief holiday scheme during contentious times of the year (See Intergroup Contact and Identity for Peace below.)

Northern Ireland is now considered by many to be a post-conflict society; 17 years have passed since the historic signing of the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement and representatives of all sides to the conflict share power in a devolved legislative assembly based on consociationalist, in other words inclusive and power-sharing, principles. However, the conflict still casts a long dark shadow on Northern Ireland, and many challenges remain with legacy issues around how to deal with the victims. Moreover, perpetrators of the conflict still have the ability to raise tensions and open old wounds (Ferguson, in press).

Despite the signing of the peace agreement, politically motivated violence has not vanished. Dissident Irish republicans remain involved in shooting and bombing attacks and sectarian tensions around flying national flags and annual Orange Order parades in the summer months remain. Recent Northern Irish Life and Times surveys (NILT, 2012, 2013) and reports on the state of community relations in Northern Ireland (Morrow, Robinson, & Dowds, 2013; Nolan, 2014) have all reported a deterioration in community relations and a hardening of oppositional identities over the past few years. There is also much debate about a continuing 'cultural' war between

nationalism and unionism, in which nationalists are perceived to have undertaken a strategy to hollow out British cultural symbolism and weaken Protestant identity and associations to the United Kingdom (Halliday & Ferguson, 2015; McAuley & Ferguson, in press).

Even a cursory examination of these lingering legacy issues highlights the importance of understanding the role of social identity, social categorisation, and intergroup relations in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish research utilising the social identity approach has tended to follow particular themes, namely: (a) the prevalence of social categorisation, social identification, comparison, and the impact on intergroup relations; (b) the role of identity in embracing the conflict; (c) the relationship between stress, coping, and identity; and (d) the role of intergroup contact in promoting identity for peace. These themes are explained in more detail in the sections below.

Social Categorisation, Social Identification, and Comparison

Some of the earliest SIT research conducted in Northern Ireland explored categorisation and the importance of categorisation in Northern Ireland, with much of this research focused on what is colloquially termed 'telling', or the considerations involved in trying to work out whether someone is a Catholic or a Protestant during every day interactions. It must be pointed out that it is a taboo subject to directly ask someone which ethno-religious group they belong to, as this line of questioning may cause the recipient anxiety and could trigger a hostile response. It is also important to remember that in Northern Ireland the differences between the communities are not racial or physiognomic, yet individuals in this society have the ability to categorise others as being either Protestant or Catholic through various social and geographical cues. Cairns (1980) reported a list of the five most frequently employed cues. These include area of residence (much of Northern Ireland's neighbourhoods are segregated along ethnopolitical lines), school attended (as we shall discuss later, most schools are also segregated), names (both given and surnames), appearance (which mainly relate to facial features and clothing), and speech (both language content and accent). Interestingly, all cues are employed by both sides. Since this pioneering early work (also see Cairns & Duriez, 1976; Stringer & Cairns, 1983; Stringer & McLaughlin-Cook, 1985), approximately 50 different ways of telling the 'other's' religion have been documented (Kremer, 1999).

It is perhaps fitting that the inaugural article published in the *Irish Journal of Psychology* dealt with social categorisation among children from Belfast. Jahoda and Harrison (1975) employed a colour vs. form sorting task with children from an area of Belfast that had been severely impacted by the conflict. In these tasks, European and North American children consistently display a shift from sorting on colour preference (e.g. sorting on the basis of a shapes colour) to form preference (e.g. sorting by shape) and this demonstrates a developmental advancement. In the Jahoda and Harrison (1975) research, however, unlike the control sample from

Edinburgh, the majority of the older Belfast children did not show a switch in preference from sorting on colour to shape. The reason for this developmental delay relates to the colours chosen by Jahoda and Harrison, as they chose red and blue (related to the Union Flag and viewed as Protestant) and green and orange (synonymous with the Irish Tricolour and viewed as Catholic). Importantly, almost half of the older Belfast children spontaneously mentioned the ethnopolitical symbolism behind their choices. Indeed when the researchers attempted to mix the colours by combining blue and green or red and green, many children protested that 'you can't put Protestants with Catholics' (p. 15).

Whereas research has demonstrated that identity in Northern Ireland is more complex than pure comparisons of Protestant and Catholic (Cassidy & Trew, 1998; Gallagher, 1989; Ferguson & Gordon, 2007), research has also consistently demonstrated the ease with which people in Northern Ireland categorise others and themselves, places, and activities as Protestant or Catholic (Cairns, Wilson, Gallagher, & Trew, 1995; Cairns & Darby, 1998; Cairns & Mercer, 1984; Whyte, 1991). Indeed, the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland will state whether they are a Catholic or Protestant, regardless of whether or not they even attend church (Niens & Cairns, 2001). This was clearly observed in the recent 2011 census, where 48 % of the resident population self-identified as Protestant and 45 % self-identified as Catholic. In Northern Ireland, Protestant or Catholic identity is ascribed from birth, producing impermeable group boundaries, which heightens the possibility of intergroup competition and conflict (Cairns, 1982; Ferguson, 2006). It has also been argued that identity processes differ for Protestants and Catholics with commentators suggesting that national identity choice is more complex and more situationally determined for Protestants, than for Catholics (Waddell & Cairns, 1986; Whyte, 1991).

Once these identity labels are accepted, Northern Irish research has demonstrated how the depth or strength of the in-group identity can impact on emotions, cognitions, reasoning, and behaviours, such as influencing in-group bias, prejudice, discrimination (Cairns, 1996; Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006; Ferguson, 2009), and the impact of intergroup contact on cross-community relations (Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns, & Christ, 2007). This research (Cairns et al., 2006; Tausch et al., 2007) also indicates that compared to those who have a weaker identification, Protestants and Catholics who have a strong identification with their group express more in-group bias, regardless of their ethno-religious background.

Similarly, Cairns and Hewstone (2005) demonstrated that Catholics and Protestants with a stronger identification, or with 'pride' in their group, had higher levels of prejudice towards members of the out-group, and this was especially the case among Protestants. This study also indicated that levels of political stability or instability played a role in mediating this relationship, with high levels of political instability linking to higher levels of in-group bias, regardless of identity strength. Additionally, during periods of low levels of sectarian tension, bias towards the in-group can disappear among individuals who more weakly identify with their community.

As well as research focusing on the conflicting or competing identities of British vs. Irish or Catholic vs. Protestant, research has also focused on the increased usage

of the identity label of 'Northern Irish' among both Catholics and Protestants. In particular, there has been a focus on how this common label may offer a means to develop a shared identity and thus improve community relations and the prospects of a peaceful future (Muldoon, Trew, Todd, McLaughlin, & Rougier, 2007). The popularity of the Northern Irish identity has risen, since it was first included in social surveys in the late 1980s, with the most recent 2011 census indicating that 21 % of residents claim a singular Northern Irish identity. Indeed, most recent surveys suggest that approximately a quarter of adults use this label (Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Muldoon et al., 2007). It has been theorised that identification with a superordinate, or overarching, identity, such as Northern Irish, could transcend the existing competing identities, the boundaries between these identity groups, and reduce prejudice and discrimination (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). This is important because a Northern Irish identity is arguably less divisive and offers an alternative from the traditional British/Irish dichotomy. As such, it has potential to help Northern Ireland move towards a more inclusive society.

Indeed, research from Northern Ireland has demonstrated that those choosing to label themselves Northern Irish rather than British or Irish have more positive views around intergroup mixing in marriage, neighbourhoods, the workplace, and education (Hayes & McAllister, 2009). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that it is an identity with which both Catholics and Protestants can and do identify, despite differing interpretations on what it means to be Northern Irish (McKeown, 2014).

Nonetheless, Lowe and Muldoon (2014) found that those individuals who utilised the label Northern Irish could get thrown back into oppositional relationships due to the divided nature of Northern Irish society. For example, although being Northern Irish was associated with more prosocial attitudes towards the out-group, political attitudes towards issues, such as the sovereignty of Northern Ireland, reflected religious identity rather than national identity. This concern was similarly reported by Hayes and McAllister (2009) who suggested that the motivation to associate oneself with the Northern Irish identity may in fact be due to disillusionment with the current political status of Northern Ireland, rather than a move towards improved relations. Arguably, as Trew (1996) suggested, selecting the Northern Irish identity allows people to present themselves as inclusive and tolerant, without changing their 'real' political attitudes.

The Role of Identity in Embracing the Conflict

Showing support for political violence or becoming involved in paramilitary groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), clearly involves the process of social identification with the group and its aims. Muldoon, McLaughlin, Rougier, and Trew (2008) research demonstrated how young people from Northern Ireland employed social identification with the in-group as an explanation for engaging in paramilitary violence. Additionally, research based on interviews with former prisoners and members of Northern Irish paramilitary groups

(Burgess, Ferguson, & Hollywood, 2005; Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2008; Ferguson & Binks, 2015) indicates that strong identification with their in-group and in-group 'love' or pride are often key antecedent factors for those who choose to engage in politically motivated violence.

Contrastingly, in the years since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, very few former combatants re-engage in violence. Instead, many play an important role in maintaining the peace at the local level or are engaged in community work aimed to halting others from engaging in violence (Ferguson, 2010a; Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008). As with engagement in violence, strong identification with the in-group and local community also fuels the processes of disengagement from violence and involvement in conflict transformation (Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2015). These findings offer support for Brewer's (1999, 2001) view that in-group love does not equate to out-group hate and indicate that building peace in Northern Ireland does not mean that individuals will need to weaken their identity to the in-group to enable them to build peace with the other community. Rather, as Cairns and Hewstone (2005) suggest, peace can be built by helping the citizens of Northern Ireland to understand that it is possible to hold positive and secure social identities without out-group derogation. Such an interpretation fits with Hewstone and Brown's (1986) salient categorisation model in which it is proposed that it is important to maintain group salience in order to allow intergroup contact effects to generalise to the out-group.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, legacy issues related to the conflict, particularly around how to deal with the victims of the conflict and how to pursue intercommunity reconciliation, are keenly debated but slow to resolve. Social identity research from within Northern Ireland has focused on group level forgiveness and collective guilt (Hewstone et al., 2004; Myers, Hewstone, & Cairns, 2009). Hewstone et al. (2004) reported that the people most affected by the conflict were less willing to forgive or experience collective guilt, whereas Myers et al. (2009) argued that higher in-group identification was associated with less collective guilt and lower levels of intergroup forgiveness. These findings again illustrate the importance of identity in building forgiveness and reconciliation. In order to move community relations forward, Protestant and Catholic identities need to be accepted and not threatened; otherwise they will become barriers to progress, again illustrating the need for positive and secure social identities in building peace.

Stress, Coping and Identity

Another part of the legacy of the Northern Irish conflict is the higher rates of mental health problems in comparison to Scotland, England, and the Republic of Ireland (O'Reilly & Stevenson, 2003). Muldoon, Lowe, and Schmid (2016) explore the role of social identity as a driver for psychological health, and much of the research exploring the role of identity in mental health and well-being is grounded in research conducted in Northern Ireland.

Social identity is key to understanding the stress created by conflict (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), with group membership mediating the experience of stress (Muldoon, Schmid, & Downes, 2009). Specifically, having a strong identity can have a moderating effect on experiences of post-traumatic stress and psychological well-being (Muldoon & Downes, 2007; Muldoon & Wilson, 2001). Additionally, changing social and political conditions play a role in shaping these processes.

For example, research from Northern Ireland has illustrated how the shifting sociopolitical context created by the peace process can devalue identities that once were viewed as positive. Mulcahy (2006) researched how members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) negotiated the changing sociopolitical environment in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement and the renaming and reformation of the RUC into the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) as part of the Agreement. Through this reform process and in the discourse surrounding it, the RUC was no longer presented as the protectors of the population of Northern Ireland, but viewed as a party to the conflict. Although during the conflict members of the RUC had negotiated the conflict with limited mental health consequences (Wilson, Poole, & Trew, 1997), they began to present higher incidences of post-traumatic stress in the post-conflict space when the value and the meaning of their role in the conflict were challenged and delegitimised (Mulcahy, 2006). Therefore, research from Northern Ireland has also demonstrated that the role of identity in bolstering or weakening resilience to traumatic stress depends on the sociopolitical context. This has helped inform theories on the role of identity in shaping psychological well-being in the face of political conflict and war (see Muldoon et al., 2016).

Intergroup Contact and Identity for Peace

As well as exploring the role of identity in conflict and the impact of conflict on identity, research from Northern Ireland has also explored the role of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) on group identities and intergroup prejudice (Ferguson, 2010b). Most of this research has focused on children and the role of integrated education or cross-community initiatives in reducing out-group biases, moderating conflicting identities, and producing more integrationist attitudes (McKeown & Cairns, 2012).

After residential segregation, segregated schooling is one of the biggest markers of communal division in Northern Ireland. Currently, 94% of children and adolescents attend religiously segregated schools with most children attending either State Controlled (but de facto Protestant) or Catholic Church maintained elementary and post elementary schools (Nolan, 2012). However, after years of campaigning by parents and charities, planned integrated schools began to open across Northern Ireland from 1981. Whilst the religious composition of each school differs, integrated schools are expected to maintain a religious identity ratio of their pupils of at least 70:30 (with 30 % reflecting the smallest religious community in the local

area) or 40:40 and 20 % from another background. Currently, there are 61 integrated schools in Northern Ireland educating approximately 19,000 pupils.

Research comparing pupils attending integrated and segregated schools has consistently reported that pupils from integrated schools experienced higher levels of intergroup contact; held more integrationist attitudes to mixing between Protestants and Catholics in marriage, the workplace and educational settings; and hold more optimistic views on future intercommunity relations in Northern Ireland (Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Stringer et al., 2000, 2009). At the same time, however, there is some evidence to suggest that some young people attending integrated schools may not be truly sharing their classroom space and often remain sitting in segregated clusters (McKeown, Stringer, & Cairns, 2015). McKeown, Cairns, and Stringer (2012) argue that such everyday segregation and the illusion of shared space is prevalent throughout Northern Ireland and we suggest that one of the key ways to address this is through promoting meaningful intergroup contact that tackles the divisive issues faced by those living in Northern Ireland. This fits with Niens and Cairns (2008) argument that schools need to go beyond physical co-presence to promote peace and indeed some of Northern Ireland's integrated schools are exemplary in this regard.

Even if a child does not attend an integrated school, he or she may be exposed to the mechanisms in place to promote community relations across all schools. One early example of this was the short-term cross-community educational schemes, Education for Mutual Understanding, which was introduced into segregated schools with the aim to improve group relations but results have been more mixed (Gallagher, 2010; Smith & Dunn, 1990). More recently, this approach has been replaced by the Shared Education agenda that focuses on creating and sustaining partnerships across schools, based on the premise of intergroup contact theory and developing from the Sharing Education Programme (Hughes, 2011). Other community-based interventions have been in place since during the Troubles. These developed due to concern about children facing conflict during contentious periods, such as the summer months when the Orange Order marches take place, have focused on children outside of the school setting, and have often involved taking the children to a different local, national, or international location for a short period of time (McKeown & Cairns, 2012).

Like integrated schools, school and community interventions have been criticised on the grounds that the contact does not address divisive issues, the children treat the experience as an outing, sports competitions are commonly used as a means for contact, and the teachers often lack the training to deal with divisive issues in class (O'Connor, Hartop, & McCully, 2002; Kilpatrick & Leitch, 2004; Murray, 2010). However, research does tend to suggest that young people who do engage in cross-community programmes hold more favourable out-group attitudes than those who do not. Programme attendees typically view their experience as positive and researchers suggest that community relations across Northern Ireland would be improved with more cross-community contact (Schubotz & Robinson, 2006; Schubotz & McCarten, 2008).

Despite the problems associated with promoting contact in areas of sustained conflict and the harsh realities of segregation (see Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005), we believe that the role of intergroup contact, through such interventions and initiatives as outlined above, has great potential for addressing the still evident segregation in today's Northern Ireland. We have particular sympathies for a time-focused approach, as outlined by Pettigrew (1998), in which intergroup contact takes place firstly on a personal level in which group identity is de-emphasised (Brewer & Miller, 1984). Following this initial contact period, and recognising the importance of identity for individual and collective self-esteem (see Martiny & Rubin, 2016), we suggest that group identity can then be made salient. This allows for the generalisation of these personalised impressions to the out-group as a whole (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). It is through this step in which individuals can be prepared to engage in discussions surrounding the causes and consequences of the conflict. The final step would be recategorisation (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), in which a common identity is developed which supersedes previous identities. The reality for Northern Ireland may be, however, that a dual identity is the most appropriate solution, in which subgroup identities (such as Protestant or Catholic) and a common identity (such as Northern Irish) are maintained simultaneously (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996).

Importantly, intergroup contact can create a ripple effect in which friends who do not directly partake in intergroup contact gain positive benefits and improved views on intergroup mixing (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004). This finding is important as it suggests that although only a minority of children take part in integrated schooling or cross-community interventions, their positive experiences can be transferred to their friendship groups within their ethno-religious community and increase the impact of intergroup contact via this ripple effect caused by vicarious contact.

Conclusion

Whilst the Northern Irish landscape has changed drastically over the past 15–20 years, the conflict has had and continues to have devastating consequences on all aspects of life for Northern Ireland's citizens. In this chapter, we have shown how identity lies at the heart of the 'Troubles' but also how changes in the social, political, and national landscape have put Northern Ireland on the road to peace. What has become clear, however, is that dealing with the legacy of the past, such as parades and flags, is vital if Northern Ireland is to move towards true positive peace. We suggest that encouraging and facilitating shared space and shared values is one way to do this. At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly diverse, and, as such, future research on identity in Northern Ireland needs to move beyond ethnoreligious divisions based on the Protestant/Catholic dichotomy and consider the wider range of identities expressed by those living in this society.

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