Rebels’ Perspectives of the Legacy of Past Violence
and of the Current Peace in Post-Agreement
Northern Ireland: An Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis

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Former members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and organizers of peaceful civil rights organizations were interviewed to assess how these individuals interpreted the current social conditions in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Contrary to the intercommunity ideals of the Good Friday Agreement, our results suggest that people continue to exist in a society where political power is based on the division of communities, where ordinary people are not motivated to contribute to politics and where everyday life is fundamentally affected by the agreements of strongly opposed politicians. Analysis of transcripts revealed that people lived in a climate that presented violence as inappropriate yet effective. To that end, members of the community were negotiating a period of social psychological conflict and were described as living in a situation of unease rather than peace. Participants warned that conditions appear to be creating tensions that could lead to future violence.

KEY WORDS: paramilitary, violence, peace, defiance

Over 70% of the Northern Ireland population voted in favor of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (hereafter, the Agreement). Despite the compromises contained within the Agreement, many people viewed the future with a sense of optimism, believing that they had been presented with a method through which the long-
lasting conflict could be resolved (Cox, Guelke, & Stephen, 2000). There was hope that the new political structure would allow Northern Ireland to progress beyond being divided into groups distinguished sharply by religious background. Over the last hundred years, the two ethno-religious communities have lived increasingly separate lives (Boal, 1996). That segregation has not, however, been stable. In all aspects of life, the distance between Protestants and Catholics has risen steadily since 1911 and has undergone a particularly sharp increase following the escalation in violence in 1969 (Poole & Doherty, 1996).

Williams and Jesse (2001) suggested that the Agreement gave an opportunity for people within Northern Ireland to embark on joint ventures, to establish a shared identity that would allow the two groups to interact more, and also to pool sovereignty in a manner that would reduce the threat of conflict between Protestant and Catholic communities. Williams and Jesse’s belief in the value of transcending distinct single identities has a firm empirical foundation. Laboratory research suggests that strategies that create overlapping identities between members of opposing groups can indeed reduce the potential for conflict and can also reduce negative evaluations between former rivals (Urban & Miller, 1998).

If the Agreement had been successful, the political landscape should now look less divisive and society should appear more peaceful. However, the 2005 elections in Northern Ireland were especially fruitful for those parties operating at the extremes rather than at the center of the political continuum. Among Catholics, Sinn Fein gained seats at the expense of the relatively moderate SDLP. Among Protestants, the DUP gained seats at the expense of the relatively moderate Ulster Unionists. Both Sinn Fein and the DUP continue to emphasize differences between groups and to celebrate distinguishing characteristics of Catholics and Protestants. Despite the IRA’s recent announcement that the war is over, the popularity of the two major political parties may suggest that the intercommunity ideals of the Agreement are failing. If the Agreement is indeed failing it would be relevant to investigate how the current peace is experienced.

**The Difficulty of Making a Transition from Violent Intergroup Conflict to Peace**

Recent research has indicated that critical incidents (such as being the victim of violence or witnessing someone else’s victimization) may precipitate a period of reflection that results in previously peaceful protestors abandoning nonviolent methods and determining to join a paramilitary group (Burgess, Ferguson, & Hollywood, 2005a). Not being in conflict then gives cause for optimism as it reduces the number of these critical incidents and should ensure fewer people become motivated to join paramilitary groups. However, entering a period of peace presents a variety of challenges for those who have been engaged in intergroup conflict. Following civil war, former members of paramilitary groups often have difficulty forging constructive relations with former enemies (Hartzell, Hoddie, &
Rothchild, 2001). Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood’s (2005b) former Loyalist paramilitary interviewees confirmed this difficulty and also acknowledged that being at war offered a peculiar form of security in that they developed a clear conception of which individuals were labeled “goodies” (Protestant communities and their own paramilitary organization) and which were labeled “baddies” (Catholic communities and the IRA in particular). In addition, during periods of war, combatants can demonize their rivals and expect the support of their wider community (Guelke, 1995).

It is not just intergroup dynamics that present challenges in the development of lasting peace. At the cessation of violence, intragroup dynamics also impact the degree to which community members can expect to live without the threat of future violence. Prolonged violence, and demonization of rivals, aids the development of distinct social identities that further helps support the legitimacy of the conflict and renders violence an essential part of the community fabric (Ferguson, 2005). Even after the Agreement and the IRA disarming, leaders and communities continue to emphasize the shared identity of their own group members through public displays of socially meaningful symbols. In the case of Protestant communities this may involve draping Union Jack or even Israeli flags from poles or may involve painting the flagstones red, white, and blue. In the case of Catholic communities this may involve draping the Tricolour or even Palestinian flags from poles or may involve painting the flagstones green, white, and orange. In the violent conflicts of the past these symbols would have reinforced the validity of the actions of those engaged in the armed campaign. Today, elaborate murals act as a constant reminder of the previous violent conflict, the civil rights demonstrations, the lives lost, and the value of remembering a conflict-ridden community history. These murals may help younger generations identify with their group and to become aware that they are part of a violent community, and they may be led to value the importance of upholding the tradition of the violent conflict that has been waged in their name (Guelke, 1995).

The personal links that enabled individuals to join countergovernment organizations would still remain within many communities in Northern Ireland, and these links become important in sustaining social movements. Klandermans (1997) indicated that people most commonly become significantly involved in nonviolent resistance movements in response to personal requests from individuals who are already activists. Existing members would communicate the importance of contributing to the overall organization and also help the potential recruit to see that the personal costs of participation are justified by the goals of the movement. A similar process may operate for many individuals who become involved in paramilitary groups. White and Fraser (2000) pointed to the fact that many of their Republican interviewees had a family background of paramilitary activity and had stated that they were “born into that tradition” of defiant Republicanism (p. 331). In itself, this was likely to make the decision to join the IRA relatively straightforward. Family involvement acted to continue the
transmission of the legacy of the armed struggle from one generation to another.

The success of a movement is not just dependent on the degree to which active members attract new recruits. During the conflict, the wider community would also help legitimize a resistance movement by providing moral, financial, and ideological support (Jenkins, 1983). McAdam and Paulsen (1993) indicated that strong social ties become important in mobilizing support for social movements within a community. In times of great community support, the activist is in little doubt of the legitimate nature of their organization or of the legitimacy of their actions. When the wider community is not under attack from an external source, however, and when support for violent conflict comes from a relatively select portion of the community, an activist may have fewer people reinforcing the importance of their actions. In that situation (i.e., the situation facing Northern Ireland immediately after the Agreement; McAuley, 2004), would former paramilitaries and those who had mobilized masses to counter the government in peaceful ways see violence as an impossible future prospect and view an opportunity for mass community involvement in the political process?

Current Study

Those people that were previously engaged in paramilitary activity and those engaged in civil rights organizations would have developed a distinct activist identity. Solidarity within the group of activists would have strengthened as individual members speak predominantly to similarly minded individuals and would also strengthen as these individual members engaged in confrontation with the enemy (the British State and particularly the Army). This enemy meets the activists’ actions with military force, thereby perpetuating the view of one’s own community being under attack and can contribute to counteractive violence being seen as a legitimate response to those who are doing the attacking (Burgess et al., 2005b). We can see that there is an overwhelming difficulty particularly facing those who were once involved with paramilitary groups but now have entered a period of inactivity. These people would have been socialized into the movement, have internalized the legitimacy of the tactics enacted, have internalized the ideology, have mutually reinforced collective beliefs with other members, and have their identity as a valued combatant reinforced by the wider community. So how do these individuals interpret the move towards peace outlined by the Agreement? Further, how do they and their nonviolent defiant counterparts (those who organized civil rights movements) interpret contemporary circumstances and the legacy of violence?

In keeping with previous research on complex issues that directly impact the lives of individual participants (Kay & Kingston, 2002; Smith, 1995), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in the current study as the analytical methodological tool. IPA is based upon Husserl’s phenomenology whereby
the experience of individuals is privileged in the research endeavour (Smith, 1996). IPA is concerned with how people think or what people believe about the topic under discussion (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) and is particularly appropriate for detailed studies of small groups (MaCleod, Craufurd, & Booth, 2002) and for research that addresses decision-making processes of participants (Smith, Michie, Stephenson, & Quarrell, 2002). The IPA approach acknowledges that a “real world” exists, but attempts to gain an insider’s perspective of the living conditions and experiences prior to engaging in a more interrogative process of interpretation (Eatough, 2005). In this way, IPA is also similar to the symbolic interactionist approach in ascribing primary importance to the meanings of individual participants. Smith (1996) is not alone in arguing that the social sciences have disproportionately investigated areas that are easily quantified and have neglected Allport’s (1963) advice that methods should be adapted to the subject under investigation. The current paper joins the growing corpus of IPA research that analyses the way in which individuals make sense of the situations they face in a manner that is not available through quantitative research methods (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The current study involved individuals who had actively engaged in a form of resistance designed to advance the conditions of members of their community. That form of resistance was either violent (in the case of former paramilitary combatants) or peaceful (in the case of civil rights organizers). Acting in either of these ways is often the product of a decision-making process rather than being a mindless reactive response to environmental circumstances or, alternatively, being assigned a role in the way that laboratory participants would be assigned a role (see Burgess et al., 2005a). To these ends, IPA offers an excellent methodological system for describing how individuals make sense of the current social circumstances.

Method

Participants

Participants were from the Bogside in Derry, Northern Ireland. Since the late 1960s the Bogside has been an area that is synonymous with resistance against authority forces. Each of the participants had heavily invested themselves in securing a different future for Catholics in Northern Ireland, and each person had engaged in some form of prolonged activity designed to alter the social circumstances for themselves and their broader social group. Post-Agreement Northern Ireland would be of particular interest to these individuals as the manner in which they had defined their self had largely been shaped by the actions they had taken in response to the circumstances of intergroup conflict. Three people in this sample had engaged in prolonged violent resistance against the British authorities through their former involvement with the IRA. The other two people in the sample had
not contributed to the IRA’s armed conflict. However, these individuals were as concerned about the community as their paramilitary counterparts but had attempted to instigate change peacefully by organizing a variety of committees, demonstrations, and marches, and by being instrumental in establishing the civil rights organizations.

The conceptualization of validity in phenomenological research differs significantly from the conceptualization of validity in quantitative methods (Smith, 2005). Rather than focusing on sample size and participant selection, deep qualitative methods focus on the internal coherence of the narrative. In addition, the presentation of material should be grounded in examples in a manner that gives sufficient evidence to allow the reader to evaluate the authors’ interpretations (see also Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Participants are referred to numerically rather than with names in order to maintain anonymity.

**Interviews**

In order to maximize the degree to which participants felt at ease, each interview was conducted in an environment selected by the participant. These environments included an interviewee’s home, a public café, an office, and, on two occasions, the home of a friend of the interviewee. The first and third author interviewed all participants, and the second author was also present for the interviews of Participants 2 and 5.

Semi-structured interviews were employed and explored participants’ experiences of the current situation in Northern Ireland and inevitably addressed the impact of the violent conflict. Participants had the opportunity to develop themes themselves and were probed to continue with their elaborations. The interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes and were recorded onto a mini-disc. These were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed according to the IPA guidelines established by Smith et al. (1999).

**Data Analysis**

The first author conducted a detailed analysis of each interview, annotating and coding each participant’s transcript fully before starting the next one. Broad themes were developed for each transcript in turn and these themes became more focused with successive readings of the transcripts and construction of code summary documents. This system of analysis is in line with Smith’s (1996) second recommendation of analyzing interview data from groups. In this case, summary documents of master codes were determined for each individual without attempting to read the next individual’s transcript. This was done to reduce the tendency of codes from one interview completely determining the construction of themes identified in subsequent transcripts. Eventually, a set of superordinate master
themes was achieved by identifying relevant extracts across all participants. Rereading the transcripts and summary documents helped the researcher to identify themes that were repeated across individuals and to identify themes that were specific to particular individuals. The second and third authors independently conducted a mini-audit of the transcripts and summary documents and agreed with the coding and themes identified (see Yin, 1989, for a discussion of the value of the audit for purposes of reliability). Here, we present a subset of themes that most directly address participants’ interpretations of life in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

Results

Participants’ extracts are used to illustrate the narrative account of different individuals and to allow the reader to see how the researchers’ interpretations were reached (see Smith et al., 2002, for a similar structure). We start by outlining participants’ assessments of the effectiveness of the armed campaign, their evaluation of the legacy of former violence in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland, and their analysis of the prospects for future armed conflict.

The Effectiveness, and Legacy, of Violence

Participants had different views on the effectiveness of the paramilitary activity of the past. Participant 5 had organized civil rights demonstrations and believed peaceful forms of protest to provide the most effective means of opposing authority and to provide the best means of changing unfair social systems. Perhaps it comes as a surprise then, to learn that he also believed that the violent program of the IRA had directly influenced the desire of the British and Irish governments to address the situation in Northern Ireland:

[the Agreement] is a direct result of a lot of the violent action as well as the more peaceful action. As far as the London government was concerned, I am damn sure it was the violence, particularly the violence in London, that made them sit up and say, “hey, we better do something about this.”

A former paramilitary (Participant 3) also believed that each person who became involved in the armed conflict had contributed to the progression of the community:

I think that every person who was injured or killed made a difference in the overall context of the situation. I think every single person made a difference.
If violent combat were to be seen more widely as having been beneficial there would be a distinct possibility that current generations would believe they too could achieve their goals using similar violent means. Participant 1, however, draws a distinction between the circumstances he saw as requiring armed action over 30 years ago and the circumstances facing the young today:

I say [to the young], “now, it’s because of people like myself and lots of others who stood up, that will never happen again in your time. We have given you a life whereby you can have third-level education, you can have a house, a job. Don’t mess it up. It was very, very, dearly bought.” I’m passing that on to them. But, don’t use violence any more. It worked for us, but it’ll not work any more. We’ve come to that conclusion. We solved that.

For this individual, violence was the solution to problems (lack of appropriate housing, lower opportunities for further education, and unfair voting practices) that have now been solved. In fact, here he attributes responsibility for these changes to people in his own organization (in the same interview he acknowledges the equally important efforts of noncombatants). However, he warns that failing to take the opportunities available in contemporary society and instead opting to take up arms would be to “mess it up.” In essence, future violent action would be a betrayal of those who have gone before, and the young have a responsibility to take the opportunities currently available.

Participant 1 acknowledged also that the Republican paramilitary groups and the British Army effectively fought each other to a standstill. Each of these groups eventually realized that “talking was the way of solving it.” He goes on to emphasize, “I have no time now for any more armed or military or private armies. We want to rid them all.”

Not all members of the sample viewed the paramilitary campaign as effective either in terms of the end results or in terms of the investment of effort. Participant 4 stated:

I actually do not believe that the armed struggle of the IRA will be seen in history as having contributed a great deal. . . . Go back to 1970, 71, 72, and read the cabinet papers of the day and think back at what was being said and what was in prospect. Who can say that the Belfast Agreement represents, in so far as it’s delivered, more than anything that was readily available at that time. It seems to me to be a very peculiar argument that the investment of pain and suffering inflicted and endured, which was involved in the armed struggle, that that represented a good investment given the return that we’ve had on it.

He questions how former members of paramilitary groups can interpret their efforts as having been effective, and he draws attention to the fact that the pain
inflicted on others should be seen as a cost as well as the pain that was endured by the community.

The differences in the way that participants interpret the relative success of the armed campaign may be at the root of the different ways in which individual interviewees interpreted success. Participant 4 assesses success by comparing what was likely to be agreed at a political level in the 1970s with what was actually included in the Agreement of 1998. To him, the differences between the two are too little to be able to evaluate the armed conflict as having been effective. To the former combatants (and also to Participant 5, an individual who organized peaceful forms of resistance), the fact that the Agreement was reached in 1998 and that the everyday opportunities are now greater for members of his community indicates that the paramilitary efforts were fruitful.

There is an inherent risk, if one is to believe that violent methods are effective, that contemporary youth will see similarly violent methods as a viable way to gain whatever they feel they lack in modern life. Participant 5 highlighted that violent resistance “is very glamorous and very newsworthy” and therefore remains in public consciousness. Participant 4 also noted the challenge facing young people, in that they would experience a pressure to emulate their combative forefathers:

There’s a lot of pressure. The pressure to some extent, I suppose, is inevitable and natural. [the community here] celebrates and vindicates and recognizes it [the conflict] and it’s passed on, so there’s an element of that. . . . But, as well as that there are political elements and political tendencies that have a vested interest in maintaining a culture of the community. They have an imperative to do it because how would they go on existing unless they convince people of it [the historical victimization of their community and legitimacy of their part in the conflict]. So, it’s imposed upon people almost as a duty to support the struggle and see heroic figures.

The importance of maintaining a belief in the importance of violent action is spoken of as a natural occurrence, almost as if the violent legacy is a gene passing from one generation to the other. However, there is a more proactive social force responsible for this perpetuation of the legacy of victimization and violent reaction. We might assume that the only protagonists perpetuating this legacy are the former combatants themselves, but this participant emphasizes that politicians also provide the fuel for the perpetuation of the violent heritage of the community. These politicians have a vested interest in maintaining distinct divisions between groups, thereby ensuring the power base of voters is maintained.

The tension created by people looking positively to their violent heritage yet also being in a peace process is terribly problematic. Participants 1, 3, and 4 each
point out that some of the most influential political parties contain members who were formerly involved with paramilitary groups in some form. The challenge for those politicians is to maintain the perception that their own actions were previously legitimate without enthusing a new generation to re-enact the same violent confrontations between communities and between paramilitary organizations and security forces. To that extent, the way in which a specific community’s history is passed down to the next generations is often “sanitized” to present its members in the best light:

**Participant 4:** In any conflict there’s physical heroism and so forth, but there’s also a great deal of animal brutality, viciousness and low-life behaviour, and torturing and intimidation of people. So, the legacy of any of the armed groups in the Northern Ireland conflict is not one of unrelied glory. You don’t get any murals of the times that they have blown the arms and legs off some innocent person or that someone was taken out and viciously beaten for some imagined slight of some local “made” man in a paramilitary organization.

These comments are particularly pertinent at a time when a considerable amount of media coverage of Northern Ireland has been devoted to community members who have been victims of paramilitary groups that previously would have been considered to act on behalf of that same community. In a similar vein, Participant 1 believed that it is essential to address all issues of the armed conflict, even those that would be less palatable for the main protagonists. Speaking of events where bystanders and ordinary civilians were killed, he distinguishes between legitimate targets and innocent deaths:

There’s lots of things that’s happened in this last 30 years that were awful tragedies and shouldn’t have happened. . . . Like where civilians were involved. It was wrong to do it, to take innocent life. And I wouldn’t even say to myself, I wouldn’t go along, I wouldn’t buy into the idea that in every war there’s going to be mistakes and the innocents are going to suffer.

The desire to move into and maintain a peaceful period (and leave the violence in the past) was also indicated by Participant 2, also a former paramilitary:

I marched back then and done whatever I had to do back then for myself and for when the day would come that my children wouldn’t have to go through what I went through. That would grieve me if I felt that they had to do it all over again. So, it’s vitally important that we do move into the peace process, which they are doing.
The desire for peace is qualified by a sense that there may still be a possibility of violence being necessary, the regrettable possibility of the current generation “having to do it all again.”

An area that is often overlooked is the suffering and psychological anxiety experienced by those that have been involved in armed conflict. Participant 1 revealed that he had been shot twice and had close friends lose their life. In addition, he is struggling to come to terms with the consequences of his own actions:

I’m someone that’s living that lived in the past, that went through it and is able to recount and tell them [the young today] the horrors of it. And how much it can take lumps out of your head. Because it has taken lumps out of mine, there’s no doubt about it. I have the rest of my life to live thinking on things that I’ve done and maybe hurt people. And I’m very, very, sorry for it. I never wanted to do it. I don’t want any young people to go through that again. And I want them to appreciate life, you know.

This individual reinforces the personal costs of being in violent conflict, the lumps it has taken out of his head. At the same time, he acknowledges the lumps that he has taken out of other people’s lives. He accepts responsibility for his actions and recognizes that he will have to reflect upon what he has done for the rest of his life. In addition, he again emphasizes that the impetus for his actions resided externally (the fact that he “never wanted to do it”). It could be argued that attributing the start of one’s violent activities externally is merely a rationalization that allows former combatants to see their actions as regrettable, but necessary. However, Participant 4 (an individual opposed to the armed struggle) indicated that these accounts appear so frequently from both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries that it would be unwise to dismiss these explanations as mere rationalizations rather than being grounded in real experiences.

The State of Post-Agreement Northern Ireland

Participants valued ordinary members of the population becoming actively engaged in the political processes of their community and their region. But what were the chances that people would, once again, seek to alter their circumstances through violent means? Participant 3 stated that the chances of people becoming involved in armed combat were slight as a result of problems with substance abuse in the working-class communities of Northern Ireland:

For reasons that are best known to themselves, if a person’s drugged up to the eyeballs, they aren’t going be out lifting an Armalite rifle or an AK-47 rifle or whatever. They can’t defend themselves, never mind attack. Or even march.
He sees modern apathy and substance abuse as rendering a community incapable of violent attack or politically motivated protest. This is an interesting analysis of contemporary apathy with the political process. Rather than focusing upon whether social conditions are sufficiently poor to motivate people to be active in their community, this individual is judging whether members of his community are up to the challenge of becoming involved in conflict. In fact, he believes that people lack interest in the wider community and would not even become engaged in a supportive capacity:

Before the main drug culture hit here, say around the hunger strike time, there were huge turnouts. And at the funerals, there was a hundred thousand people at the funerals. Would that happen today? Not a chance. Not a chance. It wouldn’t happen.

Participant 4 also expresses the apparent dislocation of ordinary individuals from active participation. For him, paramilitary groups and political groups both demand that the general population abdicates the responsibility for their lives to more powerful individuals who will act on their behalf. So, how does the general population view the present situation in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland? Participant 5 believes that:

At the present time it’s very much in the balance. I don’t know what’s happening, but it seems to me, looking at the Unionists, they don’t want a settlement. That’s the way I see it. They don’t want a settlement with me, and my people, as equal partners. And if they don’t accept that, then there’s no agreement. That’s that. So, it looks to me at the present time as if there is no agreement. Things may well regress for a while and smolder for a while. I don’t know. Let’s hope, there’s a time factor involved and let’s hope there’ll be a breakthrough somewhere.

This participant’s account involves an expression of the divisions between the two communities. Whether the Agreement will prove to be successful is believed to be dependent on the actions of members of the outgroup, the Unionists. The result of failure would likely be a regression, presumably to previous suspicions and hostility. The fact that participants refer to the current situation as “smoldering” or “simmering” reflects a fundamental reality that people are not living in ease with one another. To that end the Agreement has not been an unqualified success, and peace is seen not merely as lack of violence but having one’s needs satisfied. In fact, the Agreement itself is considered deficient:

Participant 4: It’s not an agreement whereby people agree to live as one together. It’s an agreement to police people apart, and if you police people apart there is always the potential for it to erupt again into
violence. The implication of the agreement, the “peace” that we have, is that two communities should live alongside one another, in solemn rivalry with one another without ever erupting into the all out violent conflict that we saw, for example, in the 1970s and the 1980s. This isn’t peace, but neither is it war. Obviously, we are a more segregated society than at any time in our history, than at any time. We have never been as segregated. There are very few mixed areas left and almost no working class mixed areas, one or two, but they’re very unusual. So, we’re very segregated.

The segregation of communities exacerbates differences and contributes to the feeling (among all of our participants) that the potential for future violence still exists. This is great cause for concern. Interviewees spontaneously offered that the best situation would be to live in a manner that enabled people to see everybody (including members of the other group) as equal and as sharing an identity of fellow human beings, a superordinate category. Yet, the communities are separated. The dangers of segregating groups have been known for half a century by social psychologists (see Sherif’s, 1966, classic Robber’s Cave study for a compelling example of how easily people can engage in physical conflict with one another). On the one hand, we know that merely being in contact with the “other” group is insufficient to reduce prejudices and to eliminate discriminatory behaviour (Pettigrew, 1998). On the other hand, we can also be sure that continued segregation does not provide the answer to secure living conditions whereby members of each community feel safe, can develop overlapping identities, and do not feel the constant threat of renewed violence.

Despite outward appearances of a relative peace, the people of Northern Ireland are not truly living with one another. In that regard, the situation is described as being worse than ever before. With circumstances such as these the potential will exist for future conflict between groups. The separation of groups is especially marked among those with the most limited opportunities and the lowest level of material resources. Participant 3 describes these people as being the “cannon fodder” for the conflict and points out that these people are traditionally the ones who suffer the most:

The ordinary Catholic and Protestant, quite honestly, doesn’t matter [to the politicians]. They are the cannon fodder of the whole war. Of the thirty six hundred people that have died in this war, how many was above the average wage? Not too many.

The emphasis is on the disparity between those in power and ordinary members of a community. While politicians are largely responsible for negotiations and for determining the manner in which agreements will be implemented, ordinary people are most affected by disputes, and especially affected by violent conflict.
It would be reasonable to believe, then, that people would be resentful of the conflict. Despite being counterintuitive, Participant 4 reveals that this is not necessarily the case:

This is also probably true of everywhere there’s a conflict: people really get to like their own conflict. It’s what defines us in Northern Ireland, it’s what makes us interesting. If it wasn’t for the conflict, what a boring people we would be [laughs]. . . . [People say] oh, you come from Northern Ireland? Oh, that’s interesting! So we get to like it and almost to celebrate it.

The implication is that people in Northern Ireland have defined themselves by virtue of their group categorization and are now encouraged by the Agreement to focus on the roots of their specific category (i.e., continue to emphasize their single identity). In addition, the people define themselves by the conflict. Essentially the conflict becomes part of their personal and social identity. For its part, the media reinforces the distinctions between groups and reinforces the conflict by focusing almost solely on the violence in Northern Ireland. Participant 5 challenged a journalist to tell him whether a series of uneventful and peaceful marches in his area would be reported. The journalist replied that planes that take off and land safely do not constitute news whereas those that take off and crash will make the front pages. Any agreement has its work cut out if it does not seek to diminish the extent to which the people can find reasons to define themselves through hostility. An additional problem in Northern Ireland is that the rest of the world, through news reporting, defines the region and defines the people in terms of conflict. Moreover, the participants themselves tell of how appealing they found the conflict in their youth:

*Participant 3*: You would have went anywhere for a riot. The possibility of a march and a riot? You’re gone! But, now if I could go back 35 years, god, 35 years. If I could go back now I would definitely plough back into education.

**Discussion**

Our participants were important figures in their community at the height of the resistance campaigns 30 years ago. These individuals remain influential figures today. Participants differed in the extent to which they believed the armed campaigns of paramilitary groups had been effective in contributing to societal change. We can see from our interviewees’ accounts that their individual experiences of current social conditions could not lead them to believe they were in a period of guaranteed peace.

In contrast with the late 1960s and early 1970s where community members had been motivated to become politically active in a variety of ways, contemporary
generations were characterized as being apathetic and as not having a sense that they were personally responsible for changing their group circumstances. This decline in social capital is not peculiar to those in areas of intergroup conflict and has especially been noted by Putnam (1995, 2000) in his critique of modern American life. In the past, people in the Bogside would contribute to a collective movement aimed at inducing social change through attending public meetings, marching in public rallies, becoming members of community boards, through contributing to community projects, and by becoming active in the peaceful civil rights leadership. In addition, of course, they could have become involved with a paramilitary group. With time, however, the armed conflict dominated the community, and paramilitary groups and the British Army attacked one another to an extent that rendered safe, peaceful mass protest impossible (Burgess et al., 2005a). Forceful defiance became the primary route for opposition to external forces, with the consequent diminution of widespread involvement in the daily politics of the area. All interviewees stressed the value of contributing to one’s immediate social group. Indeed, Putnam (2000) suggests that engaging with one’s community has a variety of personal and social benefits. Of particular importance to communities that have experienced conflict is the fact that being interdependent can help to resolve collective problems in an effective manner. In addition, the mere process of experiencing oneself as contributing to, and being dependent upon, the well-being of others has important ramifications for increasing awareness of the ways in which people’s fates are linked.

Williams and Jesse (2001) were optimistic that opposing groups would have the opportunity to reduce the ambient tension through the creation of shared identities. They suggested that the power for change would come from the people themselves, but these very people are considered by our participants to be less likely to become involved in the social problems of their community than ever before. Moreover, it should be recognized that those with the greatest authority are the politicians who our participants suggest have a vested interest in keeping the communities in solemn rivalry. In future, researchers could investigate the extent to which the younger generation experience themselves as disconnected from the wider community and from the political process and could seek to determine ways of reengaging young people with the life of their community.

Those interviewees who were in the IRA were contributing to the ongoing definition of what it meant to be a member of a community in which violence was an integral part of the shared social history. That process creates violent social memories for the community to draw upon in considering the legitimacy of the defiant actions enacted on their behalf. As a result, the individual actors become known to others, and their actions are hailed in murals and public symbols. As pointed out by one of our participants, these murals are selective in the images that are depicted. The scenes promote heroism rather than brutality. The next generation then becomes aware of the heroic quality of the defiant collective identity shared by those who resist. In Northern Ireland, both Catholics and Protestants have strong
traditions of utilizing physical force and violence to safeguard and promote their interests (see Guelke, 1995). These violent traditions become increasingly strong when the actions of former rebels are seamlessly linked with the actions of contemporary youth. Our participants addressed the problematic nature of ensuring that current generations do not take up the mantle of violent resistance. These issues underline the challenges involved in ensuring that contemporary collective identity is managed carefully by those who wish to project an image of peace seeking yet also wish to remember the acts of historical movements.

Those who previously were active in the IRA saw themselves as having fought for equal inclusion in society. For them, it was critical that fellow Catholics were not disadvantaged in the workplace, in the education system, and in terms of access to housing. According to one member, those aims were achieved, and, as a result, he believed that there was no argument that could satisfy further armed rebellion on the part of the young. While it is evident that the interpersonal links that existed prior to the Agreement still exist today, it is also clear that some former combatants are keen for people to shift their focus to issues that are relevant for post-war life. On the other hand, participants did not experience Post-Agreement Northern Ireland in terms of already being at peace. Despite the hope that the Agreement would reduce the threat of conflict by nurturing overlapping identities and pooling sovereignty (Williams & Jesse, 2001), the real-life experiences of those affected by the implementation of the Agreement suggest that the threat of renewed violence still exists. Participants recognized this threat and saw it as being born of living in a society where political power is based on the division of communities, where ordinary people are not motivated to contribute to the shaping of their political landscape, and where everyday life is fundamentally affected by the agreements of strongly opposed politicians. Moreover, despite their opposition to future conflict and their belief that fewer people would support such future violence, participants acknowledged that the conflict itself has become a notable part of the identity of people in Northern Ireland. They also acknowledged that it is difficult to overcome the brutal legacy of violence as many individuals become nostalgic when reminiscing about the armed struggle.

Violence has already been identified as an issue that is pervasive and almost a compulsory rite of passage in young men’s lives in Northern Ireland (Reilly, Muldoon, & Byrne, 2004). The young offenders in Reilly et al.’s focus group research believed that greater contact with formerly violent individuals would be useful in preventing current generations from becoming similarly violent. They suggested that it would be particularly useful to learn how former paramilitaries stopped engaging in violent activity and also to learn of the factors that had instigated their decision to abandon violent means. Our participants had been engaged in sustained high-risk activities. For them, the termination of their participation may not only be associated with positive affect (e.g., pride in having contributed to a movement), but would also be associated with distressing emotions such as guilt and anomie. One of our former paramilitary participants gave
some insight into the negative consequences of his actions, and, presumably, this information and similar first-hand accounts would be valued by current generations in that it would help to offset the positive history of community defiance passed on through the legacy of violence.

Despite expressing a desire to live with their “fellow-man” and despite recognizing the value of connecting with members of other communities in a meaningful way, participants saw their society as more segregated than ever, with people being policed apart rather than encouraged to engage in communal tasks. These circumstances make it even more difficult to achieve the kinds of interactions that would create a sense of an overlapping or shared identity that would contribute to a truly peaceful society. The fact that participants reasoned that their political representatives were motivated to maintain, rather than reduce, the perceived differences and distance between members of rival communities does not auger well for progressive social change. A recent report by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) in 1999 supports the views of our participants. As many as 98% of NIHE residential estates in Belfast were segregated, and 71% of all NIHE tenants lived in segregated areas.

It appears that segregation, sectarianism, and fear of the “other” community has increased rather than decreased since the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994. One of the clearest illustrations of the increased division between groups is the construction of so-called “peace lines” in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Jarman, 2002). These euphemistically labeled barriers have been erected to manage inter-community violence. Surveys of those who live in these areas reveal that the majority of residents believe that intercommunity relations have deteriorated further in recent years (Shirlow, 2001, 2003). People even base their mundane everyday decisions regarding which services to access (such as hospitals, supermarkets, and libraries) on sectarian lines. Even if the willingness to engage with people from the other community exists, the tension revealed from our participants’ accounts would not improve without members of each group being able to interact with one another on a daily basis. In fact, participants indicate that people in working class areas were especially unlikely to interact with members of the other community and, therefore, would have fewer opportunities to reduce any existing intergroup bias.

The use of IPA methods allowed a comprehensive perspective of individuals’ interpretations of the former violence waged in Northern Ireland and of the likelihood of future violence. IPA researchers acknowledge that their method is intended to gain deeper insight into the lives of a relatively small sample that share important characteristics. To that end, results cannot be generalized to a population as a whole (Chapman & Smith, 2002). However, the reader should be able to determine the coherence and utility of the study (Turpin et al., 1997), and the results could be used to generate a survey that could subsequently be used to gain an understanding of the degree to which the sample’s views are held by others. Moreover, in order to gain a further understanding of the intergroup and intragroup
legacy of violent conflict, it would be especially valuable to engage in similar detailed IPA investigations with groups still explicitly committed to continued violence and with members of communities that have endured violent punishments from paramilitary groups traditionally seen as acting on their behalf. In addition, it would be of great benefit to gain an insider’s perspective of individuals in other areas of Northern Ireland (e.g., North and West Belfast) in order to gain a deeper understanding of the views of similar people in those communities.

We gained an insider’s perspective of the Post-Agreement situation in Northern Ireland from a select sample of former rebels. Future IPA research should seek to illuminate the conflicts inherent in people’s lives in other areas of Northern Ireland and to elucidate the intra-community factors that may provide obstacles to peace. In that way, we will build a bank of knowledge that addresses a critical feature in today’s society, namely the manner in which individuals experience daily life and interpret their chances of living in a community engaged in future violence. Moreover, the process of interviewing increasing numbers of groups in Northern Ireland will enable greater generalizations to be made.

We can draw the conclusion that the success of the peace is dependent on a wide variety of factors. This is especially important to consider at a moment when the people of Northern Ireland are negotiating another period of political tension. Historically, casualty rates increase following such periods (Ferguson, 2002). The British Government, the political parties of Northern Ireland, former paramilitaries, those who promulgate the violent legacy of the past, the media, the youth of today, and the wider community all have a part to play in ensuring that the people of Northern Ireland manage to live in peace. Also, and critically for future development, the politics and practice of segregation need to be seen as damaging the society and likely, in fact, to create the very conditions that lead to intergroup suspicion, hostility, and violence. Ideally, agreements should not result in people being policed apart. However, current political strategies (e.g., the disproportionate emphasis on single-identity work; see Church, Visser, & Johnson, 2004) and the nature of the political system that rewards polarization show few signs of encouraging people to live together or to work together towards mutually beneficial goals, activities that may help to realize the hopes of those that aimed to create overlapping identities between Protestant and Catholic communities.

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