
The Conflict in Northern Ireland

Causes, Consequences, and Controls

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The conflict in Northern Ireland is at its most basic a struggle between those who wish to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom and those who wish to see the reunification of the island of Ireland. It is underpinned by historical, religious, political, economic, and psychological elements. These elements underlie the violence that has spanned the past 25 years and that has led to death and injury, led to increased community divisions, and impacted on the population's mental health. In an attempt to transform the conflict, various policy initiatives have been pursued, including attempts to reduce inequality and to improve community relations, in particular through educational initiatives.

In ethnic conflicts, unlike in international wars, the combatants permanently inhabit the same battlefield. Even during periods of tranquillity, their lives are intermeshed with those of their ethnic opponents. As a consequence, ethnic violence is often characterized by internecine viciousness rather than by the more impassive slaughter of international wars. Group loyalty and the maintenance of group boundaries are dominant features of ethnic conflicts, so they are marked by higher levels of immutability than are many other forms of conflict. Northern Ireland is a society enmeshed in such a conflict, which is based on political ideologies and social/ethnic identities that happen to be divided along religious lines.

Protestants generally support unionism, which aims to maintain the legal, economic, and political link with the United Kingdom, whereas Catholics generally support nationalism, which seeks the reunification of Ireland under a Dublin government. The more militant elements of these two factions are prepared to take up arms to fight for their respective beliefs, resulting in the emergence of terrorist or, as they are known locally, paramilitary groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA; drawn mostly from the Catholic Nationalist Republican population) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (drawn mainly from the Protestant Unionist Loyalist population). Today it is estimated that 38% of the Northern Irish population is Roman Catholic and 50% is Protestant, with those not wishing to state a denomination comprising the rest of the population. Traditionally, Catholic birthrates have been higher than those of Protestants, but this has been offset by the higher emigration rate of Catholics. Overall, how-

ever, the Catholic proportion of the population has been rising steadily since the early 1930s. As the British government has always guaranteed Northern Ireland continuing membership in the United Kingdom as long as the majority of the people desire to retain this status, this rise in the Catholic population has led to fears on the part of Protestants that one day they will be out-voted on the question of a united Ireland. Although the media image of Northern Ireland is that of a war-torn society constantly plagued by gunmen and rioting youths, the violence of the past 25 years in Northern Ireland has been sporadic and confined to particular areas at any one time. In fact, political and sectarian violence aside, the population of Northern Ireland enjoys a lower rate of civil crime than any other part of the United Kingdom. At the same time, despite the fragmented and sporadic nature of the violence in Northern Ireland, most families have been touched in some way by "the troubles." With over 3,000 deaths, the impact of the protracted conflict has been marked on the closely knit urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland, an area with a population of only 1.5 million living in just 32,000 square miles.

Causes

The conflict at its most basic can be seen as a struggle between those who wish to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom and those who wish to see the reunification of the whole island of Ireland. Although the roots of the present conflict in Northern Ireland can be traced back some 300 years, the conflict in its present form is in fact "a tangle of interrelated questions" (Darby, 1995, p. 12) involving historical, religious, political, economic, and psychological elements (Whyte, 1990). We examine each of these elements in turn.

History

To understand the development of the conflict and the emergence of Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists as distinct groups, it is necessary to recognize the

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long legacy of Irish conflict. Centuries before the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Western Europe, the people of Ireland were in conflict with the English because of England's control of Irish people and resources. After the emergence of Protestantism in England, the Catholic faith in Ireland and the identity of the Irish people were swamped by the controlling English. In particular, the Plantation of Ulster introduced to the North of Ireland a community of foreigners (mainly Scots—hence the term Ulster-Scots) who spoke a different language and most of whom were Protestant in contrast to the native Irish who were Catholic. By the 18th century, the colonists occupied 95% of the land, which they had confiscated from the natives, and came to form a majority in Ulster in contrast to a Catholic majority in the South of Ireland.

Years of oppression by the colonists and rebellion by the native Irish culminated in the Treaty of 1921, which partitioned the island into two sections: the 6 predominantly Protestant counties of the North, which remained an integral part of the United Kingdom, and the 26 mainly Catholic counties of the South, which separated from the United Kingdom and became known as "The Free State" (later the Republic of Ireland). After partition, Northern Ireland was ruled from Stormont, the seat of Northern Irish government, but it was ultimately answerable to London. Since that time, periods of significant violence have occurred in Ireland with IRA campaigns in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s as some of the Catholic Nationalist population, who saw partition as an attempt to maintain a Protestant majority, attempted to force the reunification of Ireland. The latest and most sustained period of violence began in the late 1960s, when claims by the Catholic population of Protestant discrimination against Catholics in the areas of jobs, education, housing, and local elections led to a civil rights campaign. This campaign quickly escalated into violence, resulting in the deployment of British troops to try to restore order. In 1972, the Stormont Government was abolished and the province was governed by direct rule from London.

Theology

Of the many interrelated causes, religion or, more correctly, theology is probably the least important despite the fact that church membership is high in Northern Ireland: 87% of people with 62% of those claiming that they attend church weekly in Northern Ireland compared with 66% of people with 14% of those claiming to attend church weekly in Great Britain (Cairns, 1991). The use of the terms "Protestant" and "Catholic" to identify the conflicting groups is as much ethnic and political as religious. For most people in Northern Ireland, it is not inconsistent to say that one is not religious (e.g., never attends church or is an atheist) but at the same time to describe oneself as a Catholic or a Protestant. Theology is seen as critical mainly by a small sector of the Protestant population that is virulently anti-Catholic and sees the

Catholic church as "evil and unchristian" (Morrow, 1995, p. 159). This sector fears for its religious freedom in what it sees as a state dominated by Rome if Northern Ireland were to become part of an all-Ireland republic (at present 98% Catholic).

These perceptions have not been helped by the fact that the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy has been one of the most conservative in the Catholic world. For many years, this hierarchy described the Protestant churches as churches "in error" (Morrow, 1995, p. 158) and heavily influenced the laws of the Republic of Ireland especially in such matters as divorce and birth control. This fear of theological domination on the part of some Protestants is also fostered by homogeneity in the Catholic church; that is, the Catholic population belongs to one single, unified denomination, whereas there are some 45 separate Protestant denominations (of which Presbyterianism is the largest, accounting for some 75% of all Northern Irish Protestants).

Nationality

To a few, nationality is inextricably linked to theology. However, most people view the issue as a straightforward desire on the part of Protestants to remain part of the United Kingdom (i.e., British) and on the part of Catholics to be part of an all-Ireland republic. The former, the Unionist Loyalist Protestants, make up the majority, whereas the latter, the Nationalist Republican Catholics, are in the minority in Northern Ireland; however, this is not the case in the whole island of Ireland. Self-definitions also vary; the majority of Catholics prefer to label themselves as Irish, whereas Protestants prefer the term British (Moxon-Browne, 1991; Waddell & Cairns, 1991).

Inequality

Economic factors have loomed large in the conflict in Northern Ireland, which is seen as the least affluent region of the United Kingdom and as one of the least prosperous areas within the European Community. Northern Ireland is characterized by large families, poor standards of health, a high cost of living, low earnings, high unemployment, and poor housing. This situation was exacerbated by Protestant domination that led to higher unemployment for Catholics (18%) than for Protestants (8%). This differential is especially noticeable between men (23% of Catholic men are unemployed versus 9% of Protestant men). As a result, more than twice as many Catholic households are dependent on social security, and there are fewer Catholic home owners (Darby, 1997). More Catholic children (12%) than Protestant children (8%) leave school lacking any formal education, and fewer Catholic children (35%) attend grammar schools (the most likely route to a university education) than Protestant children (42%). It is perhaps therefore not surprising that those adolescents most likely to have experience with sectarian violence or its consequences live in economically depressed neighborhoods.

As a result, most commentators would agree that the Catholic aspirations to join their coreligionists in the Republic of Ireland are fueled as much by the way Catholics have been treated in Protestant-dominated Northern Ireland over the past 70-plus years as by history or theology per se. However, the desire on the part of Catholics to join in a united Ireland is not entirely economically based, because the Republic of Ireland has a less prosperous economy. In addition, Northern Ireland receives considerable subsidies from the British government. As a result, Northern Ireland has the highest level of government spending per capita of the four regions of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland). Part of this increased expenditure is because of the extra costs involved in providing increased security services.

Psychological Explanations

As the political scientist John Whyte has noted, "Anyone who studies Northern Ireland must be struck by the intensity of feeling which the conflict evokes. It seems to go beyond what is required by a rational defence of the divergent interests which undoubtedly exist" (1990, p. 94). Despite Whyte's insight, psychological explanations for the conflict in Northern Ireland have been virtually ignored by scholars from other disciplines (political scientists, for example, rarely cite psychological work) and indeed have received scant attention even from local psychologists who have, as in other parts of the world, been more involved in mainstream psychology. In part, this may be because psychology as an academic discipline was a relative latecomer to Northern Ireland (c. 1950) or because early attempts to use psychological explanations to understand the conflict (e.g., Fields, 1973; Fraser, 1973) tended to be less than satisfactory because of methodological and conceptual weaknesses. The basic difficulty with the early psychological attempts to explain the conflict was that the theories were individually based, tested largely in North America, and often relied on psychodynamic ideas. This work also tended to claim primacy for psychological explanations thus ignoring the role of history, religion, economics, and politics, and it helped foster the view that the conflict was in some way irrational.

Recent psychological work has proved more fruitful by adopting a model that attempts to explain the conflict in terms of intergroup, not interpersonal, processes. In particular, Tajfel's social identity theory (SIT) has provided a useful starting point (Cairns, 1982; Gallagher, 1989). This model recognizes that psychology has only a modest role to play in explaining what has been happening in Northern Ireland because "the social, historical, political and economic causality of the present situation must undoubtedly remain prior to the analysis of any of its psychological concomitants" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 9). SIT suggests that part of one's self-image is derived from membership in various groups. If one finds oneself as a member of a group from which it is difficult or impossi-

ble to leave, the only way to enhance self-esteem is to act to preserve or defend the group's interests. This model fits well with what has happened in Northern Ireland over the past 25 years. It captures the phenomenon better than individually based cost-benefit analyses of behaviors such as, at one extreme, the hunger strikes or, at a more prosaic level, the intense group loyalty represented in election results. SIT is above all a dynamic theory in which the relationship between groups is seen as fluid, and it provides insight into the social changes that have occurred in Northern Ireland and that are still underway. Finally, in contrast to earlier psychological explanations, SIT influenced psychologists and policymakers to see the conflict as stemming from behavior that is determined by essentially normal psychological processes that are operating in exceptional circumstances rather than as a form of madness. This view has affected the policy approaches adopted by the government (see below) as it began to realize that the conflict was not caused by a small group of psychopaths who were intimidating the rest of the community into submission but reflected a widespread ethnic identity-based phenomenon (Weinreich, 1992).

Consequences

The Northern Ireland conflict has had many tangible costs. On an economic level, there have been direct costs incurred by the requirement of maintaining a large security presence and of rebuilding the many buildings destroyed in countless bomb explosions. There have also been indirect economic costs reflected in high levels of unemployment, decline in inward investment and tourist income, and the emigration of young highly educated people to Britain and elsewhere. Surprisingly, there have been no attempts to measure the economic costs of the conflict (Dunn, 1995). What have been researched, however, are other costs not reflected in economic statistics such as the effects of living in a violent society over the past 25 years, the effects of increasing community divisions, and the effects of the situation on mental health.

Violence

The most conspicuous cost of the conflict has been 25 years of uninterrupted violence. Although Darby (1995) noted that "no generation since the Plantation of Ulster has escaped its heritage of violence" (p. 14), the recent violence is the longest and most sustained of all, continuing uninterrupted from 1969 to 1994. During this period, more than 3,000 people died and approximately 30,000 have been officially recorded as injured. Of the deaths, the vast majority (2,000 plus) have been of civilians (including members of paramilitary groups) whereas the remainder have been of members of the security forces, that is, the police (Royal Ulster Constabulary; RUC), the British Army, and its associated locally recruited militia (Ulster Defence Regiment; UDR).

Media appearances to the contrary, political violence has not been a constant variable in everyday life but

has varied temporally, geographically, and qualitatively. Temporally, the level of violence (as defined by fatalities) rose rapidly in the first three years to a high of 467 fatalities in 1972. The level of violence then dropped but remained high over the next three years, averaging around 250 fatalities annually, and over subsequent years it averaged below 100 fatalities annually. Geographically, certain areas of Northern Ireland have been more likely to be sites of political violence than others, especially Belfast, Derry, and areas near the border with the Republic of Ireland. Within Belfast, political violence was more likely to occur in interface areas between Protestant and Catholic working-class neighborhoods. Finally, over the 25 years the type of violence changed from street riots to bombings, specifically targeted assassinations, and plainly random sectarian killings. Similarly, tactics and weaponry changed, becoming increasingly more sophisticated.

By international standards the death rate in Northern Ireland could be seen as modest. On a pro rata basis, however, it is equivalent to 100,000 deaths in Britain and to 500,000 deaths in the United States (O'Leary & McGarry, 1993). Nevertheless, violence in Northern Ireland never reached the levels experienced in Lebanon or Bosnia and has not resulted, as some had predicted, in genocidal massacres. This was in part due to the influence of both informal and formal social controls (Darby, 1986). Informal controls include self-imposed limits on the actions of paramilitary groups. For example, assassinations or attempted assassinations of leaders by opposing groups have been remarkably infrequent. Formal controls have included the decision of the Republic of Ireland not to intervene militarily and political limits imposed on the British security forces, such as issuing instructions to refrain from hot pursuit when suspects fled into the Republic of Ireland or when soldiers might open fire.

A strong police and military presence has also helped to prevent escalation of the violence. Police numbers increased from around 3,000 at the start of the current troubles to over 13,000 in the mid-1990s (including reserves)—an increase of 178%. This amounts to some 7 full-time police officers per 1,000 people in contrast to, for example, an estimated 2 officers per 1,000 people in England and Wales. In addition, the police can call on full- and part-time military personnel whose numbers have varied depending on the security situation but at peak times exceeded 20,000. These forces also had had controversial emergency legislation at their disposal, which allowed for trials in the absence of a jury, detention of a suspect for up to seven days without the authorization of a judge, the banning of named organizations, and special powers of interrogation at airports and seaports (Dickson, 1995). Despite military and legal might, the security forces were used largely in two ways: in an attempt to contain violence within the communities (Republican and Loyalist) from which it emanated (Darby, 1995) and in a determined attempt to make central shopping areas safe from bombing by setting up security areas

entered by checkpoints from which private motor vehicles were banned. Various factors mediated the psychological impact of this saturation cover by the security forces, including social class and ethnic and religious group membership. Those living in working-class areas were more likely to view the security forces as a source of harassment, attested to by constant allegations of army and police misconduct especially by Nationalists. Nationalists in particular have little faith in the impartiality of the RUC, 90% of whose members are Protestant. On the other hand, Unionists, especially middle-class Unionists, have been frustrated that security policies have not been aggressive enough but have simply reacted in an ad hoc manner to IRA violence.

Community Divisions

The violence has led to forced migrations, particularly in the early 1970s, often as a result of intimidation. These migrations have led in turn to greater residential segregation. It is important to note, however, that although some parts of Northern Ireland are religiously exclusive, many are not. Consequently, unlike in some other apparently intractable conflicts, in this conflict contact between members of the two ethnic/religious communities is normal in many areas. This is one of the defining characteristics of the Northern Irish conflict. As Stewart (1977) noted, most people, if asked to define the chief symptom of the Northern Ireland troubles, would say it is that the two communities cannot live together. The very essence of the Ulster question, however, Stewart suggested, is that they do live together and have done so for centuries.

Physical division has not, however, increased markedly, and day-to-day contact at work, for example, is the norm rather than the exception (Trew, 1986). Also, intermarriage rates have risen from 6% in 1969 to around 11% in 1991. Generally, people from the two groups interact peaceably and do so by avoiding divisive topics of conversation, such as politics and religion, guided, as the poet Seamus Heaney has put it, by the motto "whatever you say say nothing." Paradoxically, according to survey data, psychological divisions have increased over the past 25 years as more Protestants have come to reject the possibility that they might identify themselves as Irish and have embraced a British identity (Trew, 1996).

Mental Health

The numbers of those killed and injured attest to the fact that violence has led to physical suffering over the past 25 years. There is also evidence that a smaller proportion of individuals in the population have become psychiatric casualties severe enough to require specialist attention. A greater proportion of individuals have certainly suffered from milder forms of stress, but this has probably been relatively short-lived. These conclusions appear to apply equally to children and adults (for a review, see Cairns, Wilson, Gallagher, & Trew, 1995). The psychological casualty rates have not been as high as initially expected partly because people learned to cope with the stress of

political violence, apparently by using distancing as a coping strategy. Also, it has been suggested that social support, particularly from family members, and religion have been used as coping mechanisms (Wilson & Cairns, in press). What is missing, however, is any research on the long-term psychological costs of the conflict.

Policy Approaches to Conflict Transformation

Reducing Inequality

Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made in tackling the inequalities experienced by Northern Ireland's Catholics. The electoral manipulation that had worked against them until the 1960s has ended; inequitable housing provision—a major issue in 1969—has been virtually eradicated; tougher fair employment legislation has greatly diminished the differential ratio between Protestant and Catholic employment rates; and access to higher education has been equalized. However, Catholics, especially Catholic men, are still significantly more likely to be unemployed. Nevertheless, the dominant theme of the past 30 years has been the creation of a significantly more equal society. However, as Dunn (1995, p. 14) noted, although part of the unstated agenda of government policy has been to undermine violence by improving the economic character of those areas from which it comes, there has not been any research that has attempted to evaluate this process or to examine the impact this policy may have had on the attitudes of the people of these areas.

Improving Community Relations

The reduction of material disadvantage has not led to a measurable improvement in relationships between the two ethnic and religious communities. This is not unusual in ethnically divided societies. The most commonly held belief about how conflict between groups can be reduced is what has come to be known as "the contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969). The contact hypothesis argues that contact between people will allow them to communicate with each other and thus to discover that they share the same basic attitudes and values, which in turn will allow them to appreciate one another's way of life. The vast majority of attempts to improve community relations have involved children or young people, either in informal settings such as integrated holidays or in more formal educational settings described below.

Educational Changes

The segregated school system in Northern Ireland has been seen by many as either promoting or maintaining community differences that contribute to the conflict. This is thought to happen because the segregated schools present children with two very different views of the world (the cultural hypothesis) or because the schools contribute to mutual ignorance and hostility (the social hypothesis). In Northern Ireland, therefore, policies based

on the contact hypothesis have been implemented mainly through government-initiated educational interventions. A number of approaches have been adopted. For example, within the existing segregated systems a common curriculum has been established that includes two cross-curricular themes, both with a community relations dimension, Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage. Under EMU, Protestant and Catholic schools are encouraged (by government-provided financial and logistical support) but not required to establish contacts between their pupils. As noted earlier, people in Northern Ireland already coexist on an interpersonal level; the conflict exists at an intergroup level. One criticism leveled at many of these contact schemes, therefore, is that they have encouraged contact on an interindividual basis rather than on an intergroup basis as suggested by SIT.

A more radical strategy has involved the development of planned integrated schools, the aim of which is to have approximately equal numbers of Catholic and Protestant pupils, teachers, and school governors (Dunn, 1989). Based on charitable and parental support, the first of these schools was established in the early 1980s. Today, they number almost 40 but still account for less than 3% of the school population. Since 1989, integrated schools have received government funding.

These initiatives, of course, are planned to make long-term changes to Northern Irish society. It will therefore be some years before the impact of the programs can be properly evaluated. In the interim, it appears to be government policy to keep its options open by pursuing EMU and integrated education simultaneously. Similarly, although apparently contradictorily, the government is encouraging assimilation while at the same time encouraging diversity through its cultural traditions initiative.

Cultural Traditions

Although the government has encouraged contact, it has also come to acknowledge the existence of pluralism in Northern Ireland. This has led to 100% government support for Catholic schools, financial support for Irish-language schools, and general support for activities that are traditionally supported by either Catholics or Protestants. As government policies have moved toward explicit support for cultural diversity, there has been a noticeable increase in sensitivity toward the symbols of cultural expression. These include the use of the Irish language and the display of flags and symbols in the workplace. The most dramatic illustration of this new emphasis on symbols has been confrontations about traditional Orange marches, regarded by their advocates as a legitimate expression of Protestant culture and by their opponents as an intrusion and as an expression of triumphalism. Disputes about the right to march have led to serious threats to public order in the past few years and have threatened both the peace process and political stability.

The Peace Process

In August 1994, the IRA declared a cease-fire following secret talks with the British government. The loyalist paramilitary organizations followed suit in October, and a process toward negotiations started. Hopes were shattered when the IRA resumed its bombing campaign in February 1996. Most Unionists attributed the ending of the cease-fire to IRA cynicism; they believed that the IRA viewed the cease-fire simply as a strategic change in its campaign for a united Ireland. In contrast, most Republicans attributed blame to the British and Unionists who they perceived as creating a series of unnecessary obstacles, including the need to decommission arms. In both cases, when a second cease-fire was declared in July 1997, there was none of the euphoria that had accompanied the earlier cease-fire. It had been replaced by greater caution and apprehension.

Political Accommodation

Political accommodation is nowhere better illustrated than in the difficulties experienced in trying to reach a political agreement. Unionists have found it difficult even to engage in discussions with Sinn Fein, the political party that shares the views of the IRA, regarding them as murderers. Sinn Fein pointed to its political mandate—it currently claims the support of about 40% of Catholic voters—and was recently admitted to the negotiations. It took three years from the IRA cease-fire in August 1994 for most of the parties to agree to meet in the same room before they even began to discuss how their apparently incompatible aims—an independent united Ireland for Republicans and continuing as part of the United Kingdom for Unionists—might be resolved. In ethnic conflicts, constitutional disputes are often seen as zero sum problems.

Conclusions

Have these features any significance outside Northern Ireland? Are ethnic conflicts different in kind, in their dynamics, and in their consequences from other social conflicts? What significance have they for the study of psychology? A number of observations may be drawn.

In ethnically divided societies, people vote predominantly according to their ethnic identity. Consequently, they are less influenced by arguments about improvement of their material circumstances, which is the normal currency of politics. In Northern Ireland there is no floating vote on the constitutional issue, which is seen clearly as a zero sum game. Thus, although there was widespread cross-community anger and disapproval when the cease-fire ended, the voting patterns at subsequent elections continued along ethnic lines.

In such circumstances, political negotiations serve to reinforce divisions. Compromise is seen as ethnic betrayal, which is an important issue in a small society such as Northern Ireland where everyone tends to know everyone else and communities are vigilant for members

who do not behave as they are expected to. There are always individuals within each ethnic community who take "purer" and more extreme positions and who can exploit any move to dilute ethnic aims.

Understanding how ethnic identity is passed from generation to generation remains a major challenge (Cairns, 1996). Although evidence has been slow to accumulate in Northern Ireland, it may be that schools do not, as has been long suspected, play the crucial role in this process.

Another related, neglected topic is the role of the past in the present. "Why do people in Northern Ireland cling so tenaciously to battles fought long ago? How do they learn about these, why are certain dates fixed like beacons in the folklore and mythology of Irishmen . . . [so that they] trip off the tongue during ordinary conversations like the latest football scores in other environments?" (Darby, 1983, p. 13).

Far from remaining unchanged, on the surface at least, ethnic conflicts are very dynamic. In Northern Ireland, for example, a number of old grievances have been resolved (fair allocation of housing is a prime example), and there is a much greater awareness of cultural sensitivities. Unfortunately, as the more concrete problems are resolved, a new generation of problems emerges to reinforce the central divisions and refresh the basic dispute. Experience in Northern Ireland would suggest that these new problems are more symbolic or psychological in nature and consequently more difficult to deal with.

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