

Ships passing in the night: psychosocial programming and macro peacebuilding strategies with young men in Northern Ireland

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The study presented here explores how the impact of the conflict, as it applies to interventions with young men, is conceptualised within the context of Northern Ireland after the signing of the peace agreement (1998). It focuses on four groups undertaking psychosocial work, that is, two generic support groups and two groups with an explicit focus on those who had experienced violence during the conflict. A total of 20 young men (18–24 years old) and 19 staff were individually interviewed, using a semi-structured interview. The study found that many challenges facing young people concern the interrelationship between the past and a poor socioeconomic context in the present. The struggle to address the legacy of the conflict in the present is, certainly in the literature and according to the participants of this study, linked to a lack of knowledge about the past. When it came to promoting such change and building peace, participants tended to ascribe to a personal transformation model as the route to engagement with peacebuilding work. This article argues that the personal transformative model is emblematic of the wider peacebuilding debate in Northern Ireland, where psychosocial and peace orientated programming has been separated from wider peacebuilding strategies, such as job creation. This highlights an analytical deficit in the psychosocial programming, peacebuilding and economic development fields.

Keywords: economy, masculinity, Northern Ireland, peace, peacebuilding, psychosocial interventions, social change, trauma, young men

Introduction: background

Northern Ireland is a society emerging from over 40 years of, what has been described as, a political, religious, economical and psychological conflict (Harland, 2009; Whyte, 1990). This long history of conflict is based on a struggle between those who wish to see it remain part of the UK (mainly Protestants) and those who wish (mainly Catholics) to have a united Ireland (mainly Catholics) (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Gallagher & Cairns, 2011). Although the start of the modern part of the conflict, or ‘the Troubles’ as it is called by some in Northern Ireland, is believed to be in the late 1960’s, the roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland are actually centuries old (Bardon, 1992; Stewart, 1989). Since 1968, there have been between 3,600 and 3,700 deaths, in which half of these have been civilians (Morrissey & Smyth, 2002; McKeown, 2009). The number of people injured as a result of the conflict ranges from 8,383 to 100,000 (Breen-Smyth, 2012). The impact, therefore, has been extensive in a country with a population of some 1.8 million. Indeed, conflict has been part of everyday life for over four decades, and has occupied politics, employment, residential space, public space, movement and social and cultural activities, thereby having a profound psychological impact (Hamber, 2004; Gallagher, Hamber & Joy, 2012). Although, Northern Ireland is post peace agreement, or in a peacebuilding phase,

following the 1998 peace agreement, a wide range of conflict related issues and social ills have been identified as impacting on the mental health of young people. It is argued that one of the unseen effects of the conflict has been the toll on the psychological health and wellbeing of children and young people (Ghigliazza, 2010). In comparison to the UK, average mental health needs in Northern Ireland are 25% higher (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2004). Northern Ireland's turbulent history, at least in part, contributes to these statistics (McAlister, Scraton & Haydon, 2009). Although many young people have never experienced *'the Troubles'*, young people in Northern Ireland face a real threat of inheriting the psychological vulnerability of their parents that was created by the conflict (McGrellis, 2004; McAlister et al., 2009).

Social exclusion, as well as unemployment and under employment are also major concerns (Campbell et al., 2013; Rondón et al., 2014). According to a report by the World Bank (2011), youth unemployment is a constant in all conflict situations globally. Northern Ireland is no different in this regard, and has experienced low socio-economic progress as a result of the ongoing presence of sectarian divisions, especially in low income, segregated communities (Davidson & Leavey, 2010; McCormick & Harrop, 2009; Rondón et al., 2014; Campbell et al., 2013). This has had a direct effect on young people in Northern Ireland, with youth unemployment now reaching 19.1% (Nolan, 2012). There are approximately 46,000 young people who are unemployed, and are not in any training scheme, or on an educational path (Office of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013). Alienation among young people is also closely correlated to issues of deprivation, high levels of poverty and low educational attainment (Office of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013). Increasingly, there is evidence that some young people have become entirely

dispirited in relation to employment, with the result of alarming levels of low aspirations among young people in Northern Ireland today (Breakthrough Northern Ireland, 2010; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, 2010).

Low aspirations in young people, in relation to education and employment, may lead to an increased likelihood of anti-social behaviour, community alienation and subsequent punishment attacks (i.e. informal justice meted out by paramilitary groups to allegedly manage anti-social behaviour within their communities). Despite the peace in Northern Ireland, some young people, especially young men, still live with the threat of punishment and other forms of intimidation from paramilitary groups, as well as being the children of direct victims of the conflict. In a recent study by Morrow, Robinson & Dowds (2013), the authors note that the obstacles to improve community relations *'lie in real fears and the risks which some young people run in relation to violence. Of particular concern has been the sharp decline in the perceptions and attitudes of young people towards improving community relations in recent years suggesting an increase in anxiety and antagonism in youth culture, dashing hopes that the peace process would liberate young people from the fears of the past'* (Morrow et al., 2013). From 2001 to 2011 there have been (approximately) 805 shootings, with 862 recorded victims of punishment beatings by paramilitary groups, with the latter carried out mainly on young men (Security Situation Statistics, 2011). Paramilitary style attacks are a legacy of the conflict, and a threat that those working with (particularly) young men have had to deal with on an ongoing basis, despite political peace. Therefore, amidst the continuing legacy of the past and the ever present threat of sectarianism in the present, young people in Northern Ireland are clearly dealing with serious issues of social exclusion, fear and intimidation and unemployment (Campbell et al., 2013; McGrellis, 2005; McAllister et al.,

2009; Morrow et al., 2013; Rondón et al., 2014).

Additionally, high prevalence rates of depression and mental illness in Northern Ireland have been associated with unemployment, addiction and conflict related trauma (Breakthrough Northern Ireland, 2010). A poll conducted by the Prince's Trust has shown that a third of young jobless people in Northern Ireland have contemplated suicide (Belfast Telegraph, 2010). Northern Ireland has the highest rates of suicide in the UK, with research finding an increase of more than a third in young men taking their own life since the end of *the Troubles* (Bennett, 2007). The majority of suicide deaths in 2010 were males between 15–34 years old; a total of 240 male suicide deaths were registered, in comparison to 73 female deaths (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2011). Since the 1998 agreement, there has been a growing trend in suicides, and notable gender variation in self-harming and completed suicides (Tomlinson, 2012). Violence and aggression remains deeply ingrained in the society and manifests in violence, both against others and themselves.

The study presented here found that many challenges facing young people concern the interrelationship between the past and a poor socioeconomic context in the present. Through interviews with both staff and young men that attended victim/survivor groups and (general) support groups, the study aimed to ascertain the impact that the conflict has had on young men in today's society. The findings revealed differences between the groups' primary focus. Whilst the victim/survivor groups mentioned dealing with problems relating to the past conflict, such as trauma and intergenerational problems, in contrast, the support groups mentioned that social and economic issues were their primary focus. In addition to the problems that young men face, was the acknowledgement of the barriers to seeking help, such as reluctance, the fear of seeming

weak to others and how masculine stereotypes act as a barrier. This article argues that the personal transformative model is emblematic of the wider peacebuilding debate in Northern Ireland, where psychosocial and peace orientated programming has been separated from wider peacebuilding strategies, such as job creation. This highlights an analytical deficit in the psychosocial programming, peacebuilding and economic development fields.

Under investigated: impact of past conflict on young people and young men today

The transition from conflict to peace has been difficult for many young people, and especially for men growing up in the peace process. Some argue that the violence that was externalised and socially accepted in the past is no longer accepted, and is therefore being internalised through alcohol and/or drug abuse, misuse of medication (especially antidepressants) and self-harm and/or suicide (McAllister et al., 2009; Tomlinson, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2012). Studies have argued that the impact of sectarian division on youth culture has been under investigated, especially in terms of how their lifestyles have sustained the adverse effects of this impact (Bell, 1987; Rondón et al., 2014).

Additionally, Templer & Radford (2007) noted that the investigation into the trans-generational impact of the conflict on young people is almost nonexistent, and it is only in the last decade or so that there has been a growing acknowledgement of this problem. This is partly due to the fact that, for many years, children were perceived as resilient and that the conflict had had little impact on their psychological health (Horgan & Monteith, 2009; Gallagher et al., 2012). However, this presumption of resilience in children and young people, and the culture of silence surrounding the conflict, led to an underestimation of

the actual psychological impact on the local population (Binks & Ferguson, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2012). The failure of society to acknowledge the complexity and pain of the past, and deal with outstanding conflict related issues, has led to the neglect of the massive impact the conflict has had on the society (Consultative Group on the Past, 2009). The 2001 evaluation of services to victims and survivors in Northern Ireland noted that there was 'universal agreement' among groups and organisations of the need to address issues associated with young people, as well as the 'ripple' or intergenerational effects of the conflict (Deloitte & Touche, 2001). It is sobering to think, however, that in the 10 years since this report, questions remain about how best to address the current and conflict related needs of young people, and in particular young men. This stands in stark contrast to work with adults affected by the conflict, where there has been a plethora of 'victims' work and a dramatic increase of victims groups across the society, since 1998 (at one point there were as many as 60 victim groups operating). Much of the youth work in Northern Ireland has happened through programmes focused more widely on supporting young people in the 'clinical' or 'trauma realm'. These do not move from the premise that 'past trauma' is the issue for young people, rather it is social dislocation, poverty and identity concerns within a society that remains polarised and divided. Although not referred to as psychosocial interventions locally, such initiatives (e.g. youth groups, theatre projects, sports projects, etc.) have a lot in common with other psychosocial programmes around the globe, and in this article we refer to these as generic support groups. These programmes generally seek to make psychosocial orientated impacts, whether they refer to themselves as such or not, that is to improve the social conditions of young people, enhance their capacities, and thereby improve self-esteem, confidence and/or ability to talk about problems.

The few programmes that do specifically focus on the impact of the past conflict on young people as noted, are mainly located within victim groups, normally as a stream of work in addition to the work focused on adults. While these programmes might use some of the same approaches as generic support groups (often with therapy), by virtue of being placed within a victim of conflict group, the young person is too often seen as defined as a victim of the conflict (certainly by those funding such programmes). In many cases, some of these young people have a specific history, such as losing a parent in the conflict either as a civilian, paramilitary or member of the security services. These groups are referred to as victims/survivors groups for the purpose of this article.

At a formal policy level, despite a rather belated start, there is a growing recognition of the importance of addressing younger people's needs and some recognition of their relationship to intercommunity difference and tensions. For example, a recent government strategy, *Together: Building a United Community* (Office of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013), which aims to improve community relations in post agreement Northern Ireland, extensively mentions the value of youth services and employment.

Notwithstanding the multiple problems facing young women and girls in post agreement Northern Ireland (Kelly, 2012), this study focused on youth groups specifically catering to the needs of young men. Young men remain a priority group in Northern Ireland, often associated with being the primary perpetrators of violence (Reilly, Muldoon & Byrne, 2004) and at risk of under education (Purvis, 2011). According to previous research, young males in Northern Ireland have reported higher levels of political and intercommunity violence, and were also more likely to participate in violence than their female counterparts (Muldoon & Trew,

2000; Reilly et al., 2004). *'The Troubles'* in Northern Ireland, particularly for young men in working class areas, has created *'highly localised social structures where paramilitary and criminal violence, intimidation and bullying are thought to have contributed to suicide and harmful behaviours'* (Rondón et al., 2014).

Methods

The present study was designed to assess the experiences and needs of vulnerable young men living in Northern Ireland, given that they have been identified as a group whose needs should be prioritised. The sample consisted of four psychosocial interventions with a youth focus, two victim/survivor groups and two generic support groups. A purposive sampling method was used with participants chosen for the following characteristics: young men aged 18–24 years of age that were attending victim/survivor or generic support groups and the staff working with these young men. A total of five staff members and five young male participants from each group were selected, with a total of 39 interviews completed. These were comprised of interviews with a total of 20 young male participants (18–24 years old) and 19 staff (16 men and 3 women). Age and religious identity of staff were not sought, as this was not in line with the focus of the study and because it did not look to assess differences in staff perceptions as a result of either age or religious identity. However, it was known to the researchers that both victim/survivor groups and generic support groups had participants from both communities (Catholic and Protestant traditions).

The particular groups were chosen because they represented the range of support groups available to young men in Northern Ireland. While there were some differences between victim/survivor groups and generic support groups in terms of why the young

men were signposted to them (reasons included addiction, self-harming, anger problems, depression, trauma, etc.), there were also a lot of similarities in terms of underlying issues, such as inter/transgenerational issues and/or coping with the loss of a loved one. The victim/survivor groups included offered a service to any young people affected by *'the Troubles'*, while also acknowledging the inter/transgenerational effects. In addition to counselling, they also offered activities such as personal and social development, storytelling, and training in essential life skills. The generic support groups offered proactive support to young men, in terms of health and wellbeing, relationships, addiction and anger management. Services offered included one-to-one support, counselling, anger awareness and residential programmes.

All interviews took place in the organisation that the participant was a part of, and where the participant felt at ease. Interviews lasted approximately 40–60 minutes, depending on the participant. Prior to beginning the study, ethical approval through standard university means was obtained.

The study was qualitative in nature. Materials used included a semi-structured interview for staff, containing open ended questions, in order to assess how programme staff understood the work that they do, the impact the programme has on the people they work with, as well as questions about the wider impact of the programme within the peacebuilding environment of Northern Ireland. Separate, semi structured interview questions for young men, included open ended questions in order to assess how young men understand the work that the programme does, the impact the programme has on them, the wider impact of the programme and whether they know if the programme has worked for them.

In line with a wider project¹ that focused on trauma, peacebuilding and development, of which this study was part, the

interviews also included some key questions for those running programmes. These questions focused on issues regarding how groups in Northern Ireland understand trauma, and the relationship between psychosocial work and social transformation within the peacebuilding context. That is, how do they understand the impact of the conflict on young people? How is the resiliency of young people understood in this conceptualisation? Do groups link their programmes to, or see a link to, the wider processes of peacebuilding, reconciliation, dealing with the past and, in particular, to social transformation? Do group leaders/youth workers working on such projects consider inter/transgenerational trauma to be an issue affecting young people with whom they work? How do they conceptualise this?

Some key questions included were to ascertain the perspectives of young men themselves. Do they consider themselves to be the 'indirect victims of the conflict', as some suggest? Do they see themselves as somehow 'traumatised' by the conflict? If so, how do they understand this and articulate 'their suffering', and what do they feel needs to be done in order to address this (e.g. support services, advocacy work, justice, etc.)? Additionally, questions pertaining to men's help-seeking behaviour and how masculine ideologies impact this were included (although this not the specific focus of this article).

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for purposes of analysis. The data were subjected to a thematic content analysis. Key points made by the participants were identified and assigned a colour code using the Nvivo computer program (QSR, 2010). Similar codes were gathered together into themes and sub-themes. To authenticate the key themes and sub-themes, as identified by the researcher, members of the research team were asked to examine a random selection of the transcripts to confirm the issues identified.

Findings

Groups' understanding of the issues that young men are facing

Staff and the young men were directly asked 'what problem is the project trying to deal with?' In evaluating the responses to this question, a notable difference was found for groups' conceptualisation of the problem. While both victim/survivor groups reported that they deal with trauma and inter/transgenerational effects of the conflict, generic support groups mentioned that they help men with various issues, such as mental health problems, unemployment, access to their children, addiction and anger management. As was noted by staff member of a victim/support group:

'The years of conflict, has had a major effect on people's lives, and they have been deeply traumatised by losing a family member or friend, witnessing violence and shootings and being injured. Also, young people are traumatised by what their families have gone through, and this carries the hurt through the generations. We try and provide people who have been traumatised with the support and encouragement they need so that they can move forward' (staff member, victim/survivor group 1).

In comparison, both support groups mentioned that dealing with social and economic issues were their primary focus. In addition to the problems that young men face, was the acknowledgement of the barriers to seeking help, such as reluctance, the fear of seeming weak to others and how masculine stereotypes create a barrier. *'Men are generally reluctant to seek help and even admit that they have problems. This comes back to stereotype that men hold about men, the macho image, that men shouldn't show emotion, from a young age boys are taught to be emotionally unresponsive and adhere to set gender roles in that boys don't cry'* (staff member, support group 2). In fact, the majority of participants confirmed the men's reluctance to seek help for their problems, citing reasons above. Participants also highlighted the fact that young men

feel neglected and disengaged from their communities.

Conceptualisation of trauma

The study found young men attending support groups had a more individual notion of trauma, whereas staff had a more collective sense. The majority of young men, from all four groups (n = 20), referred to individual or personal traumas that individuals may experience (i.e. grieving over friends that have committed suicide, death in the family, dealing with their own attempted suicide and issues such as depression, addiction and anger management). *I tried to commit suicide and I had a lot of problems, especially when my aunty died and the way she died hurt me the most* (young male, support group 2).

Whereas, the majority of staff from all four groups (n = 12) mentioned collective trauma, or trauma that the population of Northern Ireland have suffered as a result of the conflict. This collective perspective, according to staff, arises when family, communities and countries share experiences. Staff maintained that memories of unresolved trauma are often perpetuated through stories told within the family and broader communities. As a result, memories continue to affect generations, even when they do not directly experience the traumatic event. *Young people have been affected in some way, whether they are perpetrators or victims. Some may have lost a family member through the conflict or someone they know has been badly injured, or even through stories of the past told to them by family and neighbours, these factors definitely play a part in the trauma that our young people face* (staff member, victim/survivor group 1).

Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly where this difference in conceptualisation came from, it may be the result of staff having lived through the conflict, and thereby having a more collective memory of the conflict as a result. Also, many of the

young men seeking support are in crisis and see their own suffering on more individual terms.

Resilience and coping methods

In terms of resilience and coping methods, one of the key points to emerge was that the majority of the young men and staff (n = 26) mentioned risk taking behaviours (drinking, drugs, sex and violence) as a popular method of negative coping. *Mainly, they don't [cope], they end up drinking, taking drugs, fighting, and if they are in a relationship they may take it out on their partner. We have a lot of people come in here who are perpetrators of domestic violence* (staff member, support group 2).

Other themes to emerge were that the young men ignore their problems and *'bottled them up'* (n = 10), largely do not cope (n = 9), with some seeking help from family and friends (n = 6). At the same time, young people's own resilience and their ability to cope effectively with their problems were also noted. *A lot of people have probably dealt with it on their own in the past, people are very resilient* (staff member, victim/survivor group 1).

It also became apparent during interviews that a large proportion of the young men in the study had reported having self-harmed, attempted suicide or experienced suicidal thoughts. *In this town, for a while, there were a lot of suicides, people were letting everything build up and didn't talk to anyone about their problems. People were committing suicide because of the lack of communication, they didn't tell anyone their problems and places like this aren't widely enough advertised. They weren't being reached on any level. I also think that people weren't able to talk about a lot of things, especially problems/issues related to the conflict* (young male, support group 2).

These findings reveal a tendency to not seek help, believing that services will not be helpful or that they should be able to deal their own problems, which often results in

negative forms of coping. These findings clearly show that many of the young men in this study are in, or have been, in crisis or have had severe problems in the past, such as self-harming and suicidal ideation.

Taking the past into account

The majority of staff and young men from all four groups felt that current projects do take the conflict into account when dealing with young people, and need to do so to be effective. When asked to explain why, a large proportion mentioned transgenerational effects (n = 17). *I think it depends on the client, but yes, generally most projects need to be aware of how trauma and experience of the conflict can be filtered down through generations* (staff member, victim/survivor group 1).

Some young men and staff, from both support groups (n = 7), felt that the conflict is still ongoing and that young people are in danger of paramilitary recruitment (n = 4), underlying why projects needed to take the conflict into account. It is not just in the past, but also alive in the present. *A lot of young men are dealing with transgenerational effects of the conflict. And it is these issues, if they are not dealt with, that are pulling us back into the past and keeping the conflict alive. It's these types of young men that fall prey to paramilitary recruitment* (staff member, support group 2). Young men and staff from both victim/survivor groups (n = 6) felt that young people could learn from the past. *Yes, I think it's important always to have the past in the back of your mind. We can learn from the past, learn from our mistakes and make a better future for our children* (young male, victim/survivor group 2).

The findings also show that for the young men and staff, although Northern Ireland is now in a peacebuilding phase and considered post peace agreement, the conflict is still viewed as a present day, rather than historical, phenomenon. This affects young people, not only psychologically (transgenerational), but also in terms of real life

choices such as joining paramilitary groups. The majority of staff and young men (n = 32), within this context, felt that programmes set up to help young people need to recognise the link between the past and the present to a greater degree.

The impact of the psychosocial projects and the personal transformation model

In terms of the wider impact of the project, a high proportion of young men and staff from all four groups mentioned social change (n = 16), peacebuilding (n = 13), improved relationships (n = 16), and changed attitudes and behaviours (n = 11). The young men and staff also mentioned better health and well-being (n = 5), improved understanding of violence (n = 7), and also education, employment and community development (n = 8). What was most interesting was that, broadly speaking, staff and young men from all four groups seemed to see social and societal change happening through individuals. That is, if young men had their self-esteem built, changed their attitudes about others, and had the skills to participate in society and the economy, then the prospect for wider change was enhanced. All the groups placed importance on developing individual human resources and personal capacities as key to personal and subsequent social change; the personal transformation model.

The young men also emphasised personal growth in terms of attitudes and perspective changes, improved confidence and self-esteem, occurring since beginning the programmes. Better communication, interpersonal skills and increased awareness of their talents and usefulness in the world were also mentioned (n = 16). The young men (n = 19) also felt that they had changed for the better and were learning how to become better fathers to their children, improving relationships with their families as a whole and generally having a more

positive outlook on life. They also felt that they had a more positive outlook in regards to their future, going back to education, looking for better jobs and making plans for the future. Some of this work was very practical, with young men gaining recognised qualifications (n = 5), a step that could also ensure greater social integration.

By sharing problems, and hearing from others with similar problems, the young men (n = 8) felt that they could cope better through using coping methods learnt in the groups. Therefore, through capacity building techniques, such as young adult development programmes, drug awareness training, anger management courses, young leader's courses and part-time youth work training, staff in all the groups felt that they were increasing confidence, skills and perceptions of self worth.

Also highlighted was the increased ability to challenge and condemn prejudice and discrimination, especially against those seen as different to themselves and who held different political views of the conflict. Through exploring attitudes, learning about cultural identity and gaining an understanding of the past conflict, young men in the programmes were able to explore the sectarianism that was present (both cognisant and subliminal) in their attitudes. This was done through discussion, teamwork, joint activities and residential based learning. Staff and the young men alike (n = 26) indicated that they felt that gaining awareness of other people's perspectives and encouraging a mutually shared understanding of the past, encouraged empathy and cooperative interaction, thereby assisting antagonistic groups build better relationships.

That said, although there was a focus on intercommunity exploration of political issues and attitudes to some degree within the various projects, most of the focus was on improving life chances, capacity and trying to teach young men to adopt a more positive approach to life. This was achieved

through helping young men to look at alternative lifestyle choices, and to move away from negative forms of coping, such as alcoholism or interpersonal violence. A focus was placed on finding ways young men can improve their own lives, contribute to their local communities, and subsequently the processes of peacebuilding, social transformation and social change that are underway in Northern Ireland.

Discussion

A number of major themes have emerged from the research. This section highlights some of those themes and discusses them in relation to recent policy developments in Northern Ireland. The section then concludes with a reflection on the wider policy significance of the findings, and in particular, explores the relationship between psychosocial projects researched and wider peacebuilding approaches in Northern Ireland.

Major themes

The first major theme evident in the research is that the challenges facing young men concern the interrelationship between the past, and a poor socioeconomic context in the present. The findings of this study also show that many young men are suffering from a range of generational effects of the conflict. Although Northern Ireland is seen as emerging from political conflict, the research confirms that the violent past still haunts the young today. The legacy of victimisation by paramilitaries and state violence still lingers at a community level, coupled with high levels of poverty and social exclusion. This research has additionally highlighted the need for more emphasis to be placed on intergenerational effects of the conflict and how it is transmitted through processes of attachment, memory, family and community responses (Burrows & Keenan, 2004). A high level of unemployment among young people (19.1%), has also

been identified as a potential future threat to peace in Northern Ireland (Nolan, 2012). In addition to this, there is evidence that many young men are dealing with the stressors of family breakdown, educational failure, unemployment, economic dependency, and addictions. Tomlinson continues to explain that this has all been aggravated by the conflict, which *'sharpened divisions in employment and unemployment and, through specific experiences such as imprisonment, it increased social isolation at the level of families and households'* (Tomlinson, 2012). Problems facing young people in Northern Ireland are therefore linked to the past conflict, but also interrelated to social and economic problems (McAlister et al., 2009). Our research confirmed this perspective. Overall, this suggests that psychosocial programming and peacebuilding more broadly, for the young men interviewed and those who work with them in Northern Ireland, would need to involve a wide set of processes that moves beyond a narrow focus on intergroup difference. Integrated strategies are needed that address the social context that exacerbates social exclusion, and continues to be influenced and shaped by the conflict, within a range of intergenerational aspects.

A further problem, that became clear from the interviews, is that young men in this study presented with both mental and social health challenges, but generally do not seek help in order to be assisted with these problems. The number of young men in this relatively small sample that mentioned having self-harmed, experienced suicidal thoughts, undertaken risk taking behaviour or attempted suicide was alarming. These behaviours were, according to the respondents, a result of: depression, stress, anxiety, addiction, perceived worthlessness, low self-esteem, lack of life prospects, feeling neglected, hopelessness, despair and threat and fear of paramilitary attacks. On the positive side, many young men in the study said, as a result of the interventions from the projects reviewed, that they were now

happy to talk about their problems. Opening up gave them a sense of relief and a feeling that a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

Challenges and limitations

However, although the young men interviewed in this study have managed to find support, it is also possible that the type of problems experienced by this group of young men do not neatly fall into a service provision or support group category. For example, given some of the social problems outlined and issues mentioned, such as addiction, it is not clear if those experiencing a range of social pressures and strains would immediately identify themselves as victims of the conflict and as a result not present at such services. Also, given the crisis that some of the young men presented with, it is unlikely they would immediately see their needs as directly associated with political conflict, but rather tended to see their problems as individualised. Although the link to the conflict was mentioned on reflection, and in the interviews in relation to the intergenerational aspects of the conflict, it is unlikely that young men who feel socially excluded with little life prospects would join one of the many peacebuilding programmes (e.g. dialogue, theatre, encounter groups) available in Northern Ireland to address such needs. Finally, the other projects and services that are available (including some of those reviewed in this study) that clearly identify project services, such as anger management, dealing with addiction and abusive life choices, require a level of emotional awareness and a lack of fear of stigma for a young man to decide to access. The latter remains a challenge within the current context. Although the stigma associated with emotional or mental health needs is perhaps less now than in the past, there are still barriers to accessing help and support. Barriers to help-seeking still include stigma and negative attitudes towards

problem solving assistance from professionals (Robinson, Rodgers & Butterworth, 2008).

Taken together, these points highlight how issues of the past and contemporary problems, are not only fragmented at a level of theory, but also in terms of actual service provision. The Community Relations Council has argued for *'a serious youth strategy, which deals with the various needs of young people as they are, rather than the current provider-led models which leave too many young people without support'* (Community Relations Council, 2010). In a similar vein, a range of policymakers in a recent research project also called for an integrated multi-agency, multi-issue overarching strategy, instead of a disparate approach that offers services for specific problems (Kelly, 2012) (see Conclusion, below). The research presented here would endorse the need for not only an integrated youth strategy, but also one that is underpinned by a more rigorous analytical understanding of the problems.

Resilience, risk and identity

The themes of resilience, risk and identity were also a critical component of the findings of the study. Throughout *'the Troubles'* and after, there was a presumption that the people in Northern Ireland were resilient (Horgan & Monteith, 2009; Gallagher et al., 2012). Although it is true that society continued to function on many levels despite the conflict, this misguided notion of resilience as being universally inherent has, it could be argued, hindered attempts to address the impact of the conflict, thereby leading to the neglect of mental health issues related to it. This universal presumption of resilience has also led to negative forms of coping, which in turn has negatively impacted on the mental health of people affected by the conflict (Gallagher et al., 2012). Self medicating, risk taking behaviour and various forms of violence have become

ingrained ways of coping with the conflict (Gallagher et al., 2012). The behaviour of the young men in this study, and those outlined by support workers, highlighted similar patterns. Of course, many of the young men interviewed are resilient, in that they have survived in difficult contexts and no doubt have various capacities to cope, but at the same time many of those interviewed were not, or are not, coping particularly well. Developing a more healthy form of emotional resilience from a young age is increasingly regarded as a priority by those working with young people and children. It is recommended that in the school curriculum, greater emphasis should be placed on promoting emotional health and resilience learning, so that children and young people are equipped with skills to deal with the challenges of modern life (Bacon et al., 2010; McGrellis, 2011). Notwithstanding the value of such recommendations, what is clear from this research is that the debates about youth resilience and wider processes of peacebuilding discourse are not particularly integrated in Northern Ireland.

Personal transformation model as a path to social change

When it came to promoting change, participants largely did not see themselves or their work as directly related to social change, or even to see it as their role to actively pursue social change (e.g. through advocacy work or activism). Rather participants tended to ascribe to a personal transformation model as the basis for social change, or as the door to peacebuilding work. Participants saw developing self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills, as well as attitudinal change about *'the other'*, as vital to being emotionally healthy. This was, participants argued, the first step needed in order to be equipped to engage in peacebuilding activities. Social transformation and peacebuilding work would flow from personal transformation. The participants in the

present study believed that by helping the individual through modes of capacity building and interpersonal relationship, this would enable them to make a positive mark on the wider society. This finding fits with the capacity development and relationship aspects of peacebuilding (Zolondek, 2010). Arguably social transformation can be achieved through individual change, in terms of capacity building and personal/professional development.

Similar findings were found in a study conducted with 80 14–15 year old teenagers in North Belfast. The study examined how young people recount the narratives that *'maintain, reinforce and at times challenge sectarian boundaries in interface areas'* (Leonard, 2008). The study also found that the attitudes of young people are not predetermined and static, but change. Additionally, they are influenced not only by external factors, but also through their own development, reflection and experiences (Leonard, 2008). The question remains, however, whether attaining such personal transformation can happen in a vacuum, or whether it needs to be supported by social processes that create a context conducive to individual contributions to social transformation and/or social change. Furthermore, it also tends to place the onus of peacebuilding on the individual, and implies a very resource intensive process of building peace, that is peace is built one person at a time. That said, such an approach was highly valued by participants and was seen as effective, certainly at the individual level.

Increasing awareness of the past and groups in crisis within peacebuilding

Interestingly, however, those interviewed for this study, clearly saw the past conflict as linked to present challenges, and advocated for a greater awareness of the past. However, it was difficult to identify how exploring the past in individual or group settings built

peace, other than through the personal transformative model outlined above. This, at least to some degree, points to a gap in theory and practice, both within the psychosocial practitioner field and the wider peacebuilding field. Psychosocial practitioners, and certainly those in this study, tended to focus on service provision (with some acknowledgment of the past conflict related impacts) in the first instance, with the hope it would then contribute to a peacebuilding effect. The wider peacebuilding field finds it equally challenging to consider how those dealing with individual challenges, such as young men in crisis and who are socially excluded, fit into the peacebuilding discourse. It is possible to identify areas of intersection, such as how many young people still live in fear of paramilitary punishment beatings, or are dealing with intergenerational issues, such as their parents being victimised in past political violence. However, arguably the peacebuilding discourse currently lacks the nuance and knowledge to fully articulate how the social context and groups in crisis fit within the wider peacebuilding field. Groups such as the young men represented in this study, as well as those dealing with the wider problems of living everyday within a peacebuilding context that does not fit into a *'target group'* category (such as victims, vulnerable women and children) and are not often linked to wider peacebuilding discourse and programming.

Recent policy developments

The result of this in Northern Ireland has been that, at a policy level, the challenges of young people are acknowledged in various policy documents, but is often reduced to a service delivery issue (such as drug awareness or buddy schemes). This is somewhat disconnected from wider peacebuilding processes in the society, or is narrowed to debates about the needs of youth victims of the conflict who have lost

a parent, or are seen as directly traumatised. Alternatively, the debate is reduced to a fairly linear economic model, that is, that the emphasis needs to be on job creation. This implies that if young people are employed, then peace will follow and sectarianism will be reduced. Of course, greater employment would be welcomed and certainly the young people interviewed would agree with this, but whether it would transform the challenges facing young people or prevent a reduction of conflict in itself is an untested assumption. Furthermore, the complex social, psychological and economic contexts of the young men in this study suggest that capacity building extends well beyond education access, training and obtaining qualifications.

The evidence of the different approaches is visible in a range of policy documents. For example, The Commission for Victims and Survivors proposes that funding should be made available to meet the growing demand for services addressing transgenerational issues, as well as the development of a greater focus on the assessment of delivery of youth services in both the statutory and non statutory sectors (Commission for Victims and Survivors, 2011). The perceived limitations in the provision of child and adolescent mental health services are noted, and the Commission advocates for funding to be prioritised in relation to continued service development, and to address existing deficits (Commission for Victims and Survivors, 2011). Others have also argued for an increase in youth services, particularly in deprived communities, where these are often considered the only services available (Youthnet, 2011). Serious questions have also been asked about the *'levels of financial support currently available to support work with young people in both formal and informal educational and developmental sectors, particularly focusing on the impact of inter-communal division'* (Kelly, 2012).

The most recent government strategy, *Together: Building a United Community* (Office

of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013) aimed at improving community relations in post agreement Northern Ireland, makes extensive mention of the value of youth services and employment. The strategy includes, for example, a focus on intercommunity youth programmes to tackle sectarianism, and summer camps where young people can engage in sport and development activities aimed at getting to know each other more. The strategy also makes direct mention of the importance of employment in tackling youth related problems, highlighting specifically the goals of the *Pathways to Success*, the local Assembly strategy to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment nor training (referred to as NEETS in Northern Ireland). This type of approach, in conjunction with various other economic development policies and the work of wider youth work sector, suggest the Northern Ireland model for peacebuilding is predicated on rebuilding the economy and increasing employment as a task of politicians and policymakers on the one hand, and peacebuilders and psychosocial programming as undertaken by projects and NGOs, on the other. This is clear in the *Together: Building a United Community* (Office of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013) document, which notes the economic strategy to improve youth employment is to run *'along with a dedicated programme designed to foster good relations and a shared future'* (Office of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013). The document contains an additional commitment to create 10,000 one year placements in a *'United Youth Programme'* to offer those in the so-called NEETS category (structured internships, placements, volunteering and training). Although the document acknowledges *'the complex issues facing our young people'*, it still largely presents job creation and improving life prospects as separate from the *'good relations'* (peace orientated and psychosocial) programmes. It is hoped the two will interact with one another and build

peace, but how this will happen exactly is never made completely clear.

Conclusion: need for a more holistic approach

Despite the value of the various strategies discussed above, the research presented here demands a more integrated and robust approach. If one reads the various policy documents, of which only a small proportion are included above, it is clear that despite a slow start, much is being done in Northern Ireland and there are certainly aspirations to address issues facing young people. However, at the same time, there is a gap between psychosocial practitioners of the type reviewed in this study and wider peacebuilding strategy steered by government. If one reviews the various speeches and policies released by the Office of the First and deputy First Minister, it is clear that they see building the economy as their key peacebuilding priority. However, the economic strategy for Northern Ireland as a whole, and the various strategies aimed at addressing so-called NEETS issues, generally do not mention the conflict in Northern Ireland as contributing factor, or even as a factor to consider in addressing youth unemployment. Nor, how such programmes would address employment training needs at the same time as dealing with the complex interplay between marginalisation, poverty, conflict legacy issues, self destructive behaviour, mental health problems and low aspiration.

At the same time, there is a plethora of youth services and programmes, funded largely through the European Union special peace programme, that has invested some €1.5 billion in peace orientated programmes (not just youth focused) over the last ten years. Much of this work has used creative peace orientated projects (e.g. dialogue, encounter, art), as well as offered skills development of different types reminiscent of the projects reviewed in our study.

However, although these projects also acknowledge the impact of the conflict and recognise the collective impact of the past on individuals (with some seeing this more than others, such as victim groups), most interventions do not move beyond the individual transformation model. As noted, this has been found to be individually beneficial and desired by the young men interviewed as part of this study, but the link to overall peacebuilding impacts is not particularly strong.

As noted previously, the *Together: Building a United Community* (Office of the First and deputy First Minister, 2013) document clearly supports the Northern Ireland model for peacebuilding in terms of economic growth. Although this strategy makes sense on some levels because, of course, economic growth would be beneficial, it also points to the deficiencies within the different fields. Although the peace orientated and psychosocial programming approaches can generally identify complex social problems, they often struggle to address these in their activities, consequently having more individual, rather than, social impact. The wider economic strategies that are cast broadly as necessary to maintain and build peace, are often devoid of a rigorous understanding of the interpersonal issues facing those affected by the conflict, as well as wider and persistent conflict dynamics. Specifically, the latter fails to see or acknowledge how the transgenerational issues of the past, in relation to political and interpersonal violence, continued paramilitary influence and intimidation, as well as social and economic deprivation and addiction problems facing young people (McAllister et al., 2009), truly interact and intersect.

The multifaceted problems highlighted by participants in this study demands such an analytic underpinning and a more holistic policy approach. Such an approach should be based on an analysis and practice that extends beyond the confines of individual

pathologies and problems, and uses a model of individual transformation to engage with peacebuilding work on the one hand, and a structural peacebuilding approach that is underpinned by an a contextual economic growth model, on the other. It is at this intersection where worlds of psychosocial programming and macro peacebuilding strategies need to be developed, and much work remains to be done. An analytical deficit remains in the psychosocial programming, as well as in wider peacebuilding and economic development fields, in this regard.

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