

Wee Warriors: Youth Involvement in the Northern Irish Troubles

Sam Neill, College of Arts and Science, Vanderbilt University

The Northern Irish “Troubles” refers to the bloody 30-year conflict, from 1968 to 1998, largely centered in Belfast between the Loyalist who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of Great Britain and the Republicans who wanted independence. The extremely violent conflict took more than 3,600 lives, resulted in more than 40,000 serious injuries, and deeply affected almost every person in Northern Ireland. The violence occurred almost daily, right in the city streets. Of particular note is the extent to which Northern Irish youth were involved in the struggle and the degree of the sacrifice many made for the respective causes. This study seeks to gain insight into the reasons for this element of this unique conflict.

“Young people are asked to ‘voice’ their views not only because it is seen as beneficial to them personally, but because people believe they can learn from what they are saying.” (Kilpatrick and Leach, 563)

Introduction

Milltown Cemetery, a famous landmark of Northern Ireland, lies in West Belfast at the end of The Falls Road. A central path in this cemetery marks the final resting place of many of the protesting Irish hunger strikers of 1981 as well as a number of other Irish Republican Army members. The dates that mark some of these tombstones indicate lifetimes as short as 16 and 17 years of age, a truly shocking realization. These gravesites, adorned and glorified with flowers, cards, and photos, provide one example of the dire consequences of the “Troubles,” a bloody, 30-year conflict, from 1968 to 1998, between the Catholic Republicans and Protestant Loyalists of Northern Ireland.

While civil violence and conflict characterizes many locations around the world, the conflict that transpired in Northern Ireland is unique. The Troubles remains the longest period of civil turmoil in the modern western world (Cairns, 1987: 11). Throughout the course of the three decades, more than 3,600 people perished and over 40,000 suffered serious injuries as a result of the Troubles, not to mention the unimaginable psychological and emotional pain endured by tens of thousands more (McKittrick, 1999: 1480, & Cairns, 2000: 438). By one estimate, one in two inhabitants of Northern Ireland knew at least one of the deceased victims and one in ten lost a family member. In

excess of 34,000 shooting incidents occurred, more than 14,000 bombs were planted, 100 tons of explosives were seized and likely more than that actually exploded, and 15,615 people were charged with terrorist crimes during this period of unrest (Dunn: 27). These numbers clearly demonstrate the extensive and powerful influence of the Troubles on the Northern Irish.

The youth of this nation have been involved in the conflict both as innocent victims as well as active participants. McKittrick (1999: 14) recounts an explosion in a restaurant in which two sisters lost both of their legs, while the “Bogside Artists” depict in a famous wall mural a young boy heaving a petrol bomb at British security officers (Kelly, Kelly, & Hanson, 2001). The involvement of Northern Irish children in the conflict is undeniable. While much research has focused on the effects of the Troubles on youths, less has directly examined the causes of their participation in the conflict. This study seeks to demonstrate that the internalization of violence as well as the association with the increasingly polarized ethnic identities, Ulster and Irish, of Northern Irish youth during the Troubles facilitated their involvement and active engagement in the struggle.

Background

Northern Ireland has long been deeply divided. The first major contributing event to this storied relationship dates back to the plantation of Ulster in 1609, in which Britain took a section of land in Northern Ireland known as Ulster from the Irish Ulster clan that previously inhabited it, and gave it to a community of Protestant colonists. This reorganization created ethnic and economic conflict in

the region by situating two very different cultural communities in one area and with a single advantaged community possessing the substantially more productive and valuable land. The partitioning of Ireland in 1922 also complicated the initial group dynamic. This event divided Ireland into entities with the northern part, Northern Ireland, remaining under British control and the southern part establishing the free state of the Republic of Ireland in 1922. This partition, however, did not separate the two conflicting religious groups and left a large population of Catholics in Northern Ireland subjugated to the politically and economically dominant Protestants of the region. This established the groundwork that allowed the civil rights movement of the late 1960s to spark initial protests in Belfast and initiate the Troubles (Muldoon: 457-459).

While unrest and violence began in the late 1960s, the years from 1970 to 1972 marked the first significant escalation of the violence as well as the period of the greatest amount of political turmoil during the conflict. The death toll peaked in 1972 with 496 fatalities (McKittrick, 1999: 1473). A number of key events were the main catalysts of this violence. In 1970 3,000 British troops imposed The Falls Curfew upon the Republican lower Falls area, which ignited a heated exchange of gun fire with the Irish Republican Army and aroused angry cries of injustice and accusations of torture. The introduction of Internment in 1971 allowed troops to detain civilians without trial. In 1971, authorities detained 350 civilians not one of whom was Protestant. Between 1971 and 1975, of the 1,981 people detained, only 107 pledged an allegiance to Protestantism or Loyalism. This measure compounded appeals of injustice and accusations of torture in addition to inspiring previously uninvolved citizens to take up arms. Possibly the most infamous and media-covered incident was the Bloody Sunday Massacre on January 30, 1972, which resulted in 13 deaths, including six minors (Cairns, 1987: 18). Other notable events of the Troubles include the emergence of the republican political party Sinn Fein (the political front of the Provisional IRA), the deaths of Bobby Sands, and nine other hunger strikers, in 1981, and the 1994 Loyalist and Provisional IRA ceasefires. The conflict finally ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement (Cairns, 1987: 20-21).

Internalization and Social Identity Theory

Two key concepts paramount to the argument

of this paper include internalization and social identity. Internalization is the process by which a person learns to accept a certain idea, behavior, or social structure (Connolly & Healy: 513). By observing their group or community, people eventually accept the established norms as their own and incorporate these values and beliefs into their identity (Trew: 514). The individuals, or "significant others," in one's immediate and local environment play crucial roles in this process as the teachers or demonstrators of the groups norms and roles (Burgess: 146). The relationship of internalization and violence with involvement in the Troubles becomes critical when one considers the locality and extensiveness of the violence.

Intergroup discrimination is another focal element of the Northern Irish situation. Tajfel and Turner developed a theory called social identity theory that helps to understand this group relationship. It dictates that intergroup conflict consists of labeling certain groups, associating ourselves with one group, and favorably comparing our group with one or more distinctly separate groups (Cairns, 1987: 96-98). Once a person establishes firm ideas of group categorization and association, the identification with his or her own group could become so strong that a person takes on great risk, even life, in order to defend that group. This illustrates the formation of the concept of collective identity. In other cases, the same degrees of risk and action might be taken due to the inability of the individual to break away from the collective and as a result resolves to defend it instead (Burgess: 147). The Northern Irish example demonstrates both cases.

Two dominant groups exist in Northern Ireland that form the regions intergroup conflict, the Ulster and the Irish. The existence and perpetuation of each group rely heavily on internalization and social identity formation.

An Ethnic Conflict

While the ideological nature of the Northern Irish conflict is heavily debated and includes a combination of elements, ethnic division predominantly characterizes the temperament of the on-going dispute. Societies form ethnic identities when they distinguish groups as separate for sharing cultural, physical, linguistic, and/or religious elements (Burgess: 153). Other aspects vital to the understanding of ethnic identities include ethnogenesis and ethnocentrism. People learn and

establish their ethnic identities through the process of ethnogenesis, which can be passive in the form of group markers or active identification such as physical group separation or culture revival. It is also common for ethnic identities to assume nationalistic qualities, usually when the situation involves a history of colonization or migration (Burgess: 102, 240). These components of ethnic identity help inform and explain the group identities embedded in Northern Irish society.

While the two sides of the conflict often receive religious labels, the source of the clash is primarily ethnic and rooted in the land's history. Cairns dismisses the religious nature of the Northern Irish Troubles. The clash, he elaborates, comprises not religious entities, but rather their "membership" (Cairns, 2000: 438). As mentioned earlier, the plantation of 1609 resulted in the resettlement of a large contingent of British immigrants in the north of Ireland. This cohesive group proceeded to establish a functioning society, largely British as well as capitalist in nature, and markedly different from the previous homogeneous Irish inhabitants of the land. Protestants of British background and Catholics of Irish background subsequently converged, populating Belfast city (Boal & Livingston: 162-163). The origin of the inhabitants and history of the land supports an argument for the formation of ethnic identities and conflict. As stated before, histories of immigration and colonial expansion often characterize such ethnic identities. Furthermore, the resettlement situated two groups with remarkable solidarity right next to each other. At the same time, these groups were well separated and easily distinguished, which allowed for recognition of a distinct external group, another necessary condition for ethnic identity formation. The onset of the Troubles in the late 1960s subsequently exacerbated the intergroup conflict and division of the Ulster and Irish ethnic identities.

Importance of Youth

Examining youth during the Troubles is important for a variety of reasons. Young people, those 25 years of age and under, in Northern Ireland constitute a uniquely large percentage (40%) of the region's population (Muldoon: 457). As a large part of the nation's population, their testimony adds an important perspective to the conflict. Moreover, their vulnerable status as youths makes them a unique group to study and explore. Despite active

and destructive participation by some, the children were the greatest victims of the troubles both in an ideological as well as empirical sense. They did not create the tragic situation but rather were often born into communities of intense ethnic allegiance that allowed many no passage of escape. Although they were not the cause of the Troubles, many undeservingly carried the burden of the bitter conflict. Statistics confirm youth victimization in Northern Ireland. Over 25% of those deceased perished before their 21st birthdays. This number gave this age group the ominous title of the highest risk of death (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1998: 1). The children that survived the struggle will eventually grow up to lead the people of Northern Ireland and, consequently, their welfare deserves a great amount of care, consideration, and awareness.

Research

Holliday and Jennings & Durran provide the majority of the primary sources used to inform this analysis. Each has combined numerous accounts of children and youths, on both sides of the sectarian divide, that have had direct experiences with the Northern Irish Conflict. Jennings & Durran selected accounts from hours of discussion with their participants (16), while Holliday includes an additional element for examination by predominantly using literature (short stories, diaries, poems) written by the affected youth along with their accounts and impressions. These compilations provide information and texts that powerfully express the perspectives of the youth during the conflict. Nevertheless, the overarching goals of both books, as the respective authors note, aim to ease the pain of victims of the conflict, proceed to a peaceful resolution, and reconcile sectarian divisions. While noble causes, the works, to a certain degree, assume youth involvement and don't explore its causes. This results in inadequate evaluation and explanation of the reasons for the involvement of young people in the Troubles.

The subject of the role and experience of young people in the Troubles received little attention and even less reliable research up until the last decade or so. A number of factors, primarily ethical and methodological issues, account for this research gap. Many researchers, in a general sense, perceive information from child interviews to be very problematic and of little worth as a result of limited sample sizes, validity and reliability issues, as well

as evaluation difficulties (Trew: 511). Moreover, the unstable political climate of Northern Ireland introduced additional considerations and even dangers to conducting research. For example, Trew notes one research attempt during the conflict that led to controversial media attention in the local newspapers and new channels. In another case, research was discontinued because of a strong fear that a child might unknowingly incriminate a friend or relative by revealing information that they had overheard or witnessed (511). Fortunately, the paramilitary cease fires and to a greater degree the Good Friday Agreement (1998) achieved during the 1990s remedied many of these impediments. Also, increased government aid in light of growing attention to development in recent years has encouraged such research (Trew: 511-512). Consequently, only relatively recently has research more directly addressed the role of Northern Irish youth in the Troubles.

In a general sense, the Troubles have at this point been widely covered. Many scholars address the topic focusing primarily on the extreme violence emanating from the struggle. Ed Cairns produced a great deal of literature concerning the Troubles and the children involved (*Children and Political Violence*, 1996). David McKittrick remains a leading scholar of this subject area as well (*Lost Lives*, 1999). There has also recently been a growing trend of scholars approaching the role of children in the conflict in terms of the social identity theory (Boal & Livingstone: 1984, Connolly & Healy: 2004, and Cairns: 2000). This paper looks at both of these well studied issues, as well as the internalization of violence in terms of its accessibility to children and social identity formation in terms of youth perception of two rival ethnic communities. It establishes the role that these elements play in engaging and including Northern Irish youth in the Troubles.

First, however, it is important to note possible problems with the research that will be analyzed. One issue concerns the range of ages of those studied. Some studies evaluate observations from children as young as three years old, while others include data from subjects as old as 27. This constitutes a wide spectrum of participants and involves varied terminology including children, youths, and young people, each referring to different age groups in different cases. Some scholars also include information obtained from subjects well into adulthood based entirely on distant memories.

Furthermore, the political nature of the conflict raises concerns. Over the 30 years of the struggle, the intensity of the conflict has varied greatly as a

result of time and location. Belfast obviously experienced much more unrest and violence than the surrounding towns and rural areas in Northern Ireland. West and North Belfast civilian deaths totaled 436 and 396, respectively, while those in a suburban area such as County Down to the east of Belfast only reached a comparatively humble 88 (McKittrick, 1999: 1481). This statistic evidences the large degree to which violence was centered in Belfast. Even within Belfast itself the amount and extent of contact varied between neighborhoods. Working-class areas and neighborhoods along sectarian divides, most notably the Falls/Shankill border, endured the worst of the terror (Boal & Livingstone: 165). Casualties and rioting also differed significantly from year to year, often reflecting controversial, prominent events such as the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972 or the deaths of the hunger strikers in 1981, which witnessed a spike in total deaths of over 35% from the previous year (McKittrick, 1999: 1473). Consequently, Northern Irish youths encountered an extremely varied and wide range of experiences (Cairns, 1987: 24-5).

In addition, due to the length of the conflict, accounts of the youths involved have to be considered in respect to their birth dates. Accounts from adults who spent some of their childhood years in Northern Ireland before the Troubles began are included with those of children who have not yet reached adolescence and only know Northern Ireland engulfed conflict. This creates very different perspectives of the people giving such accounts and deserves notice. Ultimately, the children of the Troubles had a wide range of contact with differing events and the information obtained from such subjects reflects that.

Treatment of Sources

While youth experience is clearly varied, this paper primarily focuses on the information provided by those people with more direct contact with the conflict. An examination of the testimony of youths who experienced a greater degree of interaction with the Troubles provides more telling primary material for this studies objective of determining the reasons for the involvement of Northern Irish youth in the conflict. Considering the utility of this type of primary material, the majority of the sources studied will be testimonies of experiences in Belfast. This is the case for two reasons. First, most of the unrest and turmoil during the struggles

was significantly concentrated in Belfast, particularly its working class communities, and as such, those living in the city encountered the most direct contact with the conflict (Trew: 508). Second, the physical structure of the city, characterized by tight-knit neighborhoods bordering each other, presents a dynamic of great value to an analysis of conflict accessibility and ethnic solidarity. Additionally, accounts of youth experience will not be discriminated against as a consequence of when the information was obtained or the age of the participating subject in an effort to include a wide range of perspectives and evidence. These factors will, however, be considered in interpreting the accounts.

Internalization and Violence

The Northern Irish Troubles was an extremely local conflict. It was not a war in which the violence and participants were exported abroad. The violence occurred within a dense urban context (Boal & Livingstone: 164). The attacks took place in the densely packed streets of Belfast, among the rows of attached brick houses, on a daily basis. The “enemy” lived within a stone’s throw (Holliday: 6). The violence and effects of the conflict, in general were highly visible to all those who lived in these areas. Residents in these neighborhoods frequently needed to fortify their homes with grills over their windows to protect themselves from petrol bombs, stones, and other missiles (Connolly & Healy, 2004: 517). The media frequently reported on children, even pre-schoolers, with stones in hand, on the streets of Belfast and Derry engaging British soldiers (Cairns, 1987: 12). Other symbols and effects of the violence filled the city streets as well. Murals depicting deceased paramilitary leaders as martyrs, unionist and nationalist flags and signs, as well as painted kerbstones and street lamps coated the neighborhoods of Northern Ireland. “Peace lines” or barrier walls dividing bordering neighborhoods constructed during the Troubles to reduce violence also characterized a number of the more tumultuous Northern Irish areas (Cairns, 2000: 443-444). An excerpt from the diary of 11-year-old Bridie Murphy captures the immediacy of this violence:

“I am frightened living across this street from the Protestants. I am frightened they will come and kill us because this is the eleventh time they have shot people in our street. I don’t know why

they want to kill us” (Holliday: v).

The local nature of this warfare greatly contributed to increased direct interaction of the population, and especially youths, with the conflict. One study conducted on children in Northern Ireland in 1973 found that 20% of the children interviewed reported that they had been a part of or in close proximity to a bomb explosion and 20.1% confirmed that they had a relative or friend, murdered or injured as a result of the Troubles (Dunn: 97). Their age did not afford them the luxury of experience and perspective to deal with this aspect of the conflict. Many became habituated to the violence (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth: 10). This direct experience with violence created opportunities for youths to observe members of their ethnic groups, at times role models in their communities, committing acts of violence. They learned this behavior as group norms and inculcated this violence into their identities and set of values. This experience, in turn, increased the likelihood that they would be willing, and even desire, to participate in the conflict through such violent action. Muldoon addresses this aspect of the Troubles stating that residents of the turbulent areas of Northern Ireland readily recognized the great pervasiveness of the violence. They accepted it and internalized it as part of their identities (Muldoon: 462).

The testimonies of childhood experiences with violence support this assertion. Pearce Elliot, born in 1970 on the most notorious and violent republican street, the Falls Road, illustrates this as he tells the fictional story, titled “The Hurricane’s Mane,” of a young boy that is based on his painful real-life experience. In this text he describes how soldiers enter the home of a child and his family and proceed to harass them as they wreck their house. He notes the young child’s acute awareness of the situation and his desire, listening to the sounds of violence in the background, to find a place to hide with his family where no one can hurt them, a place that does not exist. Elliot also states the boy’s intense eagerness to grow up and fight these soldiers, as well as the lasting effect of hatred from the experience (Holliday: 50-53). This telling story highlights how the direct experience of youths with violence produces the motivation and peace of mind to participate in the conflict. It shows how children can essentially come to accept this type of behavior and see it as an integral part of their lives (Muldoon: 462).

Adrian Fox’s childhood experience in Belfast clearly demonstrates this idea. In chapter two of

his book, *Freedom Winds*, he recounts the incident in which, at the age of six, he lost his “peaceful innocence” when his family moved to Belfast. From his new bedroom in Belfast he witnessed five policemen beat a nationalist to death, which he confirmed when he saw the blood stained streets in the morning (Holliday: 24-30). Holliday juxtaposes this story to Fox retelling how, at 15 years of age, he split a black soldier’s head open for which he received congratulations and praise from his friends. He prefaces this story by stating that he was, “a young teenager, thinking this war a part of me and I a part of it” (Holliday: 23). The example of Fox clearly shows how direct contact with the violence of the Troubles produces an identification with and acceptance of such actions that facilitate and foster active participation in the struggle. A story titled “Just Another Day in Belfast,” by John Delaney, born in West Belfast in 1960, chronicles his real-life experience with the Bloody Sunday massacre and perhaps further illuminates the perspective of youths in Northern Ireland. He opens his account musing, “the incessant drone of Army helicopters above doesn’t bother me – their presence is reassuring that all is normal” (Holliday: 101). Delaney considers this military machine, an imposing symbol of violence, a “normal” part of his everyday life and feels completely at ease with it.

Dunn furthers this notion of reinforced behavior noting how the glorification and perception of paramilitary members, the main perpetrators of attacks, advanced by neighborhood wall murals, as “defenders” of the communities promotes youth engagement. Young people often see involvement in associated actions as attractively exciting and one means by which to gain prestige and status within the ethnic community (Dunn: 219). The message of such murals reinforces and rewards reproduction of violent paramilitary behavior. Ideological messages like this one effectively swelled participation of youths in paramilitary organizations (Dunn: 219). Cairns cites glaring evidence of this internalization process. In addition to children as young as five and six actually throwing stones at the “enemy,” youths fantasized their involvement in the violence. Reports indicated that childhood games during the Troubles included “playing riots,” which for some consisted of pretending to build barricades or peace lines, fire arms, and toss petrol bombs. Photographs even exist of children in quasi-military uniforms holding toy guns (Cairns, 1987: 31). Adults conditioned norms that valued violent behavior into the children of the community

through methods such as these, starting at very early ages. Margaret E. Simpson, who grew up in Belfast, expresses this reality in a line in her poem “Belfast Boy,” written at the age of 15:

“One of a thousand Belfast boys with guns and stones for toys. What age you say...the child is grown up and he is only seven.” (Holliday: 68)

The paramilitaries played a large and intrusive role in the community, a role that actively included children. The case of Gina, a 20-year-old girl from a Catholic neighborhood, and Billy, a 20-year-old from a Protestant neighborhood, provides an example of the extensive reach of paramilitary organizations. Discussing their “mixed” relationship, Gina explains, “Our organizations know about us. Scares you a bit when you know they have to know in case anything goes wrong...If anybody was to touch me they [paramilitaries] would deal with them” (Jennings & Durran: 28). Such influence and pervasiveness in the local community designated great importance to paramilitary figures. As a result, they often filled the roles of “significant others” for young children in the community and in turn heavily impacted the behavior and values that the youths internalized. For example, Norman, an 11-year-old from the Loyalist Shankill area, figured he would “just grow into a UVF (a loyalist paramilitary organization) man” (Jennings & Durran: 15). Alec, a 14-year-old from the Republican Ballymurphy area, would still strongly consider joining the IRA (a republican paramilitary organization), even though they were responsible for the murder of his uncle (Jennings & Durran: 68-69).

The continuation of such local organizations depended on new members, which gave paramilitaries additional incentive to engage and involve the Northern Irish youth. Many reports also exist that claim paramilitaries used children as young as seven to assemble, hide, as well as use weapons and even utilized them as human shields. One interviewee testified that paramilitaries at times paid youths to throw bombs, but that this was unnecessary because they would do it for just the excitement value (Cairns, 1987: 28). The glory that paramilitaries received from their respective communities reinforced their actions in the eyes of the children and encouraged their adoption and reproduction.

Ethnic Group Identification

Northern Ireland’s ethnic division further intensified as the Troubles began. The onset of the conflict subsequently achieved to amplify the split between the already firmly-established ethnic rivals. Each ethnic group perceived the other one

as even more different and distinct from itself than they had previously. The trend of geographic inhabitation of Belfast during this period provides an example of both a consequence and cause of ethnic polarization. In 1972, 77% of people in Belfast lived on streets that were inhabited by over 90% of either Catholics or Protestants, up from 67% just three years earlier (Boal & Livingstone: 164-165). While “intimidation,” the process by which minority members of an area were harassed and forced to abandon their homes and relocate within communities of their own ethnicity, largely accounted for this increase, the numbers clearly indicate the deep ethnic segregation of neighborhoods in Belfast. This trend is quite telling considering the larger general trend of reduced interethnic division (Boal & Livingstone: 164).

This statistic carried with it major implications for the children living in Belfast. First, although highly segregated schooling was already in place in Northern Ireland, neighborhood relocation still strengthened the ethnic identities that schools transmitted to their students. The institutions achieved this through changes in such areas as curriculum, faculty, and athletics. The revival of the Irish language, Gaelic, which occurred during this time provides one cogent example of ethnic identity reinforced through schools (Boal & Livingstone: 164). The Gaelic linguistic revival, along with a regeneration of Celtic games, was part of a much larger Irish cultural resurgence. This cultural reaffirmation marks a key component of ethnic identity formation and active ethnogenesis giving credence to the widening of ethnic identities.

The importance of educational institutions to social identity formation, as stated earlier, placed additional weight on the issue of expanding school polarization. Research conducted by Anderson illuminates the relevance and significance of this issue to Northern Irish children. He cites how the shift from local segregated schools to a system of standardized education contributed to, previously ethnically, physically, linguistically, and religiously separated peoples on the coast of Sumatra, being able to relate and share commonalities in these same areas (Anderson: 119-121). This helps to put into perspective the influence of segregated schooling in Northern Ireland on community relations and conflict. One Protestant youth of the Troubles attests that, “our schools drummed into us over and over again the Protestant history” (Darby: 150). This testimony holds greater weight when one looks at an example such as that of one

boy throwing stones at a British officer because, “you bastards (the British) have been exploiting us for 300 years” (Dunn: 221). Although in this case violence consisted only of a young boy throwing a stone, the young Catholic justifies the action using information he very likely learned from a history lesson taught in his segregated school. The boy thoroughly understands his identity as belonging to one distinct, and morally correct, group and categorizes the British officer as part of the “other” inferior group. This incident plainly demonstrates how the intensified homogeneity and division of a community experienced daily by youths contributed to ethnocentrism and subsequent violent participation in the conflict. Dunn tells of a soccer game between ten-year-olds from one Protestant and one Catholic school about which a teacher noted, “there is more to this than just football” (Dunn: 222). This instance provides another example in which school segregation involved youths in the conflict and reinforced ethnic identities. Ultimately, the schooling institutions, as segregated entities, in Northern Ireland during the Troubles functioned to imbed the norms and beliefs of the respective ethnic identities into the young students (Boal & Livingstone: 170).

In addition to educational divergence, escalated physical separation promotes an enhanced perception of the “other” in the context of intergroup conflict. The acknowledgement of the other community alone polarized the two ethnicities. It created a sense of fear and feeling of vulnerability. Individuals felt threatened and alienated. They remedied their qualms through further identification and association with their own group (Cairns, 2000: 445). This made them feel more secure. The instability and turmoil of Northern Ireland during the Troubles exacerbated these fears and resulted in a strengthening of “heartland” communities (Darby: 148-149). As a consequence, the interaction of bordering ethnic neighborhoods closed in an effort to strengthen the community’s periphery. Similar efforts to bolster the group’s core resulted in a surge of ethnogenesis, both passive and active, on both sides of the divide (Boal & Livingstone: 168-169).

Passively, neighborhoods transmitted ethnic identities through visual symbols and markers. Kerbstones, displaying Loyalist or Republican colors, denoted a neighborhood’s allegiance and boundaries. Murals, graffiti, and flags lined Northern Irish streets and effectively reinforced neighborhood loyalties and distanced external

groups at the same time (Cairns, 2000: 442-444). Home life in these communities further stressed ethnic allegiances through symbolic flags, posters, and other politically distinguishing paraphernalia. One Protestant notes a poster of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, prominent Irish figures, buried to their necks in sand in his “wee brother’s” room (Cairns, 2000: 444-445). Actively, neighborhoods constructed physical barriers between neighborhood using car parts, building supplies, and other material. They also formed community associations such youth clubs to tighten local solidarity and identity (Boal & Livingston: 171-173).

The construction and association of these ethnic identities was instilled in the children so strongly that youths could tell which community a person was from using a number of different cues including elements such as one’s dress, accent, name, residence, even facial characteristics (Trew: 509-510). Marie, a 19-year-old Catholic girl, remembers one time when she was with her brother Seamus around a group of Protestants. She referred to her brother using his true name to which he worriedly ordered her to call him James because she was, “going to get me (Seamus) shot” (Jennings & Durran: 26). Cairns describes how one loyalist respondent claimed that he knew that a certain man was a Catholic solely based on the fact that he was going to church in *Joe Bloggs* jeans and shirt (Cairns, 2000: 443).

Such extensive active and passive ethnogenesis immensely influenced the youth living in these areas. One study indicated that segregated communities promoted identification of the local boys in a neighborhood with the paramilitaries that hailed from that area (Connolly & Healy: 519). This alone provides great insight into the reasons of youth involvement. The sentiments of Houstie, a youth from Andersons town, illustrates youth indoctrination of two distinct rival identities. She admits that she did not want to understand the other’s point of view and that she, “thought of them as the enemy. That was drummed into me” (Jennings & Durran: 62-63). This testimony shows the influence of identity formation on youth perceptions of the other community. Tracey, a 16-year-old Northern Irish girl, states it plainly explaining, “it’s just the way we grew up. They all grew up to hate Protestants. We all grew up to hate Catholics and that’s what’s kept us fighting” (Jennings & Durran: 57). Similarly, Billy expresses his pessimism about a lasting peace saying, “little kids grow up hating Catholics and it’s the same on the other side. Some may get

mixed up in organizations” (Jennings & Durran: 33). Billy’s sentiments illustrate the great potential that ethnic divisions in Northern Ireland had in facilitating youth involvement in the struggles. His thoughts also exhibit the development of ethnocentrism that followed from the formation of strong ethnic identities. The immense polarization of the two Northern Irish groups produced feelings of great hostility and group discrimination. A study by Connolly & Healy explored the influence of two segregated and strongly ethnically identifiable communities. It revealed strong identification in children, as young as seven, of the other community and the perceived threat that it presented to them. When asked if they ever go to the other community to play, one girl named Chloe replied, “Aye and get my head bricked in!” and gave the reason that the people of that community, Catholics, were “bad” for why this would happen. This type of response exhibits the resentment and separation that intense group identity formation promotes.

The powerful ethnic groups additionally contributed to the development of individuals forming collective identities. For instance, when asked how he would react to a Catholic doctor saving him from death, Bob, an 18-year-old protestant, retorted, “I’d kill myself” (Gillespie, Lovett, & Garner: 139). Although difficult to determine the sincerity of the response, Bob’s forceful reaction helps to understand this aspect of ethnic identities. He would rather preserve the reputation of his ethnic group at the cost of death. Incorporation of ideas and beliefs resulting from ethnocentrism and collective identity reduced barriers preventing participation in the struggle and promoted involvement.

Counter Arguments

Although this paper presumes the Northern Irish conflict stems from ethnic differences, others believe a different nature characterizes the division. Many maintain that the communities are divided along religious lines. This perspective seems logical when one considers the demographic of Belfast with, as mentioned previously, 77% of the population living on streets that are more than 90% Catholic or Protestant (Boal & Livingstone: 164-165). Many scholars, however, discount this view. For example, Holliday declares that the Northern Irish Troubles is much more of an ethnic conflict than religious (Holliday: 2). Supporting Holliday’s argument, Hutchy, an 18-year-old Protes-

tant from the Shankill area, concedes that religion plays a large role in Ireland and church attendance remains high, but contends that, "religion is often just a badge for the political divisions of the community" (Jennings & Durran: 34). Such testimony also lends support to McAuley's argument that politics and nationalism pervades the conflict. He points to the development of political divisions from historical constructs, which he continues to assert are expressed through social and physical segregation (543).

Others emphasize the economic nature of the conflict. Northern Ireland has remained the poorest region of Great Britain and on the lowest rung within the European Economic Community. High unemployment, at times over 25% of the adult population, notoriously characterized the area throughout the Troubles (Cairns, 1987: 17-18). They analyze it in terms of a Marxist ideology in which conflict arises where Protestants hold economic power and Catholics become marginalized. Unsurprisingly, this is a popular stance of the republican Sinn Fein (Burgess: 100-102, 117). The correlation of economic deprivation and violence, of the kind that characterized Northern Ireland, also supports this stance. Although the root of the Northern Irish conflict includes ethnic, religious, economic, and social components, the dominant nature of the division begets a variety of interpretations. It is important, in considering the information and argument set forth in this study, to keep such perspectives in mind.

Conclusion

The Northern Irish Troubles was an extremely painful 30-year period in Irish history that affected almost everybody in the country. Its onset effectively exacerbated the polarization of Ulster and Irish ethnic identities. The urban context in which the conflict played out created a large amount of both direct and indirect contact with the violence. The street nature of the warfare provided great accessibility as well as opportunity for the involvement of Northern Irish youth. Those who grew up during the Troubles witnessed this behavior first hand through family, friends, and local role models. Increased violence and turmoil in the region reinforced ethnic division. Homogeneity in neighborhoods and communities intensified in response to overall insecurity and fear. As the split between Ulster and Irish widened, active and passive ethno-

genesis of respective ethnic identities strengthened in efforts to reaffirm core values and beliefs as well as tighten community unity. Segregated neighborhoods, schools, and the highly symbolic street culture of Northern Ireland produced and reinforced the formation of ethnic identities in youths. The children who grew up during the Troubles experienced the formation of ethnic identities in the context of a significantly more ethnically polarized society composed of communities of increasingly intense solidarity and violence than the generations before them. As these youths internalized the violence and inculcated group identities, they became more likely to participate in the Troubles. They accepted violent behavior as a norm of society and intense ethnic identification increased sentiments of ethnocentrism and collective identity, all of which ultimately promoted hostile action and group discrimination.

This analysis of Northern Irish youth becomes extremely pertinent to the present day when one considers recent events in Northern Ireland. One article in the *National Catholic Reporter* on January 25, 2002 reported how violence flared when parents of students at Holy Cross School in North Belfast were pushed and spat at by Protestants and rioters who filled the streets well into the night. The article continues to report a survey which showed that Northern Ireland's young people, those from 18 to 25, were more polarized and segregated than ever before. McAuley notes nightly rioting between Loyalist and Nationalist youths as a result of the Holy Cross issue (542). He gives further evidence of current division and instability of Northern Ireland. A campaign of "New Loyalism" has emerged from the unionist paramilitary organization with the stated goal of reestablishing traditional Unionist values and identities. The 2001 Westminster elections in which pro-Agreement Unionists lost seats and anti-Agreement Unionists gained seats reflects this current trend. An entreaty by Unionist leader Peter Robinson in one speech, "Young Ulster do not surrender to defeatism," provides another illustration of this movement as well as the continued reinforcement of ethnic identities and engagement of Northern Irish youth (McAuley: 550-555). McKittrick calls attention to this critical issue facing Northern Ireland today declaring that a new generation is "being blooded." He perceptively encapsulates the great potential danger of the situation:

"North Belfast is witnessing the creation of the next wave of paramilitary gunmen. Today they are aged eight, their stones bouncing harmlessly off

the army and police Land Rovers...But give them a decade and, unless things change remarkably in the meantime, many of these children will know how to fire a rifle or revolver, will have learnt to manufacture and use blast-bombs, and know exactly how much sugar is needed in a petrol bomb." (McKittrick, 2001)

Clearly political unrest and ethnic division still exists in Northern Ireland and again, the children of the nation are at the forefront of the conflict and violence. This issue deserves great attention and consideration. The problem needs to be addressed and action needs to be taken in order to prevent the conflict from damaging another generation of youths. It is often noted that the specific can inform the general. In this regard, despite the nation's unique situation, hopefully a study of Northern Ireland's case could help inform people involved in ethnic conflict in other areas of the world.

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