Legitimising peace: Representations of victimhood and reconciliation in the narratives of local peacebuilders in Northern Ireland

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Societies that have experienced violent interethnic conflict often fail to transition into a sustainable peace. Reconciliation, particularly in its 'thick' sense of developing more collaborative and empathetic relationships between groups, requires much more than institutional peacebuilding; it entails widespread willingness among ordinary citizens to make changes in how they interact with out-group members in their everyday lives (Lederach, 1997; Strupinskienė, 2017). However, international peacebuilding efforts often fail to achieve widespread local engagement in working towards a fully reconciled society (see Lemay-Hébert & Kappler, 2016). Instead, in post-conflict societies, reconciliation can be viewed as a 'dirty word' (see McEvoy, McEvoy & McConnachie, 2006, p. 81), and groups often voluntarily maintain patterns of segregation and hostility long after the official end to a violent conflict (Strupinskienė, 2017; ;Brewer 2010).

The lack of enthusiasm for pursuing reconciliation raises important questions about why local populations do not see reconciliation as a legitimate social goal, and how this perception might change. Many scholars believe post-conflict populations view peacebuilding efforts as lacking legitimacy because they follow a one-size-fits all approach that is imposed by international agencies without regard for local needs or local culture (Autesserre, 2014; Lemay-Hébert & Kappler, 2016; Richmond, 2013). While this may be true in many cases, these critiques tend to ignore the socio-psychological barriers that can also prevent post-conflict populations from viewing reconciliation as a legitimate goal (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Rafferty,2019). These socio-psychological barriers need to be overcome as part of developing a sustainable peace; if this is not achieved, empowering local communities to take ownership of peacebuilding may fail to result in meaningful moves towards reconciliation. Instead, resources intended to support peacebuilding may be

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misdirected into deepening bonds within identity groups while opportunities for creating bridging relationships and cooperative working between groups are avoided (see Morrow, 2012).

From a socio-psychological perspective, legitimacy involves a cognitive process of categorising a social object as morally acceptable (Kelman, 2001). This process, however, does not occur in a vacuum; what individuals view as moral is influenced by socialisation experiences such as exposure to narratives that circulate in a society. Narratives offer explanations for events that convey judgements about who and what is moral, (Murray, 2017). In conflict-affected societies, ethnic or religious groups often adhere to biased collective narratives that legitimise intergroup violence by conveying a dehumanised image of the out-group and by representing the in-group as morally superior and entitled to use violence to pursue their goals (Bar-Tal, 2007; Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014).

As a result, the continued circulation of biased conflict narratives in a post-conflict society can be a major impediment to the development of sustainable peace (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Rafferty, 2017b). A conflict narrative is an account of the past, present and expected future trajectory of a conflict that often conveys an interpretation of the causes of the conflict and attributes motivations and characteristics to the parties involved (Rafferty, 2019). Collective conflict narratives are often highly biased in post-conflict societies; they tend to focus on in-group victimhood while ignoring in-group harmdoing and often delegitimise the out-group's claims to victimhood while portraying out-group harmdoing as motivated by evil intentions (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014). Widespread adherence to such biased perspectives deters participation in important aspects of reconciliation processes such as publicly acknowledging in-group harmdoing and extending trust to out-group members (Kappmeier & Mercy, forthcoming; Noor et al., 2017).

The challenge for peacebuilders in post-conflict societies, then, is how to successfully confront and transform the collective narratives that legitimated the recent intergroup violence, while also developing and disseminating a narrative that legitimises reconciliation as a social goal. If biased conflict narratives are not addressed, institutional peacebuilding efforts that aim to promote reconciled relationships between parties to the conflict will likely fail to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of many individuals living in post-conflict societies, regardless of whether they are championed by international agencies or local actors. Yet,

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while the role of biased collective narratives in underpinning support for violent conflict is well recognised, and while the potential for alternative narratives to build support for peace has been theorised (see Bar-Tal et al., 2014), to date there has been little empirical investigation of the particular narrative content that can enable individuals to frame reconciliation as a legitimate social goal in the aftermath of violent intergroup conflict.

This chapter addresses this gap by examining how local peacebuilders in Northern Ireland interpret the violent past in ways that support them to frame reconciliation as a legitimate and important goal for their society. These peacebuilding activists are unusual in the context of post-conflict Northern Ireland, in that they are highly committed to working towards reconciliation despite living in a society where social separation, polarisation of political attitudes and intergroup mistrust are the norm. Hence, identifying common themes in how they interpret the past violent conflict can offer important insights into the types of narrative content that support an individual to perceive reconciliation as a legitimate social goal, even within the fraught atmosphere of a post-conflict society.

The chapter begins by examining how narratives can alternatively legitimise or delegitimise social change in general. It then outlines the socio-psychological barriers to sustainable peace provided by collective conflict narratives and in particular how biased representations of collective victimhood call into question the legitimacy of reconciliation processes. It goes on to explore the counter-factual case of local peacebuilders in Northern Ireland who view reconciliation as a highly desirable goal. The findings presented identify common themes in how these local peacebuilders interpret victimhood and reconciliation in their conflict narratives, conflict and the chapter concludes by discussing how these particular representations support their motivations to work towards reconciliation.

Narratives, Legitimacy and Social Change

In social psychology, legitimacy is understood as the categorisation of a social object as morally acceptable (Zelditch, 2001). Perceptions of legitimacy, however, are rarely unique to individuals, but rather are strongly influenced by narratives that circulate in a society. Narratives are a cognitive tool that individuals use to construct coherent meanings out of sequences of events, making them a central mechanism through which individuals engage

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with their social world (Murray, 2017). At the group level, collective narratives about a group's historical experience provide group members with a shared sense of identity and support cohesion and collective action (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). Both individual and collective narratives often convey implications about what is and isn't morally acceptable behaviour (Murray, 2017). In this way, the narratives that circulate in a particular society, or among a particular group of individuals, have an important influence on what people perceive as a legitimate or illegitimate course of action.

In the aftermath of years of violent conflict, peace represents a profound social change. Whether a social change is perceived as legitimate has an important influence on whether that change will be supported or resisted (Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008; Hirsh-Hoefler, Kahn & Hirschberger, 2019). Processes of legitimisation and delegitimisation are, therefore, an important aspect of achieving social change (Kelman, 2001). Delegitimising existing social arrangements and asserting that new arrangements would be more legitimate is often the starting point for societal transformation. From a socio-psychological perspective, legitimisation is a process of re-categorising a social object that was perceived as immoral as morally acceptable. When social objects are perceived as binary, legitimation of one object often results in delegitimisation of the other (Kelman, 2001). Hence, for example, if engaging in violent conflict is categorised as a legitimate endeavour, peace-making becomes delegitimised, and vice versa.

Processes of legitimisation and delegitimisation require changes to narratives. Social change often begins with changes to collective narratives that result in delegitimisation of the status quo, concurrently making a case for the legitimacy of a new vision for society (Kelman 2001). Hence, the content of the dominant collective narratives in a society, and the degree to which individuals are willing to question those narratives, can be expected to influence whether a particular social change, such as transition from violent conflict to reconciliation, will be widely viewed as legitimate.

Understanding how narratives shape perceptions of legitimacy has, therefore, particular relevance for peacebuilding initiatives that aim to persuade post-conflict populations to categorise reconciliation as a legitimate social goal. This is no easy task, as the collective narratives that legitimised engagement in violent conflict often become routinized into patterns of separation and hostility that shape everyday life (Bar-Tal, Abutbul-Selinger &

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Raviv, 2014). In particular, as explored in the next section, the biased ways in which collective conflict narratives often represent conflict-related victimhood can provide a significant barrier to individuals developing motivations to pursue reconciliation.

Representations of Victimhood and the (De)legitimisation of Reconciliation

In post-conflict societies, there are often fierce debates over whose victimhood is recognised, by whom, and in what ways (Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2010). Victimhood carries a certain implication of moral superiority; the term implies that someone has suffered through no fault of their own, and that they can make moral claims on the perpetrators of an act that harmed them, and on society as a whole (Brewer, 2010). Due to the group-based nature of interethnic violence, concepts of victimhood often extend beyond those individuals most directly affected by the violence to encompass all members of an identity group (Brewer, 2010). Collective victimhood refers to a psychological phenomenon where individual members of an identity group hold a perception that they have been victimised as a group, regardless of their personal experiences of violence (Noor et al., 2017). It often results when targets for violence are selected solely on the basis of their ethnic or religious identity, and in turn a sense of collective victimhood can be used to justify retaliatory violence. Groups involved in a violent conflict often engage in 'competitive victimhood' where each group asserts that its own collective victimhood is greater and less deserved than that of the out-group (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). This phenomenon has also been termed 'exclusive victimhood' and is associated with more hostile attitudes towards the out-group, and reduced willingness to accept responsibility for in-group harmdoing (Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015).

Collective conflict narratives that convey an exclusive representation of the in-group's victimhood present a serious challenge to achieving sustainable peace. Reconciliation involves recognising in-group harmdoing, extending forgiveness to the out-group, and re-establishing more trusting and collaborative patterns of interaction with outgroup members (Lederach, 1997; Strupinskienė, 2017). Conversely, a sense of exclusive victimhood legitimises continued hostility towards out-group members (Brewer, 2010). Hence, conflict narratives that represent victimhood as exclusive to the in-group help to maintain a sense of collective grievance regarding the past victimisation of in-group members, and can fuel fears

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that the out-group cannot be trusted and will attack the in-group again in future (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Breen-Smyth, 2018). Meanwhile, the requirement in a reconciliation process to acknowledge in-group harmdoing can be viewed as incompatible with the group's narrative that it is the primary victim of the conflict (Brewer, 2010). Moreover, individuals socialised to adhere loyally to their in-group's conflict narrative may find that questioning that narrative as part of a reconciliation process feels like an act of disloyalty (Ross, 2014). Representations of exclusive victimhood then, when disseminated by collective conflict narratives, provide a significant psychological barrier to post-conflict populations viewing reconciliation as a legitimate social goal. Instead, these narratives support perceptions that reconciliation is an immoral compromise with an evil enemy, and a threat to the group's moral self-image as innocent victims of the conflict (see Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Lawther 2014).

However, not all representations of victimhood lead to the delegitimisation of reconciliation as a social goal. Socio-psychological research has also identified a phenomenon termed 'inclusive victimhood consciousness' (Volhardt & Bilali, 2015). When individuals exhibit this belief that suffering is shared equally by groups engaged in a violent conflict, they hold more tolerant attitudes towards the out-group and are more motivated to engage in helping all the victims of violence. Inclusive victimhood consciousness is also associated with greater willingness to extend forgiveness to the outgroup and to develop collaborative relationships with out-group members. These are key aspects of any reconciliation process.

Moreover, research also indicates that local peacebuilders hold an alternative conflict narrative from that of their wider identity group, and this supports their motivations to engage in efforts to achieve reconciliation (Nasie et. al, 2014; Rafferty, 2019). In particular, these local peacebuilders have been noted to acknowledge both out-group suffering and in-group harmdoing in their narratives. Although these individuals typically represent a small minority of the population in conflict-affected societies, they do demonstrate that it is possible for individuals living in these societies to develop an inclusive and balanced interpretation of the conflict. Moreover, while some local peacebuilders in Northern Ireland have explained their activism as resulting from the early influence of parents, others have recounted experiencing a profound change in their perspective on the conflict as adults (Rafferty, 2017a). This suggests that individuals can change from adhering to a biased collective conflict narrative,

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and develop a more balanced interpretation of the conflict that supports their motivations to work towards reconciliation.

It seems, then, that there is potential for alternative, more inclusive, conflict narratives to support individuals to frame reconciliation as a legitimate social goal. However, to date, the specific conflict narrative content that supports the legitimisation of reconciliation has received little attention from researchers. In particular, detailed qualitative exploration of the inter-relationships between representations of conflict-related victimhood and the legitimisation of reconciliation as a social goal is currently lacking. This chapter aims to contribute insights in this area, by analysing the conflict narratives of local peacebuilders in post-conflict Northern Ireland and exploring the interplay between how they represent conflict-related victimhood and their framing of reconciliation as a desirable and important goal for their society.

Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

Two decades after the peace agreement, thick reconciliation between the Catholic and Protestant communities remains elusive in Northern Ireland. Between 1969 and 1998, over 3700 people were killed and over 40,000 were injured as a result of the violence known as 'the Troubles' (McKeown, 2009). The conflict was primarily fuelled by a combination of Catholic resentment over discrimination and political exclusion, and by Protestant fears that Catholics wanted to force them to join the Republic of Ireland where they believed they would lose their distinct British identity (Cairns & Darby, 1998). Violence was committed by Irish Republican paramilitaries from the Catholic community who aimed to unite Northern Ireland politically with the rest of the island, and by Loyalist paramilitaries from the Protestant community who aimed to maintain Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Both local armed police and soldiers in the British army were tasked with defeating these paramilitaries, and at times their members committed human rights abuses against non-combatants as well as paramilitaries, including indefinite detention, unlawful injury and unlawful killing.

Despite the signing of a peace agreement in 1998, separation and hostility remain embedded in Northern Irish politics and society (Hall, 2018). Ethno-nationalist political

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leaders continue to draw on communal conflict narratives to justify their pursuit of zero-sum political goals (Leahy, 2018). Debates about how the legacies of the Troubles should be addressed are highly contentious, and fierce contestation over the nature of the conflict, and by extension who should be considered a victim or a perpetrator, continues to shape Northern Irish political debate (Jankowitz, 2017). In particular, each of the two main communities asserts a conflict narrative that portrays in-group members as the most innocent victims, while delegitimising the claim to victimhood of at least some out-group members. This means that there is little agreement between the two main communities around how the legacies of the violent past should be addressed, nor around what a legitimate reconciliation process should involve (Jankowitz, 2017; Little, 2012)

The Protestant community's collective conflict narrative asserts the violence was primarily driven by terrorists pursuing the nationalistic goal of a united Ireland (Rafferty, 2017b). In this narrative, British state forces are understood as defenders of law and order and protectors of innocent civilians. Meanwhile, those killed by paramilitary groups are represented as the most innocent victims, while harmdoing by members of state forces is largely ignored or perceived as justified (Hancock, 2014). Protestants in Northern Ireland tend to oppose public inquiries and legal prosecutions directed at members of state forces (Brewer & Hayes, 2015; Lawther, 2013). They also tend to express discontent with provisions in the peace agreement that gave paramilitaries early release from prison (Hancock, 2014).

Meanwhile, the Catholic community's collective narrative represents the Troubles as the inevitable response of a community prevented from achieving their civil rights, and forced to defend themselves against repression (Rafferty, 2017b). Within this narrative, state forces are understood as discriminatory and repressive, while members of Irish Republican paramilitary organisations are viewed as defenders of their community in at least some quarters. Meanwhile, killings committed by members of state forces are seen as the most important to address while violence committed by Irish Republican is represented as a justified reaction against oppression, meaning that members of paramilitaries can be viewed as victims of the conflict. Moreover, while Northern Irish Catholics tend to be broadly supportive of the 1998 peace agreement as it contains many measures to prevent discrimination (see MacGinty & DuToit, 2007), some articulate concerns that the peace process has framed the conflict as a case of ethnic hatred between the two communities and

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hence ignores wrongdoing by the British government and by state forces (McEvoy et al., 2006). Moreover, there is substantial support among this community for legal prosecutions against members of state forces, without perceiving any double standards in their concomitant support for paramilitaries to be viewed as victims of the conflict and given early release from prison (Brewer & Hayes, 2015; Jankowitz, 2017).

There are, then, clear difficulties for constructing an agreed definition of a conflict ‘victim’ in Northern Ireland. While the Belfast Agreement of 1998 affirmed that its signatories “believe that it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation” (Northern Ireland Office, 1998, p. 22), the document does not define a ‘victim’ and does not made any prescription for how reconciliation should be achieved. In the years since, multiple attempts have been made to reach an agreement on how to address the legacies of the Troubles but none have yet been effectively implemented (Jankowitz, 2017). Instead, both communities in Northern Ireland continue to avoid explicitly acknowledging responsibility for the suffering experienced by the out-group during the conflict, while simultaneously calling for the suffering of in-group members to be better recognised within the peace process. Hence, the persistence of biased collective conflict narratives in public discourse and political debate drives a situation where each community is arguing for a version of ‘reconciliation’ that favours their own interpretation of the conflict and that the other community finds illegitimate (Little, 2012).

Nonetheless, amid this context of ongoing division, a committed minority of local peacebuilding activists in Northern Ireland have developed collaborative approaches to dealing with the legacies of violent conflict (Rafferty, 2017a). Initiatives include a shared day of reflection to acknowledge the loss of life on all sides during the conflict, facilitated dialogues between victims and ex-combatants, support for individuals and communities most directly affected by the violence, and promoting efforts to teach a balanced interpretation of the conflict in history classrooms. While various civil society organisations associated with a particular community lobby to achieve support for in-group victims of violence, or to see particular injustices addressed, locally-run peacebuilding organisations place an emphasis on supporting all victims of conflict-related violence and on the need to heal relationships between the two communities (Hallman, 2017).

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Given the tendency in Northern Ireland, and in post-conflict societies in general, for individuals to adhere to biased collective narratives that delegitimise a vision of reconciliation that includes out-group concerns, these local peacebuilders present an important counter-factual case. We can learn from how they interpret conflict-related victimhood in ways that support them to frame mutual reconciliation as a legitimate goal. Such insights have the potential to inform the development of new peacebuilding initiatives in post-conflict societies that could effectively promote interpretations of the past violent conflict that increase motivations among local actors to work towards achieving an inclusive vision of reconcilaition.

Northern Irish Peacebuilders' Representations of Victimhood and Reconciliation

This chapter is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Northern Ireland in 2014. The goal of the overall study was to understand how motivations to engage in intergroup peacebuilding emerge, and are sustained, in a protracted conflict (see Rafferty, 2017a). As part of this study I conducted in-depth narrative interviews with 15 individuals who have spent at least five years working to improve relations between Protestants and Catholics, termed here 'local peacebuilders'. The interviews were semi-structured, covering topics such as personal philosophy, vision of peace and experiences of family life and education..

For this chapter, I created two subsets of data; a 'representations of victimhood' subset was created from instances in the transcripts when respondents referred to suffering or harm resulting from the conflict in Northern Ireland, and a 'representations of reconciliation' subset was created instances in the transcripts when respondents referred to reconciliation or peace. I then subjected each of these two datasets to inductive thematic analysis based on the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). I identified the most prevalent themes in how the peacebuilders represented victimhood and reconciliation and these are presented below. These findings are followed by discussion of the inter-relationship between the peacebuilders' particular representations of victimhood and their framing of reconciliation as a legitimate goal for Northern Irish society.

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Representations of victimhood.

There were two prevalent themes in how the local peacebuilders represented victimhood resulting from the conflict. Firstly, almost all of them articulated an inclusive understanding of victimhood as a shared experience, asserting that members of both main communities suffered in equal measure, and making no claims that their in-group's suffering was greater or less deserved. Secondly, many of the peacebuilders also represented victimhood as a complex concept, not necessarily mutually exclusive with having perpetrated violence.

Victimhood as a shared experience.

The local peacebuilders' inclusive interpretation of victimhood involved representing the suffering of members of both communities as equal in magnitude,and rejecting any idea that one community can claim greater victimhood than the other. As a result, all of them expressed concern for suffering experienced by members of the out-group. For example, a Catholic peacebuilder who grew up in an area of Belfast that experienced heavy military presence during the Troubles, expressed her concern that ex-members of the security forces have not had their suffering adequately addressed;

> *I feel really sorry for a lot of the people I work with.... It's because the Troubles are still very real for most of the men I see.... Many of them are ex-UDR. I think there hasn't been enough done about (supporting) ex-UDR people through the Troubles.* (LP-1)

Clearly, this is quite distinct from the typical Catholic conflict narrative that represents members of state forces as repressive agents rather than potential victims of the conflict.

Overall, the local peacebuilders did not represent the conflict as an experience of exclusive in-group collective victimhood. Instead, a strong majority of them displayed concern for the suffering of all those most directly affected by the violence, regardless of their background or the circumstances of their trauma and/or bereavement. For example, a Protestant peacebuilder related how her work is a response to the conflict-related suffering of people from all backgrounds;

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It goes back to violence, and the reality of what violence does….It's one of the driving factors of why I work with victims. I don't care who they are, what their background is, what their story is. What I do care about is that the consequences of violence makes them a victim…. (LP-2)

This peacebuilder's concern with human suffering, distinct from social identities or political considerations, was reflected across the local peacebuilders' narratives.

Hence, these local peacebuilders displayed a strong tendency to represent conflict-related victimhood in inclusive terms, acknowledging that both Catholics and Protestants suffered during the conflict. This was illustrated by their tendency to avoid discussing victimhood in terms of groups' experiences and, instead, to repeatedly articulate concern for all those individuals who were directly harmed by the violence, regardless of their communal affiliation.

Victimhood as a complex concept, not separate from harmdoing.

The Northern Irish peacebuilders also tended to represent victimhood as a complex phenomenon that could over-lap with harmdoing. This was part of their tendency to portray the conflict as a mutually-destructive cycle of violence, rather than an experience of in-group suffering caused by the out-group.

Hence, peacebuilders from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds rejected a binary view of victims and perpetrators as mutually-exclusive categories. As a Catholic peacebuilder working in a majority-Protestant region recounted;

I was reading (the local paper) yesterday, and there was a job advertisement for a person to support the 'genuine' or 'real' victims of the Troubles …. And I just think to myself, 'what (are they thinking)?'…. I mean, my view is, going back to the wee fella (I told you about earlier) who was so badly injured (by the British Army) with the plastic bullet, all his brothers joined the IRA…. And they probably committed terrible atrocities. And then two of them got killed and are down in with the IRA volunteers (in the cemetery). So that whole hierarchy of victimhood, to me, is (misleading)…. I don't

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really see how you can have a 'genuine' victim of the Troubles or an 'innocent' victim, (and say at the same time) like 'see him there, no (he's not a victim)'. (LP-1).

Similar representations of the complexity of victimhood and its inter-relation with harmdoing were articulated by most of the local peacebuilders. Most of them tended to represent victimhood and harmdoing as categories that could over-lap and most of them were willing to extend a degree of understanding and support to individuals who had perpetrated violence during the conflict.

At the same time, almost all the peacebuilders represented the conflict as a mutually destructive cycle of harm, and this was associated with representing perpetrators of violence as ordinary people caught up in extraordinary times. For example, a Protestant peacebuilder ascribed the end of the Troubles to a growing recognition among paramilitaries that violence was a harmful cycle that could not achieve any political goals;

> *It was actually the prisoners in jail who were having the conversations….who were then looking at the fact that people were being slaughtered in the streets -and what was going happen? Because there was a realisation here that they were going to be no winners, only losers, that no one was going to outdo each other here. So that's how the ceasefires came about*. (LP-7)

This same peacebuilder also explained her view that perpetrators of the violence can be considered victims of the conflict:

> *So (reconciliation work) it's a passion for me, it's a passion because of my own involvement (in the conflict) and the people that I knew being slaughtered, and the wonderful people I know who have gone to prison, who have done things that they would never have done if they had been brought up in another place….*(LP-7)

This lack of distinction between different forms of conflict-related suffering was a recurring theme in the narratives of all the local peacebuilders.

Overall then, these inclusive and complex representations of victimhood were associated with interviewees articulating al conflict narrative where the responsibility and the

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suffering of both groups is acknowledged. Of particular note, they strongly tended to disassociate victimhood from communal identities. Instead, they often expressed concern for the suffering of individuals regardless of their group membership, and at the same time represented people from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland, including perpetrators of violence, as victims of a destructive cycle of conflict.

Legitimising reconciliation as an appropriate response to violent conflict.

Alongside displaying an inclusive understanding of victimhood, the Northern Irish peacebuilders all represented reconciliation as a legitimate response to the suffering caused by violent conflict. There were two prevalent themes in how they represented reconciliation as a desirable social goal. Firstly, they legitimate reconciliation by representing it as a process that can heal harms caused by violence. And secondly, they further legitimate reconciliation by representing it as an essential pre-requisite to developing a future society that can meet the needs of all its citizens.

Reconciliation as a process that heals the harms of violence.

Most of the peacebuilders represented reconciliation as a process that can, at least partly, heal trauma through a process of restoring broken relationships. At the same time, none of them expressed any idea that revenge or punitive justice against perpetrators could be beneficial for victims of violence.

The local peacebuilders displayed a strong awareness of the multiple ways in which violence had harmed individuals who lived through the conflict, and a strong commitment to supporting them. For example, a peacebuilder from a Catholic background who had himself almost been killed during the Troubles, described the importance he saw in Protestants and Catholic victims of violence mutually supporting one another to cope with the legacies of violence:

One of the pieces of work that I am proudest of was with a group called 'survivors of trauma' ...and what they all had in common was that they had all lost people....They were just captives of their past, if you know what I mean. It was like a cage that they

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lived in. And the way they supported each other was so good, like at anniversaries (of the death of a loved one) and all this kind of thing - it was so good. (LP-9)

This view that intergroup contact and mutual support among victims of violence is an appropriate and positive response to the harms caused by violent conflict, was expressed by a strong majority of the respondents.

At the same time, a number of the peacebuilders expressed a belief that individuals can heal from conflict-related trauma by restoring broken intergroup relationships, as part of a mutually-reinforcing process. For example, a peacebuilder from a Catholic background described his conviction that reconciliation work can heal individuals and relationships at the same time;

> *(In reconciliation work) You're going on a journey and you may pick up some understanding and you may pick up some healing…. And the vehicle for the journey is a story…. Part of what needs to happen for healing here is that people hear each other – so you need to create a climate where people can come together to do that…. And sometimes in our work that is what happens. It happened when we were on (a) residential (intergroup reconciliation activity) on the weekend. Two women (from different backgrounds) in front of the group spoke to each other. They didn't realise what they have in common (as victims of the conflict), and as they spoke it became manifest. It wasn't just that they spoke it, but you could feel it… And I was one of the people who became quite tearful as a result….* (LP-10)

This sentiment, that building relationships across identity divisions can help individuals to acknowledge and heal personal trauma associated with the conflict, was expressed explicitly or implicitly by a many of the peacebuilders, particularly those who work directly with victims of violence.

Overall, then, most of the peacebuilders represented reconciliation as a positive process that can heal the hurts of individual victims in ways that cannot be achieved through punitive legal justice or violent acts of revenge. They also tended to represent reconciliation initiatives that heal intergroup relationships as having positive emotional benefits for healing individuals from conflict-related trauma, meaning that, in their eyes, there is no need to

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choose between meeting the psychological needs of victims of violence and building collaborative intergroup relationships that can support sustainable peace.

Reconciliation as the pathway to a society that works for everyone.

All the local peacebuilders represented reconciliation as the only viable means to create a society in Northern Ireland that can meet the needs of all its citizens. This theme included representing reconciliation as the means to ensure the identity of both main communities is respected, and representing reconciliation as essential to the development of a new form of politics focused on social justice.

All the peacebuilders expressed, either explicitly or implicitly, a belief that in order for each community to have its identity and culture respected, everyone needs to become more tolerant of difference. For example, a peacebuilder who grew up in a Protestant enclave in a Catholic-dominated area of Belfast, described how he is motivated by a vision of a future Northern Ireland where minority identities are protected and valued;

> *…(in my vision of future peace) people would be living together more, we'd have more integrated areas. It'd be ok to be the minority in a village that's traditionally majority one side or the other, that's alright, you're cherished....I think that would be great, a sense that you can live wherever you want really, and it's ok. No one's going to bother you because you're a minority, it's the opposite, they think it's great that you're there*. (LP-4)

Similarly, but going further, a peacebuilder from a Catholic background related his hope for a future society where national identities would no longer be framed as mutually-exclusive binaries, but could be recognised as interdependent and over-lapping within each individual;

> *I would like to see…a future where … we find a way for people to say that they're Irish while at the same time acknowledge that they're British, that we could even live with that….I think that is the only way that we would get to somewhere that I feel happy with - otherwise a whole load of people will feel that they have lost….* (LP-9).

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This sentiment was a prevalent theme among the peacebuilders, that in order for members of each community to have their identity respected there needs to be a widespread shift towards a more inclusive society where all identities are accommodated.

Many of the peacebuilders also articulated a belief that reconciliation is needed to establish a new form of politics that can better meet the material needs of all those struggling with poverty and social exclusion. For example, a Protestant peacebuilder described her belief that sectarian divisions must be overcome to achieve a more socialist-orientated politics in Northern Ireland;

> *I think that, for me, peace is a new generation of politicians who don't have the legacy of the past… to haunt them, or to keep informing their politics in the future. So for me peace will look like a whole range of new politicians, fighting for … the (ordinary) man and woman on the street rather than doing party politics (based on sectarian identities).*

Many of the peacebuilders expressed similar ideas, that the lack of intergroup collaboration in Northern Ireland is damaging to the material interests of all those struggling with poverty and/ or social exclusion, and that reconciliation can be an effective pathway to developing a new form of politics that could reduce material inequalities regardless of ethno-national identities.

Overall, then, the peacebuilders represent reconciliation as a legitimate social goal that can bring benefits to individual victims harmed by the conflict and that can, through greater tolerance of diversity and a new form of politics, bring about a future society that meets the needs of all its citizens. This seems to be related with their representation of victimhood as an experience shared across identity groups and across non-combatants and combatants, and with their representation of the violent conflict as a destructive cycle that inflicted a collective harm on the whole society. The particular nature of this inter-relationship between representations of victimhood and the legitimisation of reconciliation are discussed now below.

Discussion

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Despite being born into a deeply divided society as members of either the Protestant or Catholic community, these peacebuilders represented victimhood in ways that are distinct from the collective conflict narratives of both main communities in Northern Ireland. In turn this was associated with articulating a strong conviction that intergroup reconciliation is a legitimate response to the harms of violent conflict, a position that remains rare in Northern Irish political debate to this day. Their conviction that reconciliation is a legitimate goal seems to strongly informed by their representation of victimhood as a category disassociated from ethno-national identity or status as a combatant or non-combatant. Effectively, no one is excluded from their sphere of moral concern (see Opotow, 1990), not even perpetrators of violence, and all must be included equitably in any future social arrangements.

Moreover, the peacebuilders frame reconciliation as an effective response to individual-level and societal-level harm caused by the conflict. None of the interviewees advocated punitive responses to the past violence. Instead, they spoke enthusiastically of the benefits of improving intergroup relationships, for both individuals suffering from trauma and for society as a whole. As such, their representation of victimhood as shared and complex seems to delegitimise punitive responses to the past violence, and instead provides a rationale for focusing on healing individuals and relationships and building a more inclusive future society that can benefit all its citizens. From this perspective, reconciliation becomes not only legitimate, but urgently needed in the aftermath of such a destructive conflict.

When compared with the norm in post-conflict societies, these local peacebuilders present an unusual case. Typically, individuals living in post-conflict societies tend to continue to adhere to biased collective narratives that provide a cognitive barrier to acknowledging in-group harmdoing and out-group suffering (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Rafferty, 2019). Moreover, individuals often view victimhood and guilt as mutually exclusive categories, leading individuals strongly focused on in-group victimhood to avoid acknowledging in-group guilt (Noor et al., 2017). Overcoming such psychological barriers can be challenging, but the local peacebuilders featured in this chapter demonstrate that this can be achieved.

Viewed in light of the aforementioned research, the peacebuilders'cognitive balancing act between acknowledging the harms suffered by all victims of violence, and concurrently

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humanising all the perpetrators of violence is a significant achievement. Typically, post-conflict populations in societies that have witnessed two-sided violence tend to humanise in-group perpetrators and acknowledge the suffering of in-group victims only, while simultaneously ignoring or delegitimising in-group suffering and advocating punishment of out-group perpetrators (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014). Instead, from the peacebuilders' perspective, no one identity group is the source of suffering, but rather the conflict itself is the true enemy. As a result, they frame reconciliation as a highly desirable goal as they believe it can reduce the harmful impacts of the conflict, helping individual victims and improving social structures in the process.

While research to date has pointed to the role of biased collective conflict narratives in supporting continued hostility and violence between groups (see Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014; Psaltis, 2016, Ulug & Cohrs 2017), this study demonstrates that individuals living in a post-conflict society can, and do, develop counter-narratives that support their motivations to work towards reconciliation. While prior research has shown that a sense of inclusive victimhood can support more tolerant attitudes towards out-group members and greater willingness to extend forgiveness to out-group perpetrators (Noor et al., 2017; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015), this study goes further to suggest developing an inclusive and complex understanding of conflict-related victimhood is key to enabling individuals to frame reconciliation as a goal that can bring healing and greater well-being to the whole society. This insight has important implications for peacebuilding practices in post-conflict societies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings presented in this chapter can help to inform more effective peacebuilding practices in post-conflict societies, particularly those where violence has been two-sided and victimhood is a contested concept. In particular, these findings call attention to the need to go beyond local-international binaries when seeking to explain why post-conflict populations often view institutional peacebuilding efforts as illegitimate. Instead,, this chapter points to how collective conflict narratives that continue to circulate widely in post-conflict societies often disseminate exclusive representations of conflict-related victimhood, deterring members of that identity group from viewing reconciliation as a legitimate goal. Hence, we can expect that while biased conflict narratives that promote an exclusive understanding of

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victimhood remain unaddressed, there will be little motivation to work towards reconciliation among post-conflict populations, regardless of the geographical origin of those leading the peacebuilding initiatives. As a result, efforts to ensure greater local ownership of peacebuilding efforts are unlikely to result in sustainable peace unless they simultaneously address the impact of collective conflict narratives that legitimise continued hostility and mistrust between identity groups.

This study suggests that in order to achieve widespread legitimisation of reconciliation as a social goal it is particularly important to develop and disseminate conflict narratives that represent victimhood in inclusive terms, framing the conflict, rather that the 'other side', as the true enemy. This chapter has provided an illustration of how an inclusive and balanced interpretation of the recent conflict supports categorisation of reconciliation as a legitimate social goal among individuals in Northern Ireland. While many existing psychosocial peacebuilding interventions, such as intergroup dialogues, aim to encourage participants to acknowledge the legitimacy of the out-group's narrative, this study indicates that it could be important to support individuals to recognise in-group harmdoing as well as out-group suffering. Reconciliation initiatives may also benefit from directly encouraging participants to become aware of biases in their in-group's conflict narrative, particularly the tendency to represent victimhood as exclusive to the in-group. It may also be effective to expose participants to individuals who share their group identity but who are convinced that reconciliation is a legitimate goal that can achieve positive benefits for members of all identity groups. This may require local peacebuilders, who often facilitate such interventions in a role of 'neutral third party', to re-envision their role and become vocal advocates for the cause of reconciliation.

Past research, and the findings presented in this chapter suggest that we can expect initiatives that effectively support individuals to develop an inclusive and balanced interpretation of conflict-related victimhood can make an important contribution to developing a groundswell of support for reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Such a process would involve challenging the conflict narratives that legitimated engagement in intergroup violence and developing more inclusive interpretations of the conflict that acknowledge out-group suffering and in-group harmdoing. Such narrative content is likely to support individuals to recategorize reconciliation from an illegitimate compromise with an evil enemy to an important social change that can benefit everyone in society by breaking the

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mutually-destructive cycle of violence. With reconciliation widely viewed as a legitimate goal for society, we would expect to see increased motivations among local actors to accept the compromises and self-reflection required in a reconciliation process that can lead to sustainable peace.

While the findings in this chapter are subject to the limitations of a small-scale study conducted within the particular context of post-conflict Northern Ireland, they do indicate the importance of understanding how individuals in post-conflict societies construct narratives to make sense of the violent past, and how these narratives shape their present-day attitudes and their motivations to work towards a particular future. Further research is needed across a variety of post-conflict societies, in order to more fully explore the relationship between inclusive representations of victimhood and the legitimisation of reconciliation as a social goal. Such research can provide an empirical basis for more effective initiatives to address the contribution of biased collective conflict narratives to continued intergroup hostility in post-conflict societies. It can also lead to the identification of specific narrative content that supports individuals to categorise reconciliation as a legitimate goal for their society, according to the particular context of the conflict in their society. Moreover, further research is required, across a variety of contexts, to better understand under what conditions individuals develop their conflict narratives, and into the nature of the processes whereby individuals change their perspective on a conflict and develop a more balanced and inclusive interpretation.

Ultimately, this chapter indicates that there is an important link between how conflict-related victimhood is represented and whether reconciliation is framed positively or negatively. While the legacies of violent conflict will always be painful, it seems that how a past conflict is interpreted is key to whether motivations emerge to ensure that such violence will never be repeated in future.

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