Shifting patterns of social identity in Northern Ireland

SECTARIAN conflict in Northern Ireland has often been described in terms of a clash of identities between the Protestant British, who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the Irish Catholics, who desire the unification of the whole island of Ireland. It has become common practice to use the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' when referring to the two communities in Northern Ireland. But although the 'Troubles' have often been regarded as a clash of religious identities, the practice of using religious labels for these two communities is quite recent; previously they were described as unionist and nationalist, or as the Ulster British and the Ulster Irish (Whyte, 1990). In fact, the Troubles may be seen more broadly as an ethnic conflict, in the sense that 'ethnic' may be used to refer to allegiances based not only on race but also on religion, language or other aspects of culture (Darby, 1997). More figuratively, the conflict has been likened to 'two scorpions in a bottle' (Darby, 1997).

So how can a psychological perspective help us understand and reduce the conflict?

Historical background

Today's two divided communities can best be understood within the context of Irish history (see, for example, Kee, 1980). The unhappy involvement of the English in Ireland stems from the invasion of Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke, in 1170. This led to the medieval English monarchy taking on the overlordship of Ireland, but their rule was often little more than nominal, with royal government confined

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to a few hundred square miles around Dublin known as 'the Pale' (the origin of our phrase 'beyond the pale'). This state of affairs was drastically changed in the 16th century under the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I. During her reign, Ireland was brought effectively under English control, but remained firmly Catholic. Under her successor, King James I, the so-called 'Plantation of Ulster' took place: Protestant colonists from England and Scotland were settled in Ireland, with the specific aim of stabilising English government rule. The Protestants of modern Northern Ireland are directly descended from these 17th century colonists.

It is from this point onwards that Irish history becomes a tale two divided communities, Catholic and Protestant, their long-standing conflict marked by periodic violence, massacre and atrocity. The Catholic rebellion of 1641 against the Protestants and Oliver Cromwell's massacre of Catholics at Drogheda and Wexford in 1649 are events still remembered to this day. Every year on 12 July, Ulster Protestants celebrate the Battle of the Boyne, when in 1690 the forces of the Protestant King William III vanquished the army of the Catholic King James II. The year 1690 remains a watershed of British rule in Ireland (Stevenson, 1996). Subsequently, in the so-called Protestant Ascendancy, the Protestant minority owned most of the land in Ireland, and dominated its government, both before and after the Act of Union of 1801 created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

The Irish republican movement dates ideologically from the French revolution of 1789 and a failed rebellion by the United

Irishmen in the 1790s (White, 1997). Throughout the 19th century, Irish rebels attempted to withdraw Ireland from the United Kingdom through force of arms (in 1803, 1848 and 1867). The Irish Republican Army (IRA) dates from 1916 and the Easter Rising, which occurred primarily in Dublin. In response to the subsequent unrest, an agreement was eventually reached between the British government and the leader of the IRA on 6 December 1921 to divide the country into two areas of sovereignty. The new Irish 'Free State' was to comprise 26 of Ireland's 32 counties. The other six counties (to be known as 'Northern Ireland') had a devolved parliament of their own, but remained under the overall sovereignty of the British government at Westminster.

The partition of Ireland did not solve the problem of the two communities, rather it enshrined it into the new province of Northern Ireland by creating what has been termed 'the problem of the double minority' (Jackson, 1971). In the North, the Catholics were a minority, but in the context of Ireland as a whole, the Protestant majority in the North were also a minority. This resulted in a siege mentality, in which both communities felt beleaguered, and deeply threatened by the other.

In the new province of Northern Ireland, institutionalised discrimination against Catholics was the norm. This led ultimately to the civil rights movement in 1968, with a campaign for equal rights in housing and voting for poorer Catholics; there were also counter-demonstrations from the Protestants. The following year,

British troops were sent to Northern Ireland, following an upsurge in sectarian violence. Although initially welcomed by the Catholic population, the British army was soon to be resented as an army of occupation, especially by a now resurgent IRA, who sought through violent conflict to achieve the traditional aim of Irish unification. Despite the IRA's announcement last year that its war against Britain was over, Northern Ireland still remains a divided society, and a lasting political settlement remains elusive.

A common viewpoint is that the Irish conflict is intractable because it is unchanging, but from the above historical analysis this can be seen to be demonstrably untrue. Until 1921 the political dispute focused on Ireland's attempts to maintain or secure independence from Britain. From 1921 the emphasis shifted to the relationship between the 26 counties of what was, in 1949, to become the Republic of Ireland, and the six counties of Northern Ireland. From 1969 with the outbreak of sectarian violence, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in the North has played the predominant role (Darby, 1997).

The social identity perspective
The intergroup conflict between Protestant and Catholic lends itself particularly well to an analysis from a social identity perspective (Cairns, 1982). Social categorisation is fundamental to all societies, it is a means whereby people can simplify their environment and make it more understandable (Tajfel, 1978). However, from a social identity perspective, social categorisation becomes of paramount importance if two particular conditions pertain (Tajfel, 1974, 1978):
1. If the division of the social world is such as to produce two clearly distinct and non-overlapping categories.
2. If there exists a serious difficulty, if not impossibility, of passing from one group to another.

Both these conditions have applied in Northern Ireland. The social structure has been such that the categories Protestant and Catholic are of overriding importance. Other social identities do not cut across these superordinate categories, but are typically subordinate to them (for example, membership of political parties, or membership of the Orange Order). Even social class and gender have been seen as subordinate to the overriding categories of Protestant and Catholic, such that marriage between members of the different communities (so-called mixed marriage) has been extremely unusual and traditionally evoked enormous hostility. In effect, religious categorisation has been assigned at birth and maintained throughout life. Of course, religious conversion is possible, but it is extremely rare, and opposed equally by both sides. Thus, it has been almost impossible to pass from one group to the other, unless you actually leave the province (Cairns, 1982).

A number of large-scale national surveys of social identity have been

conducted in Northern Ireland. Four such studies, conducted between 1968 and 1994, were reviewed by Trew (1996a). Respondents were asked to select from a list of identities (British, Irish, Ulster and Northern Irish) one term which 'best describes the way you usually think of yourself'. Results showed a consistent pattern of identification for both Catholics and Protestants. The vast majority of Catholics identified themselves as Irish or Northern Irish – only between 10 and 15 per cent chose British as their primary national identification. The proportion of Protestants identifying themselves as Irish has radically declined over the period of the surveys, from 20 per cent in the 1968 survey (Rose, 1971) to only 2 or 3 per cent in the 1990s (Moxon-Browne, 1991; Trew, 1996b), suggesting that identities became more polarised following the onset of political violence in the early 1970s. Whereas Catholics typically saw themselves as Irish or Northern Irish but not Ulster or British, Protestants typically saw themselves as British, Northern Irish or Ulster, but not Irish (Trew, 1996a).

Indeed, identity matters as much in a negative as in a positive sense. It seems to have been as important for Catholics to regard themselves as not British as it was to to define themselves as Irish; and similarly for Protestants, not being Irish was as important as being British. The mutual exclusiveness of these rival identities is one of the reasons why commentators have often been so pessimistic about the intractability of the Northern Irish problem.

On the other hand, it is interesting that some respondents have now been choosing to refer to themselves as 'Northern Irish'. According to Trew (1998), analysis of successive British Social Attitude surveys (1989, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995) showed that the Northern Irish identity is being used by the young, the educated and the middle class; it is particularly widely used by well-educated young Protestants. Those Protestants who define themselves as Northern Irish do not differ from other Protestants in their support for the union with Great Britain, while Catholics who define themselves as Northern Irish still aspire to a United Ireland. A Northern Irish identity can therefore seemingly offer a shared identification for both Catholics and Protestants without threatening the political and ideological commitments of either (Trew, 1998). From a social identity perspective, this might be seen as a positive development, since it is the only superordinate identity employed by both Catholics and Protestants.

It is also of interest that national and religious identities seemed to be assigned relatively low importance in contrast to other identities. In a study by Cassidy and Trew (1998), psychology undergraduates (55 per cent Catholic, 45 per cent Protestant) at the Queen's University of Belfast were asked to rank the importance of six identities (family, friends, boy/girlfriend, university, nationality and religion). The majority of students assigned national and religious identity to the lowest two ranks (75 per cent and 72 per cent respectively). Thus, despite the long-standing background of political violence in the province, the identities of student,

friend and family member were much more likely to pervade the lives of these young people than identities based on nationality or religion.

Political violence

The role of social identity in the protagonists of the Troubles was investigated by White (2001) through an analysis of the statistics for political violence from 1969 to 1993. Violence in Northern Ireland has of course involved not just republicans and loyalists, but also the British armed forces. Hence, according to White (2001), a social identity perspective must include each of these three groups. The results of his analysis can be summarised as follows:

● The primary target of Protestant paramilitaries were Catholic civilians (67 per cent of their 911 victims); only 3 per cent of their victims were Irish republican paramilitaries.
● The primary target of the Irish republican paramilitaries were members of the security forces (the British army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) – just over 50 per cent of their 1926 victims).
● The British army killed 296 people. Of these, 42 per cent were Irish republican paramilitaries, 45 per cent Catholic civilians, 6 per cent Protestant civilians.

Thus, whereas Catholic civilians were the primary target of Protestant paramilitaries, Irish republicans did not primarily target the Protestant community in Northern Ireland; their principal targets were members of the security forces.

According to White (2001), these differing patterns of violence can be seen as reflecting differing patterns of social identity. Protestant paramilitaries see themselves as British, and define themselves as Protestants in contrast to

Irish Catholics. Whereas Protestant paramilitaries hold a deep sectarian hatred of Catholics, Irish republicans are in contrast not simply opposed to Protestants. For Irish republicans, the conflict is not with Irish Protestants but with British parliaments that lay claim to Irish territory. From formal interviews with approximately 100 Irish republicans, as well as informal encounters with an unknown number of others, White (2001) found that they all agreed on two things: the British government is the cause of political strife in Ireland; and a British withdrawal from Ireland could be gained only through force of arms. Thus, although both republicans and Protestant paramilitaries can be seen as having a social identity that places them in an 'us and them' situation, the 'them' for Irish republicans is not the Protestant community in Northern Ireland but the British government (White, 2001). The importance of social identity can be seen in this quote from *Republican News* in 1972:

We are NOT British, WE ARE IRISH. We will not willingly accept British rule. England for the English and Ireland for the Irish. Is that unreasonable? (cited in English, 2003, p.126)

For the British, the conflict has been between Protestant Irish and Catholic Irish, and the British, as the lawful government, are caught in the middle. According to White (2001), the British in effect have denied not only the social identity of

Protestant paramilitaries, who view themselves as British, but also the political aspirations of Irish republican paramilitaries, who do not want to be citizens of the UK. Thus, in terms of social identity, the British perspective on Northern Ireland might be summed up as 'them versus them' (White, 2001).

The peace process

The development of the peace process in Northern Ireland reflected a significant modification of these polarised identities. Of central importance has been the acceptance of the principle of consent: there could be no constitutional change, no end to partition, unless a majority in Northern Ireland freely said so. This marked a radical change – a recognition by republicans that the Protestant majority in the North cannot be bombed into joining a united Ireland, and an acknowledgement by the British government that it had no strategic interest in remaining in Northern Ireland without the consent of the Northern Irish. How these changes in attitudes and identity came about has been described in great detail in Moloney's *A Secret History of the IRA* (Moloney, 2002).

The most significant development in the emerging peace process was the Good Friday agreement (so-called because it was signed on Good Friday in 1998). Sometimes also referred to as the Belfast agreement, it sought to address relationships within Northern Ireland; between Northern Ireland and the Republic; and between both parts of

Ireland and England, Scotland and Wales. A power-sharing devolved government was to be formed with ministerial posts distributed according to party strength. The involvement of parties representing paramilitaries (primarily the Ulster Democratic Party, the Progressive Unionist Party and Sinn Fein) depended on the maintenance of ceasefires and decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. The Good Friday agreement received overwhelming support in referendums both north and south of the border; even unionist voters in the North gave their approval by a narrow margin.

An important feature of the agreement was the recognition of the right of the people of both parts of Ireland to self-determination, and also to recognise 'the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose'. Thus, whereas the unionists agreed to power-sharing institutions, the republicans agreed to Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom as long as that was the wish of the majority. Furthermore, the Republic of Ireland revised Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution, which explicitly called for the unification of both parts of Ireland, thereby renouncing its constitutional claim to the North.

The agreement set up four new democratic institutions for Northern Ireland: a Northern Ireland Assembly, a North/South Ministerial Council, a British–Irish Council, and a British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference. Williams and Jesse (2001) have argued that these cross-border parliamentary institutions can contribute to a resolution of the conflict through providing multiple layers of representation for the parties involved. Not only do they provide alternative forums of representation in addition to the national or regional ones, they also pool sovereignty. As a consequence, both Northern Ireland communities should feel more secure, because policy does not rest in a single political arena (e.g. the British House of Commons or the Northern Ireland Assembly).

Williams and Jesse (2001) also argued that these cross-border institutions should promote the growth of overlapping identities amongst the groups in conflict. Furthermore, the intensity with which individuals hold their primary identity should decline, and group identifications should become more complex and less antagonistic over time. From a social identity perspective, this is of course the crux of the issue. As long as the people of Northern Ireland are divided into two mutually exclusive social categories, social identity will militate against a resolution of the conflict. But to the extent that these identities are diluted or incorporated into other more inclusive social categories, then shifting patterns of social identity may serve to lessen the conflict.

Since the Good Friday agreement

Elections for the new Northern Ireland Assembly were held in 1998 on the single transferable vote system, and the new executive officially took power in 1999. However, the Assembly has been suspended on a number of occasions, and the British government has again assumed direct rule of the province. New elections were held in November 2003, which resulted in a significant swing to the anti-Good Friday agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and to their opponents Sinn Fein. Despite intensive negotiations, these two parties have still to agree on a new power-sharing executive.

The major problem has been the issue of arms decommissioning. In July 2005 the IRA announced that their war against Britain was over; in September 2005 General de Chastelain – head of the International Commission on Decommissioning – announced that IRA decommissioning was complete. However, despite these dramatic events, DUP leader Revd Ian Paisley has remained unconvinced, and still rejects power sharing with Sinn Fein.

Conclusions

Conflict in Northern Ireland is still far from resolved. At the time of writing, the main political parties still cannot agree on a new power-sharing executive. But there have been enormous social and political changes within the province within the last decade. I have argued that polarised social identities have played a central role in perpetuating the 'Troubles' of Northern Ireland – their softening has also contributed to the lessening of the conflict. Further progress might be expected from further dilution of these identities, which traditionally have been antagonistic, polarised and mutually exclusive.

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