

Negotiating Intercommunity and Community Group Identity Positions: Summary Discourses from Two Northern Ireland Intercommunity Groups

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Abstract

This study applies a critical/interpretive framework to analyze discourses from two public documents compiled in 2002 from two intercommunity groups in West Belfast in Northern Ireland. Discourses are taken from participants' comments, recounted experiences, and descriptions of their intercommunity relationships and actions produced to share with wider audiences in Northern Ireland. Analysis of selected discourse demonstrates: (a) how intercommunity group identities are negotiated simultaneously with community group identities, gendered, generational, and class privilege positions; (b) how speakers' comments position their own groups in relationship to institutional representatives such as religious leaders, politicians, and security personnel; (c) how levels of agency and resistance are contextually negotiated; and (d) the importance of dialectic tensions and contradictions of being a member of an intercommunity group as well as a separate community in West Belfast. Implications of this framework for conflict researchers and practitioners are also addressed.

Introduction

Since the partition of the island in 1921, Northern Ireland has experienced protracted social conflict with communities arguing that basic needs for cultural, religious, ethnic, and national self-determination are limited and threatened by the other community/communities. In such conflicts community members' identities may become endangered based on such factors as historical grievances, fear, and hostility (Burton, 1987), and

identity negotiation is often complicated by decades of violence, economic challenges, and political divisiveness (Azar, 1986).

In Northern Ireland then there are many intercommunity groups who have formed at the grass-roots level, hold regular meetings, and address problems in need of solution. What is not well understood in the conflict literature is the nature of the communication and relationship dynamics in such intercommunity groups. Inquiry about how intercommunity group members negotiate and construct their intercommunity group identities, and how this occurs alongside separate community group identities in the broader day-to-day context of an ongoing conflict, is needed. How participants dynamically negotiate community and intercommunity relationships and manage the challenges of decades of violence, political and economic strain, and periods of peace have not been addressed. Therefore, in this study, I analyze discourses in the form of summary accounts and reminiscences gathered in 2002 from members of two intercommunity groups in West Belfast in order to understand how community/cultural and intercommunity group identities are negotiated in this setting.

Giving attention to intercommunity group discourses has several benefits for conflict scholars and practitioners. As Ross (1993) argues, there is a need for more research on conflict management efforts that have some measure of “success” and some degree of sustainability. Second, discourses and first-hand accounts from individuals living at the interface provide one window through which to hear their views and experiences. Third, such discourses allow researchers to analyze the forms and the outcomes/functions of messages in intercommunity meetings. Learning what message forms are in use and how they affect relationships within and across the fault lines of the conflict is useful to researchers trying to understand interaction and to practitioners seeking to limit or prevent violence. Fourth, analysis of community members’ experiences of intercommunity groups adds richness and depth to research on approaches to social differentiation (Tajfel, 1978) as well as to topics such as recategorization and decreasing intergroup bias (Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989). Fifth, there are merits to approaching different communities in Northern Ireland as compilations of multiple cultural identities. Validity and relevance of interpretations and interventions are potentially increased through recognizing that communities have a broad cultural voice and also a chorus of diverse and sometimes contradictory voices based on gender, generation, area of residence, and social class.

Background on Northern Ireland

During the last two decades political agreements have been forged, cease-fires have been negotiated, and violence has continued. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in 1985 and was supported by moderate Nationalists but rejected by Unionists and Republicans. A Provisional IRA bomb killed eleven people in 1987. SDLP leader John Hume and Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams engaged in a number of talks between 1988 and 1993. Cease-fires by the Provisional IRA and Loyalist paramilitary groups followed the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, which was based on the Unionist principle of consent and the Nationalist principle of self-determination. A bomb planted by the Real IRA, a

dissident Republican group, killed twenty-eight in Omagh in 1998. However, the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, an Assembly was elected, and the Executive established the following year. Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons remains an unresolved issue.

The groups around which identity conflicts and the fault lines of the “Troubles” can be traced include such groups as Protestants, Unionists, Conservatives, Orange Party members, Catholics, Republicans, Loyalists, Nationalists, Sinn Fein, and IRA. The conflict or “Troubles” in Northern Ireland should not be oversimplified as that between two parties who are struggling over interests of religion or politics. Interests and positions relate to complex combinations of group identities, power in terms of access to and ability to distribute resources, economy, politics, government, religion, security, history, and rights of self-determination. Darby (2003) emphasizes that Catholic Nationalists, Unionist Loyalist parties, and the IRA are not homogeneous groups.

There is a wide range of grass-roots organizations and cross-community groups sponsoring initiatives and networks to address the changing conditions that comprise the Troubles (Darby, 2003). There are a myriad of organizations and groups in Ireland that focus on Track Two approaches, which include informal interactions designed to develop productive intergroup relationships and reduce the violence or intensity of conflict. Two organizations of many are Corrymeela, in Ballycastle, and Glencree Conflict Resolution Center outside Dublin, where numerous peacemaking and listening circles, problem solving workshops, and summer school institutes have been attended by individuals from diverse communities in Northern Ireland. This study utilizes group interview discourses from the Fasset Community Think Tanks Project in West Belfast as a way of analyzing cultural group identity negotiation.

Cultural Identity Negotiation and Conflict

Understanding how cultures and group voices are socially and structurally constructed is particularly important to understanding conflict and conflict management (Avruch & Black, 1991) in Northern Ireland. As Ross (1993) argues, cultural background and socialization influence communicative moves and communicative processes construct cultural positioning. “Culture shapes what people consider valuable and worth fighting over, investing particular goods, social roles, official positions, or actions with meaning” (p. 13). “Cultural symbols of particular acts [the wearing of the chador], or settings [the public school] become highly emotional. Symbols involved in the dispute quickly become associated with control, autonomy, power, and most important, identity, hopes, and fears” (p. 14). Consistent with Saunders’ (1999) call to emphasize the character of relationships among parties in sustained contact and dialogue in ethnic conflicts, I address both identities and relationship negotiations in this analysis.

In order to do justice to the complexity of structures and contextual features of the conflict as well as the dynamics of recalled accounts of situated conduct, I apply an evolving critical and interpretive framework. Contextual structures, cultural identity discursive positioning, and intercultural relating are three of the key concepts/processes. Fitzduff (1996) notes in her analysis of conflict resolution work in Northern Ireland that

using either structural or psychocultural approaches alone in research or praxis has proved insufficient. She points out that eventually practitioners and participants in intercommunity groups see the need to address both relationship building and structural work. She further argues for giving attention to macro critique, more situated interpretations, and relationship development. The current approach to negotiation of identities and relationships, with an eye to what is accomplished in the way of outcomes and structural change, is also compatible with an orientation to conflict transformation (Lederach, 2003).

Critical/Interpretive Theoretical Perspective

The critical/interpretive perspective, consistent with what Burrell and Morgan (1988) call a critical humanist orientation, guides my approach to examine discursive examples in which speakers recognize and critique constraints and enabling forces and structural conditions affecting their intercommunity relating. These include historical events, political climate, economic conditions, social norms, and political ideologies, as well as the practices of such institutions as religion, education, and legal systems. Studying discourse and interaction allows me to uncover premises about social hierarchies and levels of agency. Dow (1997) elaborates: “When we speak or write, we do so from social locations that are constituted by discourse and experience. Moreover, because all social locations are not equal, because some are attended by privilege and others by marginalization, they have political implications” (p. 247). Thus, part of this analysis will focus on comments reflecting community positioning, status, and resources, as well as intercommunity group status, in relationships to others and institutional practices and representatives.

An interpretive understanding of peoples’ experiences is created in this study through examining examples of discourse and conduct and the cultural identities and group positions that become evident. I examine the discourses of the two intercommunity groups to see how community and intercommunity identities are constructed as commonly intelligible and accessible to insiders (Carbaugh, 1990) and broaden the view to include the tensions that emerge with other identities and positions. In social interaction such as intercommunity meetings, individuals assume various positions of speaking and acting as members of communities, intercommunity groups, as well as gendered and generational alignment.

In this study, cultural identity locations are evident when there is an identifiable discursive location of speaking and acting that is socially constructed as a group marker. These may be evident in individuals’ comments avowing a cultural group identity, e.g., “in our community” or “Among Unionists...” Identity positions avowed and ascribed are contextually negotiated, e.g., sometimes members of an intercommunity group talk more about their community identity with regard to preparations for an upcoming march, and what information is shared with police and security forces about community or intergroup community activities may vary depending upon outside political events and agreements. However, group members enact their multiple identity locations in ways that show membership, and also their identities can be seen

in descriptions of structures such as historical events, political party platforms, or institutional policies.

Group membership and group positioning are also discursively evident in cultural representations and ascriptions. Woodward (1997) defines representation as the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which subject positions are produced and images of groups created and resisted. In the present study, representations take the form of group stereotypes and ascribed cultural identities. As Hall (1997) argues, identifications and representations are produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. For instance, governmental, political, and legal policies are related to histories and predicted future examples of violence, used as guides for distributing resources related to housing, education, and unemployment aid, and regulating marches. When speakers reinforce commonly circulating representations about other communities this can reinforce status hierarchies between cultural identity groups and communities. Finally, negotiation refers to communicative processes in which parties are engaged in developing, challenging, and reinforcing their group and individual positions in relationship to each other and the context.

Examining avowal and ascription of cultural group identities is important because they occur concurrently, and this intergroup positioning implicates status hierarchies. Given the history and widespread impact of the Troubles, the context and structural forces that impact avowal and ascription, community relationships, and access to resources may be understood well by residents of Belfast and their discourses may reveal that understanding. Darby (2003) argues that, for example, versions of histories, educational teachings and media representations position some Catholics into educationally privileged locations and Protestants into marginalized locations. When characteristics of avowed identities are not matched by ascribed characteristics, i.e., each community may avow their positioning as economically disadvantaged and ascribe to the other a positioning of more economic opportunities, then the relationship between them is likely to be challenging (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Johnson, 2001). Therefore, negotiation of avowed and ascribed identities, multivocality, status positioning, and contextual structures are all important to understanding the nature of intercommunity meetings and their potential for conflict transformation in Belfast.

How people interact and talk about their contact, for instance in descriptions of intercommunity group meetings, can be a rich resource for scholars, practitioners, and policy makers to build understanding of individuals' experiences "on the ground." Such discourses may reveal more about economic, religious, and political exigencies and structural forces in the lives of individuals who live at community interfaces. Studying discursive negotiation of intercommunity identities offers a means of building understanding of communicative forms and functions of relating and hence levels of hierarchy during conflict, and provides cues about positions and orientations of people, groups, and institutions relative to each other. These cues also indicate changing positioning with regard to dominance and submissiveness, trust, inclusion and exclusion, independence and interdependence, and the like.

Researcher Positionality

Consistent with the critical/interpretive framework used here is a call for scholars and/or practitioners of intercultural communication to be self-reflexive (Chuang, 2003; Starosta & Chen, 2003). I am a European American, white, middle-class, middle-aged female. I have participated in protests and marched for political causes, support democratic platforms, and identify as a feminist. I was raised as a Christian but currently do not affiliate with a church or religious doctrine. I am working to uncover my own unrecognized race, ethnic, and class levels of privilege since these impact what I choose to study, the approaches I use, and my interpretations of communication messages. I've been a sojourner studying other conflicts in South Africa and the Middle East. However, I've only spent a few weeks in Northern Ireland and the Republic, had short visits during homestays, and attended 'summer school' institutes and workshops at Corrymeela near Ballycastle, and Glencree, outside Dublin. I recognize that I cannot speak as nor speak for individuals and groups in Northern Ireland. What I offer here however is a particular reading of first-hand descriptions and reflections of intercommunity relationships in West Belfast.

Specific Goals and Overview of Analysis

In the remainder of this essay, I turn my attention to the following objectives. I analyze public discourses from two intercommunity groups meeting in West Belfast in 2002. I demonstrate the value of discourse analysis to examine how cultural group (community based, gendered, generation, class oriented, and regional) identities, along with an intercommunity group identity, are negotiated. Additionally I address the fundamental importance of acknowledging contextual factors in inquiry about discursive negotiations of cultural identities and intercultural relationships. I also give attention to negotiation of multiple relationships within and across groups and between members of the intercommunity group and others such as security forces. I show how participants in these two particular groups communicate in ways that illustrate multiple dialectic tensions, notably the pushes and pulls of community and intercommunity affiliations. The discursive examples show how speakers both reinforce the salience of the intercommunity group identity and maintain the salience of their respective community identifications. Finally I point to the value of this kind of analysis to inform conflict transformation and peace building efforts.

Intercommunity Identities in Two Intercommunity Programs in West Belfast

I give attention in this study to public discourses that reveal how intercommunity identities are negotiated along with community and other cultural identities. Rather than specifying a priori criteria that must be met for an intercommunity group to have an intercommunity group identity, I choose to focus on the discursive practices that reflect an understanding of intercommunity group membership. The names and mutually

defined goals of both groups construct them as intercommunity groups, and the discourses reveal affiliations and avowals of speakers who align as members of each intercommunity group. Furthermore, cultural identity is defined as a shared position of speaking and acting, an alignment with a history and itinerary (Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep, 2002) that is both constructed and produced and represented by contextual structures. In this study, discursive examples of histories and itineraries related to goal directed actions are evident; thus a cultural/group identity location can be proposed for each intercommunity group. The discourses also reveal both avowed identifications with the intercommunity group as well as ascriptions about outsiders in other parts of Belfast, and comparisons of their intercommunity positioning to that of security forces, politicians, and land developers.

To showcase how community identities and representations are contextually constrained and situationally negotiated in group relationships, I selected examples from public discourses produced by two intercommunity programs. I chose two programs with very different purposes in order to identify similarities and differences in intercommunity group identities and negotiation of relationships. Both of the documents containing the discourses of interest here were produced by the Fasset Community Think Tanks Project and funded by the EU Special Support Program for Peace and Reconciliation administered through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

Michael Hall has been involved with the production of *Island Pamphlets* since 1993, when a series of booklets was produced in which “people at the grassroots could articulate their hopes and fears, and draw lessons from their experiences.” He describes the process as after tape-recorded discussions, “a summary of these discussions is then prepared for publication as a pamphlet by the Project Co-ordinator [Michael Hall]. At all stages, control of the process remains in the hands of the participants, with the Co-ordinator acting as editor, not as censor. This has allowed for the publication of some very challenging material, reflecting the rich diversity of opinion which exists in Northern Ireland—even within the same community.” (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications/index.html>). To meet the expanding needs of communities to share their experiences and open up debate, the pamphlet series was re-launched as the Fasset Community Think Tanks Project. Hall (2006) describes the purpose of the Think Tanks Project: “to stimulate a greater awareness of community issues and to provide a unique vehicle for dialogue and debate, both within communities and between communities. It does this through a dual process: (a) a series of small-group discussions are convened on a range of community concerns and from each series an edited and accessible pamphlet is produced; and (b) copies of each pamphlet are distributed widely around the community network free of charge” (p. 23). Thus the discursive texts analyzed here, though not solicited directly by the author, do reflect first-hand comments of community members in West Belfast as they interact about broad questions related to reminiscences that they have shared, or the benefits and challenges of maintaining the mobile phone network. The comments that serve as text in the present study were taken from these public documents. The full text of both pamphlets is available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications/index.html>.

It's Good to Talk is the title of a public pamphlet that captures discussions among members of the Springfield Intercommunity Forum during the summer of 2002 about the use of their mobile phone network in West Belfast. The mobile phone network was created in order to report and prevent, if possible, potential violence, and keep lines of communication open. Michael Hall from the Farset Community Think Tanks Project and Seamus Colligan and Noel Large from the Springfield Intercommunity Development Project describe the goals of the document as: "...to focus on the experiences and thoughts of those who actually operate it [mobile phone network] at interface level...in the hope that lessons learned from the West Belfast experience might prove useful to those who are working in other interface areas." (Hall, 2003a, p. 5). While the first meeting was "tense and defensive on both sides" the group that eventually called itself the Springfield Intercommunity Forum developed aims to: "develop and strengthen relationships between key players and community activists; improve communication between communities in order to reduce tension; and reduce the number of incidents of violence on the interface. SIF also facilitates the Mobile Phone Network with many SIF members being also phone holders." (Hall, 2003a, p. 4) Quoted comments from those who attended the discussions to produce the summary document are noted here as SIF-MPN (Springfield Intercommunity Forum-Mobile Phone Network).

Shared Memories, Shared Reminiscences by the 50-Plus Springfield intercommunity Group was also compiled by Michael Hall. He notes that members of Highfield Women's 50-Plus (referencing their age) Group and the Springfield Senior Citizens Group often encountered each other at different cross-community social events. He describes the context in which the intercommunity group formed and how the women decided to produce a document capturing their reminiscences.

The members of the two groups found they had much in common. They had all grown up within the same area of West Belfast, even if it now possessed a "sectarian interface." They had all been in their late teens or early twenties at the beginning of the Troubles. They had socialized and shopped in each other's areas when such interaction was commonplace—religious differences had not stopped Protestants from attending ceilis, or Catholics from shopping on the Shankill Road....Because of this bond, the two groups decided to merge into one....In late 2002, facilitated by Highfield Community Center, they requested that Farset Community Think Tanks Project record a series of "reminiscence evenings" in the hope that a pamphlet depicting some of their shared memories would have an important message for the wider society. (Hall, 2003b, p. 3)

Quotations from this document are noted as 50+ SIG (50-Plus Springfield Intercommunity Group).

Although the documents present an overall picture of intercommunity meetings that evidence cohesiveness and general agreement, Hall underscores that the comments should not be taken to suggest that there weren't disagreements and challenges during meetings. The initial meetings of the SIF-MPN are described by Hall as "tense and defensive on both sides." While the two intercommunity groups had different goals, one was collective discussion of problems and prevention of violence and the other was to socialize and share memories, both groups are comprised of voices from across the

interface of the Troubles. While perhaps reflecting a “positive” bias toward examples of cooperation and agreement, the documents do feature the voices and comments of the participants in their own words and in their own community centers, and offer discursive examples of identities and relationship negotiation.

Discursive Themes

The themes presented below show both the forms through which intercommunity and community identities are constructed and negotiated as well as what is produced or accomplished by the discourse such as preempting youth violence. The first discursive theme features the emergence of intercommunity identities through sharing memories of past challenges. Also consistent with the interpretive and critical theoretical foundations outlined, the second theme provides multiple examples of within-group differences and multivocality among intercommunity voices based on such factors as generation, economics, and political orientations. The salience of the intercommunity group identity is evidenced through the third theme showing how norm violators are sanctioned. This is followed by descriptions of intercommunity spaces being used to allow for community identities to be negotiated and modified through both avowal and ascription. Since knowing how individuals experience the dynamic and influential context of Northern Ireland is so important to understanding their negotiation of intercommunity and community identities, the next theme deals with how discourses about contextual constraints act to make intercommunity identities salient. Levels of agency and actions of resistance are showcased by the next theme in order to provide a view of power relations impacting and impacted by the two intercommunity groups in this particular context. Finally the last theme synthesizes the contextually contingent identity negotiation processes by pointing to some of the dialectic tensions in relationships among community, intercommunity, and outsider voices.

Constructing Intercommunity Identities Through Memories of Being Neighbors

Cultural identity salience becomes evident from discourses in which individuals express pride in particular identity positions, and there is a high frequency of avowals (Collier & Thomas, 1988). When several members of an intercommunity group offer numerous examples of a time when their relationships as neighbors is more important than their cross-community differences, this functions to validate and show the importance of a collective past in which their relationships were not characterized by violent conflict. Here, inviting parties to collectively reconstruct their past as neighbors opens a space for them to relate in the present.

More specifically, in the examples below the comments of the participants in the 50+ SIG construct collective memories about their cross-community relationships as neighbors. Their comments also show that their intercultural relationships changed as the political context changed over the course of the Troubles. They compare and contrast a time “then” in which their neighborhoods were “mixed” and intercommunity

relationships were characterized by “great rapport,” with an implied time “now” which is different.

Highfield was mixed at one time. Ballymurphy, New Barnsley, Dermott Hill—it was mixed then...

When John and I got married we moved to Dixon Street and my neighbors on both sides of me were Protestant. One used to crochet and knit baby clothes for my wee ones, and there was never any question of religion coming between us...

There were Catholics among the staff in Ingli’s. And we’d all a great rapport. (50+ SIG, p. 20)

The comments show the value in asking individuals to talk about their past experiences, especially when the past includes a time of living as neighbors. The 50+ SIG speakers below also illustrate how in the past the shops owned by Protestants were frequented by Catholics, and neighbors recognized political differences and still remained friendly over the years.

See every shop, from Merkland Street up on the Springfield Road, it was all Protestant owners. There was Billy Stewart, Lambs, there was the butchers, the wee hardware shop, the chemists, Turners, McAfee’s Bernie Spring... (50+ SIG, p. 20)

Sure there’s a family we knew and one of them was in the IRA and we’re still friendly with them. They were at my brother’s funeral a year ago, and they still keep in contact with us and we keep in contact with them. (50+ SIG, p. 21)

The remembering of a past time when being neighbors was more salient than community difference is useful for conflict researchers and practitioners to note because it points to possibilities for relationships based in shared identities to be constructed and these shared identities and salient relationships may offer the potential to prevent or minimize violent conflict.

Acknowledging Multivocality and Within Community Differences

While conflict practitioners recognize that not all individuals who align with one community identity speak and act with the same voice, it can be challenging to pinpoint and account for within community differences; often research studies and summary reports contain generalizations about Protestant versus Catholic or Nationalist versus Loyalist without including examples of differences related to generation, gender, or socioeconomic class, for instance. Noting discursive examples of group identity intersections can be useful for both researchers and practitioners; for example, some of the comments from the 50+ SIG group illustrate that the women are speaking as women of a particular generation. They describe that their identities also emerged in social contexts; in the past there were family norms to reinforce male dominance, but these have changed over the years.

The first example below shows that men were “in control,” in the past. Then this is contrasted with an example from the present in which wives who “can’t be bothered” to prepare a hot meal are also described as “going the other way.” Not only do these women compare themselves with young women, but their comments show a set of tensions; they both accept and resist traditional and hierarchical gender roles.

My da went to the Stadium on a Saturday night and to the graveyard on a Sunday, and on Sunday night you had to get his suit and put it in all the folds and all and brush it and put it away. And whenever he was going out to the pictures you had to go and get the shaving mug, fill it up and bring it out, get his shirt, put his cuff-links in...

But men were spoilt then, and they were in control.

Now the women are in control, but it’s going the other way. Some of the young ones today don’t even have dinner ready for the men coming in from work. They wouldn’t be bothered, they get a take-away or something they can stick in a microwave. There’s absolutely no sense of economy in young people these days. They laugh at me when I try to save money, but you can’t help the way you were reared. (50+ SIG, p. 28–29)

The discourses above show that group identities are contextually situated and contingent to relationships; male identity is understood through one member’s story of her father whose identity is defined in part by his children who had duties to help him maintain his clothing and appearance before he went out. Young females are critiqued in the last example because they do not have dinner ready for their husbands and don’t economize.

While one speaker describes men as “spoilt then,” they do not embrace the young female resistance of traditional gendered hierarchies either. These exchanges function to construct their own identity positioning together; these kinds of stories enable them to reinforce similarities in their own generation and gender, and this process validates their intercommunity group membership as well.

In addition to generation and gender, the importance of including attention to another intersecting identity, positions of socioeconomic access and relative privilege, is also implicated in the comments about economizing above. Other 50+ participants co-construct negative ascriptions of being privileged to teenagers they know and talk about challenges in relating with them.

They’ve got everything they want, the kids nowadays, they couldn’t get any more, could they? They’ve the best of education and they’ve the best of clothes and they’ve the best of toys...and their CDs and videos.

Yet they’re still not satisfied.

They don’t want to work, they want everything to be handed to them.

Our neighbor’s young lad stared work recently but packed it in after only 4 days. And they took L5 tax off so he says: “I want my tax back.” (50+ SIG, p. 30–31)

The comments above provide further evidence of the divergent voices and locations from which individuals within and across communities speak. Generation, gender, and socioeconomic position are but a few of the examples illustrating the importance of multivocality and multiple group identities. When conflict researchers and practitioners can point to situated examples of multiple identities and positions, they can also uncover opportunities for group members in conflict situations to identify convergent positions from which to speak and act. In this case the members of the 50+ group have chosen to come together and form an intercommunity group based on their shared identities as women from a particular generation.

As well these exchanges reveal one way that intercommunity group members construct their own positive identities as 50+ women in relation to others within their own communities (in this case, youth) who are ascribed negative characteristics. Previous research on racism by Van Dijk (1993, 2000) shows that discursive attributions of negative characteristics to “others” with an implied comparison to positive characteristics of one’s own racial group can work to establish status hierarchies and domination. The four speakers in the 50+ intercommunity group above construct a comparison of their generation versus the younger generation; this allows them to validate their connection to each other as 50+ women as well as the salience (Collier & Thomas, 1988) of their intercommunity group identity.

The examples below show that members of the mobile phone network intercommunity group recognize the value of acknowledging their within-group diversity; some group members encourage the throwing of stones and others do not, some want change and some do not.

But then you have a small minority of adults who actually encourage young people to throw stones and that’s always going to undermine the process. (SPC-MPN, p. 15)

...And some people don’t want change—it scares them. But that’s their problem, and we’ve got to recognize that such people exist in both communities—they’re not just in yours, there’s certain people on our side try all the time to misrepresent us... (SPC-MPN, p. 16)

A broader understanding of how cultural group locations emerge from the intersections of identifications and representations is also illustrated by the comments above. Insiders from one community critique adults from their own group who encourage young people to throw stones, which is followed by members of the other community admitting that they have insiders who are “misrepresenting us” too. The intercommunity interaction becomes the site in which members of both groups can clarify who is representative of their community’s principles, reaffirm their value of the “process” and their reactions to those who try to “misrepresent us.”

Also, in the comment above, the intercommunity identity is being implicitly negotiated through a call for embracing change and monitoring representations of their work to outsiders. Additionally, the discourse of both the 50+ and mobile phone network groups works in similar ways. The critique and acknowledgment that there are members of their own communities who encourage violence and are not supportive of the intercommunity work illustrates again the comparison of “us” versus “them” (Van Dijk,

1993, 2000) as well as the dialectic tension between being both a community member and being a member of the intercommunity group (Martin, Nakayama, & Flores, 1998). The example above also illustrates an affirmation of the participants to the intercommunity identity group, and thus the salience of that identity (Collier & Thomas, 1988). Recognizing these moves underscores some of the complex process in how individuals in the mobile phone network are finding ways to work through the tensions and struggles of doing the intercommunity work of minimizing violence.

Sanctioning Norm Violators Within Communities as Demonstrating Commitment to Intercommunity Group

Another way that multivocality within communities is evidenced is in the way that members of the mobile phone network discuss how they handle norm violators. The series of examples below shows that when individuals violate norms of the community group, members act to sanction the behavior. These comments and descriptions of actions function to confirm a commitment to the intercommunity group and shared value of nonviolence.

Yes last year was a prime example. We had a superintendent on the road who made life hell for everybody. So we went to a meeting and we got him taken off the road, and we have guarantees from the district commander that he won't be on the road this time around. (SPC-MPN, p. 11)

Intercommunity Discourse as a Space for Negotiating Avowed and Ascribed Identities

During intercultural contact, avowal and ascription occur as interrelated processes in which cultural identity locations are negotiated (Collier & Thomas, 1988) and cultural group positionings can become better understood. The ascriptions below are being offered by speakers in meetings in which members of the different communities are present in the conversation and the representatives who are being described with the ascriptions evidently do not object or withdraw from the meeting. This process of identity negotiation through sharing avowals and ascriptions is demonstrated in the discourse below from the mobile phone network meetings. Also, the discursive examples show how resistance to structures such as security forces is being enacted in that the speakers discuss how actions to prevent either community being "hassled" by the police should be taken and procedures for crossing the interface between sides to meet.

Within the Nationalist community there is a feeling that the Loyalist community is solely behind the police, but that is not the case. I have to say that a lot of the Protestant people don't trust the police either; but we went to see them because we needed to ensure that we weren't going to have hassle from them, and that your community won't get hassle either. Because, as was said earlier, these relationships are building between us, and just because a bit of trouble might arise on the day, they should not be broke. (SPC-MPN, p. 14)

If you go back to the Queen's Jubilee situation, I think we took the wind out of the sails of the PSNI that day, because when we crossed the interface to meet up with yourselves I think they were just astounded and aghast; you know; "how dare these community people get together!" (SPC-MPN, p. 14)

Without dialogue the fear in the Catholic community is that the Unionists want to go back to how it was before and don't want Catholics to be treated equally, that's their perception. Without any sort of dialogue you're not actually hearing each other. (SPC-MPN, p. 18)

The comments from the speaker above and below show that dialogue is valued in order to allow groups to avow their positions and provide opportunities for speakers to modify or answer predicted questions about their identity positions. Clearly these examples show the potential benefits for conflict practitioners to encourage members of communities to clarify avowed group identities and positions and counter widely held ascriptions. At least for some speakers, the mobile phone network has established a climate of dialogue that serves their intercommunity group goals to build understanding through discussion.

For the speakers above and below dialogue is a way to negotiate these views and "hear" each other. However, the remarks of the speaker below to feeling "powerless" and the recognition that dialogue in the intercommunity meetings doesn't result in changes in the broader political context. The speaker however voices the view that dialogue is nonetheless valuable to build relational bridges in the local setting. Clearly this kind of dialogic engagement reinforces the value of the intercommunity work.

...And part of the problem is the prevailing political situation, because a lot of the problems stem from that, and we're largely powerless to impact upon it. Nevertheless, we've established a dialogue amongst ourselves; can we spread that dialogue, can we build bridges...whether should that be through cross-community activities or whatever. (SPC-MPN, p. 23)

Reinforcing Intercommunity Identity Salience through References to Contextual Constraints

The discourses of the 50+ SIG group show how particular cultural identity positions always emerge in contingent ways within contextual constraints. In the conversation below several members of the 50+ SIG group build on similar memories and versions of living conditions and events during the 1950s. They comment on the constraining policies of the housing office, the common practice of bribes, and having to account to the "rent man."

We lived in rooms in Urney Street and my ma and da had five children, and they told my mother she'd too many children for a prefab and not enough for a house. But it was well known that by paying backhanders in them days you stood more chance of a house. In fact, there was a big scandal about it, and one woman who worked in the housing office ended up in jail.

Aye, that was known as the "matchbox scandal," because if you put the money in a matchbox and pushed it across the desk you'd be looked after alright. This was in the fifties.

As a child I can remember one rent man commenting about the state of our rent book. And here's my ma: "Never you worry about the bloody outside of the rent book; it's the inside you worry about." (50+ SIG, p. 16)

Participants in the 50+ meeting also describe the importance of major contextual and institutional forces on their lives and relationships in the comments below by drawing attention to socioeconomic divides as well as disappointingly slow support from the church. The description of a bishop of a local church who was from "elsewhere in Ireland" acts to position him as an outsider due to his lack of understanding of locals and inaction on behalf of community members.

The real divide in this society is between the haves and the have-nots. (50+ SIG, p. 23)

At the start of the Troubles people thought that the church would be only too willing to support our communities, but the church was very slow to respond to people's needs, very slow, and they gave nobody any backing for years. We had 'Bishop Philbin—"fill the bin" they called him. He was from somewhere away elsewhere in Ireland, and he couldn't really understand our situation. You needed somebody who lived on the Falls to understand what was going on. (50+ SIG, p. 25)

The discourse from the 50+ group also illustrates that there are divergent positions taken with regard to the role of contextual influences and youth actions in the Troubles. Below members of the 50+ group converse and offer different and sometimes contradictory views about how much influence family norms and upbringing have in preventing young people from getting involved in violence. The comments also illustrate how contested their views of the context of violence are and that they don't always reach consensus in their accounts.

It's sad the way the Troubles has divided people.

I think it depends on the way you were reared...

I had six sons and it's a hard job. We live in an area where it is all paramilitary, yet none of them joined...

If you don't hear it in the house it's not in you.

Circumstances may change things—say if your father or brother got shot dead, that could change your opinion...

Nobody rears their children and sends them out to do the things that have been done. They just get involved. And it's fear with a lot of young ones. (50+ SIG, p. 21)

The discourses below reveal an awareness of structures and contextual factors that constrain the mobile phone network members' abilities to maintain their network. Below they reference the reluctance of funders to provide what is needed, and how the

government has saved a significant amount of money from their network as a “cheap form of community policing.”

When you go to the funders they focus solely on the “22 phones,” and often resist funding us the full money for those, when in reality there’s hundreds of other phones linked into the networks—residents, taxi men, and others. (SPC-MPN, p. 24)

In some respects the phone network is being used as a cheap form of community policing...when you think of the thousands of pounds government have saved through us intervening on the streets—damage claims, police overtime, etc. (SPC-MPN, p. 25)

References to problematic power relations (Foucault, 1980) are evident in the example from the mobile phone network about tensions between the positions of politicians, developers, and community residents. It is also important to note that, given contextual conditions, individuals as members of different communities have different levels of agency and choices of actions.

Both communities have let the politicians and the developers walk all over them, and now communities are sitting back and asking: what’s happening here, our areas are dwindling away; we need to do something about it fast. Take an area like the Shankill: how many houses were there originally, and how many remain now? The same with Clonard... (SPC-MPN, p. 19)

Negotiating Levels of Agency and Intercommunity Actions of Resistance

Levels of agency are negotiated within and across identity locations and community positions in the form of advocating for sanctioning norm violators within both communities. In the comments below, the speaker calls attention to the need to minimize the voices of political agitators, the “rats coming out of the woodwork” who are “irritants” in the Catholic as well as the Protestant communities. The speaker’s comments additionally provide evidence that can be added to earlier examples, for the utility of: (a) recognizing that there are individuals trying to undermine their work, “agitators for political reasons,” on both sides; and (b) talking together about taking responsibility for monitoring and sanctioning norm violators within their groups will ensure that those voices remain “irritants” rather than a “major problem.”

The elements that ___’s talking about in the Protestant community are in our community as well—they’re in both communities and often they’re agitating for political reasons. One our side, they’re trying to use a political cover to undermine the work that we’re doing, but in our area they’re actually a minority, nobody will listen to them ’cause they’ve no respect, no responsibility. They’re like rats coming out of the woodwork; they weren’t here the past thirty years when there was a conflict going on, and now all of a sudden they’re starting to emerge...The communities know where they came from, they know their background, so they’re not going to be a major problem, they’re going to be an irritant rather than anything else. (SPC-MPN, p. 16)

From discursive examples such as this one, conflict researchers and practitioners can see that developing intercommunity consensus of positions is negotiated. While this particular example and others suggest agreement that agitators against the work of the intercommunity group should be defined as minority voices and “irritants,” it is important for the insider members of the community to decide who the agitators in their communities are. It is notable that throughout the discourses in the public documents from both groups, there are no examples of critiques or negative ascriptions across communities; the negative ascriptions emerge in descriptions of insider community members (or those claiming to speak for a community). Who speaks for the community is thus an important issue.

In addition to who speaks for the community, how leadership is negotiated is another important consideration in protracted conflict and appears in the discourses here as well. Community workers from North Belfast who were invited to attend a meeting with the SPC-MPN to share information and offer support below comment on their experiences of how levels of agency and recognized leadership are co-constructed over time.

...in the likes of North Belfast there is, certainly on the Protestant side, often confusion within the community as to who to put up as their spokespersons. And those who do speak maybe haven't had enough leadership experience yet to be able to take the community with them into any sustained dialogue, whereas most people involved around this table have established a bit of clout, a bit of respect in their community, so I think that's why it works so well. (SPC-MPN, p. 17–18)

The remarks show that status and abilities to influence others are negotiated and earned over time. A mark of a respected leader is one who has had experience and can demonstrate the ability to “...take the community with them into sustained dialogue.” This description also shows that conflict researchers and practitioners benefit from giving attention to the criteria for situated leadership which emerges in community and intercommunity group discussions, rather than assuming that persons such as politicians or religious figures are viewed as leaders who speak for their respective communities.

Managing Dialectic Tensions in Relationships Among Community, Intercommunity, and Outsider Identities

As argued earlier, interaction is the means through which individuals co-construct their group and intercommunity identities and simultaneously negotiate the nature of their relationships with each other. Discourses provide cues about the orientations of people and groups relative to each other. These cues indicate, for instance, changing positioning with regard to dominance and submissiveness, trust, inclusion and exclusion, and affection and hostility. As previous examples of tensions between being both women over fifty who were raised with traditional, hierarchical gender norms and being women who see the value of resisting those traditions, discourses in both intercommunity documents reveal examples of dialectic tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Martin et al., 1998). Specific comments from the mobile phone network show the contradictory

tendencies to be both independent and connected, recognize differences and similarities, and honor salient community as well as intercommunity identity locations.

I also think that this communication is actually helping to build up our areas *internally* as well as the cross-community benefits. Whereas before different wee areas, even streets, all sort of pulled in different directions. (SPC-MPN, p. 22)

It's recognizing too that we don't have to dilute our politics by engaging in this process. I'm sure that's the same for everybody round this table, and that's the good thing about it, there's no pretense about it and we don't have to hold hands—if you know what I mean. (SPC-MPN, p. 23)

The first speaker addresses the cross-community benefits of the network as well as those that accrue internally in communities; those who live on local streets, presumably due to the mobile phone network, are no longer “pulled in different directions.” The second speaker refers to the view that engaging in the mobile phone network process and meetings does not require sacrificing the salience of one's community identity, establishing a “pretense” of agreement, or that members “dilute our politics” or have a relationship that is close. “We don't have to hold hands...” In this way both the intercommunity and community identities remain intact and recognized, but the tension of differences is still recognized.

More examples of dialectic tensions in multiple relationships, which are also constrained by broader political events, are evident in the comments below. There are also tensions in one's individual position in relationship to his/her community.

Our communities might remain wary of engaging positively with one another for some time; and I know that a changing political situation can easily impact negatively at the interface, but I remain optimistic. I think ours is a success story; not only is there greater awareness at community level of the mobile phone network and what it can achieve, but on an individual level each of us has become more aware of the positive impact of their involvement. (SPC-MPN, p. 27)

The speaker's comments above show that attention to contextual forces as well as commitment to engaging in situated, local relationships is what is required in order to remain optimistic about conflict transformation. The speaker describes that, while political conditions reinforce communities being “wary of engaging positively,” engaging the relational tensions required in maintaining the intercommunity mobile phone network is worth the effort since involvement in the network has produced an overall positive impact as well as increased awareness at many levels.

Conclusions and Implications

When juxtaposing the close relationships with neighbors from different sides of the conflict in the past described by the 50+ group with the comments of the member of the mobile phone network, the differences in their orientations to personal relationships across the community divide become evident. The intercommunity group identity does

different work in each group. In the 50+ group the identity enables social support and sharing memories while in the mobile phone network the intercommunity identity enables collective action to minimize violence at the interface. This comparison demonstrates the importance of recognizing that how each intercommunity group negotiates their identities and relationships is unique and contingent to the context and members. While some general trends for intercommunity groups in West Belfast may be identified, generalizing too far to other intercommunity groups would be inappropriate. The analysis also shows that identity positions and relationships, as well as contextual structures, are both produced as well as constructed and evident in these discursive accounts. The examples clearly show the contextually contingent way that each intercommunity group negotiates a dynamic intercommunity identity along with struggling with tensions of community identities and differences.

Several limitations of the study need to be mentioned in order to contextualize the analysis. The scope of the present study pertains to two of many intercommunity groups in one location in Northern Ireland, West Belfast. The texts from which the discourses were taken were produced for a particular purpose of informing others about the value of intercommunity engagement. Therefore the pamphlets do not include the full range of interactions, disagreements, changes in membership and struggles over structure that characterized each intercommunity group. First-hand interviews or access to full transcriptions of the group meetings would have provided a different and much more in-depth set of discursive texts for analysis. Participant observation with the Farset Think Tanks Project would have enabled more familiarity with the local context and given the opportunity to probe for details. The commentary and narratives in the pamphlets sometimes took the form of interactions between speakers, but sometimes included comments without sequences of talk. Therefore the examples cited are not always “naturally occurring” examples of discourse.

Nonetheless, the analysis of these two sets of public discourses shows the value, as Fitzduff (2003) argues, of combining attention to macro critique of such factors as histories, economics, and institutional and political discourses with more situated interpretations of individuals’ experiences and relationship development in models of conflict transformation. The critical/interpretive orientation used here places the focus on discourses as a window to understanding communication interactions and relationships as well as revealing contextual factors that are relevant to participants, e.g., histories, institutions such as the church, police and paramilitary forces, and housing agencies.

Conflict researchers and practitioners may derive a broader understanding of conflict processes when noting how multiple group identity locations are being negotiated through struggle as well as mutual agreement in intercommunity meetings, and from recognizing the diversity of community voices across age group, gender, and political standpoint that emerge and change over time. Acknowledging the complexity of cultural identity positioning also offers an alternative to the tendency to overgeneralize about any particular “side” and also may encourage practitioners to overcome the tendency to approach conflict from dualistic orientations to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. When researchers and practitioners have a broader picture of the complexity of identities of parties and the contextual forces that affect their multiple interests, they will be more

likely to recognize identity positions in which alignment offers some mutual benefit. In this analysis the 50+ women shared collective memories and support, and neighborhood residents at the interface of the conflict acted together to prevent or minimize violent conflict.

Adding critical attention to context strengthens the consistency of research findings with conflict parties' lives and material worlds; cultural/community identity positions in these two intercommunity groups are negotiated in dynamic ways through contextually contingent interactions. As well the participants' reflections show that community group norms are both created by the actions of group members and structured by political events and institutional representatives carrying out particular policies.

Lederach (2003) defines conflict transformation as engaging in relationships in new ways as well as strategizing about how to change oppressive institutions and structures that contribute to continuing inequities and injustice. The discourses of the mobile phone network clearly show that their interaction is oriented in this way. For the individuals in the mobile phone network, participating in the intercommunity discussions did not mean discounting or even putting aside their community identities, nor taking on the identity of the other's community, but adding on an intercommunity identity and engaging in the struggle to manage the myriad tensions and contextual challenges that the multiple relationships sparked. These observations from a communication perspective to identity negotiation can complement the work of researchers and practitioners utilizing social/psychological, intergroup communication, and conflict resolution orientations.

The discursive descriptions in the two publications provide opportunities for conflict specialists to understand how parties in Northern Ireland are using transformative moves to co-construct intercommunity relationships. Giving attention to shared orientations to structures in the form of institutional norms, government policies, and economic conditions may suggest ways in which groups can redress needs for security and social justice and work for structural change.

An ideology of the value of intercommunity contact as conflict transformation is evident from the discourses of these two intercommunity groups. This is not surprising given that participants committed time and energy to their groups, and from reported comments about critics of the intercommunity work, they have chosen to risk negative evaluations from other insiders in order to continue meeting. While the representations of these two groups are characterized by themes of "success" and some degree of sustainability, it is important to contextualize such conclusions before generalizing to other intercommunity groups.

Researchers and practitioners may benefit from studying models of conflict management that illustrate some measure of "success" (Ross, 1993). In the words of members, the SPC-MPN is having an impact both in discouraging youth-led violence and increasing understanding across communities, and the 50+ SIG is creating a means of intercommunity social support. Finally, applying a critical/interpretive framework to discourses from these two public documents has hopefully provided evidence of its potential utility and opens a space for further critique and discussion.

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