Social Capital in Northern Ireland: ABarrier to Reconciliation?

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ABSTRACT

Limited qualitative research exists on the social capital of young people in Northern Ireland, but this remains an important aspect of Northern Irish society which needs to be further studied given the propensity for ethnic conflict within the province. This article represents the summation of a larger research project analysing the problems facing Northern Ireland given its current social capital structure. The empirical aim of the project is to understand how young people in Northern Ireland view their relationships across sectarian boundaries. Drawing from in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis from 14 participants, aged 16-19, this project evaluates the ways in which the social capital structure of Northern Ireland perpetuates division and presents a challenge to the peace process. The project shows that, while the surface division and tension of the past has largely disappeared, significant obstacles to the generation of peace in Northern Ireland remain, due to the lack of bridging capital available to young people in the province. A brief set of suggested policy proposals to address these challenges conclude the project. The implications of this research demonstrate that substantial work remains to be done to address fundamental societal issues surrounding inter-sectarian contact and to build sustained integration in Northern Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland has borne witness to many changes in its society since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA): the peace deal which marked an end to over thirty years of open hostility and inter-communal violence that left over 3,600 dead, thousands wounded, and many thousands more injured or 'missing' (Bloomfield, 1998). For many, it was an intractable conflict, yet the GFA marked the culmination of decades of diplomacy and peace talks. The loyalist and republican paramilitary organisations agreed to progress towards disarmament and political means of achieving their aims. However, no comparable efforts have been taken to reconcile the people of Northern Ireland in general. The GFA was a top-down attempt at peacemaking, with specific efforts afforded to reconciling the leadership of the nationalist and unionist communities.

On the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the GFA, this article takes a critical look at the progress achieved since the GFA's signing in 1998 by analysing the steps taken to reconcile differences between the unionist and nationalist communities. Using qualitative methods, this article provides a summary of a wider research project, describing the challenging environment in which the Northern Irish peace process persists and the attitudes and opinions of Northern Irish young people.

This article consists of five sections. The first provides a brief introduction and review of the literature surrounding social capital in general. In addition, this section analyses the literature which surrounds social capital, particularly relating to post-conflictual societies. The second section offers a brief overview of the research methodology and an analysis of its relevance. Section three discusses the findings, primarily highlighting that the current social capital structure of Northern Ireland is not conducive to the general peace process. Potential policy solutions are described in section four, outlining a series of proposals that aim to address the most demanding social capital issues facing Northern Ireland. Policy solutions will focus on three areas: (1) education and the promotion of shared education; (2) the promotion of cross-community activities; and (3) housing integration.

While social capital is a fluid concept with many competing definitions, social capital for the purposes of this article is defined using Putnam's (2000 p.47) conceptualisation: 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.' This definition is further expanded upon in the literature review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of current writings relating to social capital and Northern Ireland, wherein three areas are discussed: (1) a general introduction to social capital; (2) social capital in conflictual societies; and (3) social capital in Northern Ireland.

General Introduction to Social Capital

Relationships are the basis of all social capital theories (Field, 2008, p. 1) and, like any other capital, social capital may influence society, for good or for ill (Field, 2008, p. 1). Therefore, it is important to have a healthy balance of social capital in any society, because in the wrong conditions social capital can aid the spread of 'sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption' (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). This is a key avenue of investigation for this article, as it examines how the social capital structure of Northern Ireland exacerbates division. In his seminal article, Putnam (1995) describes the value social capital can provide for societies which succeed in developing high levels of capital. He argues that social capital contributes to improvements on various pressing social issues, such as lower levels of crime, higher levels of tolerance, lower levels of pugnacity, and better educational outcomes (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, Putnam argues that social capital is an integral part of a flourishing society, and absence of good stocks of social capital call into question the sustainability of society (Morrow, 2006, p. 67).

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Putnam's main contribution to social capital theory is his understanding of 'bridging capital', which 'provides access to external assets and information diffusion' (2000, p. 22) to members of a society. This means that communities have access to information, power, and capital which would not be available to the group internally. Clarifying the distinctions between bonding and bridging capitals, Putnam (2000, p. 23) states, 'bonding capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging capital provides a sociological WD-40'. While social capital is generally considered a positive social force, it can prove to be a negative social force. On this 'dark side of social capital', Putnam (2000) describes what can happen when social capital stocks become skewed towards insular, bonding capital. Social capital stocks can lead to the rise of hate groups and sectarian groups. This 'dark side of social capital' becomes apparent throughout the course of this investigation, with communities displaying biased predispositions towards bonding capital. In a remedy to this, Putnam argues for the correlation between having high levels of bridging capital and higher levels of tolerance for difference and dissenting opinions (Putnam, 2000, p. 355).

The report from the Community Foundation NI (CFNI) provides a succinct description of conceptions of social capital variants which form the definition of social capital types and are the fundamental basis for this project:

- 'Bonding – How local communities trust and relate to others like themselves (intra-community relations).
- Bridging – Trust and relationships between individuals and groups who are in other communities (cross-community relations).
- Linking – The quality of relations between communities and decision makers (local government, service providers, funders, etc.).' (CFNI, 2005, p. 3)

Putnam's exploration of the effect of education further shines a light on the importance of good educational structures for civil society, noting that 'social capital keeps bad things happening to good kids' (Putnam 2000, p.296). He finds that schools based in areas with higher levels of social capital achieve better social capital outcomes. For example, Putnam's (2000, p.306) examination found that American states with higher social capital measures achieved higher General Educational Diploma (GED) scores. Additionally, higher levels of social capital come with associational contact from extra-curricular activities. During the interview stages, focus is paid to the extra-curricular activities of the participants, as this provides the key avenue of intercommunal contact. Putnam (2000, p. 310) investigates briefly the links between social capital and pugnacity, finding that states with higher levels of social capital tended to show higher levels of willingness to solve difference. This is of particular relevance to the Northern Irish case, as it may help explain why creating a bottom-up solution to lingering sectarian issues has been so problematic.

Central to Coleman's (1994) rendering of social capital is his conceptualization of the norms of reciprocity and trust, stating that social capital is merely an understanding of trust. He gives the example of person A and B: 'Person A does something for B[,] and A now trusts B to do something for A in the future.' (Coleman, 1994 p.102). The important caveat in Coleman's analysis is that this trust is not merely between *individuals* in society, but rather that norms of reciprocity and trust are shared between different *groups* in society. These norms of reciprocity are aided through good social capital stocks. A particularly convincing conception of social capital, and one relevant to the Northern Irish case, may be found in Woolcock's (2001) presentation of social capital. His concept of linking capital can

be summarised as the ability for the weakest in society to access political and economic power.

Social Capital in Conflictual and Post-Conflictual Societies

Social capital theory has been applied to many areas of social science exploration; however, there has been surprisingly limited investigation into the relationship between social capital and conflictual societies (Varshney, 2001, p. 362). This section attempts to reinforce a theoretical link between the literature on conflict studies and the literature relating to social capital, particularly focussing on bridging and linking capital, and how it may be applied to existing theories on intergroup contact theory.

One of the foremost, convincing articles in the exploration of civil society, social capital, and ethnic conflict, is Varshney's (2001) article on civil society and social capital in Indian ethnic conflict. Varshney makes two central arguments to link the concepts of social capital and ethnic conflict: the first states that interethnic connections are necessary to reduce tensions between groups; the second relates to how people make interethnic connections. The initial part takes inspiration from Putnam's (1995) conception of associational community engagement, by arguing that community associations need to act with an interethnic focus if they are to be successful in reducing interethnic tensions. The second part relates to everyday interactions between individuals and how they can reduce prejudice and increase trust, whilst the absence of everyday contact can have the opposite effect. This argument appears to draw inspiration from Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which argued that prejudice between conflicting ethnic groups could be reduced by everyday contact between communities, so long as the contact fulfils five key criteria. On prejudice, Allport comments:

> Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e. by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups. (Allport, 1954, p. 255)

Varshney's (2001) assessment argues that non-associational space can be included in civil society. This argument is a fair one as everyday contact is an important means of cementing social trust: a key feature of a thriving and civil society with healthy levels of social capital. Varshney's assessment of the relationship between the two main cleavages in Northern Irish society are an important line of examination for this project.

Social Capital in Northern Ireland

There are limited qualitative studies into Northern Irish social capital. Most studies reference it only in passing or indirectly, and yet 'because of the diffuse impact of the conflict on the life of ordinary people, Northern Ireland serves as a testing ground for the hypothesized effects of cross-group friendship on intergroup evaluations' (Paolini, et al., 2004, p. 770). Similarly, the Northern Irish case study provides an exciting opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the social policies used to increase social capital (Hewstone et al, 2006, p. 100).

Horner (2012) conducted a study into the connection between interschool collaboration and social capital in Northern Irish young people. That study provides an excellent point of comparison with this study, as the samples studied share similar

demographics, albeit Horner's sample is much larger. The study helped identify key limitations of the school collaboration programme which exists in Northern Ireland. In the programme, post-primary schools are encouraged to collaborate on classes and trips in a bid to build trust between the two main communities. Horner's study found that there are severe limitations regarding the policy's effectiveness to build bridging capital between the two communities. The key reason behind the ineffectiveness of such programmes is the lack of quality time participants had. Horner (2012) argues that they may have been in each other's presence but building relationships was difficult given the educational setting of the interactions. Horner's findings are grounded in Allport's (1954) work on contact theory, which found that friendship potential during social interactions is an important factor in increasing tolerance. Inspired by Horner's work, the participants of this study took part in inter-school collaboration programmes, such as those examined by Horner (2012), and their experiences will be reviewed in the results and analysis section. Interestingly, Horner's examination finds that young people are willing to discuss sensitive topics and divisive issues; it is often the teachers and youth leaders who discourage this type of interaction. This phenomenon was reflected in this study, and is discussed in greater detail in the results section.

Muir's (2011) article describes the low levels of bridging and linking capital in Northern Ireland; however, they show similarly high levels of bonding capital in both Protestant and Catholic communities. Their report includes a qualitative section, although brief, that helps describe why participants feel this way. Some respondents pointed to the lack of community in Protestant culture, referring to the old adage of Protestant individualism which used to pervade Protestant culture in Northern Ireland (Muir, 2011, p.28). However, this misconception is not supported by the evidence, with similar levels of social capital between the communities being observed, even when controlling for other socio-economic factors like wealth. What appears to be a key determinant in social capital levels is socio-economic position and wealth, as it appears that wealthier citizens tend to have more contact with members of the other community (Cairns, et al., 2003).

Campbell et al.'s (2010) study offers one of the few attempts at qualitative research into Northern Irish social capital, using sixty interviewees from two mixed areas and two segregated areas. The study found a much stronger sense of affiliation in the two homogenous communities; however, among mixed communities there appeared to be more tolerance for religious and ethnic diversity. The study found that integrated communities were more resilient in times of stress, for example, due to the actions of some 'troublemakers' within the community (Campbell et al, 2010, p.30). During times of trouble within a segregated community, troublemakers are not distinguished from the community and the outgroup get a collective blame attributed to them due to the actions of a small number of individuals. However, in mixed communities, a distinction is made between the perpetrators as individuals and the community to which they belong.

Overall, Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland have similarly high levels of bonding capital, while exhibiting similarly low levels of bridging and linking capitals. Apparent from the literature on Northern Ireland is a general tendency to support the findings on contact theory with contact between groups reducing tensions, prejudice, and violence. Nonetheless, a significant gap exists due to a lack of effort to explore the effects of false enforcement and pluralistic

ignorance within Northern Ireland. The aim of this research project is to address this gap in the knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This section will explain the theoretical basis of the research, which uses a phenomenologist research philosophy. Thereafter, details on the ethical considerations of the project are provided, thereby highlighting the high-risk nature of this project. Thirdly, details on the sample and data collection techniques are discussed. Finally, the section discusses the following interview topics: personal background, social contacts, and community opinions.

The project focuses on the post-Good Friday generation. Born after c.1995, this generation should arguably be more detached to the atrocities of the past as compared to older generations. Participants were further limited to a sample pool of A-level politics students in a Catholic grammar school in Northern Ireland. Specifically, this project used 14 participants, the full breakdown of which can be seen in the sample section.

The interview process followed a semi-structured format. Questions focused around three key themes: personal background, association life and non-associational life. The broad questions allowed for a fuller picture to be built of the participant's activities and interactions. This offered the flexibility to tailor the data collection to suit the interview. The use of this format was successful and permitted follow-up of other lines of enquiry while maintaining a structure that allowed comparisons to be drawn between responses. In total, 4 interviews were conducted with young people aged between 16 and 18. The gender mix of the participants was nine males, four females, and one intersex participant. Of the 14 participants, 11 identified most closely with the nationalist community, and three identified most closely with the unionist community. In terms of religious background, 12 said they came from a Catholic background, two said they came from a Protestant background, and one did not disclose. The discrepancy between the number of nationalists and unionists was due to the school environment, with the participants originating from a Catholic grammar school. As such, an uneven sample was expected.

In terms of reproducibility, the study is potentially difficult to replicate, as the results presented in this research project are very specific to the time and place in which they were conducted. The school, which participants were sourced from, was a high-achieving grammar school with a predominantly middle-class population located in a moderately nationalist area.

Narrative analysis was used as the main tool by which the participants responses were analysed. There are numerous benefits to this approach, especially given that 'narrative analysis shifts attention from what happened to how the participants perceive what happened' (Bryman, 2004, p. 412). This type of analysis, in the context of this dissertation, complements the phenomenologist approach taken over the course of the data collection, which sought to explore why the participants exhibit the social capital behaviours they do. Secondly, this course of analysis permits primary data collection. Throughout the interviews, the participants presented little changes in behaviours and speech patterns, which meant that discourse analysis was impossible to conduct, as this type of analysis relies on *how* participants present their responses as much as the content of their response (Bryman, 2004, p. 398).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section offers an overview of the themes which arose over the course of the interviews. The emerged themes paint a complex picture of the state of intergroup social capital in Northern Ireland; the analysis section following the results section discusses how these findings relate to the literature. A more in-depth discussion surrounding the participants' engagement in formal associations and wider social activities is provided, which shows a strong tendency to engage in insular bonding activities which may ultimately be harmful to cross-community engagement. [1]

The patterns that emerged through the interviews demonstrate that participants tended to take part in associational activities that are generally appealing to one community or the other, with sport being the primary form of associational participation. Sport remains an incubator for division in Northern Irish society, and is symptomatic of the wider divisions that exist (McCall, 2006). The division of separate sports for separate communities does not appear to be of concern for much of the population, with 57% of people agreeing with the statement 'there should be different sports for different communities' (Mitchell, 2000, p. 987). Many of the participants took part in Gaelic Athletic (GAA) sports, including hurling, Gaelic football and Gaelic handball. These activities formed the basis of their associational lives. Catholics primarily follow GAA sports (Mitchell, 2000). The popularity of GAA football among the male participants was clear, with six of the ten male students taking part in GAA football. Mitchell (2000) estimates that 95% of participants of GAA sports are Catholic. This was consistent with the sample interviewed in this study, as all those who participated in GAA sports were Catholic.

The participants accepted that their insular cultural activities would not be acceptable to members of the other community. David's experience of his GAA club exhibits a type of civil society that will generate bonding capital but may in fact damage bridging and linking capital. David's comments that a unionist/Protestant would feel uncomfortable in the club suggest that this type of activity does little, if anything, to help relations between nationalists and unionists. This has been a historical criticism of the GAA, which has long been used as a symbol of Irish nationalist identity (Cronin, 2010).

Analysis of interviews showed that very few of the respondents took part in cross-community events. When asked about any cross-community activities they had taken part in, most respondents cited the initiative taken by the school to work collaboratively with the local controlled grammar school, which is associated with the Protestant community. The effectiveness of this programme has been called into question, particularly by Horner (2012), who has argued that while schools do well at interschool education, programmes like this have not been effective in the long term at reducing tensions.

There was a sense of frustration with Imogen's account of the school collaboration, as she felt that it was a box ticking exercise for the school and had little impact on improving relations. This frustration was backed up by Horner's (2012) study of school collaboration, where she found that the majority of pupils felt that interschool collaboration efforts were too strict. Horner's findings concur with Imogen's sentiments in that there is little potential for friendship to flourish. Friendship

potential is an important ingredient in creating a constructive everyday interaction that will reduce tensions between communities (Allport, 1954). The impact of intergroup educational programmes was shown to reduce tensions amongst participants in Scacco and Warren's (2018) study in Nigeria: they found that participants reduced levels of prejudice by half when they engaged in group learning objectives with mixed ethnic groups. The positive effects of mixed educational environments have not been seized upon by the Northern Ireland educational system, which still relies on segregated schooling. This study found that participants are exposed to the out-group but are not allowed much interaction. This could prove to be counter-productive, as Enos (2014) found that 'exposure without contact with the out-group can lead to increased prejudice levels.'.

Respondents did little else in terms of extra-curricular activities: a common reason cited for this was the drive for attaining high results in exams (all participants were A-Level students). This lack of extra-curricular activity may affect their opportunities to meet members of the other community, as shown by Irvine & Schubotz's (2010) survey of young people. Irvine & Schubotz found that volunteering led to more positive interactions with the other community and a reduction in hostility and prejudice. The same study also revealed a link between volunteering and a long-term willingness to engage with the other community.

The lack of engagement in wider community activities is symptomatic of the poor cross-community programmes which were implemented in the years following the GFA. The lack of a concerted effort at building cross-community linkages at a grass-roots level came as a result of the top-down approach of the GFA process. Studies by Malhotra & Liyanage (2005) found that workshops with a specific cross-community focus were more beneficial at reducing intergroup tensions than intergroup activities without a specific cross-community focus. The fact that there is little engagement amongst young people in these types of activities represents a failure of the peace process in Northern Ireland, which will have long term ramifications for peace building into the future.

Formal Associations and Social Activities

Three themes were prominent throughout the interviews: firstly, people generally said they had little contact with the other side, yet despite this, most said they had friends from the other community. Secondly, the attitudes of parents and family to having a relationship with a member of the other community were mixed, showing a belief amongst some young people that the previous generation remain stuck in their sectarian beliefs. Finally, most participants reported that community affiliation has little to do with their choice in friendships and associations, and that a skew in their friendship groups comes from the geography and population of their local area.

The first theme revealed by the participants focused around their perceived levels of contact with the other side. When asked to describe how often they would have a conversation with a member of the other community, most said they have a little contact, but would like to have more contact across sectarian boundaries. The participants' responses tended to agree with data from the most recent Northern Ireland Life and

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[1] *A larger results section was produced for the larger project but, for the purposes of brevity, only one will be discussed in this article.*

Times Survey (NILT, 2017) which showed most people have fairly homogenous friendship groups.

Some participants mentioned that they were involved in intimate relationships with members of the other community. Intimate relationships between members of other groups have been shown to have positive effects on the attitudes towards the other ethnic groups by close family members and close friends (Clark-Ibáñez & Femlee, 2004).

One of the possible explanations as to why prejudice persists in Northern Ireland has been the theory of conformity and the influence of false enforcement behaviours. As noted earlier, much of the associational lives of Northern Irish young people are sectarian in nature; for example, Liam and David both engaged in activities where they admitted the other community would not feel welcome. What emerged during the course of the interviews with the participants was an apparent culture of pluralistic ignorance and conformity behaviours of those engaged in activities with little-to-no bridging capital potential (e.g. GAA membership or Orange Order membership).

The interviews revealed that some participants engaged in conformity behaviours in order to fit in. Kelan for example mentioned that in his experience, social events at his GAA club could result in offensive songs being sung. As the group is likely to be from the same community (i.e. Catholic / nationalist), there is little social incentive for refraining from engaging in such activity. These behaviours can create a pluralistic ignorance within the group, with members believing that the rest of the group are comfortable with the behaviours exhibited. If the GAA club were more mixed, offered more opportunity for creating bridging capital, and provided less focus on the creation of bonding capital, it is likely practices like this may cease as the social dynamic would change and a social incentive for inclusiveness would be created. However, the behaviours create a cycle, as David's account revealed that members of the Protestant/unionist community would feel uncomfortable to join in with activities within his club precisely because of practices like this.

CONCLUSION

While there has undoubtedly been significant progress in Northern Ireland since the GFA, it can hardly be said that Northern Ireland has undergone the 'social transformation' envisioned by Taylor (2001, p. 37). This research study has shown that there remain significant challenges to creating a sustainable shared future in Northern Irish society, especially one which can build a lasting devolved institution. The problem of the current Northern Irish social capital structure is its inward-looking nature. The lack of bridging capital between communities has meant age-old divisions have not healed as they should.

The question set out at the beginning of this project asked how young people view their social contact across sectarian boundaries and if the social capital structure of Northern Ireland was a barrier to reconciliation. Ultimately, the GFA was an experiment in top-down peacemaking and reconciliation, but one that did not sufficiently address the underlying social causes of the conflict, nor did it deal with the lasting ramifications of violence and mistrust among the people. The impact of poor policy provision on social capital needs further exploration; however, the findings of this project show that poor policy on promoting an integrated civil society is having an effect on the possibility of a shared future for Northern Irish

citizens. Philosopher John Dewey wrote 'democracy must begin at home, and its home is communal life', to which his biographer Westbrook (1991, p. 314) adds 'only in local, face-to-face associations could members of a public participate in dialogues with their fellows, and such dialogues were crucial to the formation and organisation of a public'. Herein lies the problem for Northern Ireland: democracy and reconciliation have two homes, one in each community, which lack the links to build a shared vision for these ideals and form a healthy, shared civil society. Therefore, at present, the social capital in Northern Ireland presents a barrier to reconciliation, and will remain so if social bridges cannot be built.

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