

NI former-paramilitaries can help deter future generations

August 8 2017

Former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland still hold powerful political convictions, but most have accepted the peace process and many are determined to use their experiences to demythologise the past and deter young people from embracing violence.

This could provide a valuable precedent for other [conflict](#) zones around the world, according to a researcher at the University of Huddersfield, who questions the need for complex de-radicalisation strategies.

Politics lecturer Dr Shaun McDaid is co-author of a new article that draws on a long series of interviews with Loyalist former-paramilitaries in the Province, analysing the role they have played in conflict transformation.

Over the course of ten years, the University of Huddersfield's Jim McAuley - who is Professor of Political Sociology and Irish Studies - and Professor Neil Ferguson, of Liverpool Hope University, spoke to men who had been members of the Ulster Defence Association, the Ulster Volunteer Force or the Red Hand Commando. Most of the interviewees had been imprisoned during the Troubles for politically-motivated violence.

Dr McDaid - who has researched and written about Ulster politics and society himself - joined the project when it was decided to take a new look at the data and analyse it in terms of different forms of violence - direct, cultural and structural - as defined by an influential thinker in the

field of peace studies, Johan Galtung. It proved to be a novel and useful way to gain greater understanding of Northern Ireland's peace process.

The three authors also identified a series of five challenges and themes, including the important role played by former-paramilitaries in demythologising the Troubles.

"They hear [young people](#) saying they how they might have liked to have been involved in the conflict, and they are challenging that, trying to bring home what the conflict was really like," said Dr McDaid.

The new article includes transcripts from interviews with former paramilitaries that vividly illustrate this theme. Such as:

We were talking about the conflict days [with a group of young men]... and one of them or two or three of them eventually said "I would love to live in those days", and I just lost it. I said "do you have any idea, you know it seems glamorous now", I said "but wait till you're carrying a coffin of your mother and father dead in the street, or you're carrying a coffin of your wife or your brother, or your best mate down the street", and it's getting this message through that it wasn't glamorous, it wasn't nice, it was ugly, it was rotten, and it's people like myself and others, we have to get this message out to the younger generation...

This kind of message is having an impact, said Dr McDaid.

"In our article, we don't try and brush over the challenges that remain in the peace process. There are still significant issues in Northern Ireland and some young people will always be drawn to violent activity when the opportunities arise, but certainly I think the former-paramilitaries have provided some effective leadership."

The new article describes Northern Ireland as a case study in how "social

movements and collective actors can affect political and social transformation in a structurally violent society". And Dr McDaid believes that there are wider lessons to be learned.

"We see people who used to engage in conflict and whose positions are as strong as ever. Their beliefs haven't actually changed. But the methods they use have changed completely.

"We think that ties into a wider debate about whether or not there need to be changes in someone's ideas in order to move them away from conflict - or whether or not that would actually be counter-productive," said Dr McDaid.

The findings raise the question of whether or not there is any need for complicated deradicalisation initiatives, he added.

"We would argue that former paramilitaries weren't actually deradicalised at all, but they very much bought into the peace process of the early 1990s, and having been involved in a long-term conflict they came to the conclusion that if there was an opportunity to bring that to an end, that was ultimately more beneficial than continuing with the violence."

More information: The article, Social movements, structural violence and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland: The role of Loyalist Paramilitaries, by Neil Ferguson, Shaun McDaid and James W. McAuley is forthcoming in a Special Issue of Peace and Conflict: *Journal of Peace Psychology*. [DOI: 10.1037/pac0000274](https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000274)

Provided by University of Huddersfield

Citation: NI former-paramilitaries can help deter future generations (2017, August 8) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-ni-former-paramilitaries-deter-future.html>

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