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COLLECTIVE VICTIMHOOD AND THE TRAUMA OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Understanding how victimhood is experienced and politicised and mobilised post-conflict can help us understand individual and societal needs.

It may appear paradoxical to suggest that the context of war may be a protective factor against the adverse psychological outcomes experienced due to the violence and upheaval of a conflict. However, research would suggest this may well be the case in Northern Ireland. Between 1969 and 1998, over 3,700 people lost their lives in the region in a bitter, often sectarian conflict between Loyalist paramilitaries, Republican paramilitaries, and the British State.

Known colloquially as ‘the Troubles’, the conflict arguably began in reaction to the emergence of a civil rights movement led by Catholics (also nationalists/republicans) seeking equality in social services, voting rights, jobs and public representation. In an already tense environment, violence against the civil rights protesters ultimately led to the extreme polarisation of communities along identity lines. As the conflict escalated, the sectarian nature of the victimisation compounded historic and chosen traumas, thereby fuelling competition over which community ‘suffered the most’.

COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD

It is not uncommon for groups to compete for recognition as victims, particularly where society is divided, where resources are scarce, and where blame is apportioned at a community/group level. The concept of competitive victimhood is based on each group’s subjective assessment that their suffering is more acute/serious/prolonged than that of outgroup members. Competitive victimhood draws attention to a common need in both groups for acknowledgement of their real (or perceived) experience of harm over and above the experience of an outgroup. Competitive victimhood increases ingroup solidarity through vilifying the outgroup and dismissing or downplaying their victimhood. As one would imagine, competitive victimhood is often considered an obstacle to peace.

...AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR

Despite this, a sense of collective victimhood resulting from ingroup trauma is thought to indirectly buffer against the stress of the conflict environment. One example often used to demonstrate the protective role of the conflict environment is the lower suicide rates and psychiatric admissions in Northern Ireland during the Troubles compared to the marked increase post-conflict. However, the mechanism underpinning the shift in these figures is poorly understood. One possible explanation is that the conflict environment makes salient peoples’ experiences of collective and **chosen traumas**, which in turn consolidate social identities (i.e., the notion of ‘us’ vs ‘them’ is heightened) thereby increasing community cohesion.

DEFINE: CHOSEN TRAUMA

Chosen traumas refer to the way communities incorporate harms that happened to their community as a part of their identity.

Usually the chosen trauma is a significant event from the past perpetrated by a clearly defined enemy.

Increased community cohesion, in turn, increases individuals’ motivation to give and receive social support within the ingroup due to the perception that an attack on one is an attack on all. An example of this is the importance of funerals during the Troubles when the victim was killed by the outgroup. Massive outpourings of public grief were central to these ceremonies, which involved distinct ingroup traditions. The funerals served to provide support for the grieving family but also as an acknowledgement of the loss felt across the community. After the fact, memorialisation, commemoration and politicisation of the death were commonplace, further solidifying the distinction between the ingroup and the outgroup, as well as serving to confirm evidence of victimisation.

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In the aftermath of the peace process leading to the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement (1998), there was a focus on reconciliation and reunification of communities and establishing peace. This ultimately meant that the conflict identities that both sustained the societal division and protected the psychological wellbeing of communities were diluted by efforts to break down the sectarian divides in the region. As

communities were encouraged to open up and effectively dilute the identities and networks that provided support, there was an increased awareness of mental health issues across the region.

SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION

The issue of identity change post-conflict has been carefully navigated by cross-community groups working with young people from the working class communities most impacted by the Troubles. Cross-community actors successfully mobilised working class identities, including their shared experience of victimisation and socio-economic deprivation, as an alternative to both conflict identities and competitive victimhood. This use of identities based on shared experiences of trauma and harm (e.g., poverty, educational neglect, deprivation etc.) enables the possibility of creating new identities that are simultaneously connected to and detached from the conflict identities of the past, yet with space for chosen traumas to exist in their own right for both communities.

CONCLUSION

Competitive victimhood as a response to trauma in a conflict setting is a significant post-conflict issue for individuals and communities. Understanding how the process of competitive victimhood meets the needs of individuals and communities and considering alternative mechanisms to address these needs should be a dominant consideration in addressing trauma in communities impacted by violence.

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