Psychological Aspects of Political Violence in Northern Ireland[1]

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Introduction

This article examines key psychological variables contributing to violent conflict and resistance to accommodation in Northern Ireland since 1965. It attempts to answer the question of how specific structures and processes helped create underlying emotions and motivations that encouraged violence. The central thesis of this article is that by casting a broader net that includes such variables as social and institutional structure as well as the more customary concerns with issues such as social identity, a psychological approach can yield greater insights into the understanding of violent ethnic conflict. The present analysis will focus on Northern Ireland as a case study and show how this broader approach can help contribute to our understanding of the motivations and actions of the participants in the protracted conflict that began in the late 1960s. It is not possible in one article to analyze and evaluate all possible sources of motivation, but the goal is to explore more deeply and broadly some key origins of motivation. It will also be argued that mental pathology and relative deprivation are not of primary relevance in the case of Northern Ireland.

The theoretical framework employed here follows, in part, the model developed by Roger Petersen in his 2002 study of ethnic violence in Eastern Europe but with a greater emphasis on social and institutional structure,

[1] This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Political Psychology, Portland, Oregon, July 5, 2007. The author is grateful to Adrian Guelke as well as two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

specifically bicommunalism, majority and minority status, and a majoritarian parliamentary system. The central variable linking these and other characteristics to motivation and action is emotion[2], with emotion defined as a mechanism that stimulates action or resistance regarding a perceived concern (Petersen 2002, 17). More broadly, emotion interacts with cognition in such ways as alerting political actors to threats in the environment (Kuklinski 2001; Marcus and MacKuen 2001; Gray 1987). Thus, emotions are consistent with the rational choice model of decision making by serving, for example, to heighten awareness of the political environment and facilitating realistic prioritization of issues and strategies (Marcus and MacKuen 2001). On the other hand, emotions may also lead to misperceptions and dysfunctional behavior.

The principle emotions considered in the present analysis are fear, hostility, entitlement, and resentment, with fear defined as a feeling of threat, hostility defined as a feeling of sustained anger, entitlement defined as a feeling of deserved preferential advantage, and resentment defined as a feeling of having ones legitimate rights ignored or challenged (Petersen 2002; Horowitz 2000). Three hypotheses concerning Northern Ireland are advanced. First, social and political structure explains much of the fear, hostility, entitlement, and resentment that have motivated actors committed to both violent and nonviolent action as well as reaction during the struggle. Second, once violence emerged in the late 1960s, the *processes* of violence operated in a feedback fashion to encourage further intense emotions, increasing the aggressive use of violence and force. In other words, through a feedback mechanism, violence contributed to further, and more extreme, violence. Third, the emotions noted above have contributed significantly to misperceptions on the part of Republicans (those

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[2] This definition modifies the definition employed by Petersen (2002), 17 to include the problem of rigid inaction in the face of legitimate demands by the less powerful adversary. It also allows for a greater recognition for the possibility of misperceptions that lead to conflict and resistance to compromise.

committed to Irish unification through violence) as well as the government and security forces.

It needs to be emphasized that many other variables contributed to the conflict (Whyte 1991). Furthermore, there are other emotions besides fear, hostility, and entitlement that help explain political conflicts. While important, the independent and feedback variables discussed in this paper constitute only part of the explanation of the conflict. It should also be acknowledged that other books and articles have addressed some of the broader topics discussed in this article. Also, it should be stressed that the work of social psychologists has been of great importance in contributing to our understanding of the conflict.

A brief overview of some of the literature will help place this analysis in context. In 1971, Harold Jackson discussed the importance of majority/minority status in understanding the politics of Northern Ireland. Ken Heskin published a study of the psychology of the Northern Ireland conflict in 1980. He emphasized the impact of the conflict on individuals and historical and other dimensions for the most part not emphasized in the present study. More generally, in his seminal work Donald Horowitz examined, among other things, the importance of positional psychology in explaining ethnic conflict. Research by scholars such as Cairns and Gallagher has provided further understanding of the link between social identity and such issues as majority/minority status in Northern Ireland. Recent studies on Northern Ireland by scholars such as Stevenson, Condor and Abell have provided useful analyses from the perspectives of discursive psychology and self-categorization theory. MacGinty and du Toit have demonstrated the importance of the social psychological concept of esteem, clearly demonstrating its relevance to the Northern Ireland peace process, which was orchestrated to include careful attention to the idea of "parity of esteem."

This article focuses primarily on two broad social configurations, defined socially as Protestant and Catholic and politically as Unionist and Nationalist. The term "Nationalist" has sometimes been used to refer to members of the

Catholic community who support only nonviolent political methods. As used in this article, however, the term "Nationalist" will follow a common usage and refer to any member of the Catholic community, including those committed to nonviolence as well as Republicans who supported violent struggle. Nationalists and Unionists are not monolithic groups. For example, the Catholics of Northern Ireland have some distinctive cultural attributes from southern Catholics and neither group has necessarily felt a close affinity with the other. As will be elaborated upon below, each of the two broad communities is itself composed of various political and social factions, and, especially among Protestants, there are significant variations in national self-identity. Detailed research in social psychology has clearly demonstrated the complexity of these matters (Trew 1992).

The article is organized as follows: first, it analyzes social and political structures that have produced key emotions contributing to the conflict. These structures include the bicommunal social and political structure of Northern Ireland, majority/minority status within the political units of Ireland and the United Kingdom, as well as the nature of parliamentary systems. Next, it considers psychological aspects of the processes of violence, and then examines the problem of misperception. The phenomena of psychological pathology and relative deprivation are then briefly considered. Finally, the article discusses policy implications.

Psychological Consequences of Bicommunal Social Structure

Bicommunalism (the existence of just two politically relevant ethnic groups) has been the source of significant hostility and resentment and has reduced the potential for accommodation in Northern Ireland. Before explaining the processes by which bicommunalism generates emotions contributing to violence and resistance to accommodation, it is necessary, first, to discuss the nature of bicommunalism in Northern Ireland.

There are two primary communities in Northern Ireland as identified by their religion—Protestant or Catholic. Until the recent wave of immigration from new European Union (EU) countries (e.g., Poland), there have been no significant minorities other than Northern Irish Catholics. As pointed out, previously, however, the broad category of religious group affiliation masks a complexity of national identities. Richard Rose was the first to systematically analyze this issue through survey analysis begun in 1966 that demonstrated, especially among the Protestant community, a diverse sense of national identity, with twenty percent of Protestants seeing themselves as Irish, thirty-nine percent as British, and thirty-two percent with Ulster as their national identity. Among Catholics seventy-six percent viewed themselves as Irish, but fifteen percent gave their identity as British and five percent as Ulster. The remainder of each community chose other related categories, with one percent of Protestants choosing "don't know" (208). With some variation this lack of clarity continues up to the present, particularly among Protestants (Henry 2007).

Writers such as Barritt and Carter have effectively described cultural differences between the Protestant and Catholic communities of Northern Ireland. Although both communities share a common language and most cultural attributes, such as eating techniques, there are some differences with respect to such areas as music and sports. Children are likely to attend distinct school systems. Particularly among the working classes, each community tends to be geographically segregated, especially since the violence began. With two different school systems, relatively low rates of intermarriage and, particularly since 1968, two communities that are separated geographically and socially, there are few cross-cutting cleavages that would serve to moderate political tension.

As John Whyte pointed out, most scholars see the conflict as between two communities (Whyte 1980). However imprecise national labels may be, there is a clear perception by most analysts and inhabitants that conflict within Northern Ireland is essentially between the two groups. Of course, the conflict is not about

religion, although there have been religious components to it, e.g., the closing of playgrounds on Sundays when Unionists controlled the government prior to Direct Rule by the British government in 1972. Rather the conflict has centered on the issue of which country Northern Ireland will belong to, the United Kingdom or Republic of Ireland, and who will control its political system.

Thus, the dampening down of negative emotions through intercommunity political alignments could not occur. In bicommunal societies, the political system has a rigid quality if both voting and the central political issues are based on ethnic identity. With the key issue in Northern Ireland being the existence of the border, each community since the establishment of Northern Ireland has voted overwhelmingly for ethnically-based parties. Virtually all Protestants have voted for Unionist parties, while Catholics have voted overwhelmingly for Nationalist or Republican parties. From a numerical point of view coalition shifts might occur if, for instance, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Nationalist Social and Democratic Labour Party were to align. But, of course, no coalition shifts between Unionist and Nationalist parties are possible, because each community has had a differing viewpoint on the border.

In bicommunal societies where there is a clear majority, the minority can never expect to win control of the political system. Furthermore, adversaries are permanent, and an "us" versus "them" mentality is likely to emerge. From a psychological perspective it means that one's adversaries remain fixed with no chance that negative emotions and perspectives will be lessened through working with their opponents, as long as the majority group is unwilling to invite the minority to participate in governing (Schmitt 1991). Hostility may build up intermittently for decades or even centuries.

This does not mean that primordial sentiments or "ancient hatreds" lie at the root of conflict. It has already been noted that a range of variables produced the conflict, and there are clear conflicts of vital interests and differing motivations. Also, as Harris has shown, much of the interaction between the

communities has been cooperative. Nevertheless, even latent hostility can be a powerful contributor to the potential for violence.

The Psychology of the Unionist Majority and Minority Status

Closely related to the concept of bicommunalism is the issue of majority/minority status, which has contributed strongly to both a sense of entitlement as well as fear among the Unionist community. Since the beginning of the violence in Northern Ireland, scholars have considered the majority/minority status of the respective communities to be an important variable in understanding the conflict (Cairns 1982; Jackson 1971). The major issue is that Catholics have been a minority in Northern Ireland (about one-third of the population at its establishment in 1921) with Protestants comprising almost all of the remainder. According to 2001 census figures Catholics today constitute about 44 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland. On the island as a whole, however, Catholics outnumber Northern Ireland Protestants by over four to one.

From the Unionist perspective Unionists have constituted the majority of the population in the north and, following the majority-rule principle of democracy, have thus been entitled to rule. This attitude has been strongly reinforced by a variety of other structural and historical circumstances. Catholics were seen by many as disloyal citizens who wanted to destroy the link to Great Britain and create a united Ireland. Catholics also held fewer elite positions in society and had higher rates of unemployment and were generally held in lower social esteem by the majority (Chambers and Smith 1991).

The political structure of the Northern Ireland political system prior to the imposition of direct British rule contributed to this sense of entitlement. Virtually all political power was concentrated in the lower house of the Northern Ireland legislature, giving the majority predominant political control within the political system. Although the United Kingdom followed the unitary model in which the central government was supreme, the British government seldom

interfered in the politics of Northern Ireland prior to the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. More broadly, democratic political structures created for Unionists a psychologically seductive stimulus to feel entitled to dominate, because majority rule was seen as a natural and legitimate feature of democracy.

As a minority on the island as a whole, however, the Unionist community confronted several sources of fear that contributed to a rigid and sometimes hostile attitude toward Nationalist political participation. Ironically the parliamentary system of the United Kingdom contributed to this sense of fear. The Northern Ireland political system was not protected by constitutional provisions, and the British parliament had the power to abolish its government and even to decide that it would unite with the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, it suspended, and effectively ended, the Northern Ireland parliament when the British government assumed Direct Rule in 1972. There were subsequent suspensions of the short-lived, power-sharing legislative assembly, 1973-1974, as well as the legislative assembly created by the 1998 Belfast Agreement, hereafter referred to as the "Agreement."[3] This Agreement established the present power-sharing government of Northern Ireland, and reiterated the British government's previously stated position that it would permit the unification of Ireland if a majority of the northern electorate were to so decide in a referendum. In effect, the Unionist majority was not only a minority on the island of Ireland but also a much smaller minority (less than 3 per cent of the population) within the United Kingdom as a whole and could not rely on the British government to insure its survival with the United Kingdom.

Until the Agreement entered into force, the southern constitution claimed that the national territory of Ireland included the entire island, although it also acknowledged that pending reintegration of the north the jurisdiction of the

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[3] The Agreement is also sometimes referred to as the Good Friday Agreement. Various other issues were also included in the Agreement including such central matters as reform of the police.

southern government would apply only to the southern state (Bunreacht Na hÉireann, Articles 2 and 3). Moreover, many Unionists feared that their Protestant culture would be destroyed by unification given their perceived role of the Catholic Church in the south. There was an element of reality to these fears. The southern constitution until 1973 acknowledged a symbolic “special position” for the Catholic Church, although there was also a guarantee of religious freedom. The influence of the Catholic Church on Irish society was profound as most Catholics were devout and held the church in high esteem. Thus, the influence of the Church permeated many aspects of Irish social and cultural life (Inglis 1998).

Overt input by the Catholic hierarchy in political decisions occurred on occasion as exemplified by its participation in blocking a mother and child health care provision in 1951, although according to Whyte this kind of involvement was the exception rather than the rule (Whyte 1980). Most important was that government officials had to consider the anticipated reactions of the Catholic hierarchy in sensitive areas such as education, in part because the Church and hierarchy were held in such high popular esteem (Schmitt 1973). Other sources of Protestant fears regarding religion included reaction to the Catholic Church’s Ne Temere decree of 1908 requiring parents in mixed marriages to raise their children as Catholic, which many saw as a threat to the existence of the small Protestant community in the south. Popular myth in the north sometimes assumed that the Catholic Church and even the pope were heavily involved in the politics of the south (Barritt and Carter 1972, 25). In reality, the southern church and, certainly, the pope had neither the interest nor competence to run the government of the south but there was, clearly, a Catholic cast to the culture and politics of southern Ireland. Although sometimes inflated, Unionist fears of subjugation as well as cultural and political survival were based on real-world circumstances. It can be hypothesized that the fear produced by their minority status on the island as a whole contributed more to Unionist intransigence

toward Nationalist participation and political reform than did their sense of entitlement resulting from their majority status within Northern Ireland.

Additionally, Unionists worried about the higher birthrate among Catholics that could make them a political minority in Northern Ireland, costing them their majority position and making Unionists defenseless against Nationalist efforts to create a united Ireland. If a Catholic majority were to emerge, however, many years would have to pass before the new infants would be eligible to vote. Also, some Catholics would be likely to vote against unification in a future referendum. As a practical matter, then, a united Ireland is not likely in the near to medium and possibly even long term, unless Unionists could somehow be convinced that a united Ireland would be in their interest.

There are important symbolic aspects to the power struggle between the Unionist and Nationalist community. Historically, Protestants had been in an ascendant social and political position in Ireland, although after the Catholic Emancipation of 1829, they gradually lost predominance. It should be added that some Protestants remained a part of the southern political establishment after the founding of a separate state in the south in 1922. Also, there were many poor Protestants in Northern Ireland, and Protestant dissenters such as Presbyterians had historically faced discrimination.

Nevertheless, the tradition of being in power contributed strongly to the sense of entitlement among Unionists. As Horowitz and others have shown, political power has important symbolic as well as instrumental uses. From the standpoint of comparative group worth, holding power implies a superior status that can have important psychological benefits such as feelings of individual and group self-esteem. It reinforces a sense of identity and pride among the dominant community, and it conveys a sense of entitlement to rule. When this status was threatened by Nationalist demands, increased resentment and hostility were inevitable.

It is the instrumental values of power, however, that drove much of the Unionist determination to retain control of the political system of Northern Ireland. The dominant goal has been first to survive against the threat to their national identity and the perceived threat to their Protestant culture. In the contemporary era, the Republic of Ireland has become a much more secular state and it seems doubtful that, even in a united Ireland, Protestant culture would be endangered in any significant way (Crotty and Schmitt 1998; Inglis 1998). Again, the self-defined identities of the Unionist community have not been unified or cohesive but there is little doubt that there is a strong desire to retain the political tie with the rest of the United Kingdom, however resentful sentiments toward British lack of support for Unionist goals may be. Indeed, the Unionist community takes pride in its role as a strong defender of the United Kingdom during the two world wars. This strong loyalty and pride of service to their country has contributed to the sense of frustration and vulnerability during "the Troubles"[4] over the British government's unwillingness to support their position.

Unionist political and economic predominance after the founding of the Northern Ireland political system also gave them the capacity to benefit themselves economically in both the public and private sectors. As discussed below, there was discrimination against Catholics in both employment sectors but it is also important to note that the degree of discrimination was sometimes overstated and that the circumstances regarding jobs and especially housing were complex. However unjustified, there was a certain logical and unsurprising quality to this self-serving behavior, not only from the standpoint of entitlement and economic security but, also, from the standpoint of the political fear of Irish nationalism. Of course, discrimination was extremely short sighted as it helped preclude the opportunity to build a perception in the minority community that the Northern Ireland government was fair and legitimate.

[4] That is, the violent struggle under discussion that began in the late 1960s.

As previously indicated, northern Unionists are a tiny minority within the United Kingdom, physically separated from the island of Britain by the Irish Sea. The lack of political support from the national government and public in the rest of the United Kingdom has intensified the emotional sense of fear and vulnerability (Cassidy and Trew 1998). Although the British government fought a long war against the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and refused to abandon Northern Ireland, it did agree that Northern Ireland could become a part of a united Ireland whenever the electorate of the north decided this through a referendum. The British government also has repeatedly made clear since the 1970s that they would never permit a return to a governmental system in Northern Ireland dominated by one of the two communities.

Of great importance is that the government of the Republic of Ireland has been a strong supporter of the rights of Catholics in Northern Ireland during the troubles, and especially since the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, has worked closely with the British government to achieve a power-sharing government for the north based on consent. Because of historical links and its large Catholic Irish community, several major politicians in the United States have also been a strong supporter of these goals (Finnegan 2002). This involvement undoubtedly contributed to the Unionists' sense of being under threat, but it also produced involvement by the Irish and US governments that helped encourage Sinn Féin to renounce violence, enter the peace process, and decommission its weapons.

Psychological Consequences of the Nationalist Community's Minority and Majority Status

In some respects, the position of the Nationalists in Northern Ireland is a mirror image of the Unionists' position. The minority status of the Nationalist community may have been a source of reduced self esteem among many Catholics prior to the civil rights movement. They not only lacked substantial political power but were demonstrably less well off economically, although unemployment and poverty was a problem for many Protestants as well. This

minority status probably would have diminished the sense of status and probably personal efficacy. However, data on this point is not entirely reliable and, by the 1970s, it was clear that an essentially positive self identity had emerged (Cairns 1982).

The Nationalist minority of Northern Ireland is a part of a sizable all-Ireland majority and has an historical sense of identity and, especially among political elites, entitlement as the real majority. This view is reinforced by the fact that the border in the 1920 compromise was deliberately created to insure a secure Unionist majority. The goals of the civil rights movement of the 1960s included only reforms within the political system of Northern Ireland. Democratic Nationalist leaders, however, later shifted to an open policy of seeking a united Ireland in the face of intransigence by the Unionist government and sometimes ill-advised, harsh law enforcement by security forces. Moderate Nationalist leaders of the civil rights movement might ultimately have sought a united Ireland in any case, but it would have been through democratic processes.

Contributing to a sense of entitlement among Nationalists is the fact that the island of Ireland has a clear, shoreline border that can make the island appear as an obvious, natural political unit. This attitude appears to exist in some other bicommunal island countries such as Sri Lanka (Schaller and Abeysinghe). More moderate Nationalist leaders such as John Hume, former leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), recognized the practical and ethical limitations of this viewpoint. He argued, for example, that it is people who have rights, not inert, physical land. One implication of this is that the historical ties between Northern Ireland and Scotland are of great importance and deserve respect, even though the two geographic areas are separated by a narrow body of water. Whether consciously or not, it is likely that, for many Catholics, the feeling of entitlement to control the entire island is strengthened by the existence of shoreline borders. Adding to this sense of entitlement is the belief that the Celtic ancestors and culture of Irish Catholics were there first and thus had a

more legitimate claim to the island. Indeed, a common theme among Republicans was the idea that the Unionists were the descendents of invaders and were British rather than Irish. Despite their minority status, then, many Nationalists in Northern Ireland felt themselves to be the true majority in an all-island homeland and that their right to govern themselves in an independent Ireland had been wrongfully taken from them.

Educational reforms following the Second World War gave members of the Nationalist community access to higher education and produced a growing middle class. With a stronger sense of efficacy and greater willingness to challenge injustices within the system, members of this elite group became leaders of the civil rights movement. Although there was some participation by Republicans in the early stages of the civil rights movement, it seems clear that the main stream of the civil rights movement sought political reform within the political system of Northern Ireland (English 2003, 104).

The goals of the civil rights movement were straightforward. "One man one vote" referred to the property qualification requirement for local voting as well as to gerrymandering. Because Catholics were less likely to own property, the property qualification disproportionately reduced the power of their vote. An end to the Special Powers Act, which allowed internment without trial, and B-Specials, an auxiliary police force comprised almost entirely of members of the Unionist community, constituted another key demand. Fair employment and fair housing were also on the list major demands.

While there is disagreement on actual levels of discrimination virtually all scholars agree that it existed to some significant degree. There is little doubt that the Special Powers Act and B-Specials were designed primarily to deal with the potential threat of Republican attacks, and the minority community saw the emergency legislation and auxiliaries as a threat to their own community. There was substantial discrimination in employment (Chambers and Smith 1991). In the public sector this might be partly attributed to unwillingness by Nationalists

to serve in a government they regarded as illegitimate or to take an oath to the monarch. But the high unemployment levels and manual nature of many positions suggest that this was not the primary cause. Discrimination in the private sector occurred in gaining entry to apprenticeships as well as jobs. Although the overall degree of discrimination is subject to varying interpretations, there is little doubt that the political and economic systems of Northern Ireland treated the Nationalist community unfairly. The resentment produced by these injustices contributed to an underpinning of resentment that mushroomed into intense hostility as the struggle wore on.

After Direct Rule was implemented in 1972, the British government began an informal implementation of affirmative action in the public sector, but fair employment in the private sector took much longer (Schmitt 1980). As will be shown below, however, grievances against the security forces soon displaced civil rights demands and became the main and much more serious source of alienation as the conflict spiraled out of control.

International politics came increasingly to play an important role in defining the power of the Catholic minority (Guelke 2002). As noted above, the growing support of the government of the Republic of Ireland for the Nationalist community of the north gave northern Nationalists an independent country as a major ally. American politicians such as Thomas P. O'Neill and Edward Kennedy gave important support to Nationalist demands for reforms within the system, although the US executive branch during the cold war was also sensitive to the concerns of the British government as its most important ally. American organizations such as NORAID provided financial and moral support for the Republicans movement.

In sum, the majority status of Nationalists on the island as well as growing international backing gave them increasing confidence. The apparent logic of the island's shores as natural political boundaries as well as the belief in the Celtic

civilization's having been there first added to this sense of entitlement that Ireland rightfully belonged to people of the Irish Catholic tradition.

Psychological Consequences of Conflict Processes

The degeneration of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s into an armed insurrection dramatically altered the psychology of the conflict. The processes of violence operated as a feedback mechanism that radicalized the situation. Enforcement personnel are the most sensitive part of government. Because they resort ultimately to physical force there will inevitably be casualties among the civilian population in cases of contentious crowd control. Even where enforcement personnel are fair minded and well trained, mistakes are inevitable in fast moving, complex conflict situations. Where enforcement personnel entertain prejudices against a major social group, excesses and mistakes are bound to increase. The almost wholly Protestant composition of the auxiliary B-Specials under the Unionist government and the largely Protestant makeup of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) contributed to an inevitable bias among some police officers, although as the conflict developed the RUC sometimes had to confront riots, violence and attacks by Loyalists[5] (Patterson 2006, 215). It may be that most members of the RUC attempted to be impartial as the conflict progressed, but instances of bias, collusion and excesses by the army and reserve forces contributed to the growing alienation of the Nationalist community (Brown 2005; Finucane et al. 2004).

In 1968 and 1969, attacks by police on civil rights marchers had the effect of mobilizing sympathy throughout Ireland for the northern Nationalists. Loyalist mobs attacking and burning the houses of Nationalists in 1969 in Belfast heightened the growing polarization and helped push quiescent Republicans

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[5] The term "Loyalist" refers to members of the Unionist community who are particularly intense in their political views. Some Loyalist groups such as the Ulster Defense Association have engaged in violence against Republicans and in violent demonstrations against the British government. Their loyalty toward the United

first into a defensive role and by 1970 into an offensive force dedicated to driving the British out of Ireland and uniting the island under Republican authority. Welcomed at first as protectors, British troops brought into Belfast in 1969 to defend Nationalist areas under attack became viewed as a hostile force as they began to use force to restore order and search for suspected IRA fighters. The use of the curfew, CS gas, as well as plastic bullets and similar techniques inevitably produced casualties and impacted primarily Nationalist areas.

Several key events helped galvanize hostility among the Nationalist community. The internment operation of 9 August 1971 involved British soldiers, operating on the basis of faulty information supplied by Unionist officials, rounding up Catholics, most of whom had no connection to the IRA. The heavy-handed arrests of these suspects in their homes terrified families, and the subjection of internees to harsh mistreatment such as hooding and blaring loud music alienated even moderates within the Nationalist community (Compton 1971). "Bloody Sunday," January 30, 1972, refers to the killing of thirteen civil rights demonstrators by British paratroopers assigned to crowd control.

The various excesses and mistakes by all of the security forces produced much bitterness within the Nationalist community, even among the Catholic middle class (Arthur 1997). Major excesses such as collusion between rogue members of the police and Loyalist paramilitaries in the killing of suspected IRA and Republicans supporters and the manipulation of evidence in trials were not the norm but were frequent enough to further polarize the situation (Finucane et al. 2004; Stevens 2003). In sum, the increasing application of state physical force to growing protest and violence deeply alienated the Nationalist community and provided growing support and numbers of volunteers to the IRA by the early 1970s (Ó Dorchartaigh 2005). The piecemeal response to civil rights demands further contributed to the resentment and hostility by the minority community.

Kingdom tends to be contingent upon the support of the British government for the Union.

To have acceded to the demands of the civil rights movement would not have dramatically changed the political and economic system. Inevitably, some reforms, such as employment equality, would take time but the demand for fair voting could have been met, more quickly. The British government did expeditiously require the end of gerrymandered government for Londonderry in 1968. Lack of knowledge of the politics of Northern Ireland and the precarious political position of British Prime Minister Harold Wilson explain part of the delay in implementing reforms but there seems little doubt that this delay contributed to the growing violence. Of course, the British government was under great pressure from Unionist politicians to resist change.

As the IRA campaign of violence progressed, the Unionist community came increasingly to see itself as a target for annihilation. The IRA explicitly targeted individual Unionist (and other) members of the security forces for assassination and carried out attacks on army and police barracks as well as economic targets in Northern Ireland and mainland Britain. Some high profile targets included political leaders and symbolic figures of the United Kingdom as a whole. An elderly Lord Mountbatten and several others were killed on 27 August 1979 as he was sailing off the coast of the Republic of Ireland. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was nearly killed on 12 October 1984 when the IRA targeted her at the Conservative Party conference in Brighton. The IRA set off two bombs, killing five people, including a Conservative Party MP. Of great concern was the killing of Unionists along the Irish border, in some cases with no current connection to the government or security forces. Many innocent civilians, including members of the minority community, were victims of IRA bombings and other operations. More generally, many Unionists began to see Nationalist moderates who did not support IRA violence as tacit supporters of the IRA, because they supported the Republicans movement's goal of a united Ireland.

Often, attacks by paramilitaries on both sides were designed for maximum psychological effect. Gunning down members of the security forces

and others in front of their families, for example, instilled greater fear among security personnel. Although overstating the centrality of the processes of violence, Feldman correctly argued that these processes themselves carried profound symbolic meaning that guided the somewhat tit-for-tat actions of paramilitaries. One of the primary results of the violence was to further polarize the two communities, creating greater fear, hostility and resentment. Spiraling violence made much more difficult the task of accommodating the core needs of each community and beginning the path toward reconciliation (Darby 2001, 18).

Misperception

A psychological problem central to the conflict was misperception—a failing that contributes heavily to decisions to resort to violence as well as methods for combating it (Jervis 1976; Stoessinger 2005). Misperception refers to cognition errors that create a disparity between one's beliefs and reality. Because effective decisions and actions are based on accurate information, misperception is one of the most serious and common mistakes leading to violence, such as war and insurrection, as well as the application of excessive force by governments.

Some of the major misperceptions by participants in the Northern Ireland conflict were the result of the previously discussed structural variables. While emotions such as fear, hostility, entitlement and resentment can be consistent with reality and produce useful perceptions of threat, legitimate interests, and other benefits consistent with rational choice theory, it seems clear that the violent conflict in Northern Ireland was produced and sustained in part by the distortions produced by excessive reactions related to these emotions. Only a few additional key misperceptions will be dealt with here. One of the most basic misperception errors is to underrate the degree of legitimacy regarding the adversary's interests and demands and to overrate the legitimacy of one's own position. Another central problem is the tendency to underrate the adversary's character and power.

The major cognitive distortion by the leadership of the Provisional IRA movement in launching its attack on the British state was its failure to accurately perceive the underlying bicommunal structure of Northern Irish society. The IRA saw Britain as its foe (Patterson 2006, 218). It implicitly viewed members of the Unionist community as enemies who were British and who, therefore, lacked a legitimate claim to be taken into account in determining the future of the island. The legitimacy of the Unionists' interests is clearly indicated by the recognition accorded to their interests by the government of the Republic of Ireland, by moderate Nationalist politicians in Northern Ireland, and by most American democratic representatives sympathetic to the needs of the Nationalist community in the north.

Even more fundamental to any chance for the success of the Republicans' violent project was the great underestimation of the social, political, and military power of the Unionist community. Not only were Unionists the primary members of the police; many had also served in the British armed forces, including the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR). It is exceedingly unlikely that over one million Unionists could have been forced into a united Ireland, even as an outcome of a major civil war. Even if Republicans had taken control of an all-Ireland government and expanded the Republic's military capacity, their ability to gain long-term control of widespread areas inhabited by a hostile group willing to fight is highly unlikely. In addition, Republicans greatly underestimated the willingness of the British government to sustain a long-term, low-intensity war. Not only was the government determined not to relinquish part of the United Kingdom as a result of force but it probably would have faced international condemnation, if it had withdrawn, because of the likelihood of a bloodbath. Yet with topflight military and intelligence organizations, the vastly more powerful British government was not able militarily to defeat the IRA.

It is true that the Provisional IRA promised, relatively early in the conflict, that Unionists would be protected in a federally structured united Ireland, but

they were to be given no real voice in whether unification took place (Irish Republicans Army 1979). Even if one agreed with the argument that the border was not legitimate to begin with, the discounting of Unionist strengths and interests meant that the IRA began and conducted much of its armed campaign without a strategic understanding of the situation. The discounting of Unionist interests and values weakened the moral legitimacy claimed by Republicans and thus led to an underestimation of the degree to which the basic political rights of Unionists would be seen as legitimate by moderates throughout Ireland as well as international actors. While many democratic observers saw Unionists as highly obstinate and unreasonable (attitudes which could be explained partly by variables discussed in this article), they also recognized the reasonable concerns of Unionists not to be railroaded into a united Ireland.

Similarly, in shifting in the 1990s to an almost exclusively electoral strategy and announcing a cessation of military operations on 31 August 1994, leaders of the IRA and Sinn Féin seem to have implicitly acknowledged that they had overrated the merits of their own interpretation of the core issues while underrating the justice of Unionist desires to retain their national identity and remain within the United Kingdom. Naturally, this shift in understanding was partly the result of the IRA's recognition that they could not win a military victory. But the decision to accept the existence of the Northern Ireland political entity nevertheless represented a dramatic turnaround in its core policies and values.

The British government and Unionist politicians also contributed to the conflict through fundamental misperceptions on their parts. Perhaps the most basic was the belief of many Unionists that acquiescing to demands by the civil rights movement would lead, inevitably, to a united Ireland. A few key Unionists, such as Prime Minister Terence O'Neill, favored concessions but were restrained by the resistance of more conservative forces within the Unionist Party, although it should be added that the political forces operating at the time

were quite complex (Walker 2004). Part of this opposition was due to the fear of a loss of privilege and status but defending against Irish unity was the central concern of both politicians and the Unionist electorate.

Although the politically vulnerable government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson might possibly have prevented the civil rights movement in the 1960s from degenerating into an armed insurrection by earlier intervention and more forceful pressure on the Unionist government, it appears from more recent research that there was nonetheless considerable pressure placed on Unionist leaders (Warner 2005). In any event, key reforms such as "one person one vote" came too late as excessive force by the security forces became the central issue within the minority community.

Another major misperception by British officials was the degree to which harsh policies and procedures by the security forces would alienate the Nationalist public. These actions contributed to the IRA's ability to recruit members and to develop and maintain a base within working-class areas of people who supported or, at least, were tolerant of IRA violence. Part of this misunderstanding may have resulted from the experience in colonial areas such as Malaya, where the use of force was a key part of defeating the insurrection. It is probable, however, that the central problem was overreaction, generated, in part, by negative feelings.

The degree of this hostility is reflected by a quip sometimes used by individuals on the British side in the fight against the IRA. They sometimes referred to burglars, rapists and similar felons as "ordinary decent criminals," in contrast to Republicans terrorists. It is understandable that anger and fear at the assassinations, bombings, and other violent attacks by the IRA would lead to a desire for harsh and, sometimes, draconian measures by some officials, but the failure of the British government to understand the political impact of these policies probably led to a much stronger and more sustained campaign of violence by Republicans. Similarly, the British government's inflexibility during

the Hunger Strikes of the 1980s also indicates a lack of awareness of the realities of the conflict. British officials gradually came to recognize the damage caused by these misperceptions and mistakes and to acknowledge them privately and publically (Hain 2007).

Psychological Pathology and Relative Deprivation

The individuals engaged in violence during the conflict do not appear to have been clinically pathological. Cairns and Darby point out that the conflict results ". . . from behavior that is determined by essentially normal psychological processes that are operating in exceptional circumstances rather than as a form of madness" and that it ". . . was not caused by a small group of psychopaths . . . (756)." There is little evidence that leaders and members of the IRA were psychotic, psychopathic, or otherwise suffered from some serious mental illness. (English 2003; Moloney 2002; Patterson 1997). The IRA and some of its members did engage in criminal activity, such as robbery and smuggling, but this was due to efforts to support the war, financially, or, sometimes, to individual greed rather than mental pathology. Some analysts have seen IRA members as, essentially, normal human beings with a tendency towards authoritarianism (Heskin 1980).

Nor is there any evidence that excesses and counterproductive actions by the government, security forces, and criminal justice system were the result of underlying psychological pathology. This behavior included individual members of the security forces colluding in murder, although some see a wider conspiracy. Of course, individual members of paramilitary organizations, as well as the security forces, may have suffered from serious psychological illnesses but there is little to suggest that this was a major contributor to the conflict. Moreover, especially as the conflict wore on, the level of criminality by Loyalist paramilitaries surpassed that of the Republicans. By the late 1990s the involvement of IRA members in crime had diminished significantly (Independent Monitoring Commission 2006). Although there does not appear to

be available clinical evidence to support the point, it may be that mental illness and psychopathology were more common among Loyalist paramilitaries who sometimes engaged in especially horrific murders.

Relative deprivation and poverty do not appear to be major causes of the IRA's actions or its success in recruiting members. Most instances of economic and social inequality in western societies do not in any event produce violent political campaigns, and members of the IRA were not typically from the poorest segments of the community (McGarry and O'Leary 1995). Similarly, although a central issue in the civil rights campaign, discrimination does not appear to be a primary cause of the violence (O'Dorherty 1998).

Policy Implications and Conclusion

The central argument of this article is that taking a broad-based approach in understanding the psychological dimensions of violent ethnic conflict can yield important benefits in understanding the motivations and actions of participants. It makes far more likely that participants will have a clearer understanding of the consequences of alternative courses of action. This knowledge may help prevent some conflicts from turning violent and reduce the severity and duration of violence once it has begun.

Using the Northern Ireland conflict that emerged in the late 1960s as a case example, this analysis has shown that a broad-based examination of psychological variables can increase our understanding of the motivations and actions of parties to the conflict. It should again be emphasized that excellent research in the psychology of the conflict has been produced, but these important studies have sometimes been focused on relatively narrow psychological areas (Trew 1992). It has also been acknowledged that many variables other than psychology were important contributors to the violent struggle.

The focus in this study has been on the sources of key emotions that motivated violent action and as well as resistance to reform. The emotions considered were fear, hostility, entitlement, and resentment. Again, these

emotions can be important to rational decision making, heightening, for example, awareness to real threats. But they can also lead to motivations and actions that lessen the possibilities for goal achievement.

The three hypotheses concerning the Northern Ireland conflict appear to have been confirmed. First, social and political structures such as bicommunalism, majority and minority status, and parliamentary structures of government provided part of the underpinning for emotionally generated dysfunctional actions. As Unionists were challenged and Nationalists thwarted, the intensity of these emotions increased greatly and motivated much of the political instability and later violence that came to characterize these processes. Second, as violence emerged and grew to significant levels, the processes of violence through a feedback mechanism greatly intensified hostility and resentment, increased fear, and reinforced feelings of entitlement. Third, it was shown how these emotions contributed greatly to the problem of misperception. The tactics of the security forces, for example, contributed to the fear, hostility, and resentment of the Catholic community and motivated a significant, though minority, sector of this community to support or tolerate the Republicans violent campaign. Similarly, the inability of the Republicans leadership throughout much of the conflict to appreciate the strength and legitimacy of the Unionist position contributed greatly to a policy of coerced unification that may have been doomed from the start. Even if forced unification had been initially achieved, it is unlikely that an IRA or Sinn Féin led all-Ireland government could have maintained control of many northern Unionist areas.

On Devolution Day, May 8, 2007, a new power-sharing executive of the Northern Ireland legislature assumed power. Its first minister was Ian Paisley, head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), while former IRA leader Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin was chosen as Deputy First Minister. There is no certainty that the remarkable achievement of the accommodation and agreement leading to this outcome will result in a viable political system over the long term.

Part of the reason for the success of the peace process up to the present has been a far greater sensitivity of all participants to political and psychological realities confronting other actors. As the conflict progressed, there was a more sophisticated approach by the British and Irish governments as well as key participants, partly due to a growing awareness of the consequences of actions based on false assumptions. More insight at earlier stages by several key players would probably have enabled an accommodation much earlier with many fewer casualties.

This article has not considered all psychological dimensions of importance in understanding the descent into armed violence and the resistance of key leaders and their supporters to reaching an accommodation. Consideration of other emotions and their sources could also produce important insights. Further investigation of the role of fear, hostility, entitlement, and resentment as the conflict spun out of control should add significantly to our understanding of the troubles. Additionally, more research in areas such as conflict processes and misperceptions could add further understanding.

The Northern Ireland conflict, like other cases, is unique. It took place geographically and politically within two mature political democracies, the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, and an international body, the European Union, committed to stability, fairness, and democracy in its member countries. The United States, also a democracy, has been another major player during the conflict and a key actor in the peace process. Thus, some of the lessons learned in Northern Ireland are probably not transferable to ethnonational conflicts in the Third World. Nevertheless, scholars and policy makers may gain useful insight from the experiences of Northern Ireland. The impact of excessive or inadequately controlled force by the government and some of its security personnel, for example, has been a continuing problem in places such as Iraq.

Understanding the multiple psychological dimensions of these conflicts can help scholars better understand the motivations and, therefore, the actions of

participants. Policy makers can gain a more realistic view of the situation on the ground as well as the possible consequences of alternative policies. Appreciation for the psychological underpinnings of conflict could help avoid violence or reduce the level and duration of violent conflict. Together with other analytical approaches, a more complete understanding of the psychology of ethnic conflict can significantly contribute to the goals of analysts and policy makers, alike.

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