TRAUMA, DENIAL AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: THE LEGACY OF PROTESTANT DISPLACEMENT IN LONDONDERRY/DERRY DURING THE TROUBLES

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Abstract

  Despite growing calls for a more adequate and nuanced understanding of forced displacement and its impact on peacebuilding globally, it is one that has not figured prominently in either the literature or the practice of transitional justice in Northern Ireland. Based on semi-structured interviews, this article seeks to map issues of legacy, truth and acknowledgment onto the experiences of Protestant displacement in Londonderry-Derry's West Bank over the course of the Troubles. The article finds a collective frustration among Protestants that their forced exile is being denied, or at best, deliberately obfuscated, thus compounding their sense of loss and hurt. Furthermore, as a form of conflict-related violence that does not fit neatly into the category of 'victim-perpetrator', the article finds that 'bottom up' transitional justice practices such as oral histories and public story-telling offer the transformative potential to those displaced in their endeavours seeking truth, acknowledgement and recognition. Interviewees consistently stressed the need for nationalists and republicans to hear their stories and acknowledge them as a means of addressing the legacy of displacement through cross-community dialogue, with a view to making city centre 'a warm house for Protestants and Protestant culture.'

KEYWORDS: *forced displacement, Protestants, Londonderry-Derry, legacy, the Troubles*

Introduction

  The demand for truth and justice by victims and survivors is an integral part of any post- conflict transitional process that seeks to meaningfully address and deal with conflict-related trauma and hurt. The violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland has typically been measured using standardised assessments (e.g. number of deaths, injuries, economic impact). Much of the focus with regards to addressing legacy has, understandably, centred on the needs and interests of those who lost loved ones or those physically and psychologically harmed through shootings and bombings. But there are other forms of violence, harm and trauma which need to be considered and addressed, including the legacy of forced displacement. Based on semi-structured interviews with those who experienced forced movement[1], this article seeks to map issues of legacy, truth and acknowledgment onto the experiences of Protestant[2] displacement in Londonderry-Derry's[3] West Bank[4] over the course of the conflict. This case study is part of a larger research project gathering first-hand testimonies of forced displacement across Northern Ireland that seeks to give voice to the often-unheard

narratives of the displaced, shedding light on the multi-layered short and long-term harms and consequences of displacement for individuals, families and community relations. In considering the narratives of the displaced, this article suggests a strong need to broaden our understandings of conflict-related violence in Northern Ireland to include displacement and its long-term impact on individuals, families, communities and community relations.

Colloquially known as the Exodus (Burgess 2011), the Protestant population in the West Bank decreased from 8,459 in 1971 to 1,407 in 1991, a reduction of 7,052. By 2001, this had decreased further to 1,543, indicating an overall trend of Protestant movement out of the city area completely (Smyth 1996, 53). The last remaining Protestant enclave on the West Bank, the Fountain, is bordered in many places with segregation walls, and has been the target of numerous (and often orchestrated) attacks by nationalists. Its residents consistently express feelings of vulnerability, isolation and often alienation from the city centre (Shirlow et al. 2005). The causes of Protestant movement have been the subject of visceral debate and contestation within the city and beyond. A recent report commissioned by the Pat Finucane Centre caused much anger when it suggested a myriad of factors for Protestant movement such as jobs, housing, redevelopment and sectarian intimidation (Hansson and McLaughlin 2018). It is clear however, from existing research (Burgess 2011; Kingsley 1989; McKay 2000; O'Dochartaigh 2005; Shirlow et al. 2005; Southern 2007; Smyth 1996) and my own research here that while issues of housing and employment were clearly factors for some, the overarching reasons for many were intimidation (direct and indirect), the targeting of RUC and UDR personnel by the IRA, bomb attacks in the city centre, feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, and an overwhelming sense that Protestants, their identity and culture were not welcome in the West Bank.

Victims and trauma

The conventional understanding of trauma with regards to the Troubles has typically focused on harms caused by shootings, bombings and related physical violence. Trauma typically refers to the psychological impact of some violent or otherwise shocking event, producing deep-rooted effects which overwhelm the individual, making it difficult to process and come to terms with (Dawson 2007; 2017). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can manifest in multiple forms of physical and psychological distress; while the 'event' may have occurred in the past, its effects may be long-term, and manifest in multiple and contrasting ways. Graham Dawson's concept of a 'traumatised community' draws upon three key proposals regarding past violence: first, a sense of profound suffering has been inflicted on and endured by a community; second, the persistence into the present of a harmful social past with disturbing legacies; and thirdly, a relation of memory whereby the suffering of the past is remembered, often incompletely, by a community or alternatively forgotten or rendered invisible (2007: 62). With regards to their individual experiences of displacement, all research participants spoke of the

trauma of losing their family home, their communities, social networks, their places of employment, worship and education. 'Rita' and her family were directly intimidated and forced to leave their home close to the city centre in 1972:

'I have to tell you it was heart-breaking leaving our wee house, that you had paid for, that you had furnished and done up, built on a bathroom and kitchen; heartbreaking. There were two councillors and they sat with us and they got us a new house in Newbuildings which is just about 5 miles out the road. I hated it back in 1972, a total different ball game; you were out in the sticks [rural area], a different environment, you knew nobody.'

'Robert's' family were from the Northlands area of the West Bank; his father was a member of the RUC and the family home was targeted on many occasions:

'My father was a policeman and we were shot at; our house was shot at, at least two or three times through the front door; and on other occasions then they tried to break into the back and they tried to get in through the backdoor and it was just intimidation. But my father was determined that he was not going to move. But it ended up with the police saying to my father, they couldn't do any more in terms of security and so we had to move.'

When asked about the actual event of losing their home, many responded that while it was painful, there was an element of 'getting on with it' and 'making the best of the situation'. However, it was clear that many still feel an acute sense of pain and loss when recalling these events. The effects of displacement were of course consumed with the immediacy of losing a family home; for many, these were homes that had been in their family for generations. The impact and effects of losing the family home for many, only began to manifest in the subsequent years. 'Robert' recalls:

'At the end of the day my mother and father did not want to move but for their own safety they had to and then the house was up for sale and it was up for sale for I don't know how long but nobody put a bid on the house. And the house was worth £15,000 and I think she got £5,000. But my mother only lasted 6 years after that; she died 6 years after that and certainly part of it was that she missed the area; she missed the area she grew up in.'

Robert's father also died a short time after his wife. Their home had been in the family for generations and 'Robert' is adamant that this was a significant factor in the untimely deaths of his parents. Many other research participants in other parts of Northern Ireland also recounted how the loss of the family home severely impacted their parents emotional and psychological wellbeing. In addition to the liminality and trauma of losing their homes in Londonderry-Derry, forced movement also brought new challenges. The displacement from home and community in the West Bank profoundly

shaped access to resources, education, work, social and familial networks, status and sense of identity. All respondents were urban dwellers and always had been; they now found themselves relocated to villages and areas that were essentially rural and under-developed. While exile was essentially a necessity to escape insecurity and vulnerability, resettlement brought new forms of isolation and vulnerability. Phyllis recalls:

'We were heading for Newbuildings and while the houses were ready for occupation, there was no roads, there's no infrastructure, no streetlights; you're out in the country area so no shops. I think there was one post office……. but you had to go wherever you are sent, wherever they had, you had to go and I never got over it. People took that to the graves with them … people leaving homes they were born in and reared in. I wouldn't be that attached to a building if you know what I mean but we had no choice, no choice whatsoever. So, for anybody to say that Protestants were moving out because they were getting new houses is just nonsense, it's just nonsense.'

On a personal and most intimate level, the loss of a home represents a source of psychological trauma but it is also clear from the research participants that forced displacement is invariably intertwined with territory, place and belonging. Despite the passage of time and physical changes to the landscape, there is an unaddressed legacy here of 'long-term' exile. Many people in this research have lived outside the West Bank for 45 years or more. And although they have rebuilt their lives in places like Newbuildings, many still speak of their original home in Londonderry-Derry as their true home. For many there is a lasting and durable sense of loss for place, neighbours and community that has not mitigated in the intervening decades. That sense of loss is exacerbated by the collective sense of 'retreat', a phrase that is ubiquitous across the interviews. For many Protestants, the city of Londonderry-Derry is of significant historical and symbolic value in unionist culture. According to 'Philip', "nobody talked about it because there is a good deal of shame attached to it, that they had run away; people felt that they run away and there was a deal of shame attached that. And then people were told that it never happened."

Many in this research stated that the Exodus for Protestants is akin to what Bloody Sunday is for the Catholic community; Philip states that: 'the impact that [displacement] had on the Protestant community in this city was immense and still is and people I spoke to at the time had never been across the bridge again; they left and never came back again.' Most conventional readings of the Troubles in Londonderry-Derry tend to pivot round Bloody Sunday in 1972 and the Civil Rights period, particularly from 5th October 1968 to the eruption of civil unrest in August 1969. The predominance of such narratives invariably creates numerous blind spots, marginalised voices and silences. In this instance, the sense of loss and trauma for displaced Protestants is compounded by a lack of public recognition, acknowledgement, and in many instances, denial.

Truth, denial and acknowledgement

  Perceptions that the Exodus is being denied, or at best, deliberately obfuscated, has compounded the sense of loss and trauma, at both an individual and collective level. As an act of violence that does not fit the traditional 'victim-perpetrator' dichotomy, many of those displaced are cognisant that the staples of traditional forms of liberal justice, such as a trial, truth recovery or accountability is not, nor ever has been, a realisable prospect. More recently, the perspectives and narratives of those exiled or displaced is recognised as essential to both addressing the root causes of conflict and building inclusive peacebuilding processes (Parry 2020). Denied the public space for trials, formal truth recovery or physical sites of commemoration, many of those displaced seek public acknowledgment and recognition of their experiences. With regards to enhancing community relations in the city, respondents in this research also stressed the need for nationalists and republicans to hear their stories, acknowledge them and seek to address the hurt through dialogue, with a view to making the city centre 'a warm house for Protestants and Protestant culture.'

  Some of the research participants have been active in the community sector for many years and have engaged with nationalists and republicans on the issue of Protestant displacement but are persistently confronted with a sense of denial. 'Peter' has been engaged in community activism and cross-community work in the city for over twenty years:

  '[It's] not only because of the physical attacks and murders and intimidation but the lack of recognition … almost like a cruel thing that that movement and the impact and trauma of that has never been recognised never mind appreciated or dealt with. Derry has been a model of good practice in so many ways and like there is this idea then of celebrating diversity and culture, and so if you're Chinese or Romanian, you are welcome here but if you're a Protestant "fuck off". The Exodus, as we call it, runs very deep in the DNA of Protestants in this city and we felt that we got a raw deal in terms of how that has been dealt with or not addressed … and the things thrown at us is "oh you're just whinging Protestants" or "we don't believe you" and that is why it is so important to have an honest narrative. And you're not attacking anything; you're just saying "this is my story and this is my truth."'

  It is clear from the field research that there is an overwhelming feeling of silence and marginalisation among the respondents; most contend that their experiences of displacement are consistently trivialised or denied. 'Defining denial as information that is too threatening or disturbing to be publicly acknowledged, and so, must be repressed or reinterpreted, denial is inherent to the practice of social exclusion (Cohen 2001, 25) – denial of others' suffering creates the framework for legitimising violence against the other' (Shirlow 2018). All respondents articulated a view that denials from the nationalist and republican community have impacted negatively on community relations in the city, despite the advancements of the last twenty-five years. While

research participants do not represent a homogenous group, the commonality across all was an aspiration for public acknowledgment of hurt and the opportunity for 'storytelling.' According to transitional justice principles, alternative forms of justice that meet the needs of victims include truth recovery processes, oral testimonies, official acknowledgement, and the establishment of an authoritative record of past violence (Lundy 2011). Localised forms of truth recovery do play an important role in transforming societies emerging from conflict and Northern Ireland has widely used storytelling, oral recordings and archives, as well as witness programs as important means in the quest for public acknowledgement.

  However, many of Northern Ireland's endeavours to address the past, though by no means all, are often embedded in processes of assigning culpability and blame, rather than reconciliation and transformation. Therefore, the potential benefits of sharing personal and communal stories of past violence are also weighed against the likely prospect of rejection and denial. The construction of 'true victims' and lack of consensus in Northern Ireland regarding an acceptable definition of victimhood is highly politicised, for it encapsulates the moral virtues of the groups involved in the conflict and addresses their separate claims to moral justification for the war (Brewer 2010). The vexed post-Troubles battle over victimhood is embedded in a wider, adversarial framework whereby definitions of victim identity are ultimately vehicles for advancing particular narrative constructions for apportioning culpability for the 30 years of violence (Dawson 2007; Jankowitz 2018; McEvoy and McConnachie 2013; Shirlow 2018). Many participants believe the nationalist and republican community will not countenance an acknowledgment of the loss and trauma caused by the Exodus; an acknowledgment would signify an admission of culpability, thereby undermining republican narratives of the nature of the conflict[5]. While some respondents stated that an acknowledgment from the republican community was highly unlikely, others continue to invest much energy into communicating the Exodus narratives through the means of storytelling and other formats, and genuinely believe it has the transformative potential to enhance community relations in the city. 'Philip' expresses his hope for storytelling and oral testimonies:

  'I believe everyone in society needs to have their voice heard because when you don't you will always have people stuck in the house screaming at the wall and that is not a healing society. What I'm trying to do here is to the tell stories [of the Exodus] so people from outside can empathise on a global basis and also the Catholic Community here who are ignorant of a lot of aspects of my community, and some of those reasons are also as much the fault of my own community. They've been silent as much as they have been ignored and that is something that has to be rectified and so that's how I see the future going.'

  As articulated by 'Philip', most of the research participants look towards various communicative platforms for 'storytelling', including direct dialogue, plays, books,

documentaries, among others, not only as a means of seeking acknowledgement but also by way of giving voice to the Protestant experience. Like Protestant and Unionist victims' groups from the Border areas (Dawson 2007; Donnan 2005; Donnan and Simpson 2007), the Exodus has emerged as a central conduit of communicating the collective story of Protestant experiences of the Troubles in Londonderry-Derry city with a view to seeking recognition and acknowledgement as part of a suite of measures to address the individual and collective legacy of forced displacement in the city. To marginalise or deny (and that includes silence) is to increase social exclusion and thus denial becomes a practice that re-enforces harm. Acknowledging and listening to overlooked or marginalised perspectives and experiences can only enhance our comprehensions regarding conflict and its many harms, and furthermore, challenge some of the orthodoxies within conventional or accepted narratives, thus forcing us to revaluate our understandings of violence, legacy and our endeavours for addressing it. While the notion of oral testimony is tempered by the reality that issues of justice, guilt and accountability are effectively dispensed with, nevertheless, in certain instances such as historical displacement, the role of 'storytelling' and other bottom-up acknowledgment projects is seen by victims and survivors as an effective vehicle to 'break' the silence, challenge denial and offer a counter-narrative for those displaced during the conflict.

Conclusion

Restoring the wounds of past violence and injustice goes beyond retributive justice or revenge – and certainly nobody in this research advocated revenge or retribution, rather they wanted recognition and acknowledgement. When a political unit – state, ethnic group, or community fails to recognise victims' suffering, it compounds the trauma and ultimately functions as a secondary form of injustice.

The practice of acknowledgement is inter-relational, and requires dialogue, empathy and understanding. Public acknowledgment of Protestant displacement is therefore more than simply being mindful or knowing about an injustice or past hurts; it is about conferring public recognition that an injustice was committed in the name of a particular political unit or collective. In doing so, it validates the hurt and trauma of those exiled and has the potential to establish new relations or understandings regarding legacy issues.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on field research conducted by the author between April 2018 and March 2020, collecting 43 in-depth interviews with those who suffered displacement. The interviews occurred in Belfast, Londonderry-Derry, Liverpool, Shannon, Fermanagh, Dundalk and Dublin. Of the 43 interviews, 24 were male, 19 female; 19 self-identified as a Protestant or unionist while the remaining 22 self-identified as Catholic or nationalist. To protect the identity of those involved, all participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

2. My use of the term 'Protestant' does not signify a homogenous, unified community; differences of class, gender, location and political affiliation all contribute to the complexity of identification in Northern Ireland society. I am also cognisant that religious affiliation typically functions as a marker of ethnic identity and constitutional preferences. Given that the overwhelming majority of Protestants support the union, my use of the term Protestant is a means of using a common identity while also respecting the diversity within it.

3. As is typically the case in Northern Ireland, terminology and discourse are politically loaded. Although the city council changed its name from Londonderry City Council to Derry City Council in 1984, the official title of the city remains Londonderry. All research participants expressed their preference for the term 'Londonderry-Derry' which is used throughout this article.

4. In the 2011 census, the population of Londonderry-Derry city was 81,902; 77.95% belong to or were brought up in the Catholic religion and 19.23% belong to or were brought up in a 'Protestant and Other Christian (including Christian related)' religion. The city is divided by the River Foyle, broadly creating the West Bank, which is home to the city centre and the Waterside. Although the Waterside has historically contained a Protestant majority, the last census indicates that it is now evenly divided between Protestants and Catholics. The West Bank is the most heavily populated part of the city, predominantly Catholic and the location for the majority of conflict-related violence in the city.

5. Typically, republicans are accused by unionists and others of attempting to 'rewrite' history to justify their violence as non-sectarian and a 'war of liberation'. Many nationalists and others accuse the British state, unionists and loyalist paramilitaries of concealing their role in the conflict, particularly committing human rights violations and social exclusion against Catholic citizens. For an insightful overview of this complex debate, see Kieran McEvoy and Kirstin McConnachie, 'Victims and Transitional Justice: Voice, Agency and Blame,' Social and Legal Studies 22 (4) (2013): 489–513.

Acknowledgements

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