Agency versus structure in reconciliation

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Abstract

Reconciliation theories, discourses and practices prioritize agency over structure. They suggest that inter-group conflicts involving deep cleavages such as ethnicity, race and religion can be resolved by processes involving inter-personal contacts, and achieving a desired end-state of shared values, narratives and identity. Contact between group members under optimal conditions of parity and trust is viewed as the critical tool for change. By problematizing conflictual identities and social relations as agential and inter-personal, conflicts are decontextualized from their structural environment. Structural segregation provides us with a bridging concept between the agency factors, structural dynamics of conflict, and the obstacles to post-conflict reconciliation. The case of Northern Ireland, often elevated to the status of a model for conflict resolution, is analysed to show how structural segregation is the critical barrier to the optimal group interactions envisaged by agential reconciliation, as it sustains low inter-group trust and political polarization.

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Studies of reconciliation during and after conflict attach great importance to the role of individual emotions and behaviour in the fostering of good relations between groups. Much less attention is given to how the relationships between people and space are structured, for example by segregation, and how this impacts upon reconciliation efforts. The concept of reconciliation is used in peace-building discourses in such multiple ways that one wonders whether it is possible to identify a coherent consensus meaning for the term. Broadly, reconciliation encompasses all those mechanisms deployed at different levels (international, state, NGOs and civil society, the low-level and personal) which aim to reshape antagonistic identities, values and behaviour that are a source of conflict. There has been a surge in interest and publications on reconciliation since the 1980s. The concept was shaped, to a large extent, by the context of the period of regime transitions in the 1980s and 1990s from authoritarianism to democracy, the global turmoil following the collapse of communism, the surge in violent national and ethnic conflicts, and then concomitant peace processes, peace settlements, and the drives for transitional justice and social reconstruction after conflict. While accepting the interconnection between reconciliation and transitional justice my concern here is not with transitional justice mechanisms per se. A process of the commodification of peace-building has ensued since the 1990s. Large sums of money have been poured into these policy areas by states, international organizations, and independent foundations, which has fostered professionalization and bred a new caste of "expert" consultant, often advising and mediating between groups.

Although, the general goal of reconciliation is to contrive a continuation of peace through overcoming antagonistic identities and building a "shared society", what this entails precisely is not clearly stated. Studies of reconciliation across many disciplines (including theology, philosophy, psychology, law, history, political science, international relations, and sociology), as well as policy practices, have a bias towards some variant of the values of a liberal society (see the interdisciplinary collections of Nadler, Malloy and Fisher eds. 2007; Kymlicka and Bashir eds 2010; Keller-Hirsch ed 2012). Reconciliation is therefore a form of normative theory, being bound up with notions of peace-making, positive transformation, toleration, atonement and harmony, that to critique it risks a charge of illiberalism, if not nihilism.

While the concept is generally lauded, the dissensus on its meaning is arrayed along a spectrum of minimalist to maximalist positions, from a pragmatic low-expectation of "peaceful coexistence" of groups to the highest level of "harmony" (Bloomfield, 2006). For most Liberal peace-building advocates the concept of "coexistence" is viewed negatively, as it implies that groups (and also states) are living more or less separately, in parallel, and not sharing values except perhaps not intending to destroy or seriously harm rivals. Coexistence implicitly assumes group parity, or some symmetry of power, and at the very least the absence of domination, which is what facilitates the coexistence. Yet, as we see in the analysis of segregation later, coexistence usually persists with structural segregation and various elements of asymmetry, from severe inequalities of opportunity, wealth, cultural recognition, and prejudice. The assumption in the maximalist reconciliation model is that there is a linear sequence of positive steps for a "healing" reconciliation process leading to a common group think around shared values and identity, involving a combination of institutional and informal measures: from contact and dialogue to truth recovery to justice, with the effect of generating trust, mutual respect, catharsis and closure for victims, leading to reduced prejudice, shared narratives and ultimately to a harmonious shared society.

The peace-building turn in the 1990s generated a new moral grammar and discourse about conflict, with value-laden discussions about these various processes: "truth recovery", "dealing with the past", "legacy issues", "justice", "trauma", "victims", "perpetrators", "reparations", "restoration", "apology", building "respect" and "trust", "conflict transformation", and the goal of "harmony" and a "shared society" and so forth. The metaphor of a "journey" and the processual quality of reconciliation for re-establishing harmony and cooperation between antagonists are common themes (Fisher, 2001, 26). Galtung identified twelve distinct processes and approaches to reconciliation that inform the work of peacebuilders which are primarily rooted around agency, dialogue and inter-personal contact (2001).

Questioning the use of "toleration" as a positive value, Brown has critiqued the "global renaissance in tolerance talk" since the 1980s (2009, 2). She observes how it was used in the past to legitimize intolerance and oppression (as in Jim Crow), and has now been transformed into "a historically protean element of liberal governance", and as a legitimizing "discourse of power and a practice of governmentality", in the Foucaultian sense of organising the "conduct

of conduct" (Brown, 2009, 8, 11). In sum, discourses about toleration are often intolerant. Moon has also criticized the vague prelapsarian circularity to much of the reconciliation discourse, which assumes that harmonious group relations preceded the conflict, and a return to such relations was possible irrespective of the nature and dynamics of the conflict (Moon, 2004).

Much of the debate on reconciliation pivots on a chicken and egg dilemma: is reconciliation a precondition for a desired outcome, or the actual end goal itself? A much broader understanding of reconciliation is taken by Schaap (2005), who views the politics of reconciliation as not distinctive but rather inherently ordinary in the contentious politics of liberal democracy, accepting that there are always problems of exclusion and injustice that require reconciliation. Countering Schaap and others, Bashir (2012) challenges the notion that the inclusion of historically excluded and oppressed social groups can be achieved by deliberative democracy, arguing that reconciliation should be conceived "as a necessary requirement that must be fulfilled before deliberation is pursued" (Bashir, 2012, 136-7).

Janus-like, reconciliation is backward looking, seeking to rectify the historical grievances of a dystopian past, and forward-looking, aiming to build a new bright future of a shared society. These two aims do not seem to be logically mutually compatible and reinforcing. Doxtader, however, has suggested that the contradictions between reconciliation as a forward-looking enterprise, and the need for recognition of different historical narratives and identities, is a positive "Hegelian dynamic" (Doxtader, 2011). Similarly, Muldoon's critique of the roles of selective memory in reconciliation in South Africa and Australia, suggests that the antagonistic narratives of conflict should be embraced as part of a "truth-telling" process of democratic discourse (Muldoon 2003). These positions rightly draw our attention to the fact that political engagement on reconciliation is more about small steps than making quantum leaps.

Reconciliation and contact theory

The roles of agency and contact theory are given prominence in explanations for the major cases that are considered to be successful examples of post-conflict reconciliation (Germany and France after World War Two), and reducing societal prejudice (the ending of the Jim Crow system in the USA from the 1950s). Social and policy practitioners of inter-personal inter-

group contact long preceded the social science theoretical elaboration about the importance of "contact", not only in the USA, but also as in, for example, the work of French Jesuit Jean du Rivau after 1945, who organized extensive grassroots contacts and exchanges between French and German people (Ackermann 1994). Such exchanges were later formalized and funded by governments. In the case of post-War Germany, which was a clear loser in the war, however, there was a meta-level shape-change in thinking about identity among its governing elites. Adenauer eschewed any German narrative of grievance about the war and forged a new consensus on democratic values, partly to facilitate a speedy post-war integration into the new European order and other international institutions (Feldman, 2012). The shift from segregation in the USA was much slower, and resisted more intensely in the Deep South, a process which is analysed in Allport (1954), the classic study of prejudice.

The contact theory in social psychology is derived from Allport (1954) and has informed thinking on the importance of agency in the overcoming of prejudice and pathways to reconciliation globally. Allport proposed that inter-group prejudice may be overcome and trust built by promoting positive interaction between groups in non-hierarchical and non-threatening settings. In sum, he proposed equal status contacts towards achieving common goals. His work has been the theoretical foundation for the design of much of the social psychology research in divided societies. Allport shied away from proposing large scale social engineering of structural change to overcome prejudice, and favoured the use of essentially soft coercive change through top-down agential leadership responses by "executive action" and judicial activism (as in US desegregation) to change the "conditions of conformity". When Allport argued that "it is wiser to attack segregation and discrimination than to attack prejudice directly", he means changing values and behaviour, not attacking the structures of discrimination and segregation per se (Allport,1954, 509).

Contact has also indirectly informed the theory of consociationalism, which since the 1990s has become a mainstay of political peace processes and institutional engineering to end conflicts in deeply divided societies. Lijphart's notion of a "spirit of accommodation" among elites is central to his ideas about how power-sharing institutions work to produce peace by making elites work positively together through routine contact (Lijphart, 1968). Peace agreements, consociational or otherwise, however, can be made without the conflict groups (elite or mass) agreeing on a narrative of the conflict: its root causes, its dynamics (interpreting key events and the development of the conflict over time), and the

apportionment of fault ("blame", defining "victim", distinguishing between victim and perpetrator), or accepting that "we are all victims", or recognizing the "little perpetrator in each one of us" (Doxtader, 133 citing the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Moreover, while consociationalism accepts the necessity for profound structural institutional change, and transformed elite mentalities, it is also paradoxically grounded in an acceptance of deep structural segmentation of politics and society, in a sense accepting segregation and providing no mechanisms for transcending it. It is important to recognize that the conditions produced by consociational peace processes are not favourable to a shared identity or societal reconciliation.

Contact theory informs peace processes broadly through the idea of "dialogue". In a conflict setting, this almost always refers to elite talks. Such dialogue is almost always conducted in secret, and while that may or may not insulate elites from other radical "outbidders", or recalcitrant constituencies, it is seen as a vital way to build trust among elites - but it does exclude society. Perhaps the most recognized use of the idea of "dialogue" is in the faith-based approaches to reconciliation. The process of dialogue is less about negotiation as such, and much more derived from the Christian humanist idea that by "bringing people together" in a process of dialogue it is possible to overcome divisions irrespective of their nature, structure, ideological or material basis. Such an approach is most closely associated with Christian religious leaders and practitioners in the field such as Jean Paul Lederach and Desmond Tutu. Lederach's and Tutu's works stress the interaction of the personal and communal and specific social psychological aspects of individual transformation in post-conflict peace-making (Lederach, 1997, 1999, 2003; Tutu, 1999). In particular, it is Lederach who is the guru of the concept of "transformation", which is concerned with developing reconciliation in society and among individuals by psychocultural means, and primarily by a focus on the "self". Lederach is dismissive of the institutional engineering of peace-making, criticizing the "narrowness of resolution approaches" that are focused on institutions and politics, because while they may solve problems in the short term they do not create a dynamic of "constructive change". But what kind of "constructive change" does Lederach envisage? Lederach loosely uses ill-defined concepts such as building positive "relationships", "changing lives for the better", and building "capacities which are creative, responsive, constructive, and non-violent" (Lederach, 2003: 69, 70), without specifying how any of this will be achieved in practice or addressing the structural context of conflict.

Reducing power asymmetries so that all groups perceive equality of opportunity for material and social advancement is understood to be critical for positive inter-group contact (Malloy, 2008). At the maximum groups perceive that mutual dependence and mutual respect will lead to positive outcomes for all. Here we see a significant divergence in the studies of reconciliation between those that tend to stress the material rewards from cooperation, in terms of the ending of conflict and economic development, and those that are informed by religious belief in the spiritual benefits of recognizing common humanity. However, the basic premise at work here is that contact creates a virtuous cycle of mutual respect, shared narratives leading to a common identity, and thereby the possibilities of cooperation increase, and the potential for conflict decreases. When social scientists have attempted to measure the effects of contact, the results suggest that it has positive effects, seemingly confirming the theory. A meta-analysis of 515 studies over many decades on prejudice suggests that, even allowing for selection bias and "file drawer" problems (not reporting results that negate the theory), even unstructured intergroup contact reduces prejudice and improves attitudes toward outgroups, while the effect is enhanced under Allport's optimal conditions (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). The question then is not whether contact theory works, but whether it can work effectively in societies that are structurally segregated. After all, segregation is a huge structural limitation to contact in deeply divided societies.

Segregation, trust and reconciliation

Given the centrality of agency for achieving reconciliation in the various iterations of contact theory, the very absence of opportunities for regular contact posed by structural forms of segregation such as residential area, education, cultural rituals, social spaces, etc. constitute a huge challenge. Residential segregation profoundly shapes inter-ethnic relations by reinforcing mutual ignorance of the "other", and instilling negative emotions such as fear, hatred, and resentment. Sociologists have long recognized that even if it is the case that identities were not conflictual prior to their mobilisation, the dynamics of violent conflict produce a breakdown in social relationships which can itself further structure and deepen antagonisms by hardening group identities and rivalries (Coser, 1956). Prior to their mobilisation for conflict, identities may also be hardened by structural factors – the spatial and demographic features of a divided society – and the cleansing, targeting, and other forms of discrimination against groups. The canvas of these structural divisions is usually broad, ranging from various forms of institutionalized discrimination between groups, but perhaps one of the most embedded aspects of structural division is group segregation.

Dominant groups in divided societies often seek to harden the segregation by destroying shared communities and spaces, or by public policies which obstruct their emergence. Apartheid is an extreme case but that regime's forced removals policies, and illustrated by its destruction of District Six, a vibrant cosmopolitan multiracial community in Cape Town in 1960, demonstrate the symbolic and practical importance attached to separation by such regimes. We could consider the segregation of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian communities both inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories to be in a similar vein. In cases such as Northern Ireland and Israel, the social segregation is even visibly demonstrated by the construction of massive physical barriers between communities. The "contact" theory, consequently, tends to be decontextualized from its structural environment, in particular, where segregation greatly limits the opportunities for positive routine contact between groups.

As noted earlier, Allport's confidence in "contact" and the use of state agential power in executive actions and law reform as the primary means for changing "conformity" on prejudice did not challenge the structures of segregation directly. Such an approach does not grasp accurately the question of what constitutes social conformity. The problem was encapsulated by Woodward, who observed that "laws are not an adequate index of the extent and prevalence of segregation and discriminatory practices in the South. The practices often anticipated and sometimes exceeded the law. It may be confidentially assumed—and it could be verified by present observation—that there is more Jim Crowism practiced in the South than there are Jim Crow laws on the books" (Woodward, 1955, 87).

When social scientists analyse the effects of structural segregation they find that it seriously constrains the "contact" theory. Putnam critiques the "allure" of contact theory by citing a wide range of studies showing a negative relationship between ethnic diversity and indicators of social capital and cohesion, concluding that "diversity fosters out-group distrust and in-group solidarity" (2007, 141-2). His solution is a top-down public policy of promoting an overarching "shared citizenship" and building "meaningful opportunities" for bridging capital at local level – not dissimilar to the "contact" theory he criticizes (2007, 164). Putnam also misses the target, for in a gallop to attack diversity, he overlooks the pivotal importance of segregation. Other research that digs down into what constitutes a "diverse"

neighbourhood or city, draw conclusions opposite to Putnam. It is not diversity but residential segregation that drives down inter-group trust.

Generalized trust is the belief that "most people can be trusted," even those different from ourselves, or considered to be the "other" (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 2). Trust is a form of "bridging" or connecting capital between groups rather than "bonding" capital within groups. Using values data from US and British cities, Ulsaner (2011) has shown that people are somewhat less trusting in diverse cities, but people living in well integrated cities who have diverse social networks are much more likely to be trusting than people who live in segregated cities with homogenous social networks, though this effect is more pronounced for whites than for non-whites. Other research suggests that residential segregation perpetuates discriminatory social structures, inequalities and racist value-systems, transmitting their contexts inter-generationally (Sharkey, 2008). The effects occur as much through in-group socialization as by any of the other conventionally highlighted effects (income inequalities, labour markets, housing markets, asymmetries in opportunities, and of course prejudice). A continuity of racial context from youth to young adulthood is consistent with the logic of the place stratification model. Young white, African American, and Latino adults are residentially segregated from each other because they grew up in segregated neighbourhoods (Goldsmith, 2016).

The agency of contact theory seems to break against the structure of perpetuation theory. If segregation persists then it blocks routine contact and perpetuates deep prejudices, while at the same time providing a laager for the socialization of in-group values and a geographical basis for activity segregation and political polarization. Let us now explore critically the dynamics between these two theories in an important case of ethnic conflict and conflict resolution: Northern Ireland. This is a case that is characterized not only by deep segregation, but also where there was no conclusive victory in a conflict, and where antagonistic identities, selective memory and particularistic narratives, and social structures, endure into the post-conflict arena.

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Northern Ireland: perpetuated segregation as a barrier to reconciliation

The peace in Northern Ireland has been widely marketed internationally as a positive model for conflict resolution and peace-building by the British, Irish and US governments, and by the EU. It is also part of the canon of cases used to illustrate the debates about consociationalism

and conflict resolution mechanisms. It is also, however, under-theorized as a case illustrating the inherent dynamic tension between agency and structure in reconciliation processes. Political elite discourses in the UK, Ireland and internationally, have emphasized the transferable lessons of a peace process of elite "dialogue" that ended one of the most protracted conflicts to afflict an advanced democracy in modern times, while also downplaying the actual complex elite power-sharing consociational institutional engineering that secured the peace (Clinton, 2000; Hain 2007; Obama, 2013). The recent collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in January 2017, followed by a deeply polarizing election, requires a critical lens to be focused on the question of what are the lessons to be drawn from the Northern Ireland conflict and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998, and why progress on reconciliation there has been so problematical.

Structural segregation is a defining feature of Northern Irish society and politics. Rooted in settler colonialism and constructed over centuries, it is today perpetuated in many spatial and cultural activity dimensions: residence, education, work, sport and leisure, marital and personal relationships, social spaces, transport, use of public services and so on. Here, I will focus on residential segregation as the primary dimension, though it is important to note that education is the other salient domain (about 93 Per cent of primary and secondary school children attend single faith schools) (Rutherford and Fergus, 2013).

The second 2011 census release revealed that of 1.8 million citizens, protestants account for 48 Per cent (down from 53 Per cent in 2001), catholics almost 46 Per cent (up from 44 Per cent in 2001), and the rest are either other religious minorities or atheists. The trend is for a growing catholic population and a declining protestant population (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2011). Approximately 35-40 Per cent of the Northern Irish population live in totally segregated neighbourhoods (Hughes et al, 2007). Residential segregation is predominantly a working class and urban phenomenon and there is covariance between levels of segregation and social class, and deprivation (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). However, research that uses a time series analysis to model the effect of relative deprivation (using unemployment as a proxy) on political violence in Northern Ireland in 1922-1985, shows that there is no association between deprivation and conflict (Thompson, 1989). The weak association between segregated space, deprivation *and* conflict over time is further supported by the fact that while the conflict violence in 1969-98 was concentrated in deprived areas (according to official criteria), those same areas were deprived and peaceful

for long periods during the Stormont period from 1922, and remain the most deprived after the GFA of 1998, and yet were/are generally peaceful.

Spatial segregation of ethnic communities in Northern Ireland is viewed by some scholars as the deliberate action of "ethnic entrepreneurs" to facilitate political mobilization, as ethno-religious "enclosures" allow for more intense "propaganda conditioning" (Shirlow, 2003: 77), to strengthen the "reification of 'cultures'" (Todd and Ruane, 2010: 3-4), and to distort collective memories by inculcating particularistic historical "truths" (McGrattan, 2013). Studies of Belfast based on available census data have demonstrated that periodic sectarian violence is a key push factor in the intensification of segregation in a 'ratchet effect' over time (after episodes of interethnic violence after partition in the early 1920s, in 1935 during the Great Depression, and in the period from 1969 (Boal, 1969; Doherty and Poole, 1997; Murtagh, 2002). The further concentration of residential segregation from 1969 is strongly correlated with the spatial distribution of violence, in particular killings, in the early 1970s as these were concentrated along the interfaces between the segregated working class areas of north and west Belfast or in catholic "ghettos" (about 45 Per cent of all conflict related deaths occurred in Belfast) (O'Duffy 1995; Fay et al, 1999; O'Leary and McGarry, 2001). It is estimated that violent ethnic cleansing in the Belfast area alone between August 1969 and February 1973 affected about 60,000 people (Darby and Morris, 1974, summary page c).

A neglected aspect is the role of the state in hardening segregation as an instrument of security policy. The British Army constructed at least forty one security barriers, sometimes referred to locally as "peace lines", in Belfast along the interfaces between the catholic and protestant communities in north, west, south-west and east Belfast after the beginning of the conflict in August 1969 (Jarman, 2005). The state helped to embed structural segregation through policies in both social housing and education. Cunningham (2014) has revealed from the study of recently declassified British state documents from the 1970s and 1980s that the state security agencies in Northern Ireland played a key role in subordinating the planning and redevelopment of Belfast to military needs, the aim of which was to spatially isolate by new motorways and create a cordon sanitaire around the main areas of conflict, in the nationalist north and west of the city (Cunningham, 2014, 456).

From the early 1970s the segregation of social housing and to some extent other social provision was preserved and reinforced by state agencies, such as the Housing Executive, through a policy of prioritizing security and client "wishes" (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006: 59-60). By 2003 more than 70 Per cent of Housing Executive estates were more than 90 Per cent protestant or more than 90 Per cent catholic (Community Relations Unit, 2003). In subsequent years, the figure for segregated social housing rose to 94 Per cent in Belfast (Shuttleworth and Lloyd, 2009). The Housing Executive has a statutory duty under Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to promote community "good relations" and "community cohesion" but its policy is to develop integrated housing only when it is "practicable, desirable and safe". It has developed a programme of "shared neighbourhoods" (by now there are some 50 such estates), but these social housing estates tend to be located in peripheral areas outside the main conurbations, and the Housing Executive uses a very low threshold of 10 Per cent protestant or catholic residents to classify an estate as "integrated" (Housing Executive, 2015). The high level of social housing segregation contrasts with survey data which reveals that the majority (about 70 Per cent) of people aspire to live in mixed neighbourhoods, and the results are essentially the same for both protestants and catholics (Life and Times Survey, 2014).

The contact thesis in Northern Ireland: individuals against structure

Community Relations activists and professionals working in Northern Ireland have promoted a narrative which holds that the GFA would have been impossible without decades of work by civil society on justice, equality and dialogue (Fitzduff, 2001: 256). The commodification of reconciliation expanded rapidly in the 1990s as a result of the increased allocation of state funds (UK and Irish) and other international funds, but most of all as a result of the EU Peace Programmes for Northern Ireland (1995-2013). The grand total of peace-building funding for the period from the early 1980s to 2006 from the EU, British and Irish governments, and international foundations, was approximately £1.35 billion. The bulk of these funds went into building social capital within ethnic communities rather building bonding capital across communities, and while reconciliation was a stated goal, there was no coherence about how programmes and projects should actually deliver on this goal or be measured (Deloitte, 2007: 24-7; Hughes, 2009). By the time of the GFA in 1998 There were approximately 5000 voluntary and community organizations in Northern Ireland providing employment to some 33,000 people, with a gross annual income for the sector of around £500 million (Consultation

Document on Funding for the Voluntary and Community Sector, Department for Social Development, April 2000: 3).

Research suggests, however, that there is much political division and confusion over the concept of reconciliation and its implementation among officials, professionals and activists (Hamber and Kelly, 2005). There is a tendency to gloss over the unpalatable realities about reconciliation work in Northern Ireland during the conflict: that "community relations" was a highly politicized arena, that it was securitized as part of the British government's strategy for managing the conflict, and that British government and Army "community relations" units were rejected by catholics, that civil society organizations were overwhelmingly polarized on sectarian grounds, that much of the effort was grounded in religious organizations, not in secular civil society, and paramilitaries often benefitted from community relations funds (especially after the GFA). Contact and dialogue between government, political parties and paramilitaries was often facilitated most effectively by low level religious figures, sometimes seen as mavericks (Brewer et al, 2013; Hughes, 2014).

In the case of Northern Ireland, we can observe two main forms in which the contact thesis has been pursued. Firstly, there was bottom-up civil society efforts to promote inter-communal contact and dialogue, the most prominent of which was the reconciliation work of the ecumenical religious community at Corrymeela. Founded in 1965 (prior to the violence) by a Presbyterian pastor, Ray Davey, it provided a combination of neutral haven and forum for dialogue, where a team of experienced managers would act as "enablers" of dialogue and the outcome would be "networks for peace" and friendship circles (Braniff and Byrne 2014, 51). He was inspired by the reconciliation activities of other European Christian peace movements whose work centred on contact (the Anglo-German movement based at Coventry, and the Agape centre in Italy). Its funding from public and private sources expanded throughout the period from the early 1970s-present. By 1990 it was hosting about 8000 people per annum on residential courses, plus many thousands of day visitors annually. Its range extended from school groups, to community groups, religious groups, and groups of professionals, politicians, as well as victims and "perpetrators" (usually understood here as referring to ex-prisoners). This "gatekeeper" approach to mediating contact did not produce the sought after result of ending the conflict, nor a peaceful coexistence through to deeper forms of reconciliation.

Secondly, studies by social psychologists whose research designs are informed by contact theory have aimed to measure the effects of out-group friendship in mitigating prejudice, and generating support for more generalized positive attitudes to the out-group in Northern Ireland. While this work is innovative, the inherent methodological problems of selection bias remain – that the prejudiced avoid contact, and perhaps also avoid being surveyed. Most of the research is focused on schoolchildren and university students. Schoolchildren have long been a focus of government efforts at value and behavioural change in Northern Ireland, partly because they are a captive audience who will determine generational change, and partly to reach parents through the children. Pairing (of protestant and catholic schools and classes), and developing a curriculum around mutual understanding of culture and identity have been developing since the 1970s. Research indicates that direct and indirect cross-group friendship between catholics and protestants reduces out-group prejudice via an anxiety-reduction mechanism (Paolini et al. , 2004; Hughes et al., 2007), and promotes trust (Hewstone et al, 2008; Tam et al 2009), which is seen as an essential condition for sustained positive contact. The contact thesis is also being stretched beyond the face-to-face contacts envisaged by Allport. Turner et al (2013) have shown that in addition to cross-group friendships, "extended" contact by schoolchildren i.e. indirect forms of contact that involve learning about in-group members who have out-group friends, is also significantly associated with prejudice reduction. Potentially, this is an important finding in Northern Ireland, where structural segregation is such an immense barrier to face-to-face contact.

Reconciliation after the GFA of 1998

The initial euphoria around the GFA has steadily waned and given way to increasingly critical discourses about the lack of transitional justice mechanisms, and the failure to build consensus on addressing so-called "legacy" issues (victims, historical criminal investigations, commemoration and so on) – issues which remain deeply contentious as evidenced by the failure of the "fresh start" process in 2015 (Northern Ireland Executive 2015). The GFA is also criticized for failing to engage seriously with the issue of reconciliation. Reconciliation is cited as an aspiration in the preamble-like "Declaration of Support". There was also a separate section on "Reconciliation and Victims of Violence". Several components were highlighted: addressing the needs of victims; a commitment to fund organisations engaged in reconciliation work; and, an aim of encouraging a "culture of tolerance" and mixing in housing and education. The Agreement did not specify how these components were to be achieved (Belfast Agreement, 1998, section 6). Jonathan Powell, a key British negotiator of The

Agreement, has suggested that the negotiating parties were too overwhelmed by the complex institutional arrangements and issues such as decommissioning of weapons to pay much attention to the issue of reconciliation (Powell, 2015). The GFA's approach to reconciliation is seen as being too much driven "from above" by the British and Irish states, and the peace process culminating in the consociational power-sharing institutions is critiqued for being too top-down elitist (Byrne, 2001; Taylor ed. 2009).

The critical discourse on the GFA focuses on the way that consociationalism entrenches ethnic power and provides no mechanism for transcending ethnic and sectarian divisions to create a "shared identity". The alternative perspectives to elite-centred consociationalism have concentrated around ideas about reconciliation originating in Lederach's 'conflict transformation' approach (discussed earlier), emphasizing individual change and positive social interactions as key to building shared narratives, common identity, and a new "shared society" (Hamber, 2003; Hamber & Kelly, 2005). The alternative perspectives, however, shy away from the gargantuan policy challenges their aspirations require: the systematic social engineering of desegregation, creating new shared spaces and new forms of socialization.

Ironically, there was a hardening of sectarian interfaces after the GFA, mainly in Belfast, as the number of barriers has grown to about ninety-nine, running to over twenty miles, and their construction has become more elaborate and higher (Belfast Interface Project, 2016). There are also a small number of segregating security barriers in other towns such as Derry and Portadown. When surveyed the overwhelming majority (69 Per cent) of those living near security walls favoured their retention due to fear of potential sectarian violence (Gormley-Heenan et al, 2013). Peace brought an increase in "chill factors", including new security barriers, and a fortifying of the sectarian boundaries with graffiti, flags, kerb painting and other manifestations of religious and cultural political identity and paramilitary association (Harbison, 2002; Hughes, 2014).

When the GFA was suspended between 2002-07, the UK government attempted to address the segregation issue by commissioning the so-called "Harbison Report" (2002) on "A Shared Future" and conducting a "consultation exercize". Harbison presented a stark policy choice for future policy: "separate development" or "co-existence" versus "a cohesive but pluralist society". The costs of a divided society, he argued, were unsustainable. He advocated "promoting inter-dependence" through two mechanisms: firstly, to incentivize infrastructures

"to promote better relations within and between communities"; and secondly, to change the policy discourse, abandoning the idiom of "community relations" in favour of the more liberal term "good relations", which had been employed in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Harbison, 2002: 8, 41-2, 49). The proposals for a "Shared Future" were abandoned by the UK government when the St. Andrews Agreement brought the radical Unionist party, the DUP, into the restored power-sharing structures in 2007. From 2007 Northern Ireland was governed by an inter-ethnic coalition, the DUP-Sinn Féin executive, which collapsed in sectarian acrimony and lack of mutual "respect" in January 2017.

The DUP-Sinn Féin executive produced its own policy on social transformation around the *Programme For Cohesion, Sharing And Integration* (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (hereafter OFMDFM), 2010). The *Programme for Cohesion* document shifted the policy direction away from tackling segregation to one that elevated the notion of "mutual accommodation", on the assumption that "cultures" and identities are not only relatively fixed and enduring, but are to be valued: "pride in who we are and confidence in our different cultural identities" (OFMDFM, 2010: 2.3). The document reflected both an absence of political will at the elite level to address the structures of division in Northern Irish society, and a realistic acceptance of the perpetuation of an "intercultural society" – a euphemism for segregation.

Conclusion

The challenge posed by reconciliation is encapsulated in Allport's observation that: "It is easier to smash the atom than a prejudice" (Allport, 1954, xvii). Contact theory, developed by Allport as a process for positively transforming race relations in the USA, is the main conceptual frame underpinning the study of reconciliation more generally, irrespective of whether the deep cleavage is race, religion, ethnicity or other. The theory reifies agency over structure. It reflects a psychological concern with individuals as potential change-agents, whether the "self" or the "other". It assumes that values and behaviour can be modified in a progressive way by regimes of contact between individuals from antagonistic groups, conducted in non-hierarchical and non-threatening conditions, and mediated by an appropriately motivated and trained cadre of professionals. Even if we assume that a "shared identity" can be built in this way, contact theory does not take sufficient account of the social structures of segregation which often characterize divided places and societies, nor does it

recognize that conflicts may not always end cleanly with a clear victor, which may facilitate the imposition of a dominant shared narrative of the conflict.

Segregation can be understood as a bridging concept which allows us to analyse why agential reconciliation is so problematical. Often deeply rooted in long histories of antagonism, segregation can operate across multiple dimensions to perpetuate prejudice. By hindering, and blocking even, opportunities for sustained routine contact in the positive ways envisaged by contact theory, segregation renders the theory ineffective in terms of societal transformation. The case of Northern Ireland widely extolled as an exportable model for peace-building, demonstrates that a peace agreement between elites is possible, though as recent events show even this is problematical, without any significant steps of reconciliation at the level of society, and with the persistence of deep segregation. This is a good case also to illustrate the under-theorization of the relationship between agency and structure in reconciliation, and the disjuncture between elites and society in a peace process.

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