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**Socio-political implications of exclusive, intergroup perceptions of victims
in societies emerging from conflict**

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Abstract

Peacebuilding frameworks reflect an imperative to acknowledge the experiences of victims in an effort to remedy their harm and consolidate peace. Most social groups involved in conflict, however, claim to be the ‘real’ victims, often while refuting the victimhood of their adversaries. This exclusive attitude about victims resonates with group identification and complicates the task of addressing victims’ needs. This article examines the implications of such exclusive, intergroup perceptions of victims on the prospect of peacebuilding, drawing upon empirical evidence from Northern Ireland. Three overlapping implications emerge, including difficulty identifying victims and their needs, proliferation of a competitive and politicised ‘victim culture’ and the so-called ‘hierarchy of victims’. Exclusive, intergroup perceptions demonstrated in these three implications impede peacebuilding primarily by preventing the development of new, co-operative relationships between groups and reinforcing divisive group identities.

Keywords: Victim, Conflict, Intergroup relations, Identity, Northern Ireland

Introduction

Societies emerging from violent conflict often embark upon processes to ‘identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict’.¹ In addition to a range of mechanisms tasked with institution building, legal reform and establishing good governance, these peacebuilding processes aim to acknowledge and address the needs of victims (and survivors) affected by years of violence as a way to restore them to ‘something approaching their status quo ante’.² In developing appropriate policies and mechanisms to achieve these ends, decisions must be made as to who the victims

¹ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1995), 46.

² David Crocker, ‘Reckoning with Past Wrongs: A Normative Framework’, in *Dilemmas of Reconciliation: Cases and Concepts* ed. C. Prager and T. Govier (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003), 39-63, at 51; see also Nigel Biggar, ‘Making Peace or Doing Justice: Must we Choose?’, in *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict*, ed. N. Biggar (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2003), 3-24; Luc Huyse, ‘Victims’, in *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook* ed. D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes and L. Huyse (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003), 53-66.

are: 'What victimhood is and who gets to define it are... key questions in truth recovery and peace processes generally'.³ This is often an onerous task because experiences of violence are complex and perceptions of victimhood are constructed through subjective social and psychological processes.⁴ In intergroup conflict, research suggests social groups experience violence collectively, claiming their members to be the primary victims and placing blame for violence elsewhere.⁵ John Brewer calls this phenomenon 'multiple victimhood', describing how groups in conflict are often both responsible for and targeted by violence,⁶ leading to scenarios in which 'the distinction between victim and perpetrator may not be so sharp'.⁷ Widespread violence across groups contributes to what, in Northern Ireland, has been called a 'meta-conflict' punctuated with conflicting narratives about the past and disagreement around victimhood and blame.⁸

Determining who will be recognised as a victim resonates particularly with debate over the moral status of groups in conflict and long-standing victimological debates about the concept itself. The *ideal victim* is the prevailing construction of victimhood, informing attitudes and beliefs about the victim as innocent, vulnerable, harmed unjustly and therefore deserving of care, sympathy and support.⁹ Importantly, this construction directs society to understand the victim as the object of harm and to locate the source of harm elsewhere¹⁰ without thinking critically about how 'we gloss the interpretive procedures through which the term [victim] is selected, applied, and justified'.¹¹ A dichotomy between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' emerges, which commentators suggest is 'polarizing, oversimplifying, and counterproductive' in complex violent conflicts where multiple victimhood is prevalent.¹²

³ John Brewer, 'Memory, Truth and Victimhood in Post-Trauma Societies', in *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* ed. G. Delanty and K. Kumar (London: Sage, 2006), 214-224, at 222.

⁴ Daniel Bar-Tal, Lily Chernyak-Hai, Noa Schori & Ayelet Gundar, 'A Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood in Intractable Conflicts', in *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, no. 874 (2009), 229-258.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brewer, *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

⁷ Rama Mani, *Beyond Retribution: Seeking Justice in the Shadows of War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 121.

⁸ John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), 1-2

⁹ Bouris, *Complex Political Victims*, (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press Inc., 2007); Nils Christie, 'The ideal victim', in *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the Justice System* ed. E.A. Fattah (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1986), 17-30; Marie Smyth, 'Putting the Past in its Place: Issues of Victimhood and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland's Peace Process', in *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2003), 125-53.

¹⁰ Jo Goodey, *Victims and Victimology: Research, Policy and Practice*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2005), 2; James A. Holstein and Gale Miller, 'Rethinking victimization: An interaction approach to victimology', in *Symbolic Interaction* 13(1) (1990), 103-122.

¹¹ Richard Quinney, 'Who is the victim?' in *Criminology* (1972), 115-135, at 321.

¹² Trudy Govier, *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Acknowledgement, Reconciliation, and the Politics of Sustainable Peace* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2006), 27

Examining victimhood in intergroup conflict benefits from group-level analysis. When individuals suffer from violent actions, often ‘it is their identity as a member of the group that explains their victimhood’,¹³ and when one member of a group is targeted ‘It is perceived as a harm to every member of that community’.¹⁴ Intergroup scholarship theorises how individuals relate to one another as members of social groups, and helpfully articulates how attitudes and beliefs about victimhood (and blame) resonate with existing societal divisions that often exemplify this type of conflict. Because groups strive for a positive self-image that can be accentuated through favourable evaluation against relevant other groups,¹⁵ there is a natural tendency for groups to view their own members and their attributes favourably while harbouring animosity and negative stereotypes of groups with whom they have poor or competitive relationships.¹⁶

Social groups identifying collectively as victims often reference the ideal victim construction, and attribute to their own members the favourable qualities it exemplifies. This links beliefs about the inherent goodness of the in-group with the belief that responsibility for violence lies elsewhere. If the out-group can be blamed for violence it further serves the favourable image of the in-group by comparison and determines their role in peacebuilding processes: ‘Designations of deserving victimhood become an easy shorthand for blaming those deemed responsible for past horrors as well as absolving those deemed blameless’.¹⁷ When the in-group claims victim status, the label accentuates the positive evaluation of the in-group as victim vis-à-vis the out-group as perpetrator, establishing intergroup comparisons that proliferate alongside distinctions of good and evil, innocence and guilt, legitimacy and illegitimacy that speak to wider perceptions of victimhood and responsibility in conflict.

For peacebuilding processes such as truth commissions, reparations policies and other restorative mechanisms aspiring to be victim-centred, contest over victimhood presents a number of hurdles.¹⁸ This article explores the socio-political implications of exclusive, intergroup perceptions of victims in Northern Ireland as a society attempting to build peace and prevent a return to violence, and draws from data gathered from a range of scholarly and

¹³ J. Brewer, *Peace Processes*, 12.

¹⁴ Smyth, ‘Putting the Past in its Place’, 126

¹⁵ Henri Tajfel, ‘The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations’, *Annual Review of Psychology* 33 (1982), 1-39.

¹⁶ Marilynn Brewer, ‘Group Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When does Ingroup Love become Outgroup Hate?’, in *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction* ed. R. Ashmore, L. Jussim and D. Wilder (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 17-41.

¹⁷ McEvoy and McConnachie, ‘Victimology in Transitional Justice: Victims, Innocence and Hierarchy’, in *European Journal of Criminology* 9(5) (2012), 527-538, at 533.

¹⁸ Kieran McEvoy and Kirsten McConnachie, ‘Victims and Transitional Justice: Voice, Agency and Blame’, *Social & Legal Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013), 489-513, at 490.

empirical sources including community and statutory materials, public statements, media reports, party political publications and in interview. This analysis focuses particularly on how these implications compromise the peacebuilding imperative to develop new relationships between groups based on social trust and mutual accountability¹⁹ and to transform divisive group identities that are predicated on negation of the opponents' identity.²⁰

Three distinct yet interrelated implications emerge in the case of Northern Ireland. First, exclusive, intergroup attitudes obscure identification of victims and their needs, compromising how effectively society is able to provide recognition and remedy for past injustices. The second implication is the proliferation of a 'victim culture', in which victims and their experiences are politicised and subsumed into wider intergroup competition. Finally, exclusive and ethnocentric perceptions of victims resonate with the 'hierarchy of victims', a concept that signifies beliefs about the deservingness of certain victims over others deemed less deserving. Together these implications impact peacebuilding initiatives by preventing the development of relationships based on equal footing and reinforcing division between groups rather than re-negotiating adversarial group identities.

Identification of victims and their needs

A range of arguments support the imperative to acknowledge or 'vindicate' victims in order to right the wrongs visited upon them during conflict.²¹ Some assert the potential of such processes to restore the human dignity and self-esteem denied to victims during conflict,²² whereas others emphasise the catharsis that may occur upon recognition of loss.²³ Acknowledging and providing redress for harm also serves a wider peacebuilding imperative to build relationships based on trust and mutual accountability and to address conflict-related

¹⁹ James A. McAdams, 'Transitional justice: The issue that won't go away', in *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 5 (2011), 304-312; John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington: DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008).

²⁰ Nevin Aiken, 'Learning to live together: Transitional justice and intergroup reconciliation in Northern Ireland', in *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4 (2010) 166-188; Herbert C. Kelman, 'Reconciliation as identity change: A socio-psychological perspective', in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation* ed. Y. Bar-Siman-Tov (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 111-124.

²¹ See e.g., Crocker, 'Reckoning with Past Wrongs'; Martha Minow, 'The Hope for Healing: What can Truth Commissions Do?' in *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* ed. R. Rotberg and D. Thompson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), 235-60.

²² Crocker, 'Reckoning with Past Wrongs', 51

²³ Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, 'The politics of memory in post-conflict Northern Ireland', in *Peace Review* 13(1) (2001), 27-33, at 30.

grievances.²⁴ Key scholarship emphasises the relationship as ‘the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution’.²⁵ Restoring the human dignity and self-esteem denied to many victims throughout the course of conflict allows them to re-enter, or enter for the first time, ‘relationships that are not overwhelmed by the facts of oppression and wrongdoing, and relationships that maintain a capacity for cooperation’.²⁶ It is therefore crucial that such processes engender broad support and participation across the wide range of social groups that were involved in and/or affected by violence.²⁷

Debates about victims in Northern Ireland demonstrate continued disagreement over who should be officially recognised as a victim. The primary social groups in society maintain distinct narratives of victimhood traceable throughout their collective experiences, and are most often delineated communally as Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) and Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL).²⁸ These groups have long framed one another as violent antagonists, and struggle to accept that out-group members too have experienced harm, and moreover that they should benefit from support or services offered to victims. This section examines how that contention surfaces in official victims policy and definitions, and how attempts to capture the data on victims and survivors contend with limitations relating to intergroup beliefs about victimhood. Difficulty in identifying and acknowledging the diverse experiences of victims from across society increases the likelihood that certain experiences of harm will either be ignored or denied, compounding grievance and marginalising these groups from the process of building new, co-operative relationships within society.

Defining victimhood in Northern Ireland

In 1998, after three decades of sustained violence, Northern Ireland’s main political parties²⁹ signed the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (hereon the 1998 Agreement). Whereas this heralded unprecedented consensus at a political level, it provided no plan to examine the past or rule on an official narrative of the conflict. Since 1998, the definition of victim has been the subject of tense debate underpinned by inclusive and exclusive attitudes which

²⁴ David Bloomfield, ‘Reconciliation: An introduction’ in *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook* D. Bloomfield eds. T. Barnes & L. Huyse (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003), 40-48, at 14.

²⁵ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 26.

²⁶ Govier, *Taking Wrongs Seriously*, 12-13.

²⁷ J. Brewer, *Peace Processes*.

²⁸ Smyth, ‘Putting the Past in its Place’, 126.

²⁹ Parties representing CNR communities include Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). PUL parties include the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).

largely reflect disparate narratives of violence, victimhood and responsibility. Inclusive approaches convey the belief that, regardless of their role in conflict, ‘everyone who died as a direct or indirect consequence of the conflict should be qualified and treated as a “legitimate” victim’.³⁰ These attitudes are found to emanate predominantly from CNR sources in Northern Ireland, though some loyalist political parties and ex-combatants also espouse an inclusive approach.³¹ Exclusive attitudes resonate with clear, often ethnocentric distinctions between actors, where claims to be the ‘real’ victims project an ‘image of blamelessness’³² and direct society to locate responsibility for violence elsewhere. This approach is associated mainly with unionist perspectives,³³ and reflects a narrative ‘centred on the memory of suffering inflicted on the Protestant community by republican paramilitaries’.³⁴ Those viewed as responsible for violence either individually or collectively are rarely accepted as victims deserving of sympathy and support.

The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order of 2006 (hereon the 2006 Order) provides the current, official definition of victims and was developed for use by the Victims Commissioner and statutory victims agencies. The 2006 Order defines victims and survivors inclusively:

- (1) In this Order references to “victim and survivor” are references to an individual appearing to the Commissioner to be any of the following –
 - a. Someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident;
 - b. Someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for an individual mentioned in paragraph (a); or
 - c. Someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident.
- (2) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), an individual may be psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of –

³⁰ Marcel Baumann, ‘Understanding the Other’s “Understanding” of Violence: Legitimacy, Recognition, and the Challenge of Dealing with the Past’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3, no. 1 (2009), 107-23, at 109.

³¹ Cheryl Lawther, ‘Denial, Silence and the Politics of the Past: Unpicking the Opposition to Truth Recovery in Northern Ireland’, *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 7 (2013), 157-77; Lawther, *Truth, Denial and Transition: Northern Ireland and the Contested Past* (Abington: Routledge, 2014).

³² Lawther, ‘Denial, Silence and the Politics of the Past’, 166.

³³ Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth, *Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement: Victims, Grievance and Blame* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

³⁴ Lawther, *Truth, Denial and Transition*, 57-8.

- a. Witnessing a conflict-related incident or the consequences of such an incident;
or
- b. Providing medical or other emergency assistance to an individual in connection with a conflict-related incident.³⁵

This definition sets broad parameters, making no determination about an individual's innocence, guilt or deservingness in order to enable statutory bodies to facilitate delivery of much needed services to those identifying as victims. Most data gathered in interview reflected satisfaction with the 2006 Order: 'I'm quite happy with the definition that's there. Its intention is to help as many people as possible and that can't be wrong'.³⁶ This belief was echoed by several others who pointed out the utility of an inclusive definition in delivering services to those in need. Opponents of the 2006 Order, however, argue that it 'effectively equates "perpetrator" and "victim"'.³⁷

Marie Smyth identifies an increase in exclusive sentiment around the 1998 Agreement, when rhetoric of 'innocent' and 'real' victims was used by those opposed to the political settlement 'as a means to exclude others from the category of genuine victimhood'.³⁸ This rhetoric again intensified and victims groups re-mobilised following the 2009 publication of the *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past* (CGP), effectively nullifying the report and its 31 recommendations over a proposal for a £12,000 recognition payment.³⁹ Criticism of this proposal rested largely on the fact that payment would go to the nearest relative of anyone killed as a result of the conflict and did not distinguish between 'innocent victims' and others.⁴⁰ Similar sentiment accompanied several legislative actions seeking to change the definition to make such a distinction, including the unsuccessful 2010 Victims and Survivors (Disqualification) Bill that would exclude from the 2006 Order individuals who

³⁵ UK House of Parliament, *Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006*, pt. 3: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2006/2953/contents> (accessed 18 January 2016).

³⁶ Interview, Armagh, Northern Ireland (18 September 2014).

³⁷ Ulster Unionist Party, *Victims Charter* (Belfast: UUP, 2011), 2; see also 'DUP seeks victim definition change', *BBC News*, September 15, 2009: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8256468.stm (accessed 18 January 2016); Democratic Unionist Party, *Our Key Commitments to Innocent Victims of Terrorism* (Belfast, DUP, 2014).

³⁸ Smyth, 'Putting the Past in its Place', 128.

³⁹ Consultative Group on the Past, *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past* (Belfast: CGP). The report was launched in January 2009 following three years of consultation into how Northern Ireland should deal with the legacy of its past.

⁴⁰ Cheryl Lawther, 'The Construction and Politicisation of Victimhood', in *Victims of Terrorism: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Study* ed. O. Lynch and J. Argomaniz (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 10-30, at 26-7.

were either members of a proscribed organisation or convicted of a violent conflict-related offence.⁴¹

The 2006 Order was not, however, the first attempt to determine who should be acknowledged as victims of the conflict. Soon after the 1998 Agreement, newly appointed Victims Commissioner Sir Kenneth Bloomfield published *We Will Remember Them*⁴², a report detailing the road ahead for victims. In it, he defined victims as ‘the surviving injured and those who care for them, together with those close relatives who mourn their dead’.⁴³ This definition represents an attempt at establishing a ‘coherent and manageable target group’,⁴⁴ and is inclusive in that it does not distinguish between the experiences of those affected by the conflict. Elsewhere in his report, however, Bloomfield acknowledges that many ‘feel strongly that any person engaged in unlawful activity who is killed or injured in pursuit of it is a victim only of his own criminality and deserves no recognition for it’.⁴⁵ Several commentators argue this indicates an underlying exclusive sentiment and initiated problematic rhetoric of a ‘hierarchy of victims’, discussed below.⁴⁶

The 2002 *Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve* report mirrored Bloomfield’s inclusivity, defining victims as ‘the surviving physically and psychologically injured of violent, conflict-related incidents and those close relatives or partners who care for them, along with the closer relatives or partners who mourn their dead’.⁴⁷ The inclusive approach won favour with commentators such as Alan McBride (whose wife and father-in-law were killed in the IRA’s 1993 Shankill Bomb) for its use of the phrase ‘recognition of the suffering of all victims’ rather than qualifying certain victims as more or less worthy of recognition.⁴⁸

Also in 2002, Robin Thurston published a report detailing public feedback on general proposals for victim definitions. She offered four definitions that represented a spectrum of variably exclusive and inclusive approaches,⁴⁹ and found respondents largely favoured an inclusive definition that distinguished only the severity of harm. Only a small number

⁴¹ Northern Ireland Assembly, *Victims and Survivors (Disqualification) Bill*, 6/10 (2010): http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/legislation/primary/2010/niabill6_10.htm (accessed 18 January 2016).

⁴² Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, *We Will Remember Them* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Victims Commission).

⁴³ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Lesley Lelourec and Grainne O’Keeffe-Vigneron, ‘Ireland and Victims: Addressing the Issues’, in *Ireland and Victims: Confronting the Past, Forging the Future*, ed. L. Lelourec & G. O’Keeffe-Vigneron (Bern: International Academic Publishers), 1-22, at 6.

⁴⁷ Victims Unit, *Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve* (Belfast: Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers, 2002), 1.

⁴⁸ Alan McBride, ‘Evaluating the Strategy’, in *Recognition & Reckoning: The Way Ahead on Victims Issues* ed. B. Hamber and R. Wilson (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue 15, 2003), 26-35.

⁴⁹ Thurston, *Perceptions and Opinions Regarding Victims, Survivors & Casualties in and about Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Conflict Trauma Research Centre, 2002), 7.

preferred an exclusive definition, and she added that many more were uncomfortable with such exclusivity. She noted that, ‘A number of respondents from different backgrounds felt that peoples’ community affiliation often colours their recognition of victims’,⁵⁰ which supports the assumption that intergroup processes influence perceptions of victimhood.

Despite this evidence of attitudes favouring inclusive approaches, recent proposals for an official process to address the legacy of the past have struggled in the face of exclusive attitudes towards victimhood. The authors of the CGP report highlighted the intergroup dynamics they encountered during consultation, perhaps foreshadowing the negative response to its inclusive approach:

The difficulties of making recommendations regarding victims and survivors are many and complex. When the needs and concerns of one group are addressed, another group is likely to be offended. Placing the concerns of victims and survivors within the wider context of legacy issues is also problematic. Yet this approach, which may be difficult for some to endorse, is ultimately important for the health and well-being of society as a whole.⁵¹

Subsequent proposals demonstrate wariness about explicit inclusivity in their recommendations, however concerns relating to victimhood continue to generate contention. The proposed agreement at the centre of 2013 talks co-chaired by US Diplomat Richard Haass and Professor Megan O’Sullivan acknowledged the emotionally charged nature of victimhood and did not attempt a definition.⁵² Revisiting the same themes of the flags, parades and the past in 2014, the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) also refrained from presenting a definition.⁵³

The persistent debates between inclusive and exclusive approaches, and on-going challenges to the 2006 Order indicate the intractability of attitudes towards victimhood within the Northern Ireland peace process. Disagreement in terms of how to define victims spills over into how well society is able to account for and develop policy to address diverse experiences of conflict as part of wider processes to establish societal relationships based on trust and accountability.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 20.

⁵¹ Consultative Group on the Past, *Report*, 30.

⁵² Panel of the Parties, *An Agreement among the Parties of the Northern Ireland Executive* [Proposed], Northern Ireland Executive (2013).

⁵³ Northern Ireland Executive, *Stormont House Agreement* (2014):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/390672/Stormont_House_Agreement.pdf (accessed 18 January 2016).

Who are the 'victims'?

As inclusive and exclusive attitudes affect the establishment and support of official definitions of victims, attempts to amass information on the diverse experiences and needs emerging from the conflict are similarly complicated by conflicting narratives of victimhood. Several studies have attempted to develop a fuller picture of the impact of conflict in Northern Ireland, and their analytical concerns and limitations demonstrate not only practical questions about who 'counts' as a victim in an official sense, but also moral questions attached to the construction of victimhood. A brief examination of these studies and the interpretations of their data highlights the impediments exclusive, ethnocentric perceptions of victimhood create for the practical work of identifying victims and subsequently addressing their needs.

The most comprehensive studies to date primarily assess the conflict's impact in terms of those killed, which is assumed to be a 'relatively unequivocal measure'.⁵⁴ Prominent examples include the Cost of the Troubles Study (COTTS), Malcolm Sutton's *Index of Deaths*, and the more narrative *Lost Lives*. The information emerging from these studies represents attempts to document the impact of conflict on society along measurable parameters. When the conversation shifts to 'deep moral questions about the nature of the conflict and the lasting responsibilities toward people affected by it',⁵⁵ judgements relating to constructions of innocence, morality, responsibility, legitimacy and self-perception significantly complicate the debate. In other words, whether the victim label applies to all those who were killed, injured, bereaved or otherwise adversely affected remains a matter of contention within society.

In determining their scope, studies decide the period of time in which they acknowledge the conflict took place and what types of deaths should be recorded. Discrepancies resulting from these distinctions may be superficial, however they are indicative of unreconciled narratives of the conflict and violence. Issues pertaining to the timeline of the conflict, for example, reflect disagreements about its underlying causes and resonate with contention over broader questions of victimhood and responsibility. The authors of *Lost Lives* catalogue those killed between 1966 and 2006, including three in 1966 which they acknowledged might be controversial:

⁵⁴ Morrissey and Smyth, *Northern Ireland After the Good Friday Agreement*, 10.

⁵⁵ John Brewer and Bernadette Hayes, 'Victims as Moral Beacons: Victims and Perpetrators in Northern Ireland', *Contemporary Social Science* 6, no. 1 (2011), 73-88, at 77.

Some may question our decision to include the three 1966 killings by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), since the troubles are generally regarded as breaking out in 1968 or 1969. We felt, however, that the manner of the killings and the fact that they loyalist figure Augustus ‘Gusty’ Spence was involved constituted a clear link with the events that followed.⁵⁶

Both COTTS and Sutton focused on the time period beginning in 1969.⁵⁷ These projects also distinguished slightly different types of deaths as directly related to the conflict. Whereas Sutton chose not to include accidental shootings of any individual by military organisation or by civilians, those killed in rows between individuals regardless of their affiliation, those dying of natural causes brought on by conflict events, suicides and military or helicopter accidents,⁵⁸ COTTS included ‘all trauma-related deaths known to us which can be proven to be Troubles-related’ which included fatal heart attacks and suicides.⁵⁹ Differing beliefs about what deaths resulted from the conflict and the timeline of the conflict itself demonstrate the difficult task facing those gathering and analysing this information. Furthermore, their decisions have implications for family members of those whose deaths are not recognised.

The task becomes significantly more troublesome when determining how to categorise actors. Because these studies largely rely on the socially constructed dichotomy between the victim and perpetrator, their resulting statistics necessarily deliver partial insights into the patterns and nature of violence. COTTS, for example, lists republican paramilitaries as responsible for 59% of total deaths, loyalist paramilitaries responsible for 28% and security forces just over 11%.⁶⁰ Although an important exercise, this data represents an assessment of responsibility that does not fully articulate complexities relating to chain of command,⁶¹ moral responsibility⁶² and collusion.⁶³ Numbers do not easily account for the wider responsibility of those who orchestrated or supported violent action but who did not physically pull the trigger or plant the bomb. There is also the ‘dark figure’ of deaths

⁵⁶ David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David McVea, *Lost Lives: The Stories of Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* [Updated edition] (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2007), 18.

⁵⁷ Marie Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth, *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The Human Costs* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 137.

⁵⁸ Malcolm Sutton, *Bear in Mind these Dead... An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland 1969-1993* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1994), 195.

⁵⁹ Marie Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth, *Mapping Troubles-related deaths in Northern Ireland 1969-1998* (Derry/Londonderry: INCORE, 1998), 14.

⁶⁰ Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, *Northern Ireland's Troubles*, 37.

⁶¹ Tristan Ann Borer, ‘A Taxonomy of Victims and Perpetrators: Human Rights and Reconciliation in South Africa’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2003), 1101.

⁶² Bouris, *Complex Political Victims*, 47.

⁶³ Christine Bell, ‘Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland’, *Fordham International Law Journal* 26, no. 4 (2003), 1095-1147.

attributed to collusion which cast into doubt whether they are the sole responsibility of one group or another.⁶⁴

Regardless of perspectives on victimhood or responsibility, these numbers represent just a fraction of those affected. If contention surrounds the number and nature of deaths, statistics relating to those affected through injury or psychological trauma are something of a quagmire. Conservative estimates list 40,000 injured,⁶⁵ though recent estimates are closer to 100,000.⁶⁶ This disparity alone indicates that, as Mary O’Rawe suggests, the ‘true extent and impact of victimhood is not currently apparent. We are only touching the surface in many ways’.⁶⁷ One interviewee, a staff member of the Victims and Survivors Service, shared that a project was undertaken to gather what the interviewee called ‘the first hard numbers on who victims and survivors *are* today... the first really tangible set of neutrally collated data since the Cost of the Troubles Study’.⁶⁸ When that data was presented to government representatives, however, the interviewee was told to discontinue the project and as of the interview had not been revisited.

Disagreement over official definitions, available data and its interpretation complicates attempts to comprehend and address the scope and diversity of experiences borne of conflict. Ultimately, acknowledgement and support may be denied to those who do not conform to group narratives of victimhood or the ideal victim construction, isolating them from peacebuilding work that builds relationships by acknowledging experiences of hurt and suffering and restoring human dignity. Denying victim status to certain sections of society has been shown to compound grievance, re-traumatise individuals and guide policies that undermine reconciliation.⁶⁹ Brewer contends that when ‘equality of victimhood’ is denied, it fails to become the uniting experience it could be between former adversaries. This denial or minimising of experiences that do not reflect particular constructions of victimhood resonates with intergroup processes, and contributes to a number of other dynamics which compromise peacebuilding efforts.

Victim culture

⁶⁴ Ibid. 1128.

⁶⁵ Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, *Mapping Troubles-Related Deaths*, 37.

⁶⁶ Lawther, *Truth, Denial and Transition*, xiii.

⁶⁷ Mary O’Rawe, ‘Truth and Justice’, in *Recognition & Reckoning: The Way Ahead on Victims Issues* ed. B. Hamber & R. Wilson (Belfast: Democratic Dialogue 15, 2003), 52-55: 54.

⁶⁸ Interview, Belfast, Northern Ireland (18 September 2014).

⁶⁹ Huyse, ‘Victims’.

The 'victim culture' describes a phenomenon where 'the collective sense of victimhood becomes a prism through which the society processes information and makes decisions'.⁷⁰ When attitudes and beliefs about victimhood are prevalent in social and political processes, groups may capitalise on the favourable attributes of the ideal victim construction to attract resources such as recognition, compensation, services and influence for those identified as victims. The victim culture has a potentially detrimental impact on victims themselves and for the prospect of mitigating divisive group identities. Victims may be 'professionalised'⁷¹ or, as an interviewee remarked, 'in Northern Ireland we have celebrity victims. [...] We know who they are and they do more harm than they do good'.⁷² The victim culture covers two broad socio-political dynamics, competitive victimhood⁷³ and the politicisation of victims' experiences and needs, which together extend past suffering through to the present. The victim culture informs present day attitudes, behaviours and interactions, posing 'practical and moral challenges to the prospect of peacebuilding'⁷⁴.

The construction of the ideal victim as deserving sympathy, care and support means that certain 'rewards' may accompany victim status.⁷⁵ As discussed above, peacebuilding processes often contain a range of reparative policies to address victims' needs. To remedy their harm, victims receive physical resources like compensation payments, symbolic goods like monuments and memorials, as well as recognition, positive discrimination (i.e. housing and education access), 'truth' and 'justice', moral authority and political influence.⁷⁶ For societies emerging from violent conflict, however, access to funding, support and attention is inevitably limited: 'No post-conflict state can involve every single victim in healing activities, truth-telling, trials and reparation measures'.⁷⁷ Of necessity, those who demonstrate the greatest need may be prioritised for physical and psychological care, financial assistance and treated as symbolically representative of wider victim constituencies.⁷⁸

Where accessing reparative mechanisms is regarded as zero sum, groups may commodify victim status to serve not only their needs for tangible resources but also the symbolic moral platform exemplified by the ideal victim construction. Groups emphasise

⁷⁰ Bar-Tal et al., 'Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood', 236.

⁷¹ Smyth, 'Putting the Past in its Place'.

⁷² Interview, Belfast, Northern Ireland (11 September 2014).

⁷³ Ibid., 246-7.; Masi Noor, Nurit Schnabel, Samer Halabi and Arie Nadler, 'When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts', in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(4) (2012), 351-374.

⁷⁴ Morrissey and Smyth, *Northern Ireland After the Good Friday Agreement*, 5.

⁷⁵ Bar-Tal et al., 'Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood', 246.

⁷⁶ Huyse, 'Victims', 63-4.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

their own victimhood and underscore their deservingness by reiterating claims to innocence and legitimacy and employing group-serving explanations of violence carried out by the in-group.⁷⁹ Who gets to claim the moral position of victim is critical not only in terms of access to resources and influence over policy development, but also to ‘fundamental assessments of the righteousness of each of the conflict groups’.⁸⁰ The competition often underpinning group claims to victim status resonates with the subsequent politicisation of their experiences.

Data from interview overwhelmingly indicates a perception, across political, social and religious backgrounds, that political parties and interest groups use victims and their experiences to further political agendas. The evolution of victim discourse, however, suggests this was not always the case. Early research observed that victims were initially disengaged from politics:

...the bereaved and injured have no basis on which they may influence the political process. They have no political clout, they do not have the capacity to wreck the prospects for peace, nor do they have the power to command the ears of politicians.⁸¹

Following paramilitary ceasefires in the 1990s, the needs of victims came to the fore, and victim work and victim politics ‘became well rehearsed and well understood’,⁸² coinciding with the increase of exclusive sentiment noted above by Smyth. Victimhood became a new locus of political intractability; political parties appropriated beliefs about in-group victimisation and legitimacy to generate support for partisan interests, simultaneously reiterating out-group responsibility to de-legitimise their political agendas.

Political parties established links with victims whose experiences reinforced their narratives of conflict as a way to confirm their moral claims to authority and legitimise their goals. One interviewee described how ‘different victims sectors [are] being represented by different politicians, and it unfortunately largely comes down to Catholic and Protestant, green and orange, and that is just the facts of Northern Ireland’.⁸³ By appealing to ethnocentric beliefs that emphasise in-group victims as ‘real’ victims, politicians and interest groups may use their claims to innocence as a shield against reflection on violent actions of their own constituency.⁸⁴ Those who critically interrogate the attitudes of these politicians, and by extension the victims for whom they advocate, are easily portrayed as callous or indifferent to suffering. The attendant implication that responsibility for violence lays

⁷⁹ Bar-Tal et al., ‘Sense of Self-Perceived Victimhood’, 247.

⁸⁰ Bouris, *Complex Political Victims*, 32.

⁸¹ Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, *Northern Ireland’s Troubles*, 2.

⁸² Smyth, ‘Putting the Past in its Place’, 129.

⁸³ Interview, Coleraine, Northern Ireland (26 March 2014).

⁸⁴ McEvoy and McConnachie, ‘Victims and Transitional Justice’, 501.

entirely with out-groups further suits partisan political agendas; reinforcing perceptions of out-group guilt and untrustworthiness based on past actions communicates the belief that their policies and political objectives pose a threat of continued in-group victimisation in the present.

Political association with victims also serves as a ‘potent theme for recruitment and mobilisation’.⁸⁵ Some individual victims and victims groups may see their role as advantageous in furthering political interests, and become mobilised ‘either as political alternatives to conventional groups, or more likely, as surrogates on behalf of political parties’.⁸⁶ According to one interviewee, politicians ‘can play people like puppets – on both sides of the community’.⁸⁷ Aligning with victims in the political sphere places politicians in a powerful position to use victims as ‘emotive tools’ to condemn and punish those they view as responsible for past violence,⁸⁸ all the while holding up the mantle of honouring victims.⁸⁹ This mobilisation generates support for policies that shame or remove those perceived as responsible for violence from governing structures, and opposition to policies that run counter to the in-group’s desire for truth or justice such as amnesties or reintegration of offenders.⁹⁰

Whereas peacebuilding literature champions the empowerment of victims, doing so in the political sphere can indeed be a double-edged sword. Politicising victims may instead reinforce victimisation because those who identify strongly as victims ‘are very sensitive to particular cues and conditions and readily tend to use their inherent schema of victimhood to apply to the new situation’.⁹¹ Victims who desire recognition may therefore face re-traumatisation as a result of politicisation of their pain and suffering,⁹² and are often pitted in competition with one another for resources. For political expediency, not to mention the inevitability of limited resources, many will be denied victim status and left with unaddressed needs.⁹³ When this is perceived as malicious – minimising or relativising others’ victimisation, for example – new grievances may emerge. Huyse therefore warns that political manipulations of victims may win short-term advancement for certain causes, but risks alienating victims and compromising their involvement in peacebuilding.⁹⁴ Having

⁸⁵ Bar-Tal et al., ‘Self Perceived Sense of Collective Victimhood’, 247.

⁸⁶ J. Brewer, ‘Memory, Truth and Victimhood’, 222.

⁸⁷ Interview, Belfast, Northern Ireland (28 August 2013).

⁸⁸ Goodey, *Victims and Victimology*, 2.

⁸⁹ McEvoy and McConnachie, ‘Victimology in Transitional Justice’, 530-1.

⁹⁰ Huyse, ‘Victims’.

⁹¹ Bar-Tal et al., ‘Self-Perceived Sense of Collective Victimhood’, 238.

⁹² Huyse, ‘Victims’.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

mobilised victims to strengthen policies that resist cooperation or integration between groups, political parties may face resistance when attempting more reconciliatory policies.⁹⁵

Moreover, political interests may overshadow issues directly affecting victims, limiting victims campaigns from generating support outside their own political constituencies. Barcat highlights the struggle of the Bloody Sunday campaign to operate independently of political association with Sinn Féin. Whereas the families initially recognised alignment with the party would afford them greater visibility and access to resources, they began to realise that close association with the republican movement might actually be an obstacle for their campaign.⁹⁶ They believed association with Sinn Féin (still seen as an extension of the IRA) was detrimental to their image and alienated the broader audience and support they sought. Gerry Duddy, whose brother Jackie was killed, ‘recalled how “angry” he was at the fact that they constantly had to “prove themselves” and convince people they were not activists working for some political organisation’.⁹⁷ Whereas political leaders offer resources and agency to increase the victims’ visibility, their involvement may simultaneously undermine victims’ goals and experiences by intentionally or unintentionally linking them with political overtones.

Though the overlap between victim competition and politicisation is imprecise, their effects appear to reinforce exclusive and intergroup attitudes by setting victimhood as a further arena for competition and political point scoring. These attitudes map onto well-documented intergroup competition based in sectarianism and differing political aspirations,⁹⁸ compromising initiatives designed to build peace. Rather than supporting policies to restore relationships based on mutual accountability, a culture in which victimhood is a competitive and politicised claim incentivises on-going division. This raises the potential to marginalise certain victims from peacebuilding processes and reinforce divisive group identities.

Hierarchy of victims

Perhaps the most apt illustration of exclusive victim perceptions, the apparent ‘hierarchy of victims’ is widely recorded in academic and popular discourse in Northern

⁹⁵ Brewer, ‘Memory, Truth and Victimhood’.

⁹⁶ Charlotte Barcot, “‘A Truth for the World’: From Widgery to Saville, the Campaign for Truth and Justice about Bloody Sunday’, in *Ireland and Victims: Confronting the Past, Forging the Future* ed. L. Lelourec & G. O’Keeffe-Vigneron (Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2012), 59-73.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹⁸ Neil Ferguson, Mark Burgess and Ian Hollywood, ‘Who are the Victims? Victimhood Experiences in Postagreement Northern Ireland’, *Political Psychology* 31, no. 6 (2010), 857-886, at 860

Ireland.⁹⁹ The hierarchy acts as a symbolic mechanism to communicate attitudes about victims' deservingness and moral status and the culpability or guilt of those less deserving of victim status.¹⁰⁰ Empirical evidence and studies of societal attitudes support assertions that 'loss and hurt have not been evenly distributed'.¹⁰¹ Analysis of public rhetoric, however, implies that predominant social groups perceive this hierarchy differently. Whereas academic scholarship and primary source material highlight a hierarchy which prioritises 'innocent victims', unionist statements refer to a hierarchy of victims that prioritises state victims. Interviewee attitudes were mixed, although many clearly echoed the sentiment that the hierarchy 'is the one thing that dominates and closes down options for going forward'.¹⁰² Indeed, the hierarchy of victims appears to reflect broader intergroup competition and ethnocentrism inherent to Northern Ireland.¹⁰³ Rather than mitigate divisive attitudes, it reproduces 'broader socio-political debates over the causes and consequences of the conflict'.¹⁰⁴

Most studies evidence a hierarchy that prioritises 'innocent victims' and links with advocacy for an exclusive definition of victim. Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood record widespread support for the argument that certain victims, specifically innocent victims, are more deserving of victim status than those responsible for violence. Whereas some respondents to their study agreed paramilitaries or security forces might also be victims, most expressed the belief that they are not victims 'in the same way'.¹⁰⁵ Beliefs about what victims are 'innocent', however, resonate with group narratives of violence and responsibility. The hierarchy therefore reflects ethnocentric, favourable beliefs about in-group members as the 'real' or ideal victims and out-group members as less deserving of victim status due to their collective responsibility for violence. Indeed, most literature speaks directly to a hierarchy in which security forces and the wider Protestant community are innocent and blameless atop the hierarchy, and paramilitaries killed in active service are at the bottom.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ See e.g. J. Brewer, 'Memory, Truth and Victimhood', 222-3; Brewer and Hayes, 'Victims as Moral Beacons', 77; Lawther, *Truth, Denial and Transition*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ McEvoy and McConnachie, 'Victimology in transitional justice'; Smyth, 'Putting the Past in its Place'.

¹⁰¹ Marie Smyth, 'Remembering in Northern Ireland: Victims, Perpetrators and Hierarchies of Pain', in *Past Imperfect: Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland and Societies in Transition* ed. B Hamber (Derry/Londonderry: INCORE, 2004), 8; Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood, 'Who are the Victims?'; Sara Templer and Katy Radford, *Hearing the Voices: Sharing Perspectives in the Victim/Survivor Sector* (Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2008).

¹⁰² Interview, Belfast, Northern Ireland (28 July 2014).

¹⁰³ Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood, 'Who are the Victims?', 860.

¹⁰⁴ Lawther, 'Construction and Politicisation of Victimhood', 21.

¹⁰⁵ Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood, 'Who are the Victims?', 878.

¹⁰⁶ Colin Knox, 'The 'deserving' victims of political violence: Punishment attacks in Northern Ireland', in *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 1 (2001), 181-99; Lawther, *Truth, Denial and Transition*.

Analysis of public discourse, especially in the political sphere, supports beliefs of a hierarchy within unionist narratives of violence. In a 2014 paper, the DUP asserts a clear distinction between ‘innocent victims’ and others: ‘We recognise there are many victims who seek support... The innocent victims of terrorism have suffered the most, and many are still suffering’.¹⁰⁷ Other rhetoric implies that the ‘innocent victims’ exclude members of the CNR population, demonstrating intergroup attitudes that dismiss out-group experiences of victimhood and justify violence against out-group members.¹⁰⁸ An earlier DUP publication signposts scepticism about CNR victims of state violence: ‘There have also been calls for... enquiries, mostly in cases where it is perceived that there has been wrongdoing by the State and incidents in which the nationalist community have been perceived to be victims’.¹⁰⁹ The response by UUP MLA Tom Elliot to the arrest of a former soldier in the death of John Pat Cunningham further communicates a distinction between CNR civilians and ‘innocent victims’. Cunningham, a 27-year-old with a diminished mental age, was shot in the back while running away from soldiers, of whom he had a well-reported fear. A report by the Historical Enquiries Team found that he was unarmed and ‘blameless’.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Elliot said that, ‘this latest arrest is continuing down a one-sided route, which is unfair to many innocent victims’.¹¹¹ The denial that a mentally handicapped man was an innocent victim or deserves justice highlights the problematic tendency for groups to minimize or negate out-group members’ victim status.

There are, nevertheless, prominent examples where unionists condemn the hierarchy of victims. Former First Minister Peter Robinson publicly stated that there should be ‘no hierarchy of victims’.¹¹² The hierarchy identified by most unionists, however, is one perpetuated by Sinn Féin and the Irish government that prioritises victims of British state violence. Empirical evidence such as the costly Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday and continued calls for an inquiry into the killing of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane supports this perception of hierarchy. One illustrative case is the campaign for the Irish government to share information on IRA attacks in border areas. Nelson McCausland (DUP) argues this

¹⁰⁷ DUP, ‘Our Key Commitments’, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Smyth, ‘Putting the Past in its Place’, 126.

¹⁰⁹ DUP, *A Voice for Victims: The Democratic Unionist Party’s Policy on Innocent Victims of Terrorism* (Belfast: DUP, 2003), 8.

¹¹⁰ ‘Apology after man shot dead by Army in 1974’, *BBC News*, March 19, 2013:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-21840739> (accessed 18 January 2016).

¹¹¹ ‘Elliot condemns double-standards in arrest of former soldier’, *UUP*, April 27, 2015:

<http://uup.org/news/3519/Elliot-condemns-double-standards-in-arrest-of-former-soldier#.Vo5bv4TMBTd> (accessed 18 January 2016).

¹¹² ‘Ministers’ plea to Irish government over republican murder victims’, *BBC News*, November 18, 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-15799085> (accessed 18 January 2016).

indicates ‘preferential treatment’ of state victims: ‘There have been no inquiries into Kingsmill, La Mon or Bloody Friday, or any of the many other atrocities perpetrated by the Provisional IRA’.¹¹³ Enda Kenny, the Irish Taoiseach, was accused of ‘creating a “hierarchy of victims” by pressing for a public inquiry into Pat Finucane’s murder while failing to meet relatives of the Kingsmills massacre’.¹¹⁴

This hierarchy prioritises victims of state violence, and again emphasises the collective victimhood of the in-group (in this case, the CNR community) while neglecting or denying the victimhood of the out-group (PUL community and security forces). Contained in this hierarchy is a narrative of state victims as ‘legitimate’ or ‘real’ victims, whereas violence against security forces was a response to physical or structural violence. Far less rhetorical evidence exists, however, that CNR politicians or interest groups explicitly seek to exclude certain victims from acknowledgement. Indeed, in their submission to the 2013 talks, Sinn Féin argued that victims’ ‘voices must be heard and respected, not simply the loudest voices, not simply those on any particular side or those on no side’.¹¹⁵ Some within the republican movement do, however, maintain that members of the security forces were ‘legitimate targets’ in their struggle against the British state, which implicitly portrays them as deserving of violence.

These disparate narratives of hierarchy primarily condemn the perceived hierarchy of victims imposed by the ‘other side’, while rejecting that perceptions held by one’s own group amount to a hierarchy. The concept proves problematic for peacebuilding not only in that it reinforces the divisive group identities described in the context of victim competition and politicisation, but also in that it provides avenues to continue placing blame on the ‘other’ and maintaining a view of in-group legitimacy. Rather than reconciling different experiences of violence and creating an environment of mutual accountability and trust, the hierarchy provides groups with a platform to emphasise their moral superiority, political authority and access to resources.

Summary

¹¹³ ‘Time to put an end to victim hierarchy’, *Belfast Newsletter*, February 13, 2014: <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/northern-ireland-news/time-to-put-an-end-to-victim-hierarchy-says-mccausland-at-pat-finucane-lecture-1-5873409> (accessed 18 January 2016).

¹¹⁴ ‘Kenny blasted over Finucane comments’, *Belfast Newsletter*, April 20, 2012: <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/kenny-blasted-over-finucane-comments-1-3754692> (accessed 18 January 2016).

¹¹⁵ Sinn Féin, *Addressing Legacy Issues (Initial Submission by Sinn Féin)* (Belfast: Sinn Féin, 2013), 2.

Three major implications flow from intergroup, exclusive attitudes about victimhood, which together compromise key peacebuilding objectives to build new, co-operative relationships and mitigate divisive group identities. First, debate around alternatively inclusive and exclusive victim definitions compounds difficulties in identifying and acknowledging victims in Northern Ireland. This complicates the collection of data in order to inform policies that respond to the diverse needs of victims from all groups. Attitudes that reflect differing ideas about who counts as a victim resonate with a culture which encourages competition and politicisation of victims, ultimately reinforcing socio-political divisions and marginalising those whose experience is ignored or denied. Finally, both the victim culture and definitional debates reinforce what is known in Northern Ireland as the hierarchy of victims. A key rhetorical device in the victim debate, the hierarchy emphasises ethnocentric comparisons between those deserving of victim status and those who are seen as ‘guilty’.

Whether through truth and justice interventions, material services, memorialisation or other specific transitional mechanisms, peacebuilding frameworks champion the importance of acknowledging victims to consolidate peace and prevent future violence. All three implications examined above complicate the acknowledgement necessary to restore victims’ dignity and sense of equality in the new peaceful dispensation. By reinforcing dynamics which challenge acknowledgement of groups and individuals with diverse, complex experiences of violence, exclusive approaches risk alienating sections of society from the peace process and compounding their sense of victimisation. Whereas the ultimate objective attached to peacebuilding initiatives is to address underlying structural issues which threaten a return to violence, intergroup attitudes towards victimhood incentivise division between former adversaries. By constructing victimhood as a locus for further conflict, ethnocentric attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are reproduced rather than minimised.

These implications emphasise the need to push beyond simplistic, binary approaches to conflict roles of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ and confront the multiple and complex narratives of violence, victimhood and responsibility that complicate peacebuilding.

Biographical statement

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