

**Conflict, Conflict Resolution and the
Children of Northern Ireland:
Towards Understanding the Impact on
Children and Families**

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This review employs a multidisciplinary approach to consider the effects of conflict and conflict processes on children in the case of Northern Ireland.¹ Conflict process is likely to affect children at multiple and different levels of societal functioning, with each level capturing a unique element of the effects of conflict processes on children. Thus, understanding each part of the process is likely to contribute towards a more complete understanding than is possible by focusing only on any one level of analysis. Various levels of analysis (e.g., economic, political, institutional, educational) of the effects of communal conflict on adults and children in Northern Ireland have been considered elsewhere (INCORE, 1995). The specific gap addressed in this paper is to further the conceptualization of the psychological, sociological, and familial processes in children that may be affected by communal conflict in Northern Ireland. A related goal is to place these conceptualizations in terms of a broader framework for understanding the complexity of the processes underlying the impact of the conflict.

Illustrating the importance of considering multiple levels of analysis, in a highly influential conceptualization, Bronfenbrenner (1979,1986) and others (e.g., Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993) have proposed an ecological-transactional analysis of children and their contexts. That is, ecological contexts are seen as consisting of several nested levels with differing degrees of proximity to children's functioning. Thus, the macro system involves cultural beliefs and values that reflect societal and governmental functioning, and affect community, family and child functioning. The ecosystem consists of the influences of the neighborhood and community on

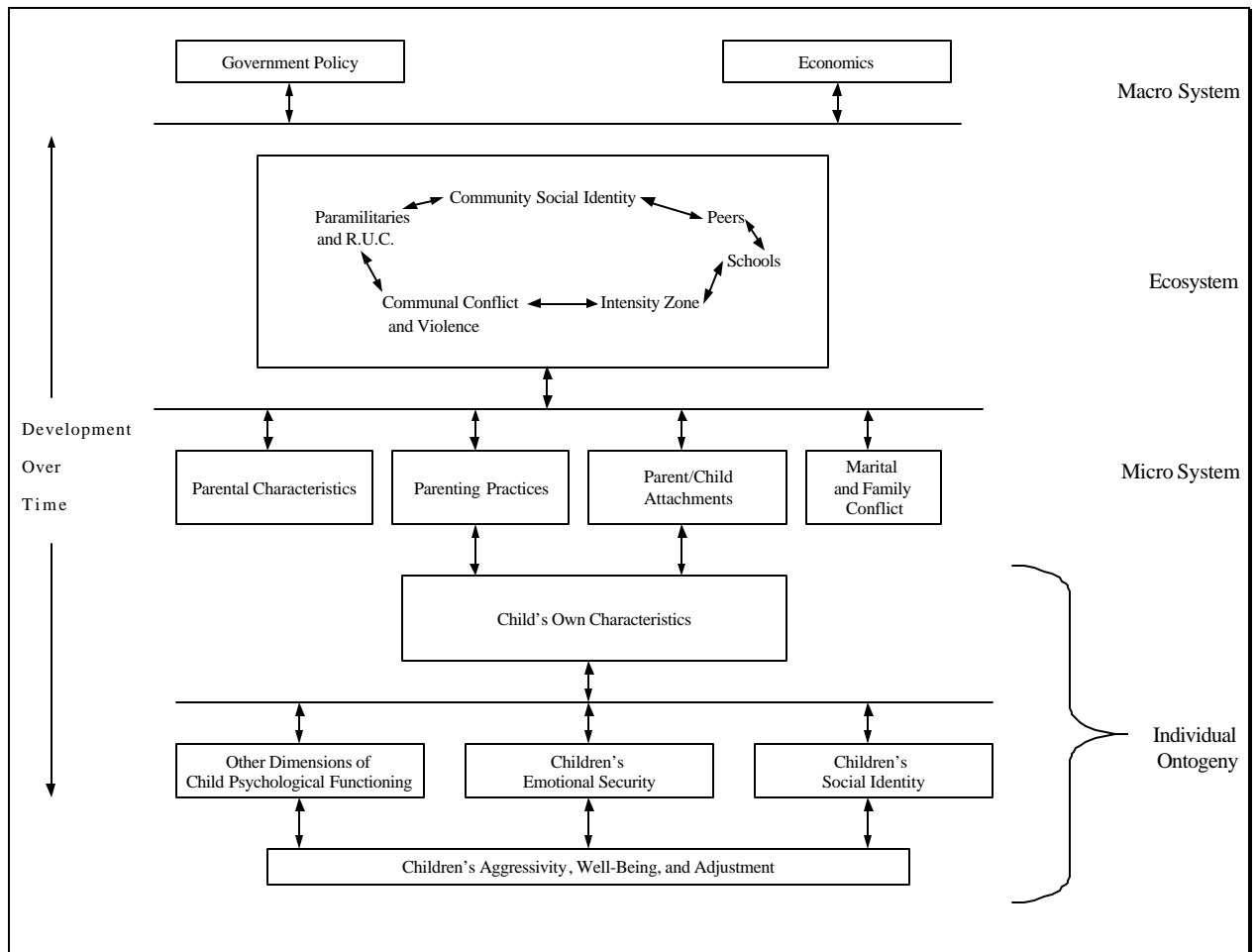
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children and families. The micro system reflects the effects of family environment. Finally, ontogenetic development is the most proximal level of analysis and is the level of the child's own development, including influences of biological and psychological functioning. It has been widely hypothesized over the past twenty years since Bronfenbrenner's original conceptualizations that these levels of environment interact and transact with each other and over the course of time in affecting whether children show desirable (e.g., social competence; good conflict resolution skills) or undesirable (e.g. behavior problems, proneness to violence and chronic hostility and anger) adaptation during their development (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993).

Figure 1 outlines a framework for the multiple levels that we hypothesize need to be considered to account for the effects of the conflict on adults and children. These levels of analysis of conflict processes, that is, the macro system (i.e., government), ecosystem (i.e., community) and micro system (i.e., family functioning, including marital conflict and parent-child attachment), and individual ontogeny (e.g., child characteristics), are represented as multiple societal influences on children's development. Moreover, these levels of analysis of conflict processes are interrelated (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth, Wong 2001). Although we focus on familial, psychological, and sociological processes affected by the communal conflict in Northern Ireland in this paper, it is important to conceptualize how these factors affect, and are affected by, the broader framework of the influences Northern Ireland's "Troubles" on children and families (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1999).

Figure 1.

Framework for the multiple levels of cultural, community, family, and ontogenic influences underlying the effects of the “Troubles” on the children of Northern Ireland.



Public policy can impact children and families. With politicians divided by national identities the agreement and implementation of public policy is a constant challenge. For example, the governments' involvement in the educational system is relevant to the present conflict. Northern Ireland's politicians have not set aside funding to encourage integrated schools. Also, even if the government had set aside such funds, political debates over

implementation could inflame passions and might eventually result in one national identity benefiting more than the other, or at least the perceptions of such favoritism, further aggravating matters. As another example, the possible reformation of the R.U.C. is also strongly impacted by political decisions, and the makeup of the R.U.C., as well as contentious debates and feelings about this matter, clearly impacts both individuals and the larger communities.

The economic situation families experience effects the well-being and development of both adults and children. Those most highly affected by the Troubles live in economically disadvantaged areas (O'Halloran & McIntyre, 1998)². Living in high intensity zones substantially increases the impact on family functioning and child development. Children in high intensity zones in Northern Ireland exhibit much more anger, suspicion, and sometimes hatred towards the other community than children living in low intensity zones (Smyth & Scott, 2000). Segregation affects the daily routines of many persons. Ninety percent of children in Northern Ireland attend segregated schools. Moreover, a high percentage of people living in high intensity zones only work with members of their own community (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth & Wong, 2001). The existence of such segregation "has far reaching implications not only for children, but also for the society at large and for long term prospects of peace," (Smyth & Scott, 2000)

The presence of paramilitaries also impacts the experiences of children and adults in Northern Ireland. In some areas paramilitaries have become the substitute police force, and may use "violent methods of punishment, such as beatings, which are tolerated and even

2. We would like to note our agreement with both Smyth and others, that in understanding and researching the effects of Northern Ireland's Troubles on children it is important to remember that depending largely on where the children live they may have very little experience with the Troubles, while other children may have

supported within some communities” (Smyth & Scott, 2000). Membership in paramilitary organizations may also come to be viewed by youth as a prestigious or powerful position (Smyth & Scott, 2000). Along with adults, the well-being and development of children in these neighborhoods, may also be affected by this culture of violence.

The merits of an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the effects of the “Troubles” on children and young adults, as is depicted in Figure 1, is now recognized by many observers and scholars of Northern Ireland (Smyth, 1998; Cairns, 1987, 1996; INCORE, 1995; O’Halloran & McIntyre, 1999). Although a multi-tiered conceptualization of societal influences is often described and discussed in the social science literature, very few studies of the effects of psychological and societal factors on children and families in conflict zones have been conducted, and even fewer involve recognition of all of these levels of analysis. Such approaches are clearly needed to more fully understand the effects of communal conflict in Northern Ireland on children and families. Moreover, we strongly encourage the development of collaborative efforts, uniting teams of specialists from a variety of fields and subjects, towards the goal of achieving such comprehensive analyses.

Next, we turn to an examination of the psychological, sociological, and familial effects of family and communal conflict on adults and children in Northern Ireland, which is the focus of the report. As the figure illustrates, both marital conflict and community conflict can affect children’s development. In addition, studies have shown that conflict in the family is related to conflict in the community (Kaslow, 2001; Reiss, Richters, Radke-Yarrow, & Scharff, 1993;

a great deal of experience with the communal conflict (Smyth & Scott, 2000).

Dudley-Grant, 2001; Halpern, 2001). In particular, high levels of community conflict are predictive of high levels of marital conflict, and each of these sources of conflict may have adverse effects on children's adjustment (Martinez & Richters, 1993; Richters & Martinez, 1993).

In this paper we argue that child development and psychological processes in families are likely to be highly affected by the communal conflict setting in Northern Ireland, particularly in zones of high intensity conflict. As we will show, children do not merely react to the presence of conflict, but interpret the conflict and what it means to them personally, and to their families (or in a communal scenario, to their respective community). Based on our review of theory and research on dynamic processes known to underlie children's functioning in families and groups, (i.e. attachment, emotional security and social identity) in high conflict contexts of family and community, we argue that it is critical to initiate and conduct research relative to the dynamic relationship between both familial and communal conflict as they effect the development and well being of the children in Northern Ireland. We hope that the perspective on the psychological, sociological, and familial forces at work in this cultural context that we present will serve as one foundation for new avenues of discussion and research in a larger multidisciplinary undertaking towards further understanding of these issues.

Dynamic Processes that Underlie Children's Functioning in Families and Groups

Human beings are "biologically predisposed to form long-lasting bonds to specific individuals" (Colin, 1996). "Attachment is an emotional bond," a long-lasting relationship that

forms with specific persons (Colin, 1996). The child desires to be held, loved, and protected by her parent not because her parent may feed her, but because the desire for an attachment is as basic and as important in human life as the desires for food and sex. One of the main factors affecting the security of attachment formed is the caregiver's sensitive responsiveness. A sensitive responsive caregiver notices signals from the baby, interprets them accurately and responds appropriately and fairly promptly (Colin, 1996).

The security of children's attachments are pertinent to their well being and adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2001). A child with a secure attachment comes to view himself in a positive light, as a person worthy of love. He exhibits self-confidence and feels free to learn through exploration in physical and social environments. He expects that others will treat her well and she has positive social skills. His behavior is likely to be flexible and easily adaptable to new situations and social partners. He is able to regulate emotions and behaviors in social contexts, and is less prone in high stress contexts to become aggressiveness or otherwise exhibit loss of control over social behavior. A child with an insecure attachment views himself in a negative light, as a person unworthy of love. He is very insecure in himself and in his relations with others. He does not expect others to treat him well, and is at greater risk for exhibiting aggressive behavior, anxiety, and depression (Colin, 1996).

Children with secure attachments are also more socially competent and appropriate than children with insecure attachments in relating to their peers. A 1992 study by Howes and Rodning found that securely attached infants "were more affectively positive toward others: they were ranked higher on social competence, number of friends, popularity with peers,

compliance, and empathy,” (Colin, 1996). Social competence, in particular, is reflected in greater success and competency in resolving everyday conflicts with others. These children also displayed less conflict during play and higher levels of social pretend play with their peers. Thus, one can see how children’s emotional security in high stress contexts, such as high intensity zones in Northern Ireland, might be related to their proneness to aggressivity, bullying behavior, vandalism, or high social anxiety.

In relation to teachers, children with secure attachments are more independent but, at the same time, are able to call upon their teachers for assistance when it is appropriate to do so. Insecurely attached children do not call on their teachers at appropriate times, but, at the same time, are more dependent upon them and demand more attention than children with secure attachments.

Without knowing the child’s history of attachment, teachers expect more mature and less conflictual behavior from securely attached students and have higher expectations of them overall (Colin, 1996). Thus, one can infer how children’s emotional security in high intensity zones could be related to their academic and school performance and social competency in these settings.

Within the first few years of life parent-child interactions help to mold the child’s view of himself and others. Attachment security leads the child to have or lack self-confidence, to positively relate with his peers, or respond to peers with hostility or suspicion, to attempt tasks on his own, or to rely heavily on the direction of others. Though alterable, these early conceptions lay a foundation for the child’s future growth, success or productivity, and happiness, as both an adolescent and an adult. The security of the attachment formed is pertinent to the well being of the

individual both in the present and future, and can be seen as surely pertinent to how well children can deal with everyday stresses in high conflict contexts.

In particular, numerous studies have shown that exposure to marital conflict and other conflict processes significantly influences the security of attachment. The increased stresses of marital and communal conflict decrease the parent's ability to sensitively respond to the needs of their child, thus negatively impacting the quality of attachment (Colin, 1996). In the case of Northern Ireland specifically, a survey conducted by Smyth and others found that close to twenty-five percent of the residents living in high intensity areas had taken some form of medication, and of these individuals, over fifty-two percent were on medication permanently (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth & Wong, 2001). In a personal interview one woman commented on her use of medication by stating,

“They lost me for seventeen years, eighteen years down the line. You know Marie, they didn't have a moter. 'Cause I was only a figure sitting there for to be used – to give them money. I was there for that. That was the only reason. I wasn't their mother...just a figure sitting in a chair,” (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth & Wong, 2001).

Depression and additional stress brought about through the troubles of Northern Ireland or marital conflict is likely to impact the well being and development of the child (Cummings & Davies, 1999). Alcoholism, shown to be a response to the troubles of Northern Ireland, significantly impacts children's security and the security of attachment (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1998). In the Northern Ireland Survey, “22 per cent in wards of highest intensity reported an increase in alcohol consumption related to the Troubles,” (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth & Wong, 2001). The stress or distraction of marital discord on the parents might cause them to become “more inconsistent and ineffective in their parenting behaviors, thereby increasing the

rate of child misbehaviors” (Cummings & Davies, 1994). The additional stress may also lead to a reduction in sensitive responsiveness to the needs of the child, which then diminishes the quality of attachment shared between the parent and child. In summary, marital and communal conflict affects parenting in ways pertinent to the well-being and adjustment of children. As we will see below, children are also directly affected simply by the exposure to conflict in their families and communities.

Conflict, Conflict Resolution, and the Emotional Security Hypothesis

Exposure to marital and family conflict and violence also directly influences children’s functioning³. Conflict within the marriage thus affects the child due to changes in the social environment of the family and also through direct exposure to conflict.

“Marital conflict has been identified as a risk factor that increase the probability of many adjustment problems in children, including both externalizing disorders, such as noncompliance and aggression, and internalizing disorders” such as depression, anxiety, and withdrawal (Owen and Cox, 1997, Grych and Fincham 1990).

Children display distress and increased aggression in response to the presence of background conflict between adults (Cummings, 1985). Researchers have observed “children were stressed and distressed by others’ physical and verbal quarrels as early as one year of age” (Cummings, E. M., Iannotti, R., & Zahn-Waxer, C., 1985). In response to the adults’ anger children appeared anxious and tense. Several covered their eyes or ears, and many cried or expressed verbal concern. Some children scolded the adults in conflict, while others

³ For purposes of this paper marital conflict is defined as any verbal or nonverbal disagreement or tension present within or between the marital dyad. Moreover, the definition of marital conflict is broadened to consider parental conflict involving unmarried partners.

attempted to act as a mediator. This suggests that background conflict between adults, which the communal conflict elicits in Northern Ireland, likely causes anxiety and tension amongst the children living there, especially those living in high intensity areas⁴.

Exposure to background conflict children experience changes in heart rate, skin conductance, and systolic blood pressure (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Thus, exposure to conflict induces distress and anxiety in children, even at a physiological level of functioning. These findings suggest that the presence of communal conflict likely elicits physiological reactions in the children experiencing the Troubles in their daily lives.

Parents may exhibit anger and conflict verbally, nonverbally, and even physically. Although it is not surprising that disputes involving physical conflict elicit the most negative impact on children, Cummings' studies on nonverbal anger challenge the assumptions of many parents about the sensitivity of children to their disagreements (Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991). Many parents assume that as long as their voices are children are not raised, their children will remain unaware of the conflict at hand. Children are affected by nonverbal conflict just as they are affected by verbal conflict.

In 1989, Cummings investigated children's responses to nonverbal, verbal, and verbal-physical expressions of anger. In this experiment, children viewed video taped interactions between adult actors and answered questions concerning their responses. The child

⁴ In consideration of the communal conflict in Northern Ireland it would be interesting to consider whether or not the presence of the communal conflict elicits more conflict within the home, thus leading to a decrease in parents' abilities to sensitively respond to their children.

participants ranged between the ages of four nine years. “Children of all ages more often reported negative emotional responses to anger scenarios than to matched friendly scenarios,” (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El Sheikh, 1989). These results show that “verbal expression is not an essential element in children’s negative response to angry exchanges between adults” (Cummings, et al, 1989). Cummings (1990) also found that “children reporting angry or distressed emotions in reaction to nonverbal anger expressions at rates comparable to verbally expressed anger,” (Cummings & Davies, 1994). In sum, the research findings indicate that a wide range of forms of conflict and anger expression between both parents and unknown adults elicits anger and distress from children.

Research on the effects of various forms of conflict on children may be related to the Troubles in Northern Ireland where the conflict is apparent in a wide array of forms, on one end, actual acts of violence, petrol bombs, paint bombs, gunfire, stoning or bricks being thrown, to the more silent, but just as piercing cries of the political murals in Derry and Belfast, and the taboo nature Northern Ireland’s society seems to embrace in avoiding conversation and discussion about the topics of religion and politics. As physical violence has shown to have the greatest impact on children (Cummings, 1998), the physical violence of guns and bombs would also have the greatest impact on distress and anxiety. In regards to the nonverbal form of conflict, it would be interesting to research how the children of Northern Ireland are affected by the taboo nature of the conflict, and possibly other nonverbal elements (the murals, flags, and painted street curbs) for children living in those areas.

Relative to the taboo nature, or lack of conversation and resolution, of the conflict in Northern Ireland, familial studies on conflict resolution may be of interest to consider. Cummings' research also demonstrates the positive effects of conflict resolution on children. In one study while testing children's responses to nonverbal, verbal, and verbal-physical expressions of anger, Cummings also presented the children with a set of skits testing the effects of resolution. Child participants viewed one unresolved conflict and one resolved conflict. The unresolved conflict elicited much more anger in the children than the resolved conflict, demonstrating children's high sensitivity to whether or not conflicts are resolved (Cummings et al, 1989). Cummings' research supports the notion that children are highly sensitive to the resolution of conflict and that the effects of conflict resolution are highly beneficial. Cummings found that, "what is most important may not be *if* parents fight, but how they act *after* fights are over. Completely resolved conflicts may have effects that are almost indistinguishable from entirely friendly interactions" (Cummings, et al, 1991).

Recently, in 1991, Cummings studied how children responded to different types or levels of resolution. The child participants viewed videotaped verbal arguments followed by one of six endings: compromise or apology (resolved anger), changing the topic or one side winning (partially resolved anger), the silent treatment or continuing the fight (unresolved anger) (Cummings, et. al, 1991). The negativity of the children's responses directly correlated with the level of resolution. Fully resolved conflicts resulted in the least negative responses. Unresolved conflicts resulted in the most negative responses. Partially resolved conflicts resulted in responses most often in between those for unresolved and resolved conflicts (Cummings, et. al,

1991). This study exemplified children's sensitivity to resolution. Children are not only attentive to whether or not the conflict is resolved, but also to what degree it is resolved. Changing the topic, or one person giving in to the other does not constitute a full resolution in the eyes of a child. Following children's attentiveness to nonverbal conflict, the study also showed that children are well aware of the silent treatment in an unresolved conflict.

The knowledge gained of children's reactions to various levels of resolution in marital conflict may have strong implications for understanding the effects of conflict and anger upon the children of Northern Ireland who are living in constant state of communal conflict, though at a variety of intensity levels. Children in Northern Ireland may feel a constant sense of dissatisfaction, discomfort, stress, or anxiety – at one level or another – due to the absence of a felt or perceived resolution. Some have hypothesized that children become habituated to conflict, but familial studies have found that children become sensitized rather than habituated to conflict (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981). Further research on the sensitization or habituation of communal conflict in Northern Ireland is certainly of interest.

In reflecting upon children's attentiveness to the various endings to conflict, Cummings further researched what constituted a fully resolved conflict in the eyes of a child. Children viewed videotaped conversations between two adults (Cummings, Simpson, & Wilson, 1993). In one scenario, following an angry interaction, one of the two adults explained a resolution that the child did not observe. In another scenario the adults left the room and went behind closed doors. During this time the experimenter asked the child what he or she thought the adults were doing. More than half of the five and six-year-olds, and almost 100% of the nine and ten-year-

olds inferred that the adults were resolving the conflict while behind closed doors. The adult actors then returned to the room and interacted in a friendly manner, implying that a resolution had taken place.

The study found that “explanation was an adequate means for communicating information about resolution, although apparently unnecessary if the child had observed the resolution,” and “children’s reactions to unobserved resolution were indistinguishable from responses to resolutions that could be directly observed,” (Cummings, Simpson, & Wilson, 1993). Thus, the conclusion was that parents do not necessarily need to worry about resolving their conflicts in the presence of their children. However, this study elicits interesting questions for further study in the realm of communal conflict. For example, due to the complexity of the communal conflict in Northern Ireland are such relatively subtle means of conveying conflict resolution adequate to convey the status of the conflict as resolved? Also, if parents are unable to provide such adequate guidance themselves regarding conflict resolution in families or the community due to the trauma they have experienced is there a possibility that outside help may be directed towards Northern Ireland’s youth?

In an exploration of young people’s views and experiences, INCORE interviewed young people and inquired how people deal with conflict, and how the youth themselves deal with the stress. One youth responded, “...I think most people are afraid to talk to somebody. They just keep it bottled up, so they do...It just hurts too much, so it does. The longer they keep it bottled up, their heart just turns to anger...” (Sunningdale Youth Group, 1998). When asked how they calmed themselves down, two other young men from North Belfast explained,

“Just forget about it. Just try your hardest to forget about it,” (Sunningdale Youth Group, 1998). Children in Northern Ireland may thus be feeling a sense of anxiety due to the lack of resolution within the communities that they live, and also within themselves.

Familial research findings strongly suggest that children do not simply respond to the presence of loud voices or felt tension, but rather interpret conflict and reflect upon and its implications upon themselves and their families. In a communal conflict setting, as in Northern Ireland, it is hypothesized that the children may also consider the implications the conflict has upon their particular community as well. As Cummings explains, “Children respond not simply to whether or not conflict is expressed but to the implications of conflict for marital relations and, ultimately, themselves” (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Cummings and his colleague, Patrick T. Davies, present their emotional security hypothesis as a new vehicle for further understanding these psychological processes present in children and conflict. Their hypothesis is that children seek to attain a level of emotional security within their family networks, including the quality of parent-child attachment, but also including factors beyond the emotional security resulting from parent-child attachments. A child’s sense of emotional security is derived from various sources such as his or her personal experiences, impressions, or models of family and community relations and networks, and the quality of attachment shared with the parents (Cummings & Davies, 1996). Cummings and Davies explain that a child may appraise his parent-child attachment as secure, while feeling emotionally insecure due to the presence of marital conflict. They hypothesize that children work towards the goal of "preserving and promoting a sense of emotional security" within the contexts of

various emotional relationships within and outside of the family (Cummings and Davies, 1996; Waters & Cummings, 2000)⁵.

Emotional security is both a product of past experiences and a primary influence on future responses to marital conflict. A child's past experiences with conflict influence how he both interprets and reacts to marital conflict. Cummings and Davies explain,

"Children who are emotionally secure about their parents' relationship have confidence in the stability and predictability of marital interactions, an expectation that marital conflicts will eventually ameliorate, and confidence in the continuing psychological and physical availability of parents. Also, they perceive that family disputes pose no significant threat to their physical and psychological well-being" (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

As a result of their emotional security about family based on experience, children from homes in which parents have harmonious marriages do not perceive the presence of marital conflict as threatening to themselves, or marital relations. Presumably they have seen their parents resolve their conflicts and have confidence in their ability to do so on other occasions.

In contrast, children from homes with high conflict marriages more readily interpret marital conflict as threatening to their emotional security and the security of the marriage; thus they are more likely to become reactive, over-involved, and aggressive in response to parental disputes (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Cummings, Iannotti, & Waxler, 1985). Cummings explains that emotional security is a process and a goal, which organizes and directs "children's coping processes and adjustment in reaction to marital conflict". Children regulate their responses to conflict in attempts to attain or reaffirm their emotional security. Those children in homes of high marital conflict may find it necessary to either interfere with the conflict, or act as

⁵ In a communal conflict scenario, such as Northern Ireland, this hypothesis may be extended to include consideration of one's community, inner-communal relations, and cross-communal experiences as being

a distraction from the conflict, in order to alleviate the presumed threat. In an earlier study in 1981, Cummings found that children from homes of frequent marital conflict responded to conflict in prosocial patterns reflecting effects to ameliorate their parents' problems, such as shown by attempt to reconcile, mediate, or distract the angry adults (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981).

Cummings' research supports the conception that children become sensitized to conflict, rather than desensitized, as a result of repeated exposure to highly negative marital conflict (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981). Cummings and Davies "suggest that repeated exposure (to marital conflict) increases children's feelings of emotional insecurity," which decreases their capacity to regulate their emotions and behavior, "leaving them more prone to feelings of fear, distress, and anger" (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Given the serious implication of communal conflict for children's emotional security, one might presume that communal conflict might lead to even greater sensitization to conflict in children, particularly for children in high conflict zones, such as the most intensely conflictual zones in Belfast (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth, & Wong, 2001). These sensitization processes are reflected in over-reactivity to conflict, including a propensity to intense feelings of anger, sadness, and fear; a disposition to heightened aggressivity towards others; and over-involvement and highly negative cognitions about others in conflict situations.

influential in interpretation of, and response to the communal conflict

Children in Communal Conflict: the Case of Northern Ireland

Thus, in reviewing the effects of communal conflict on children in the case of Northern Ireland, the processes involved relative to the impact of conflict on children's functioning multiply. Communal conflict extends beyond the family unit to include the larger community. Sociologist Henri Tajfel explains community or communal conflict as being different from other types of conflict because it is a conflict between large-scale socio-economic or socio-political groupings as distinct from conflicts inside an individual, between individuals, or between small groups (Tajfel, 1981; as cited in Cairns, 1987). The number of individuals directly acting or participating in the conflict increases from a few to many, and the amount of negativity built up over time escalates from the years or decades a couple may have been married to the number of centuries behind the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and the competing nationalisms that are reflected by these divisions⁶.

Children in homes of high marital and family conflict in the United States may seek refuge through relations with their friends or teachers, but in a communal conflict situation, the conflict may appear inescapable to the child. As is evident in Belfast, Derry, and other towns, when walking down the streets the curbs are painted reminders of the conflict. The stark segregation of the majority of Northern Ireland's schools also bears testament for children everyday to the seriousness of the conflict. The conflict dictates to the children where they can

⁶ First, although the recent resurgence of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland was initiated with the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, some historians and sociologists claim conflict may be traced as far back as the plantations, and the Great Famine (as murals depict in Belfast), or from the division of the North from the Republic in the early 20th century. Second, The usage of the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' is not meant to suggest the existence of a religious war, but rather to easily depict the two distinct social categories in Northern Ireland.

walk, what stores they can go into, what school they can attend, and whom they may befriend. The culture of silence, or taboo nature of issues surrounding the conflict, further decreases a child's chances of alleviating any distress he or she may feel with regards to the communal conflict or its affects through discussion (Smyth, 1998). The community violence in Northern Ireland has potentially wider ranging effects on children than does domestic conflict in regions relatively free from ethnic conflict, due the fact that the conflict in Northern Ireland can kill or injure children, as well as place them in the position where they are at risk for killing or injuring others (Smyth, 1998).

The absence of an entrusted police force, the presence of paramilitaries, and urban housing problems also exacerbate the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on children living there. With the absence of an entrusted police force, children suffering from sexual or physical abuse, or neglect, are less likely to be removed from their homes. Although an instance of child abuse may be observed, the individual may choose not to call the police due to poor relations with the R.U.C. (Royal Ulster Constabulary) and also in consideration of the tensions that may result, both between the R.U.C. and the accused family, neighborhood, or social category (in this case Catholics), as well as the tension within the Catholic neighborhood itself that may result (Smyth, 1998). In areas where the R.U.C. is not welcome, paramilitaries often take on the role as an active or local police force. Under local paramilitary authority, a child experiencing abuse or neglect in the home of a paramilitary leader may also have less of a chance of being alleviated from his or her situation for similar reasons.

The children of Northern Ireland are also affected by the presence of paramilitaries at a number of levels. Paramilitaries have physically harmed children and their loved ones through a variety of means such as bombs, guns, and beatings. Smyth cited that shootings and explosions “account for 224 or 87% of all deaths of children under age 18” relative to the Northern Ireland conflict. Rubber or plastic bullets, and army vehicles have also killed children (Smyth, 1998). Family involvement in paramilitaries may result in the loss of a caregiver through imprisonment or death, both extremely distressing experiences for children. Children of security forces, the R.U.C., are also at risk due to threat to the family; these children may experience the loss of a parent to death. Thus, children in Northern Ireland may witness the death of a family member, as it is not unheard of for a man to be shot in the doorway of his home (Smyth, 1998). Children and young adults in Northern Ireland may also become active participants in paramilitary activities and engage in group violence themselves (Smyth, 1998). Further studies are needed to understand this culture of violence and children’s infiltration into such a society, the possible role of emotional insecurity about family and community, and sensitization to conflict, in the effects on the children.

As regards urban housing, the growing Catholic population has posed problems due to the segregation of society and land, especially in the city of Belfast. In the early 1990’s in a northern area of Belfast, particularly in Duncairn Gardens and Tiger’s Bay, Catholics had a housing shortage, while Protestants had a housing surplus. Protestants were concerned about an expansion of the Catholics into their neighborhood, and the Catholics were angry about feeling “fenced in” while simultaneously fearing loyalist paramilitary strikes as a result of the

Protestants' fears (Bollens, 1999). Such housing scenarios negatively affect the children.

Impoverishment and poor quality housing, relative to the economy and the conflict in Northern Ireland, also negatively impact the well being of children living under such conditions.

The absence of a trusted police force, the presence of paramilitaries, and housing problems due to land segregation, are all additional significant elements to the Northern Ireland conflict beyond the fact of children's exposure to intense conflict and violence and likely add to the effect on the children. These factors are amongst numerous elements negatively influencing the well being of children in Northern Ireland in relation to the communal conflict.

Social Identity Theory : Awareness, Attachment, Perception

Beyond the individual attachments formed between parents and their children, and extending past the network of relationships composing a family unit, children form attachments within a particular group or community. Human beings exaggerate differences between certain categories while simultaneously minimizing differences within categories (Cairns, 1987).

Coinciding with the process of social categorization, Tajfel (1981,1982) argues that it logically follows for individuals to see themselves as belonging to certain social categories, but not to others; "in this way, the theory claims, we tend to develop various social identities" (Cairns, 1996). A person's social identity becomes an "important aspect of the individual's self-concept" (Jenkins, 1996). Thus Tajfel argues:

“Social identity will be understood as that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1982).

Concerning the relevance of the social identity theory to conflict in Northern Ireland, it is pertinent establish that (1) children recognize the two major social categories within their society, (2) feel an emotional attachment to the group of which they are members, and (3) perceive themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong.

In this case of Northern Ireland, the two major social categories are referred to as Catholic and Protestant and the competing nationalisms represented by these groupings⁷. Children’s awareness of these distinct categories and their sense of relationship to each category was first researched by Jahoda and Harrison in 1975 (Cairns, 1987). Roughly one hundred and twenty boys of ages six and nine years, living in either a Catholic or Protestant working-class area of Belfast, or Edinburgh, Scotland, were involved in the study. First, an experimenter presented sixteen geometric figures of the same size, which were red, orange, blue, or green, to the child participant. These particular colors were chosen due to their relation to the Irish and British flags, strong symbols for the Catholic and Protestant communities. Second, an experimenter asked the child to sort the figures into two groups and then explain the particular classification, which they formulated (Cairns, 1987). Third, an experimenter displayed the figures in different color combinations and asked the child if the figures in the group went together. Most of the younger children grouped the objects in relation to color. Of the older children however, the majority of those from Belfast continued to sort the objects by color,

while virtually none of the Scottish children did. Experimenters also reported, “that nearly half of the older Belfast children spontaneously mentioned the politico-religious symbolism of the colors as they carried out the task” (Cairns, 1987).

The children residing in Belfast further displayed their awareness of the symbolic meaning of the colors during the second activity when the experimenter combined various figures and asked the child participants if they were grouped properly. Experimenters noted that during this exercise several of the older children residing in Belfast “said things such as ‘No that’s not right: you can’t put Protestants with Catholics’ or vice versa when the experimenter attempted to combine for example red and blue with green” (Cairns, 1987). This study highlights Northern Irish children’s awareness of both the existence of two social categories within their society, and that the two social categories are at odds with one another.

Cairns, McWhirter, and Gamble, conducted later studies, which also support the finding that children in Northern Ireland are well aware of the two social categories at a very young age. Cairns wrote, “the ability to make social categorizations is probably fully developed in most children by as early as age five years,” (Cairns, 1987). However, the possibility exists that children in Northern Ireland may be aware of the two major social categories at an even younger age.

⁷ Once again it is noted that the usage of the terms ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ are not to depict an understanding of the conflict as related to religion, but are simply used to depict the two major groups in Northern Ireland.

The children of Northern Ireland most likely do not differentiate themselves from the opposing group due to a clear understanding of the political positions of each, but they do recognize the other as different. Roughly ninety percent of all children in Northern Ireland attend segregated schools, thus alerting them of the distinct separation on a daily basis. Segregated housing areas, painted street curbs, and murals are also daily reminders of the two separate social categories. Children growing up in a segregated society are aware of the existing division. One fifteen-year-old girl from Belfast reflected,

“It’s very hard when you’re split up in your different communities and you don’t want to know each other and that sort of thing. I do feel a bit sad about what’s happened to my childhood. I haven’t actually had a very normal life where I can go out into the street, go into different communities and they wouldn’t say a word to me. But unfortunately, it’s not like that at all now. And it never really will be, I don’t think” (Raymond, 2000).

Cairns explains that the children’s awareness of the two groups is important in that “as children learn about the division in Northern Irish society into two major groups they are at the same time learning to which of these groups they, and presumably their immediate family, belong” (Cairns, 1987). Children’s understanding of the social categories and their own social identity occur concurrently.

Two younger children from Northern Ireland also commented on the distinct separation. They explained to the interviewer that if they ventured into the ‘other’ neighborhood the ‘other’ children would shout, and possibly throw stones at them.

Interviewer: Why would they do this?

Michelle: Because we don’t get on with each other.

Danny: Because we’re Catholics and they’re Protestants and they just don’t like it – us being Catholics.

Interviewer: And that’s all it takes?

Danny: That’s all it takes.

Even in a child's mind, the world becomes 'us' and 'them' in Northern Ireland. As children come to learn of the existence and division of society into two major social categories, Catholics and Protestants, they also become aware of which group they are a part of, who 'we' are, and who 'they' are. Investigating social identity theory, in the case of Northern Ireland, may shed further light on where children's conceptions of the two social categories primary come from, and how they develop. For example, peers, parents, the media, and educational organizations may all play a role in children's conceptions of the major social categories in their society, and their own relationship to each.

Along with the importance of recognizing one's membership to a social category, social identity theory asserts that individuals value their membership and possess an emotional attachment to their particular group. As a child's social identity gains greater significance within his self-concept, he feels a stronger emotional attachment to his respective group. The presence and level of this emotional attachment is difficult to measure empirically. One's emotional attachment to their group membership is especially challenging to study in Northern Ireland due to the taboo nature of religion and politics. Children may be fearful in expressing their social identity to an experimenter, or to define 'Catholic' or 'Protestant' in reference to political connotations rather than as religious terms.

Another factor making one's emotional attachment to their social category complicated to measure is its wavering nature. Social identity is "a dynamic entity which may vary from time to time and from situation to situation" (Tajfel, 1981) making it even more difficult to calculate (Cairns, 1987). Social identity is more of a process than a concept with a concrete definition or

measure. Social identity is how one sees oneself in a social context and how one interprets the world around him. These perceptions are subject to change as various circumstances and events affect either the individual or group to which she is a member.

Cairns and Mercer (1984) reported evidence to support the notion that Northern Ireland's youth possess an emotional attachment to their respective social categories. In the study, experimenters asked roughly one thousand sixteen to seventeen-year-olds, "to describe themselves by choosing between a series of eighteen pairs of bipolar adjectives" (Cairns, 1987). Only three percent failed to choose either the term 'Catholic' or the term 'Protestant,' signifying the perceived importance of this group membership. Experimenters found that overall Catholics ranked " 'Catholic third, behind age and gender, while the Protestant trend was to rank this social identity fifth, behind age, gender, social class, and religiosity" (Cairns, 1987). Social identity was also placed above more personal or individualistic adjectives such as happy, anxious, and calm. The high rankings of one's social identity are suggestive of an emotional attachment to group membership.

Children's social identity may be especially salient when the child is under threat or stress. For example, Trew (1981) found that during the Hunger Strikes, children conjured more strongly to their social identity. Studies on parent-child attachment also strongly support this process of working especially hard to assure one's attachment in times of stress (Colin, 1996)⁸.

In the case of an emotional attachment to a specific social category, children under stress

⁸ A most recent example of displaying group membership or attachment, may be the vast display of United States flags across the U.S. since September 11, 2001. Many people have the U.S. flag waving outside of their home in memory of those who have died, and who have sacrificed their lives, but also as a statement that they are a home of Americans.

presumably exhibit a greater sense of connection or devotion to their group in order to reassure their sense of physical security and the security of their social identity (Waters & Cummings, 2000).

For example, in the beginning of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, Catholics were being physically assaulted by loyalist paramilitaries and the R.U.C. The Catholic community denoted the IRA (Irish Republican Army) to stand for “I Ran Away”. Catholics felt insecure without a physical force or protectorate, which instigated, in part, the reemergence of the IRA within Northern Ireland. A Catholic child, in the face of a threat from a loyalist paramilitary, may reinstate his own social category and its connection to their paramilitary organization, the IRA.

At the same time, the powerful bonds or attachments that develop between families and communities within nationalistic groups can serve to increase conflicts even within these groups. For example, silence about threatening and historical aspects of the “Troubles” In Northern Ireland may result in feuding, violence, emotional cut offs and other less than effective coping patterns within cultural groups (Smyth, 1998; personal communication).

However, one’s social identity must always be established, it “is never a final or settled matter,” but rather an on going process (Jenkins, 1996). This can be a cause for hope or concern for the children of Northern Ireland. In the case of Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants define themselves, in part, through comparison to one another. One group may view itself to be the minority, and the other group to be the majority. One group may see itself as the oppressed, thus depicting the other group as the oppressor. As these relationships

change, at least within the eye of the beholder, the perceptions of one's social category, and in turn one's social identity, changes as well. The growing Catholic population, the fall of Stormont, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and the Good Friday Agreement are examples of the changing relationship between Catholics and Protestants, which may affect children's perceptions of social category and social identity.

In some ways the strong presence of the two major social categories in Northern Ireland deducts from the significance of the individual and therefore of the individuals degrees of freedom for relating to others as individuals⁹. For example, In recalling the shooting of their father, Danny and Michelle (previously mentioned) were asked, "And who did it?"

Michelle: The UVF. (Ulster Volunteer Force)

Danny: The UVF kill and bomb Catholics.

The person(s) who shot their father was not identified as an individual man with a name; he was a member of a group. Children come to value their own social identity, while simultaneously identifying others with respect to their designated group. For example, a young girl comes to know another child who is playful, intelligent, and tall with brown hair, but despite these qualities and characteristics, the new acquaintance is defined first and foremost by his or her social identity, thus leading to an extension or termination of friendship.

The children of Northern Ireland learn to discriminate against the other group and stay amongst their own. They develop an emotional attachment to their social category and in times of stress this attachment intensifies. The children may not understand the political arguments, but

⁹ The media plays a notable role in the Northern Ireland conflict as it affects the presentation of the conflict to both children and adults. The children of Northern Ireland are exposed to various levels of the conflict, but the majority view and hear the evening news.

they are aware of the presence of conflict and the sharp distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Such angry and hostile thinking processes can only foreshadow the continuation of communal conflict in Northern Ireland; therefore, changing such thought processes in the children must be a goal for future peace efforts.

A Model for the Effects of Communal Conflict on Children in Northern Ireland: Towards an Integration of the Emotional Security Hypothesis and the Social Identity Theory

Children are both participants in, and observers of the communal conflict. As we have shown, the presence of the conflict affects the children both through exposure to the conflict, and through influences upon other social factors in their lives. Communal conflict may also undermine the effectiveness of parents to function as parents to their children, thereby resulting in another form of impact on the well being of the children (Smyth, 1998; personal communication).

In the emotional security hypothesis, children strive towards the goal of “preserving and promoting a sense of emotional security” within the contexts of various family relationships (Cummings and Davies, 1996), and we would also argue within the context of community and ethnic groupings. In social identity theory, children desire to become a member of a group formed through the natural process of social categorization. Recognizing both the various social categories and one’s membership or connection to a specific group coincides with the development of an emotional attachment to this group. In Northern Ireland children work towards “preserving and promoting a sense of emotional security” in relation to their social

identity and also in relation to threats to children's sense of emotional security, within the context of a strictly divided society," (Cummings and Davies, 1996).

Within Northern Ireland, a child's social identity becomes an integral part of his self-concept. A positive image of one's group comes to be essential in possessing a positive image of oneself. Human beings desire to enhance their feelings about themselves, "and one way of doing this is to ensure that our social identity is positively evaluated," (Cairns, 1987).

Unfortunately, within an inflexible and highly stratified society like Northern Ireland, the only way to achieve a positive social identity is not through individual effort, "but by ensuring that (one's) own group comes out on top when social comparisons between groups are made," (Cairns, 1987). In the setting of a communal conflict a child's sense of emotional security extends beyond his personal security as an individual to encompass the security of the social category as a whole, in regards to both physical security and the security of its social or cultural identity.

The emotional security hypothesis further postulates that children attain an understanding of their emotional security through multiple influences, such as parent-child attachment and experiences with marital conflict and broader social influences on security. In relation to social identity theory, children perceive a sense of the security of their social identity through both their attachment to their respective group, through experiences with, and knowledge or awareness of, communal conflict.

In the case of Northern Ireland, a child's membership to a specific group is fixed due to the immobile nature of social categories in the region. A child is born into a social category in

Northern Ireland, and although religious conversion is possible, it is rare or simply unheard of in the region. As Cairns explains, the children “of Northern Ireland are locked into membership of one of two groups” from birth (Cairns, 1987). The level of children’s emotional attachment to their group is fostered through segregation and symbolism, amongst other things such as overhearing parental conversations on the topic of communal conflict, listening to Dad’s comments against the opposing social category, or viewing and hearing the nightly news¹⁰.

We hypothesize that a child’s experiences or knowledge of communal conflict affect a child’s sense of emotional security relative to his social identity, as one of several ways in which community conflict may relate to emotional security. For example, according to Cummings’ research, repeated exposure to marital discord sensitizes children to the occurrence of conflict, which promotes greater reactivity. It follows that in the realm of Northern Ireland children may also become more sensitive to the communal conflict with the passage of time, rather than habituate to it. As the communal conflict continues, and certainly when it worsens, the children of Northern Ireland grow more concerned about emotional security as it pertains to their social identity and the security of their social category.

A child’s attachment and sense of security, relative to his group, would presumably affect how he both interprets and responds to the communal conflict. Cummings and Davies have posited that repeated exposure to conflict decreases a child’s sense of emotional security

¹⁰ In recognizing the role parental political discussion may have on the development of a child’s social identity and political preferences or activeness, it would be interesting to research whether or not parental political arguments elicited more distress in children in high political conflict areas, such as Northern Ireland.

and simultaneously reduces his ability to regulate his emotions and behavior, “leaving (him) more prone to feelings of fear, distress, and anger” (Cummings and Davies, 1994). The implication is that the continuation of communal conflict in Northern Ireland sensitizes children to conflict, decreases the children’s ability to cope with the presence of conflict, and makes them more susceptible to negative feelings such as anger and fear, and negative behavior, such as violence, aggression, delinquency, and destruction of property.

The emotional security hypothesis proposes that the level of a child’s emotional security plays a role in the child’s emotional response to the conflict, the child’s self regulation of how the conflict affects him, and how he responds to the conflict. Children do not simply respond to conflict due to the tone of voices or anger, but due to the child’s understanding of how the conflict affects him and his family on a personal level.

Theoretically, this hypothesis of children’s processes affected by conflict is also applicable to children’s behavior in a communal conflict setting. A child’s emotional security, relative to his social identity and the perceived security of his group, plays a role in his emotional response to communal conflict, and in his self-regulation of how the conflict affects him and how he responds. It is suggested that within the setting of a communal conflict children are affected by the conflict not solely through the tension or violence between groups, but due to the child’s interpretation of the conflict, what it means for himself and his social category. “Children are actively processing the meaning that events have for their own well-being throughout a given stressful event,” (Cummings and Davies, 1996). Within Northern Ireland children interpret

what an event means for them directly and indirectly, through how it affects the social category to which they belong.

In a situation where a child feels her emotional security is threatened, she will act in such a way as to reestablish her emotional security to the desired level. It is important to remember that although the desired goal is positive – a sense of emotional security – the child's action in seeking to attain this goal may have negative results in a variety of ways. For example, in the case of marital conflict a child may blatantly misbehave in order to distract her parents from fighting. This tactic may stop the conflict, thus partially restoring her emotional security, but the child's response of misbehavior increases the likelihood of negative repercussions in the future, especially if this pattern occurs repeatedly. In the case of Northern Ireland, a child may try to reinstate a positive perception of his social category and identity in a violent or delinquent manner, while possibly strengthening his emotional security relative to his social identity, the action implies negative behavior by the child towards others in the future.

Recent work demonstrates a relationship between community conflict and family or marital conflict (Kalslow, 2001, Reiss, et al. 1993). It is suggested that the presence of communal conflict acts as an additional stress on both the individual parents and their interactions as a couple, thus making them more susceptible to marital conflict. In Northern Ireland, the children's ability to successfully regulate their emotions and behaviors may be undermined simultaneously due to the effects of both communal and marital conflict on their emotional security.

The Taboo Nature of Conflict, Conflict Transformation, and the Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach

One way that citizens of Northern Ireland respond to the existing conflict is through an unspoken custom or law of silence (Smyth, 1998). Religion and politics are taboo in Northern Ireland like sex is in many other countries. This unofficial policy of avoidance may deter or prevent the occurrence of some verbal or physical arguments, as well as protect one's safety at times. However, according to Cummings' research, it is not a positive arrangement for children. In studying different forms of conflict and various conflict endings, Cummings found that children are equally affected by nonverbal and verbal anger, and that ending a conflict by using the silent treatment maintains the child's negative emotional state, rather than leaving him feeling positive, as a full resolution after exposure to verbal anger has shown to accomplish (Cummings 1989, 1991).

The taboo nature of Northern Ireland also makes it more difficult for both children and adults to cope with traumatic events, such as community violence and the loss of a loved one to death or imprisonment. Due to the possible relevance between the loss and the political conflict at large, even immediate family members are unable to openly discuss their feelings and reflections. Smyth explained Northern Ireland's taboo as being "a secret that is known, but cannot be spoken about, even with those who are closest to you," (Smyth, 1998). Considering the death or imprisonment of a loved one, the child is directly affected by the loss of the loved one and the absence of being able to adequately grieve with the remaining parental figure. The traumatic experience may also decrease the remaining parental figures ability to respond

sensitively and appropriately to his or her child, as some of Smyth's research suggests (Smyth, 1998).

Although the possible negative implications of the taboo nature of the Northern Ireland conflict upon children is recognized, the term conflict resolution itself is challenged within a communal conflict setting, such as the case of Northern Ireland. Politicians, professors, and participants of and in communal conflicts utilize the term conflict transformation, rather than the word resolution. It is thus not proposed that the communal conflict in Northern Ireland be fully resolved, as a disagreement over what to eat for dinner may be in a marital setting, but rather it suggests that the conflict be transformed into a more manageable state, which would decrease the conflict's negative impact on children. The decrease in paramilitary activity, the ceasefire, and the Good Friday Agreement are all examples of how the conflict in Northern Ireland, as an entity itself, is being transformed.

In relation to understanding how children are affected by communal conflict in Northern Ireland it is important to more fully understand how the conflict's transformation is affecting children. A greater understanding would assist politicians and community leaders in formulating policies and programs that positively impact the children residing there. Such programs may include emphasis on (1) recognizing common humanity (2) breaking generalizations and seeing individuals as people (3) acknowledging the fears and concerns of others (4) breaking cycles of retaliation and revenge (5) diminishing the stark taboo, so as to open lines of communication and not so severely restrict dissidence.

The complex nature of communal conflict and conflict transformation highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach towards building peace, and positive relations amongst communities and individuals in which the needs and rights of others are fully recognized and empowered. Moreover, historical, political, and economic factors relative to the conflict need to be addressed to improve the well being of children. Conflict transformation should be approached from a number of different avenues.

Even if the political and paramilitary leaders work out an agreement to end or significantly diminish the communal conflict in Northern Ireland, the conflict will continue unless the psychological and sociological bases behind the conflict are resolved and removed as primary influences on interpersonal lifestyles and inner understandings and perceptions of individuals. Peace efforts at a political level are essential, including policies centered on strengthening trust in the police force and alleviating housing problems relative to segregation. Coinciding with these political efforts peace programs focusing on community, family, and the individual must simultaneously occur. Programs should be aimed towards a greater understanding of the underlying social and emotional aspects of sociological and psychological processes relative to communal conflict.

The communal conflict in Northern Ireland also affects children through their exposure to the conflict. This exposure decreases their emotional security both in relation to their social identity and their perceived security of their families and communities. The continuance of this conflict, even in a nonviolent manner, will affect the children due to the unceasing tension and lack of resolution. Fundamentally, the continuation of this conflict rests, in part, upon the

perpetuation of children perceiving themselves as intricately and emotionally attached to, and defined by, their social category, which is adamantly opposed to the 'other'. Relatedly, these responses are intensified by the stress of exposure to conflict and the implications of conflict for the security of families and communities. Children's efforts to maintain a stable perception of themselves, relative to the physical security of their group and the security of their group's identity, also feeds and sustains the conflict. If the message continues across generations that "we" are incompatible with, and superior to, "them", the likelihood of lasting peace is diminished, despite the possible presence of notable gains at a political level.

Investigating how ideas and conceptions of the conflict and local politics are transferred to Northern Ireland's youth is of interest. The role of parental discussion, primary education, the media, and peer relations may all be considered as contributing to the development of a child's conception of politics. Studying how children view themselves as potential political actors, for example, whether they view the government as a legitimate institution through which change can be made, may also bring about a greater understanding of Northern Ireland's future developmental challenges as a political community.

Children as Victims and Participants in the Northern Ireland Conflict

International interest in Northern Ireland's communal conflict has continued to grow over the past few decades. A rise in publications regarding the conflict and media attention heightened public awareness and concern both in the United States and other countries. America's interest in Northern Ireland also increased, most notably through financial investments

in Northern Ireland's economy and the political guidance of former U.S. Senator, George Mitchell in the development of the Good Friday Agreement.

The majority of publications on the conflict focus on historical, political, and sociological aspects of the situation. In contrast, few studies, reports, or written documents explore the effects of the communal conflict upon the everyday lives of the individuals and families who live within Northern Ireland. In particular, many researchers neglect studying the effects of the communal conflict on the children.

The effects on children is a fertile area for further investigation due to the dual situation children in Northern Ireland find themselves in, as both victims to and participants in the communal conflict. Political and societal interest in children as victims coincides with a concern for the well-being and development of the children themselves. Interest in the children's role as participants in the communal conflict stems also from the potential of youth as an avenue towards peace, or alternatively the threat that the children will continue the traditional conflict of generations before them.

Cummings' empirical studies on children in conflict support the following statements, relative to children as victims.

- Children are negatively affected by conflict between adult, not solely their parents. The mere presence of background anger elicits distress, more proneness to aggressive behavior, and an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.
- Children become sensitized rather than desensitized or habituated to conflict in their lives.
- Increased exposure to unresolved negative conflict decreases children's abilities to regulate their emotional and behavioral responses to conflict, making them more susceptible to experiencing emotions such as anxiety, fear, and distress.

- An absence of resolution, or an incomplete resolution, such as the silent treatment, sustains the negative impact of conflict upon children.
- Children are highly sensitive to conflict resolution. The presence of resolution has been shown to dramatically ameliorate the negative effects of exposure to conflict.
- Children are affected by conflict as a result of their understanding of the how the conflict relates to them. Children are not aroused simply by the presence of angry or loud voices, but interpret the conflict and its implications for their emotional security, their families, and presumably their social categories.

These statements are based upon studies of children's reactions to inter-adult conflict; however, this working hypothesis suggests their plausible application to children in a communal conflict setting. The emotional security hypothesis and understanding of children's psychological processes relative to conflict embraces conceptions of emotional attachment and children's perception of themselves.

Children in Northern Ireland are simultaneously victims and participants in the conflict. The negative effects of conflict upon children's functioning reflect the role of children as victims. Children are participants as they come to form emotional attachments to their group, to view society as 'us' and 'them', to perpetuate the norm of a strictly divided region through perceiving oneself in relation to one's social category, and in defining one's social category relative to, or against, the competing social group. The perpetuation of two distinct social categories within Northern Ireland is dependent, in part, upon each generation adopting these distinctions. Thus, attaining a greater understanding of the social and psychological processes of children within Northern Ireland is essential in conceptualizing the youth as one possible pathway to peace, or further positive transformation of the conflict.

The social and psychological perspective presented is proposed as a working theory significant to one avenue towards peace, open for further investigation, alteration, and expansion. The attainment of a greater understanding of how and why children are affected by conflict in Northern Ireland, and how they come to form emotional attachments to their specific social categories, is essential to further conceptualizing and realizing children as instruments of peace. In the case of Northern Ireland hope for peace seems to rest, in part, upon the children and future generations.

Coinciding with the perceived importance of building peace processes amongst the youth based upon a more developed understanding of children's social and psychological processes in communal conflict settings, the need for a multidisciplinary approach is advocated. Building both communication and conflict resolution skills amongst the youth is one worthy avenue for change, but without other experts and disciplines working on a variety of factors connected to the conflict the efforts with Northern Ireland's youth may be ineffective.

The positive movements and leadership amongst politicians is essential at the international, regional and local levels. Growing cooperation among paramilitary leaders in recent years presents glimpses of hope for future resolution. The role of the economy and the development of new businesses and housing are also important, relative to the peace process. The placement of new offices and industry, and the environment within the working community is certainly affected by the conflict, especially in strictly segregated areas such as Belfast.

Building up positive communication and interaction between communities across cities, towns, and generations is an aspiration of many. In recognizing the immense complexities and

history behind the communal conflict in Northern Ireland, the need for utilizing a multidisciplinary approach to building peace processes and programs, and advancing communication and conflict resolution skills in a communal conflict setting, is clearly evident.

Further Thoughts on the Application of Theory and Research

In effort to present a new perspective or understanding of the communal conflict in Northern Ireland, in relation to children, the emotional security hypothesis are related to social identity theory, and then this newly developed or combined theory is applied to the communal conflict in Northern Ireland. Cummings studies involve children relative to marital conflict, but an expansion into the arena of communal conflict is an avenue Cummings is currently exploring. Despite the possible differences between cultures and conflict types, it is assumed that Cummings' research on how conflict affects children's emotional security and the importance of resolution to children, are relevant to both other cultures and to other conflict scenarios. Of course, additional psychological effects of conflict on children and young adults may accrue from the effects of war and armed conflict on the children (Smyth, 1998). Some of these effects may be overt (e.g., exposure to violence) and others may be less obvious, such as the effects of a militant peer culture in school in an area of ethnic conflict on children's dispositions towards nationalistic bigotry, despite the quality of the home environment (Smyth, personal communication). This paper thus explores both the possible connection between the emotional security hypothesis and social identity theory, as well as the possibilities of applying knowledge

gained on the resolution of marital or interadult conflict, to larger types of conflict as present in Northern Ireland.

The further application of theory and results from empirical studies to the conflict in Northern Ireland provide a new perspective on the conflict as it relates to children. In the search for peace in Northern Ireland, the review of all proposed avenues and the exploration of new ones are important. The working operative definition of peace entails an absence of violence and the presence of positive relations amongst communities and individuals in which the needs and rights of others are fully recognized and empowered.

The complexities of communal conflict likely require a multidisciplinary approach to resolution. Aside from resolution, an introduction to the term conflict transformation is appropriate. Conflict transformation implies the absence of a full resolution, and depicts the action of communal conflict transforming into a more manageable and positive entity or presence. This review suggests that one approach to conflict transformation at the level of theory may follow, from the proposed theory.

The purpose of this paper is not to solve the conflict of Northern Ireland, but to initiate a new way of looking at the conflict, specifically in relation to its affect on children, and in turn the role children may play in its resolution. This presentation of a new avenue towards peace may undergo further exploration and expansion within the future by other individuals and experts of various disciplines and positions. Indeed, a multidisciplinary approach to conflict transformation is essential.

All children witness conflict. Many children witness marital conflict, or some form of interadult conflict within their household. Unfortunately, millions of children around the world also witness other types of conflict, such as the communal conflict of Northern Ireland. Within the present review we consider recent studies on marital conflict for possible relevance to a case study of Northern Ireland's communal conflict, while paying special attention to the emotional security hypothesis and the social identity theory. The paper's focus on the effects of conflict on children acts as a reminder to governmental institutions to consider and address the interests of children when making decisions impacting the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Epilogue: Future Initiatives

Research on the effects on children in Northern Ireland is still a fairly recent and underdeveloped area. This thesis has worked to contribute an original and working theory firmly based on cutting-edge child developmental research to further understand such effects. As Notre Dame's involvement in Belfast through the Kroc and Keough Institutes increases, the opportunities for future research on the effects on the children and young people come closer to realization. At present, Notre Dame is collaborating efforts with the University of Ulster, the University of Illinois, the government of Northern Ireland, and researchers such as Marie Smyth. Buildings are currently being constructed to host a variety of community programs and research on communal conflict resolution or transformation in the future. The programs and studies are

presently being developed to service all ages within the two neighborhoods, and to foster positive communication and further understanding between the two social categories.

Upon his most recent visit to Belfast in mid-March 2001, Professor R. Scott Appleby, Director of the Kroc Institute, brought a copy of an earlier version of this document to Belfast. Marie Smyth requested, and now holds, a copy of this working paper. Smyth is a professor at the University of Ulster, is involved in research through INCORE (Initiative in Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity), and directs a nongovernmental organization, "Community Conflict Impact on Children". Smyth's interest in the paper, proposed theory, and the research initiatives that may follow can further enhance the dialogue and involvement of Notre Dame with these initiatives in Belfast. It is our intention to continue developing and revamping this proposal in collaboration with Erin L. Lovell, Professor E. Mark Cummings, Marie Smyth, and others. With this working paper as one starting point, we are interested in designing new research projects in multidisciplinary collaborations with investigators and scholars in Northern Ireland and at involved sites. In terms of methodology, we are especially interested in community studies in family and social environments that involve the researched populations as closely as possible in the work. It is our combined hope that we may positively impact Notre Dame's involvement in Belfast and the development and onset of the programs and studies, which will one day be realized through the efforts of many, while aiding in the attainment of a more full understanding of communal conflict and its affect on children.

Thus, work on this front is timely and important on multiple counts and in terms of the interests of multiple disciplines concerned with the broader patterns of influence of ethnic conflicts on

children's adjustment, and, thus, ultimately, on the functioning of society and the continuation of ethnic conflict.

A significant challenge for such an undertaking is that a truly multidisciplinary team is needed. For the case of Northern Ireland the team ideally should include and involve a successful collaboration of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, educators and other providing social services, community leaders, economists, representatives of government and experts on governmental policy, political scientists, academics, amongst others. Such a team is difficult to assemble for many practical reasons of time, distance, and availability as well as the challenge of overcoming disciplinary boundaries and inevitable problems of communicating across disciplines. We do not claim to have the expertise ourselves to encompass the many needed levels of analysis, including the study of conflict process and conflict resolution at multiple levels of their functional significance. We can claim to have extensive and cutting edge knowledge about research methodologies and approaches for studying the effects of conflict processes on children, marriages, and families. Thus, our goal in this paper is to provide a framework that may constitute one (of perhaps several) starting points for multidisciplinary efforts towards better understanding of the issues and possible bases for intervention for children and families in Northern Ireland. We are excited about possibilities because the Kroc Institute naturally encompasses a multidisciplinary perspective and has elements in place for advancing the study of conflict process and conflict resolution in various high conflict zones and regions of ethnic conflict, including Northern Ireland. We are hopeful that this report will

provide a useful starting point for the discussion and consideration of some of the possible new and exciting directions.

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