Learning Lessons from Northern Ireland: Routes in and out of Northern Irish Paramilitary Groups

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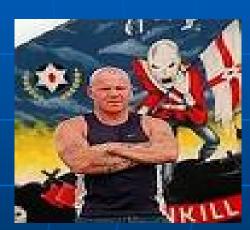
The Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies

Why do People Join Insurgent Groups?
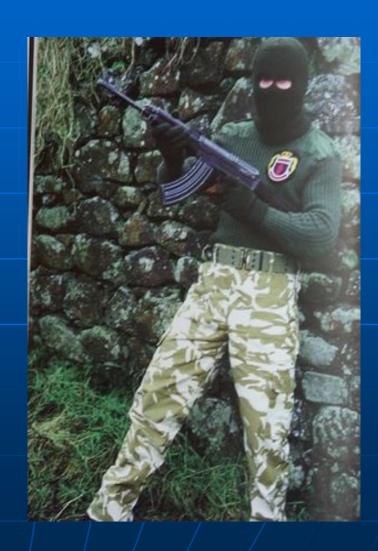
Are they psychologically abnormal?

In Reality

Naive

I was young me, daft as a brush. Thought I knew everything, knew nothing.

But actually up until I was 30, I felt very immature in my outlook. Very simplistic out look and thought Paisley was god, I thought whatever he said was true because he wore a collar and everything like that.

I was born in 1951, which was just thirty years after Northern Ireland had come into existence, but in my mindset Northern Ireland had been there from Biblical times you know, you just had no notion.

Antecedent factors

- Perceived injustice
- Age and gender
- Past family involvement
- Community support
- Coerced or conscripted
- Incremental process of involvement
- Vengeance, or a need to right wrongs
- Identify with the armed group
- Trauma and dissociation
- Opportunity to join insurgent group

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Critical Incidents

It [membership in paramilitary groups] was an explosion waiting to happen, and it happened when I was 14, and by the time I was 19, I had made a conscious decision to join the UVF. Not before that.

And I thought, "That's my fence-sitting days over", and I joined the UVF. And there's so many stories like that, where you talk to Republicans and Loyalists and you find out there was a moment. There was a moment when they crossed the Rubicon.

(Both Participant B)

A Period of Self-reflection

So, quite honestly, within, within maybe an hour I'd been sat there on my own on me hunkers, and I said, "Right, that's it. Ah, the gloves are off as far as I'm concerned". So, I went in and I seen other people and to cut a very, very, long story short, I got stuck into the Brits every time I got a chance. (Participant D)

Personal Factors & Social Histories

Bloody Sunday was a very important issue, because young fellas joined the IRA. If I had been 17, I would have joined the IRA because young fellas that age just want to get a crack back [at the State]. (Participant F)

Impact of Engagement in Violence

Elevated Collective Efficacy

I felt, as many others at that particular time, at least if you were up and being active and trying to do something, you were doing just that, trying to do something. I was not prepared any longer to sit back in my chair, like my parents had to do, and their parents. Yes, I was prepared to stand up and say, "Ok, you can knock me down, but I'm not going to go away". I'm going to be there and I'm going to try and do my best to achieve what I set out to achieve. (Participant G).

Perpetration-induced Traumatic Stress

I was after leaving the scene of an incident, where people were hurt, with a couple of friends. One of them is dead since, shot, uh, as we were going away it was night time and we were in a car and we had the lights out, but we knew where we were because we knew the area very well. And when we got a certain distance away from that incident – thank God, nobody was killed, but they were hurt – the fella that was driving the car switched on the lights, and this was in a country area. And a rabbit ran across the road, and what did the driver do? He braked and swerved to avoid the rabbit. But what did we leave behind us? That tells you a lot. (Participant C)

Disengagement from Violence

The Process of Disengagement

Micro, meso, macro and exo factors.

A. Individual disengagement.

B. Group disengagement.

I. Voluntary Processes.

II. Forced Processes.

i. Temporary.

ii. Permanent disengagement.

Disengagement of the Individual Militant

- Killing

- Incarceration

  - Incarceration may lead to:

  a) Increased radicalization in prison.

  b) Reform and rehabilitation.

Space to Think

Some people say that the likes of the Maze [a prison in Northern Ireland] and places like that were universities of terrorism, they were terrorist training camps. But I actually believe that they were the university of peace, in terms of what we discussed in there, how we decided, how we came about in our discussions how do we get out of this? How do we get, you know, where is this all going?

I went to prison in 1980 and if you've any sort of grey matter in your head at all you have to start and analyse why you finished up in prison and just my thinking just reinforced the fact that everything wasn't as black and white as I had seen it. Prison just gives you an opportunity to be detached from the conflict, it's a dubious way to be detached but you're detached from it and it gives you time to think, you come out with pretty clear ideas in your head. It's pretty difficult after that period of time when you're away and you go back and see your friends and colleagues from before and some of them are thinking in exactly the same way as they did in the early seventies, how's this happening like, and then they think because you've been in prison it's softened you or broken you or whatever but that's not the case it's just common sense, pragmatism, you can't go on killing each other forever, some time you're going to have to talk so why not do it now rather than go through another ten, twenty or whatever years of conflict.

Radicalization *vs.* Reformulation

And then they [Members of ETA] asked for a meeting and we went and talked to them and they asked for our help on how do we get out of the situation we are in. So I basically said to them look you have a big problem because if you have an active service unit that is caught maybe bombing in Madrid, say it's us three, you go to Barcelona, you go to Madrid and I'd probably go to Valencia. We never have the opportunity to discuss what we were doing. So what happens then is there another service unit comes up again, so there's no room for dialogue. So what we said to them was one of you should call a ceasefire, but have a condition within the ceasefire that after the ceasefire is held for so long that there is a repatriation of your prisoners into the one place, and then you start to debate and the discussion on how you move forward.

Life Changes

But you sort of, I was going to say you mellow out but you don't, sort of experience gives you a wee bit more of a common sense approach to things and you start trying to see things from more than just the one perspective.

When you do thirteen years in prison when you come out you wouldn't be much use for doing anything else in that line of business.

And I learnt, I'm being honest with you, I learnt more in jail than I learnt on the street all my life. Oh aye. I mean it's all self-taught. I mean I took a few courses like accountancy and book keeping and sociology, you know what I mean.

Guilt & Trauma

I'm someone that's living that lived in the past, that went through it and is able to recount and tell them the horrors of it. And how much it can take lumps out of your head. Because it has taken lumps out of mine, there's no doubt about it. I have the rest of my life to live thinking on things that I've done and maybe hurt people. And I'm very, very, sorry for it. I never wanted to do it. I don't want any young people to go through that again. And I want them to appreciate life, you know, and get on and be happy and love one another no matter what religion they are.

I was always uncomfortable with the activities that I was involved in, it didn't make me any less determined at the time to do them but I was uncomfortable with it... I didn't agonise in bed at night and couldn't sleep about it but I just knew it wasn't really the way to do things.

Family and Future Generations

Coz both my kids were young so I went and helped out and basically it just went from there and I basically walked away from the whole thing. I suppose in many senses I seen that there was more of a need for people working in their community than there was in terms of lifting guns and bombs, and I started, and nobody bothered me.

Hopefully my kids will never see trouble like I seen. No never in my life do I want them to see that. I have a wee lad there and another child on the way.

Visions of a Shared Future

In the real world- there's about 42 or 43% of the population in Northern Ireland who don't see the world the way I see it. If there had been only 10% of them we could have crushed them like a nut. Or if we had only had 10% of us they could have crushed us like a nut, but lets live in the real world. As a ready ethic I try, not very deeply, but- we can pretty much stop them achieving what they want, and they can pretty much stop us achieving what we want, so why don't we start working out that under those conditions neither of the two of us is going to get what we want, so we'd better start thinking of something else, a similar methodology to achieve what we want. What we want is a better way of life, to achieve some stability and normalness. And if that's the case, and I think, if people are building foundations on that, then there's a chance.

Transformative Leadership

He wants people to move forward now, and this is the type of guy who's worked all his life [in addition to being a member of the UVF]. He goes to his work and he said "I don't like it when I walk along the Shankill Road and people say there's such and such, commander of the UVF. I want people to turn round and say there's such and such who works in such and such a factory, coz I don't want people to see me like that. You know not that I'm not proud of it, but we need to get back to normality". We need to, and I think that's where we will be able to win the day within the UVF. The fact that there is enough good people at the top who are interested in moving forward. I wish I could say that for the whole rank and file, but I can't and I won't.

Barriers to Disengagement

Fear of Disintegration

At this point in time, the paramilitaries are disintegrating or mutating into gangs because it's, since 1994 when the ceasefire was called, it's what do you do now mate, we're redundant aren't we… How do paramilitaries justify their existence if there's no conflict? Yes, we've tried to move and alter culture, trying to get people involved in the community, trying to get people involved in politics and some people just want to be by themselves, so we do try. But the greed, the money, I mean you're talking about big money. There's people gone across to Scotland with £70,000 in a shoe box cash … that's unbelievable isn't it. The money aspect, loyalty doesn't mean a bean, it's now at rock bottom and unless you can turn it around somewhere you know, I would say we've hit a complete down spiral with gangs

Rejected and Labelled by the Mainstream

There was this stigma in your community…Unionist politicians didn't want to know, so we had no support from outside.

No one can ever take away from me the contribution that I've made. There will be those who will say that you were a bomber, and a killer, and a maimer, and a hurtful person, so therefore we don't respect you, our morality tells us we mustn't respect you and if all you bad people had gone away what a wonderful place this would be.

Lack of Leadership

You had a lot of people there who were very supportive but in a very much background type attitude, but in the same sense when it came to politics the people who could only speak for us, presumed to only speak for us was the educated, your articulated, and you never got them in loyalist paramilitaries, I mean that was one thing that there was a major major shortage of, you had nobody to speak to formulate policy, to talk about strategy, to talk about the way forward, it didn't exist. You had one or two thinkers but not in the same degree as you would have within the Republican circles, so it was more or less a blind man fumbling in the dark, where do we go from here and how do we go from here, how can we be used.

Who have we got to speak for us? Unionist politicians? David Ervine is dead. Who've we got now, we haven't even got a vote.

Legacy of the Conflict

I think that the emotional difficulty of dealing with the other side- let's look at governments for example. Governments spend billions to vilify their enemy, and then when the conflict ends, they have to talk to the enemy they've just vilified. Billions! You only realize what a damn good job you did vilifying them when you have to talk to them. And it's a bit like that for communities as well that the other side could never be honourable, never be decent, never be genuine, never be real, and meanwhile back at the ranch having espoused that for as long as I can ever remember, then a society goes to talk to each other and we get into trouble because they've done such a good job of vilifying one another in the past. We don't trust each other and- the failure of trust is not the issue, our not trusting each other, how could we? We don't know each other.

Conclusions

- Routes in and out of armed groups are complex.
- There are commonalities in the processes of both engagement and disengagement across armed groups.
- Lessons can be learnt from exploring demobilized groups.
- Critical incidents are important drivers.
- Prison or removal from the conflict is key.
- Disengagement does not mean de-radicalization.
- The research evidence and theoretical models do offer a means of conceptualizing the scale and intricacy of the problems involved.

Relevant Publications

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