INCORE Working Paper
August 2002

Single Identity Work: An approach to conflict resolution in Northern Ireland

By: Cheyanne Church, Anna Visser, Laurie Johnson

Introduction

Despite its relatively small geographic size and population, Northern Ireland has received significant international attention as a conflict society over the last thirty years. The divisions that demarcate this society are not new. Throughout its history, Northern Ireland has been a segregated society within which every aspect of life from education to work to recreation has been affected by socio-political divisions. Despite the deeply entrenched segregation, there have been significant attempts in recent decades to reconcile the two major communities, commonly referred to as Unionist (Protestants) and Nationalist (Catholics)[1]. Such attempts to overcome the divisions within society and promote reconciliation have come to be broadly referred to as community relations work.[2]

According to Hughes and Donnelly (1998) most community relations work in Northern Ireland has aimed at facilitating contact between Catholics and Protestants. This approach has been informed, at its most basic level, by the Contact Hypothesis which is 'the long

---

[1] The conflict in Northern Ireland emanates from fundamental differences that exist between the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community and the Catholic/nationalist/republican community. The former population seeks to remain part of the United Kingdom while the latter wishes to see the unification of the island of Ireland. Among each community, there are subgroupings categorized according to their absolute beliefs and methods for achieving political goals. Unionists and nationalists are generally seen as pursuing their goals through constitutional means whereas the more hardline loyalists and republicans are widely regarded as employing non-constitutional and even violent means to achieve their ends. For reasons of simplicity, this paper will refer to the two major communities in Northern Ireland as Unionist and Nationalist, while recognising the importance of the distinctions between the categories.

[2] The term community relations seems to have been coined in the early sixties in Britain to describe solutions being sought to the problem of racial disharmony arising from immigrant communities in the United Kingdom. As Frazer and Fitzduff point out, earlier explanations of the term seem to have been primarily concerned with promoting harmonious existence between differing groups, however later definitions have come to put more emphasis on the idea of the equality of basic rights and opportunities while encouraging cultural diversity (Frazer and Fitzduff, 1994, p. 17).

and widely held belief that interaction between individuals belonging to different groups will reduce ethnic prejudice and intergroup tension' (Hewstone and Brown, 1986, p. 1).

However, despite the opportunities for both formal and informal contact between the communities in Northern Ireland, serious problems remain. Indeed there have been instances where contact has proven detrimental to community relations by reinforcing stereotypes and distrust. Given the existing barriers and the lack of convincing evidence that cross-community contact actually works, several alternative models of community relations work have developed, one of which is 'single identity work'. Simply stated, single identity work involves engaging individuals singularly from within one community to discuss, address and potentially challenge the causes of conflict, with particular emphasis on skills and confidence building measures. Single identity work most commonly, but not always, occurs when cross-community contact is untenable due to fear, suspicion or physical threat. After years of practise, debate remains as to whether single identity work should be a first step or prelude towards cross-community work, or an end of its own. In Northern Ireland this work is done with groups whose membership is singularly derived from within one of the two major communities, either Catholic or Protestant.

This paper provides an exploratory introduction to single identity work, its origins and some of the questions and challenges this approach currently faces. By providing a brief context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, it highlights the deeply divided nature of this society as the basis from which single identity work developed. The Contact Hypothesis, as one of the primary foundations of community relations practice, is discussed and single identity work is examined within this conceptual framework. The final section addresses the role of single identity work in Northern Ireland, delineates the major types of single identity work, and discusses the challenges and questions which continue to be raised in relation to the efficacy of this approach. This paper does not intend to represent an exhaustive study of single identity work in Northern Ireland, but rather seeks to provide an exploratory introduction to this particular approach to community relations.

This paper largely derives from a best practice project conducted on single identity work during the Local International Learning Project (LILP)[3] at INCORE[4] in Northern Ireland. The project involved three workshops with community relations practitioners who have extensive experience in single identity work among other approaches. The workshops were facilitated along a semi-structured agenda that sought to elicit information and practitioner perspectives that would provide the basis for a common understanding around a set of key issues. The aim of the project was to identify a body of best practice

---

[3] The Local International Learning Project (LILP) aimed to promote the exchange of models and ideas between Northern Irish and international practitioners and policy-makers within the field of conflict resolution and community relations.

[4] INCORE – The Institute for Conflict Resolution is a joint research institute of the United Nations University and the University of Ulster. It seeks to address the management and resolution of contemporary conflicts through research, training, practice, policy and theory. For further information see, www.incore.ulst.ac.uk

in community relations that would lend itself to sharing across all involved. This paper also draws from the work of one author who has been involved in the development and monitoring of a single identity project with Loyalist youth.

The authors have adopted a number of working definitions. These include: 'community relations,' which is the spectrum of activities, programmes and projects in Northern Ireland that seek to overcome the divisions within society and promote reconciliation amongst the two major communities. This would commonly be referred to as conflict resolution or peacebuilding work elsewhere. For the purposes of this paper, the term community relations will be used to refer to both cross-community and single identity approaches. The term 'practitioner' refers to those individuals who are involved in initiating, developing, facilitating or co-ordinating community relations work. 'Participant' refers to those individuals who take part in the range of activities involved in community relations work or who are the end beneficiaries of the projects.

The Northern Ireland Conflict

Northern Ireland is a small region with a population of approximately 1, 691,000.[5] Neither state nor nation, it is a political component of the United Kingdom and a geographical region of the island of Ireland. Although an oversimplification, the conflict in Northern Ireland can broadly be referred to as a struggle between those who wish Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom (Unionist) and those who wish to see the unification of the island of Ireland (Nationalists). While the conflict in Northern Ireland has in popular discourse been identified as a religious one, this designation is more symbolic than motivational. Indeed those who consider themselves Unionists may not be active Protestants and likewise, all Protestants are not necessarily Unionists. Similarly, all Nationalists are not active Catholics, and Catholics are not necessarily all Nationalists.

In Northern Ireland, as with many conflicts, there is no one truth or absolute reality. Equally there is no agreement on the history of the conflict. Some perspectives date the conflict to the British plantation of Ireland in the 17th century. Other perspectives highlight a much more recent history, dating the current conflict to the division of the island of Ireland in 1921 with the Government of Ireland Act.

In looking at the conflict from a more contemporary perspective, the current 'Troubles', as the conflict is known locally, violently came to a head in 1969. The conflict was initially linked to a civil rights movement, which aimed to peacefully overcome discrimination against a minority Nationalist population by the majority Unionist government. The movement was started in 1967, with the formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), which demanded reform and an end to discrimination against Catholics within the Protestant dominated one-party state.

---

[5] Bowcott suggests that the release of the 2001 census figures for Northern Ireland will mark the declining demographic difference between the Catholic and Protestant populations. He estimates that the population will be shown to be 46-48% Catholic. A significant increase from 41% in 1991. (Bowcott, 2001)

Although in concept a non-violent movement, a minority felt the use of violence was the only solution as the current problems could not be addressed within existing state structures. The eruption of violence led to the deployment of the British Army on the streets of Northern Ireland in August 1969. By 1972 it was clear that the Northern Irish government was no longer in control of the state. Invoking its powers under the Government of Ireland Act, the Westminster Parliament[6] suspended the Northern Ireland government and introduced direct rule from Westminster.[7]

The campaign of violence and counter violence by Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries lasted until the ceasefires of 1994. The prolonged nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland has cost many lives. From July 1969 to 31 December 1998, 3480 people lost their lives in the Northern Irish Conflict.[8] Civilians have been the most significant group of victims in Northern Ireland, with paramilitaries committing the vast majority of killings.[9]

Since the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland there have been a series of macro political initiatives seeking to find a solution to the conflict, and re-establish local government structures.[10] Despite recent success on a political level the conflict has left a legacy of a deeply divided society. It is this division that has and continues to foster sectarianism and violence in Northern Irish society and which community relations work seeks to address.

Division in Northern Ireland Society

To this day, Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society; individuals can go about their daily lives without ever seriously engaging with a member of the 'other' community. This division manifests itself in all aspects of society including housing/accommodation, work, school and recreation. The longevity of the conflict has meant that for those in their forties and younger, the 'Troubles' have provided a societal context for most, if not all, of their lives (Smyth, 1998, p. 8).

---

[6] The home of the British Government is at Westminster, London, UK.

[7] The term 'direct rule' refers to the decision to govern the state of Northern Ireland from Westminster, thus suspending the local government structures. Since 1971 there have been a series of attempts to reinstate local government, culminating in the Good Friday Agreement 1998.

[8] For a full break down of deaths in the Northern Irish conflict see Sutton, M. (1999) *An Index of Deaths from the conflict in Ireland*, Beyond the Pale Publications: Belfast.

[9] As Fay, Morrissey and Smith state: 'Civilians are the largest category killed, and account for 53 percent of the total killed, with the British Army accounting for almost 15 percent. Republican paramilitaries account for almost 13 percent, the RUC account for 8 percent of those killed and the other groups each account for less than 6 per cent.' (Fay M., Morrissey, M., and Smyth, M., http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/abs1.htm)

[10]Such initiatives date back to the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 and continued through the eighties and nineties before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, also known as the Belfast Agreement, in 1998. The political process has been well documented, and is beyond the scope of this paper. For an outline of the main events which have characterised the conflict in Northern Ireland see the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/events

The division of Northern Irish society is not obvious along ethnic or linguistic lines, indeed most visitors would have difficulty distinguishing between a Catholic and a Protestant. As Trew points out,

> Nowadays cultural divisions between Protestants and Catholics are not accompanied by any difference in language or even significant linguistic variations (Milroy, 1981). Similarly, there are no obvious physical differences between the groups... Nevertheless there is almost universal acceptance in Northern Ireland of the existence of subtle, cultural clues for religious ascription. It has been suggested (Burton, 1978; Cairns, 1980) that characteristics such as name, home address, facial features, accent and dress can be conceptualised as signs in a system that serves to emphasize distinctiveness between Protestants and Catholics. (Trew, 1986, p. 95)

The geographical location of one's home or birth is an important factor in placing individuals within the political divide. Boyle and Hadden (1994) noted the patchwork communal geography that engenders territoriality in Northern Ireland based on ethnic and socio-political identification. In rural areas many of the smaller villages are commonly 'owned' by one tradition or the other, this ownership is clearly evident through the display of symbols and flags, and other identifying features. City lives are no less segregated, for example in Belfast there are numerous sectarian 'interfaces' or peace walls that have been built between neighbouring communities. Originally meant as temporary dividers many of the metal and concrete structures have become more solid as the years have passed.

Figure 1: Peace wall in west Belfast (c) CAIN (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/)

Given these divisions, it naturally follows that personal interaction between communities is also limited. Although there has been a slight increase in the instances of mixed marriages in recent years (Northern Ireland Life and Times, http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/), there is little evidence of change in the patterns of intergroup friendships. Indeed 'it appears that attitudes towards mixed marriages are not improving, at least among those not directly involved in them' (Cairns, unpublished paper). Further, extracurricular

activities such as youth clubs have different organisations for Catholic and Protestant youth, and sport in Northern Ireland reflects the denominational split. Even where communities enjoy the same sports such as soccer/football, support tends to be divided according to religion, and on occasion has given rise to violent expressions of sectarianism.

This division between communities is also institutionalised, with the education system being nearly totally segregated. Despite the steady development of the integrated education sector in Northern Ireland it involves less than 5 per cent of the school population (CAIN, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/educ.htm). As one author has pointed out, 'it is difficult to see in the support given to integrated schools, any evidence for a dramatic desire on the part of Northern Irish people to abandon their segregated ways' (Cairns, unpublished paper).

Cultural celebrations, particularly those that celebrate historical victories or losses for either community in the form of parades, are often divisive and sometimes violent. Parading has been one of the most controversial issues in recent years. There have been cases of standoffs between the police, local residents, and marching groups that have resulted in violence and the reinforcement of community divisions.

The legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland has meant that it has been possible for a large number of people to go about their daily lives without ever engaging in substantial contact with the other community. Survey data over the period 1968-1999 indicates that while public levels of optimism about the future of cross-community relations have been improving, they have still not moved beyond the point reached in 1968 before the 'Troubles' began (Cairns, unpublished paper). This division of Northern Ireland society is the *reason d'etre* of community relations work, which aims to improve cross community understanding and cooperative interdependence across the divide.   A traditional approach to community relations work would look to the notion that bringing people together will increase understanding and reduce intergroup prejudice, as was proffered by the "Contact Hypothesis" (Allport, 1954).

The Contact Hypothesis

As originally proposed by the social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954), the contact hypothesis posited that prejudice is largely the result of ignorance (lack of shared experience/knowledge). As such, contact between groups was seen as an advantageous means of gaining knowledge about the 'other' (Pettigrew, 1986). This thinking broadly influenced human relations and desegregation proponents in the post war decades. In discussing the policy recommendations that Allport made for overcoming prejudice, Brown (2000) has pointed out:

> taken together, these recommendations have come to be known as the contact hypothesis, since underlying all of them is the idea that bringing members of different groups into contact with one another in various ways

is the best way of reducing any tension or hostility that might exist between them. [11] (p. 342)

In the fifty years since Allport first proposed his contact thesis, there has been much research aimed at testing it. This research has further qualified the original proposition by finding that it is the nature of the contact, that is, the conditions under which intergroup contact takes place that will determine its impact on reducing between-group prejudice. For example, Amir (1969), Pettigrew (1971), and Wirth and Lord (1992), summarised research that tested Allport's hypothesis and identified a number of core conditions required for intergroup contact to be successful: the contact needs to be personal and sustained, involve a co-operative venture, be conducted in a framework of official institutional support, and guarantee equal status between the groups.

Examination of the contact hypothesis has continued through the years with new research questions continually unfolding (Connolly, 2000). As part of this, new models have been generated that attempt to further define the nature of the interactions that take place.

The *decategorisation* model holds that group contact is most meaningful when interaction is primarily between individuals and not groups, therefore reducing the salience of group affiliation. The assumption underlying this approach is that individualistic and personal experiences undermine the usefulness of outgroup categorisation (Brewer and Miller, 1996). In these situations individuals no longer recognise previously held stereotypical assumptions as valid. Hewstone and Brown (1986), on the other hand proposed the *recategorisation* model which suggests that only when 'intergroup' contact takes place will the positive effects generalise to the outgroup as a whole. When contact is identified with groups rather than individuals attitudes towards the whole group are changed. Finally there is the *subcategorisation* model which suggests that only when contact leads people to identify themselves as part of a larger super ordinate group, will the contact have been effective (Gaertner et al., 1993, in Cairns, unpublished paper). Individuals from different groups come to identify themselves as part of a larger overarching category hence differences which led to conflict are no longer important.

Pettigrew (1997) has attempted to integrate these three models, suggesting that all three processes are necessary but that they must occur in a particular sequence. He suggests that first people get to know each other as friends, that they then understand that they come from two different groups, and finally that an attempt is made to forge a common identity (Cairns, unpublished paper). In other words the sequence would move from decategorisation to recategorisation to subcategorisation.

Hughes and Knox (1997) summarise Brown's work on the three main failings of the contact hypothesis. First, it is based on the premise that prejudice arises from a lack of understanding. Empirical research has indicated that there are other environmental and institutional factors that play an important role in producing prejudice. For instance there

---

[11] For a detailed account of the classical statement of the contact hypothesis refer to   Hewstone and Brown, 1986, pp. 3-6; Pettigrew, 1986, p. 172-176.

may be a conflict of interest or differential status positions, factors that cannot be overcome through contact alone. Second, the contact hypothesis fails to take into account 'normative and informational forces' at work in a contact environment. Cultural norms of politeness may mean that individuals will avoid behaviours that are liable to bring about confrontation. Further, even where information gleaned in a contact context has affected attitudes, dissemination of such views within the wider community may prove too risky. In short "informational influences in one context are outweighed by normative influences in another" (Hughes and Knox, 1997, p. 334). Finally Brown suggests that contact theory fails to adequately acknowledge the salience of group identity. Differences between interpersonal behaviour and intergroup behaviour mean that friendships forged at an interpersonal level may not present a challenge to existing group stereotypes; individuals can treat each other as the exception to the norm (Hughes and Knox, 1997 p. 333-334).

As Johnston and Hewstone (1992) have pointed out, what tends to happen when disconfirming information is presented is that it leads to the formation of 'sub groups' which are not thought of as representative of the group as a whole. Cairns holds that this is almost certainly what happens as a result of successful contact in Northern Ireland. People form subtypes – they now know that 'good' or 'decent' Catholics or 'good' or 'decent' Protestants exist – but unfortunately the overall stereotype is left unchanged (Cairns, 1994, pp.17-18).

Cross community work

As in other parts of the western world, initiatives aimed at overcoming divisions in Northern Ireland have been influenced by the underlying assumptions of the contact hypothesis. These initiatives have included reconciliation groups, residential centres, publicity projects, cultural traditions work, institutional anti-sectarian work, training and cross-boarder initiatives.

Despite the range of cross-community initiatives and informal contact that has occurred in Northern Ireland over the past 30 years it seems clear that increased intergroup contact has not rendered viable reconciliation in this society. A number of factors have hindered the positive impact of contact. First, where contact does happen in Northern Ireland it can be superficial by nature. As Fitzduff and O'Hagan (2000) state:

> Even where contact has happened…such contact was usually notable for its often polite, but calculated, avoidance of any acknowledgment or discussion of differences, in the belief that such discussion is bound to be contentious. In the words of Seamus Heaney, the Nobel prize-winning local poet, the key priority for most of such conversations was "Whatever you say, say nothing."

Second, formal contact efforts may be 'preaching to the converted'. That is those individuals who become involved in community relations projects are those who would already uphold the values of a peaceful and equitable society. The argument being that those groups who are perpetrating sectarianism would be the last to become involved in cross-community reconciliation efforts. A third possibility is that those whose behaviours

have been changed are more likely to leave Northern Ireland and its quarrels behind, creating a type of "selective immigration" (Cairns, unpublished paper). In recent years, research has suggested that a significant proportion of contact projects conducted in Northern Ireland under the banner of community relations have had limited impact (Cairns and Cairns 1995; Hughes and Knox, 1997). Rather than discounting the contact hypothesis however, it is important to note that most frequently the conditions identified as central to successful contact have not been met in these initiatives. In the end, initiatives that do no more than bring the two communities into contact are unlikely to have any long-term impact on attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, Allport himself recognized that to successfully reduce prejudice it was essential to consider the nature of the contact.

Further, even when possible, cross-community or contact work in Northern Ireland is not always a positive step in its own right. There are many examples of cross-community initiatives being facilitated without adequate preparation, with damaging results, reinforcing fears and prejudices. For example in one case a community relations project was involved in organising a football match between two schools from different sides of the community. The children were not well prepared for contact and the experience served to re-enforce existing fears and prejudices.

For a number of reasons cross community work in Northern Ireland has not always been possible. The Northern Irish Community Relations Council (CRC)[12] identifies a variety of mitigating factors including: the nature of the issue, feelings of insecurity or lack of confidence, political suspicion, fear of reactions from within communities, and fear of hostility from the other side of the community. One of the major factors, that influenced the development of this approach to community relations, referred to as single identity work, has been the recognition that there are large sectors of the population who remain outside of cross community reconciliation efforts. Therefore the thinking has been that, if lasting positive peace is ever to be achieved in Northern Ireland it will only come as a result of somehow engaging such groups of people.

The apparent shortcomings of the hypothesis, as already discussed, are particularly confounded in the context of Northern Ireland's sectarian divide. As a result, many community relations practitioners have come to believe that the basic premise - that increased contact reduces between group prejudices – is not fully tenable in this society, and, as such, have sought alternative models for promoting reconciliation.[13] Pursuant to the practical difficulties that were experienced by many cross-community projects, a single identity approach was pursued as a strategy when cross community contact was viewed as either impossible, likely to be counter productive or have the potential for limited impact.

---

[12]The Community Relations Council, is a quasi-independent funding body that aims to engage two communities drifting ever further apart and to promote meaningful dialogue and co-operation beyond the immediate political sphere, www.community-relations.org.uk

[13] Here again the question remains as to whether the conditions as outlined in the hypothesis were ever actually met

Single Identity Work

Single identity work refers to those projects, programmes and initiatives that engage their participant members solely from one side of the divide in Northern Ireland. Though not always the case, single identity work often involves exploring and affirming issues related to cultural identity. The form and purpose of this intragroup engagement is not standardised and can range from projects that attempt to directly address, discuss or potentially challenge conflict issues, to those that focus on 'softer' issues and broach difficult conflict related topics only if they naturally arise. In general it is an approach adopted either as an alternative to intergroup contact for those who will not engage in cross community discourse, or, as a preliminary mechanism that will lead to productive cross community contact in the longer term.

In other words, the single identity concept represents an overarching approach within which there are a variety of project types and initiatives. These initiatives do not necessarily distinguish themselves from cross-community projects in regard to content but rather differ in terms of the definition of their constituents and nature of interaction focus. Operating from an intragroup rather than a between group approach, single identity work almost exclusively takes place in accordance with cultural, political and religious identity divisions in Northern Ireland.

Often it is those who are most firmly entrenched within their own tradition who are not involved in community relations activities and in the most need of support. The existence of single identity projects enables community relations practitioners to reach out beyond those who are able and willing to engage in cross-community contact, thus often engaging diverse pockets of society for the first time. In many circumstances, these sections of society would not consider involvement in classic community relations projects as the perception exists that those who do so are 'soft' or traitors to their own community. Moreover participating within a group that is comprised of members only from one community tends to foster the perception of a 'safe space' to explore and engage in issues, thereby creating a more open discussion, the opportunity for one which is more honestly challenging. For example, practitioners during the LILP discussions highlighted the benefit of enabling the group to explore intra-group differences.

In discussing the internal differences and difficulties that often emerge in single tradition groups, Leichty and Clegg (2000) speak to the tendency of members to want to pretend that differences do not exist within one's own group and, as such, present a united front. From a community relations perspective, these practitioners state their conviction that "finding ways of helping people to face positively the diversity that exists in their own groupings is a crucial means of helping them to be more receptive towards difference in other groups or traditions" (p. 216).

In practical terms, single identity work does not have a formal model that can be followed. There is no common timeframe to be adhered to, although all practitioners agree that the longer one is able to constructively engage with a group the better, though they would not wish to turn down the offer of a 'once-off' meeting or discussion as this

may be a stepping stone to further engagement. The focus of the projects can range from directly stated conflict resolution and reconciliation goals to community-based courses such as sewing or cooking. Additionally, there are widely differing views on the approach that a single identity project should take in relation to the degree of cross-community contact. There is a spectrum of projects that ranges from 'own culture validation' to 'respect for diversity' work, depending on the approach taken to cross-community contact (Hughes and Donnelly, 1998).

At one end of the spectrum lies the 'own culture validation' category (Hughes and Donnelly, 1998). The projects within this category argue that single identity work should be considered useful in its own right. It is an acceptable alternative to cross-community work and not a progression towards it. While single identity work may be a precursor to cross-community contact, inter-group contact is not a pre-requisite to initiating the project. Indeed, this approach dictates that to hold the view that single identity work is the first step imposes unhelpful pre-conditions. The most important factor, for those who believe that single identity work is valuable for its own sake, is that this work engages those who would not otherwise have become involved in a community project of any description.   Personnel development projects represent an example of this type of single identity work. These projects are commonly concerned with the individual with a focus on building self-esteem. For instance, the project *An Crann (The Tree)* which is centred in the nationalist community of Derry, has encouraged and supported individuals to tell their story and address personal issues related to the conflict in Northern Ireland (Hughes and Donnelly, 1998). Although classified as a community relations project, it does not broach or attempt to instigate cross-community contact. Other examples of projects in this category would include job skills training, life skills courses or local history groups.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the 'respect for diversity' category of work (Hughes and Donnelly, 1998). This approach identifies the end goal of single identity work as cross-community contact. The aim is to bring participants to the stage, be it in terms of confidence, skills or community acceptance, where they are able to engage with the 'other' community. This approach has been articulated by the CRC as follows:

> single identity work… should through social, community and economic development, be aimed at increasing the confidence of a community so that it can subsequently reach out and involve itself in networking and in joint programme development at either a cross-community or cross-border level. (CRC, http://www.community-relations.org.uk/progs/train/siw.htm)

An example of the 'respect for diversity' category is concurrent single identity/community relations work (Hughes and Donnelly, 1998). This approach holds that single identity work is essential as both a pre-requisite and parallel to cross-community contact. The *Belfast Interface Project (BIP)*, established in 1995, has adopted this approach. BIP's remit is to identify issues of major concern to communities living in interface areas or areas where there are particular difficulties between Catholic and Protestant communities living in close proximity. One of the three major functions of the project is the development of single identity work. For example the project has been

involved in developing a single identity work resource pack for young people/community activists in the interface areas.[14]

The 'Contact Triangle Model' (Figure 1) is a theoretical expansion of this 'respect for diversity' approach (Fitzduff, 1996). Fitzduff holds that single identity work can be usefully employed, though not in isolation, during initial stages of conflict resolution work. As the work progresses from introduction/exploration to agreed option/positive diversity, the utility of a single identity approach decreases.   When it comes to managing conflict in a proactive way and finding solutions to problems of identity then the single identity approach is no longer relevant and the focus should be on contact work. According to the 'Contact Triangle Model', "single identity work can contribute to the attainment of the first three levels; however, as progress is made, it diminishes in importance" (Hughes and Knox, 1997, p. 338).
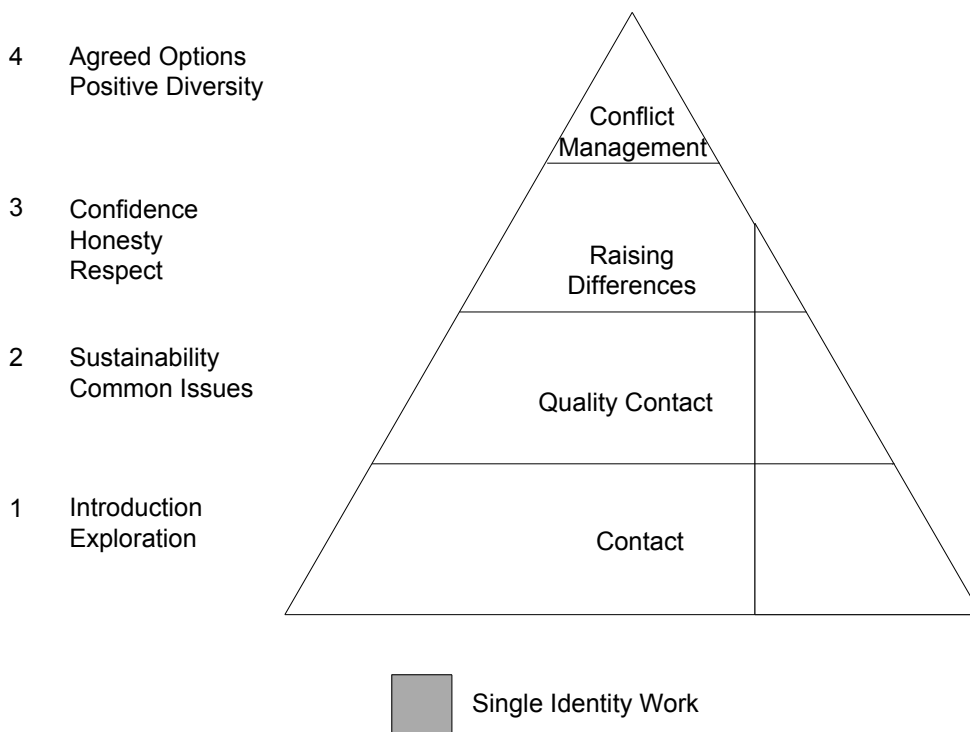
Contact Triangle Model

4   Agreed Options
      Positive Diversity

                                                      Conflict
                                                      Management

3   Confidence
      Honesty
      Respect   Raising
                                                        Differences

2   Sustainability
      Common Issues
                                                      Quality Contact

1   Introduction
      Exploration   Contact

                    Single Identity Work

Figure 1: Fitzduff, M., 'Contact Triangle Model'

---

[14] For a more detailed description of the Belfast Interface Project see, Belfast Interface Project 'Membership Information Pack'.

Many practitioners have found themselves steering between the two approaches of Cultural Validation and Respect for Diversity. Some maintain that a group of participants may not define themselves as a single identity group but, for instance as a women's group or personal development group that happens to be uni-denominational. The practitioner may then see his or her role as encouraging the group to adopt a community relations approach, for instance by considering the importance of cultural symbols in a women's sewing class. In such cases it is the practitioner's unspoken agenda that drives the group towards community relations (LILP, INCORE, 2001).

In addition, many practitioners in the LILP discussions held that while cross-community contact should not be the ultimate goal of all single identity projects, projects should be framed in a cross-community context. This could be accomplished, for instance, by considering the views of the other community or by learning about them. For example. a recent political education project with young adults in a rural Loyalist community, while primarily engaged in the exploration of Loyalist history and politics, also aimed to inform and discuss the position of the 'other' side. This project consisted of workshops, over-night residentials, invited speakers and international visits. Additionally it included learning about the 'other' community through a trip to the Republic of Ireland, a place that few rural Loyalists would go voluntarily as it is perceived to be the heartland of the 'other' (Eyben and McGuire, 2001).

In many ways, single identity work has evolved as a direct result of the limitations that the Northern Ireland context has imposed for contact between individuals from the two primary traditions. In this deeply divided society, it has proven most difficult to operationalize the requisite conditions of the contact hypothesis as a means of promoting reconciliation. As a consequence, initiatives that centre themselves within a single tradition have proliferated over the years, to some extent changing the face of community relations work in Northern Ireland.

Challenges to Single Identity Work

Despite its widespread deployment, single identity work faces a number of challenges. Several issues ranging from the conceptual to the practical dominate the debate including concerns with terminology, efficacy, and implementation. It is important to raise these issues in the context of exploring the topic of single identity work in Northern Ireland as a means outlining potential concerns for community relations practitioners and identifying areas for future research.

Mirroring the issues that plague the conflict resolution field as a whole, inconsistencies in conception and terminology and lack of ideological consensus are common among those working with this approach. For example, although the term 'single identity' conjures up notions of uni-dimensionality, it belies the internal differences that typically exist within any one community. It is therefore important to point out that 'single identity' is just one reference that has come into play in the Northern Irish context. Hughes and Donnelly (1998) prefer using:

the term 'intra-community relations work' as an alternative to 'single identity work'. It is believed that this term more accurately describes the nature of the work being undertaken. 'Identity' is complex and multi-faceted and the term 'single identity' disguises the multi-dimensional characteristic of cultural identity. (p. 83)

For many however, the term 'intra-community' suggests a solely inward looking approach which is not the case with many single identity projects. Similar problems can be ascribed to the terms 'separate community' and 'uni-national' work which have been used in other contexts. None of these terms are satisfactory descriptions of the range of activities that have been adopted under this strand of community relations work.

Through LILP discussions, it was clear when talking to practitioners about their respective projects that this terminological ambiguity reflects both practical and ideological implications. In a number of cases, the argument was put forth that a women's group could just as easily be defined as a single identity group, as could a Catholic or Protestant group. However, there is a marked difference between the two from a community relations perspective, most notably a women's group would not necessarily be comprised of members of one of the two major communities; it could contain both Catholic and Protestant women. A similar question arises when one considers single identity reconciliation work versus single identity community development work.[15] A consensus regarding terms and programmatic implications needs to be provided before further research can be initiated. This paper has adopted the use of the term 'single identity' due to its popular use within the community relations and NGO sector in Northern Ireland. This is not to suggest that the authors feel it adequately represents the depth and range of initiatives that it encompasses.

The outcomes of single identity work as a community relations methodology are widely disputed. There are three primary questions that fuel the efficacy debate: Does single identity work further entrench sectarianism and intolerance? Does it contribute to a foundation from which subsequent cross-community contact will occur? What are the (positive) outcomes of these projects on the greater community?

Those engaged in the discourse point to a number of potential negative outcomes of single identity work. First, while engaged in an examination of their own cultural issues, participants might be inclined to reinforce their negative view of the 'other'. Second, the group could (purposefully or inadvertently) further entrench the righteous view of their own position. Third, the group could simultaneously develop sophisticated arguments about why they should not engage with the other community (Eyben and McGuire, 2001). These concerns are most frequently raised in the context of 'own culture validation' work. If this work at best does nothing to impact the view of the 'other', and at worst reinforces stereotypes and prejudices, it is a misrepresentation to call it

---

[15] If the aim of a single identity community development project is to improve the job skills of a particular group and does not engage in identity issues, the question arises can this work usefully be identified as single identity work in a community relations sense, or does it expand the definition to a point where it loses it's utility?

community relations work. At present, there is little research that examines whether 'own culture validation' projects take their participants closer to or farther from a willingness to engage with the other community.[16]

There is also a need for significant research to examine the effectiveness of single identity work as a precursor to cross-community activities. Does the involvement in projects that engage only with one side improve the quality of dialogue, commitment to the process, or ability to communicate and compromise in cross-community projects? Finally, what is the impact of single identity work on the communities of the individuals engaged in the project? Do the positive impacts on individuals 'transfer' to the wider community creating a multiplier effect? In other words, how much do single identity projects actually contribute to the achievement of 'peace' in Northern Ireland and how does this differ from the contribution of cross-community projects?

Concerns looms large regarding how these projects monitor and evaluate their outcomes. Our research indicates that few single identity projects systematically incorporate any form of monitoring and evaluation[17] into project plans to assess agency's analysis, process, outcomes or impacts. Within the LILP seminar discussions, there was only one case of a specially constructed survey being developed and used out of the numerous projects represented across all discussions. According to project co-ordinators, outcomes were most commonly based on anecdotal conversations with participants. This is in part due to the lack of evaluation mechanisms that respond to the unique characteristics occurring within conflict resolution programs.[18] However it is also due to the fact that single identity work has been ill-defined in many ways and not necessarily considered as a discrete community relations approach in Northern Ireland. It therefore has not come under the same degree of scrutiny or attention as other methods. In order to determine whether the single identity approach is effective, and under what conditions, it is essential that evaluation become a central part of all projects.

There are also questions related to implementation objectives and strategies. For example, are fear and suspicion of the 'other' acceptable reasons for initiating this type of activity? When should a community be expected to move beyond resistance to engage in cross-community projects so that single identity work is no longer needed? Many practitioners argue that the tenuous nature of single identity work makes it difficult to define when a project should be able to move onto a cross community strategy, or when a community should be expected to no longer need single identity projects as a precursor. Here again, concerns raised most often relate to the 'own culture validation' type of single identity projects.

Another implementation concern deals with participant involvement including the recruitment, commitment and motivation of individuals who join projects. As the aim of

---

[16] This is not to suggest that 'own culture validation' projects are without value, but rather to recognise the potential negative impacts.
[17] In this paper evaluation includes the concept of impact assessment.
[18] For further reading on evaluation for conflict resolution programs see   INCORE's 'The State of Evaluation of Conflict Resolution Projects, Church, Shouldice and Loder; www.incore.ulst.ac.uk

single identity work is to engage those who would not otherwise become involved, the tactics to secure engagement and continued participation vary widely. In one case individuals on the fringes of paramilitary groups were 'forced' to participate in such work. As one participant in this Loyalist single identity project put it, 'I was told to take part and that there was a chance to get away on trips. I did not know what to expect' (Eyben and McGuire, 2001, p. 29). In these cases, problems can arise in terms of maintaining the commitment of those individuals who are at best, unconvinced, about the value of community relations. To counter this, various methods are used to keep participants involved ranging from residential workshops to trips abroad. These methods raise concerns as to the potential validity of their efforts/outcomes. Recruiting a group that is legitimately interested in engaging in single identity discussions around critical issues can be very difficult and as such may lead to suspect outcomes.

Finally, there are questions relating to the identity of practitioner/facilitators in single identity groups. What is the impact of a facilitator whose identity is different from the group? The identity of the facilitator, in terms of background, nationality, experience, age, gender and most importantly perceived community affiliation have not been studied in relation to their ability to 'successfully' engage in this work. Generally the Northern Irish experience indicates that having a facilitator from the 'other' community is unproblematic, and indeed can add a new dimension to the work. That said, to the authors' knowledge, studies involving the implications of the facilitator's identity have not been conducted and these assertions are based solely on practitioner experiences. However, other contexts such as the work of the Israel/Palestine Centre for Research and Information (IPCRI)[19] in Israel/Palestine indicates that it is essential to success that the facilitator is of the same identity as the group.

This issue can have an impact on both the potential success of the program as well as personally on the facilitators. One facilitator described his involvement in a recent project as follows,

> I felt continually challenged in the early days of the project. I never felt threatened though I did feel uncomfortable…as the only person perceived to come from a Nationalist background – this was a constant point of reference for the group. (Eyben and McGuire, 2001, p. 37)

In addition to the aforementioned issues, this needs to be systematically investigated in order to gather the evidence required to substantiate the methods being utilised. Without demonstration of value through research and outcome data, single identity practitioners will not be able to uphold their assertions of efficacy as an approach toward improved community relations. Notwithstanding the range and significance of these challenges, single identity projects continue to be supported in Northern Ireland. It is not the authors' intent to recommend otherwise, but rather to encourage that further discussion and

---

[19] IPCRI, founded in Jerusalem in 1988, is the only joint Palestinian-Israeli public policy think-tank in the world. It is devoted to developing practical solutions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, www.ipcri.org. IPCRI was involved in reflecting on their practice of uni-national work and the parallels and differences between this and single identity work, in a visit to Northern Ireland during LILP, at INCORE in October/November 2001.

scholarly attention be devoted to these issues. It is our belief that further examination of these critical practice questions is necessary.

Conclusion

As part of the legacy created by sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, it is common for individuals to go about their daily lives without ever engaging in substantial contact with members from a community other than their own. This societal division has created tremendous need for community relations work in Northern Ireland. Initiatives aimed at overcoming divisions in Northern Ireland traditionally drew from the underlying assumptions of the Contact Hypothesis and were guided by the premise that contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice through increased knowledge and understanding.

The internecine characteristics of Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict however have posed great challenges to achieving the conditions necessary for productive cross community contact. As a result, community relations practitioners have sought alternative approaches to promoting reconciliation whereby the focus is on pursuing activities that are centred within, rather than between, each of the respective communities. While the dilemma still stands regarding whether "separation or sharing" (Boyle & Hadden, 1994) represents the most viable strategy in this society, single identity work is being increasingly employed as an approach toward communal reconciliation.

Working from an intra-cultural framework, single identity initiatives work with groups comprised of individuals who are affiliated with one side of the divide in Northern Ireland, whether Catholics or Protestants. As with most approaches that focus their energies inwardly, single identity work faces serious challenges, not the least of which deals with the fundamental question of its outcome efficacy. Proponents of this methodology argue that it serves as a primary way toward peace in this society. Traditionalists in peacebuilding and conflict resolution on the other hand argue against its lack of focus on cross-community dialogue and engagement.

Rather than an either/or proposition, the answer perhaps best lies in 'pursuing both single-identity work within specific communities as well as well planned and sustained cross-community contact in order to explore and examine their fears, anxieties, and perceptions' (Connolly, 1999, p.171). This paper has attempted to identify some of the critical issues related to single identity work as an approach toward conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. It is clear that many questions need to be addressed in subsequent research. As an exploratory introduction, this paper was intended to go some way towards further informing the debate.

Authors:
Cheyanne Church is the Director of the Policy and Evaluation Unit at INCORE, Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, a Monitor for the Parades Commission, Belfast and a member of the International Advisory Group for the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project, Cambridge, USA.

Anna Visser is an MA graduate of the University of Birmingham. Project Officer on the Local International Learning Project (LILP) at the United Nations University – International Conflict Research (INCORE) during 2001/2002, and now working for the Institute for British-Irish Studies in Dublin.

Laurie Johnson, PhD, is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Programs in Counselling at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York and served as 2001-2002 Sheelagh Murnaghan Visiting Professor at Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland and Faculty Intern at UNU/INCORE, Derry/L'derry, Northern Ireland

References

Allport, G. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley: Cambridge, MA

Amir, Y. (1969) "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations", *Psychological Bulletin.* 1969, 71: 319-42

Bowcott, O. (12 April 2001) "Protestant Majority Predicted to Fall Sharply" *The Guardian*

Boyle, K. and Hadden, T. (1994) *Northern Ireland: The Choice*. Penguin Books: London

Brewer, M. and Miller, N. (1996) *Intergroup Relations*. Open University Press: Buckingham

Brown, R. (2000) *Group Processes: Dynamics within and Between Groups*. Blackwell Publishers: Oxford

Cairns, E. (1994) *A Welling up of Deep Unconscious Forces*. Centre for the Study of Conflict: Coleraine

Cairns, E. (2000) "The Role of the Contact Hypothesis in Peacemaking in Northern Ireland: From Theory to Reality", The Andre Salama International Workshop for Peace Education

Cairns, E. "The Impact of Peacemaking in Northern Ireland on Intergroup Behaviour", Unpublished Paper

Cairns, S., and Cairns, T. (1995) "Children and Conflict: A Psychological Perspective", in Dunn, S., (ed.) *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Macmillan: London

Church C., and Visser, A. (2001) *Single Identity Work*. INCORE: Derry/Londonderry

Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/events

Connolly, P. (2000) "What now for the Contact Hypothesis: Towards a new research agenda, *Peace, Ethnicity and Education.* 3 (2): 169-193

Darby, J. (1995) "Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Background Essay", www.cain.ulst.ac.uk

Eyben, K., and McGuire, P. (2001) "What Now? A Political Education Project with Young Adults in the Rural Loyalist Community", International Voluntary Service

Fay, M., Morrissey, M., and Smyth, M. (1998) "Mapping Troubles- Related Deaths and Deprivation in Northern Ireland", http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/abs1.htm

Fitzduff, M. (1996) *Beyond Violence*: Conflict Resolution Processes, United Nations University: Tokyo

Fitzduff, M., and O'Hagan, L. "The Northern Ireland Troubles: INCORE Background Paper", www.cain.ulst.ac.uk

Ford, W. S. (1986) Favourable Intergroup Contact may not Reduce Prejudice: Inconclusive Journal Evidence, 1960-1984", *Sociology an Social Research*, 70: 256-268

Frazer, H., and Fitzduff, M. (1994) *Improving Community Relations*. Community Relations Council: Belfast

Hancock, L. (1998) "Northern Ireland: Troubles Brewing", www.cain.ulst.ac.uk

Hewstone, M., and Brown, R. "Contact is not Enough: An Intergroup Perspective on the 'Contact Hypothesis'" in Hewstone, M., and Brown R. (1986) *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford

Hughes, J., and Donnelly, C. (1998) *Single Identity Community Relations*. University of Ulster: Jordanstown

Hughes, J., and Knox. (1997) "For Better or Worse? Community Relations Initiatives in Northern Ireland", *Peace and Change*, 22: 330-355

Leichty, J and Clegg, C., (2000) *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. The Columbia Press: Dublin

McCarthy, C., and Fitzduff, M., 'Contact Triangle Model'

Northern Ireland Life and Times, www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/

Pettigrew, T. F., (1997) Generalised Intergroup Contact Effects or Prejudice, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 23 (2): 173-185

Pettigrew, T. "The Intergoup Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered" in Hewstone, M., and Brown R. (1986) *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford.

Ryan, S. (1995) "Peace-building and Conflict Transformation", www.colorado.edu

Smyth, M. (1998) "Half the Battle: Understanding the impact of the Troubles on Children and Young People", INCORE: Derry/Londonderry

Sutton, M. (1999) *An Index of Deaths from the conflict in Ireland*, Beyond the Pale Publications: Belfast

Trew K., "Catholic-Protestant Contact in Northern Ireland", in Hewstone, M., and Brown, R. (1986) *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford

Wirth, J. F., & Lord, C. G., (1992) "Previous Conceptions of the Typical Group Member and the Contact Hypothesis", *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 13 (3): 351-396