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# **Cultural Work in Peacebuilding among Traumatized Communities of Northern Ireland 1: Background and General Considerations**

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## **Abstract**

Peace in Northern Ireland today remains fragile despite the exhaustive peacebuilding efforts that have taken place since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Many aspects of the sectarian conflict have been embedded in cultural substrata of the respective communities, and cultural transformation is necessary to achieve comprehensive and sustained peace. The basic assumptions about the Other in this sectarian conflict have their origin in traumatic events that occurred more than three hundred years ago and have been reinforced by the more recent three decades of conflict known as the Troubles. These traumatic individual and collective experiences across the generations have had a profound effect on the culture and peace processes within Northern Ireland. Two articles, Parts 1 and 2, on cultural work in peacebuilding among traumatized communities of Northern Ireland describe a psychodynamically informed understanding of the sectarian conflict and an approach to cultural transformation called “cultural work.” This first article discusses general contextual issues and includes a history of Northern Ireland from a psychodynamic perspective and presents a framework for considering culture and a process of transformation.

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The Good Friday or Belfast Agreement in 1998 marked the beginning of the end of three decades of violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, an era known as the Troubles. It also marked the beginning of a new phase of peacebuilding that continues to the present day. Peacebuilding work was already taking place at the grassroots and civil-society levels throughout the Troubles. It paved the way for the political peace process that led to the Agreement and, eventually, the reestablishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly with a power-sharing executive from both sides of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Peace in Northern Ireland during the two decades since the Agreement, however, has been fragile; the Assembly was suspended five times, the most recent lasting for three years, from 2017 to 2020. The fear of a return of violent conflict remains high, with recent polls consistently finding that more than two-thirds of the people in Northern Ireland live with this fear.<sup>2</sup> Tension has increased since Brexit, with the flaring up of riots over six nights in early April 2021, marking one of the worst episodes since the Troubles.<sup>3</sup>

Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society. The present-day peace has, to a large degree, been sustained through the continuing sectarian segregation that occurs along geographical, social, educational, and political divides.<sup>4</sup> This segregation, however, is also one of the causes of the fragility of this peace. A large part of the peacebuilding effort at the grassroots and civil-society levels has focused on bridging these divides, while increasing social capital through community and leadership development, especially in the interface areas.<sup>5</sup> At the institutional and governmental levels, significant action and change has not matched the rhetoric during the years since the Agreement. Despite a succession of government policies that aim to remove the barriers separating Protestant and Catholic communities, more walls to peace have been built than brought down.<sup>6</sup> More than 90 percent of public housing remains segregated.<sup>7</sup> The education system has also been slow to change; of the 1,136 schools in Northern Ireland in 2021, still only a small fraction (65) are integrated.<sup>8</sup>

Some of this inertia, perhaps even a large part, may be attributed to factors within the greater Northern Irish society and the difficulties that arise when individuals and communities come together for collective action. John Lederach's three-tier model for peacebuilding points to the importance of grassroots movements and the engagement of the general population in initiating the social change needed to galvanize political action.<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Todd, who has written extensively on Northern Ireland, suggests that such a social transformation involves collective identity and would need to occur at the level of the "cultural substratum."<sup>10</sup> She does not elaborate on what she means by "cultural substratum" or how this transformation might be achieved. Since the 1980s, however, an appreciation for the role of cultural transformation in the building of significant and sustained peace in Northern Ireland has persisted.<sup>11</sup>

While it remains uncertain how cultural change might be achieved, the cultural domain has become the space for conflict.<sup>12</sup> In their 1996 seminal study, "The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland" Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd reflect:

Culture-identity, values, norms, ethos, world view, sense of place in history and in the world—provides another arena for conflict in Northern Ireland. Conflict has centred on ways in which cultural differences between communities have been inscribed in public relations of hierarchy and control.<sup>13</sup>

The politicization and conflict over culture is exemplified by the deadlock around the Irish Language Act, which has remained unresolved since it was presented in early 2017.<sup>14</sup>

How might cultural transformation be achieved in the middle of a cultural conflict where all involved are more likely to pursue further entrenchment of their positions? If a sort of truce or ceasefire is necessary to reclaim the cultural space for critical self-examination and dialogue, how might it be attained? How can a common culture be fostered without diminishing differences that are critical for security, in particular, group identity? In this and the following

article, a “progress report” of ongoing work that began in 2015, I attempt to answer these essential, though by no means definitive, questions. This report is based on a deep analysis and appreciation of the complex, interacting psycho-social-cultural-political dimensions of collective life. When this approach is applied to Northern Ireland, one can begin to appreciate the impact of individual and collective trauma from three decades of violent conflict, against a background of complex sectarian unrest spanning over three centuries. In this first article, I consider some of background issues that inform this work. In the second, I outline a form of collective work, which I call “cultural work,” to build sustainable peace.

## **Context and Caveats**

When one considers situations from the point of view of a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, the “context” is paramount; it underpins everything. The personal and professional contexts and the knowledge and experience that I bring to the construction of this article are also relevant. Thus, I begin by discussing some of these contexts I used to help build an understanding of my perspectives, as well as my biases, blind-spots, and prejudices.

When I consider the context of what I present or discuss, I keep in mind that there are several contexts of the same issue or event. First, there is the subjectivity of a particular individual and of all the individuals involved. The conceptual definition of subjectivity dictates that there is no such thing as “shared subjectivity.” But we can have overlapping subjectivity or intersubjectivity and consequently create the possibility for commonality. By and large, subjectivity points to unique differences in perspectives. Second, there is the idea of a collective context, a notion that makes certain assumptions about commonalities in characteristics, history, experience, and culture that allow for the development of a shared context. This notion does not dismiss the existence of unique differences but simply says, “For the moment, what is shared is more important than that which is unique.” Third, there are multiple dimensions of life that are in concurrent existence and each creates a particular context that bears influence on an event or experience, whether that be economic, political, social, cultural, or spiritual. One dimension might have a greater bearing on one situation than another. Fourth, the Western notion of time, specifically, linear time, proposes a certain understanding of what is meant by “historical context.” It often leads to the erroneous assumption that an event in the distant past is less relevant than that which has occurred more recently. In the traumatized mind, this notion of time might cease to exist and the distinction between the past and present is often blurred. Thus, fifth, consideration needs to be given to the important context of the traumatized mind, for the individual and the collective mind. I elaborate on this point later in my brief outline of a psychology of trauma.

The complexities presented by my consideration of these contextual issues highlight potential pitfalls and call for certain caveats. There is one more context, and with it, a major caveat. In writing from the perspective of a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, I would ordinarily explore the context of the inner world and its unconscious domain. Because arguments about the validity and relevance of this dimension would distract from much of the work I present here, I do not discuss it substantially. It is inescapable, however, that an awareness and appreciation of the unconscious domain could inform this analysis and our understanding of complex situations.

## **A Personal and Professional Context**

One might rightly wonder how an ethnic Chinese, born and raised in the small town of Malacca, Malaysia—which was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Japanese for more than five centuries—and educated in England, who has been living in Australia for the past three

decades, came to be interested in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. My awareness of the conflict stemmed from my time as a medical student in London, in the early 1980s.

I visited Belfast for the first time in 2008 for a conference where I met John, Lord Alderdice, a colleague with a similar professional background of psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist. He was the Speaker of the reinstated Northern Ireland Assembly after the Agreement. In 2013, as the founding director of CASSE (an organization that helped schools and communities create safe and supportive environments through a psychoanalytic understanding of bullying and violence), I invited him to visit Australia to assist our work with Aboriginal communities. He became interested in my work with culture on traumatized communities and invited me to give a talk on the topic in Belfast in 2015.

During that visit, I surveyed the art and cultural scene in Northern Ireland and wrote a brief, reflective paper on its potential role in peacebuilding from a psychological perspective.<sup>15</sup> The following year, as chair of the newly formed Centre for Democracy and Peacebuilding, Lord Alderdice invited me to give a lecture at the Golden Thread Gallery on the theme “Art, Trauma, and Cultural Change” and to present a workshop on the same theme at the Duncairn Centre, attended by artists from across the sectarian divide. In 2018, I presented a lecture titled “Cultural Work and Peacebuilding in Traumatized Communities” at Ulster University, and the next year at the invitation of Byson Charities, I conducted a series of workshops on the same topic for workers and leaders from communities and civil society. With the onset of the pandemic, I continued to hold online discussions with a range of stakeholders as individuals and groups. Among these was a project about cultural transformation on which I elaborate here.

The ideas presented in this article have emerged from a range of professional experiences. Over the past two decades, I have worked with individuals and collectives to address their traumatic experiences. For the greater part of that period, I was also the Director of the Dax Centre; a unique organization that is dedicated to promoting mental health through art. It was a role that included being the chief curator of the Cunningham Dax Collection, one of the largest collections of art by people with experience of mental illness and trauma.<sup>16</sup> Through the process of accepting art by traumatized individuals and collectives, I had the opportunity to learn not only about individual’s experiences but also about their respective communities. They included rural communities affected by suicides, survivors of the Holocaust, survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and those recovering from natural disasters, such as bush fires, tsunamis, and earthquakes.<sup>17</sup> It was, however, my work with the traumatized Aboriginal communities in the desert of Central Australia, that helped me gain a deep and profound understanding of the nature and significance of culture. The Aboriginal people I worked with referred to their culture as “the cradle that holds us” as they spoke about their struggle for survival in the face of colonization and dispossession: their crisis was not so much over collective identity, as the continuity of their existence. A large part of what is being presented here has its origin in that work with Aboriginal communities which spanned over eight years, and it was with them that I conceived the concept of “cultural work.”<sup>18</sup>

That work highlighted the heightened sensitivities of traumatized collectives and led me to formulate an understanding of the Aboriginal people’s psychology that has enabled me to create a safe, cultural space for similarly traumatized communities in which to address cultural issues. I elaborate on this approach will be covered in the second of these two articles. I wish to emphasize, however, that the approach I take to this and other work, is less from the position of an expert, but rather, from one who is “*ignorant but interested*,” especially in the local context.

## **A Brief History of the Conflict**

I present the following brief outline of the history of the Northern Ireland conflict to assist the reader who is unfamiliar, to highlight historical events that were, in my view, of major psychological significance, and to declare the limitations of my understanding, especially in regard to its complexities. I am a relative novice to the reading of Northern Irish history; its writing reflects the conflict itself, affected by bias and revisionism. As I do not have the expertise or scope to critically review the written history from all sides, my selective account below invites criticism.

The Aboriginal people I worked with in the Australian desert told me that to understand them, I needed to go back tens of thousands of years to the beginning of their history, the era they call “Dreamtime,” for which they can claim a continuous oral history over more than a thousand generations. In his study of ancient Irish history, J. P. Mallory acknowledges that he appropriated the concept of dreamtime from the Indigenous Australian, for whom it was “a sacred time in which both the natural world and human culture and traditions originated, and these beginnings still resonate in the spiritual life of [their] people today.”<sup>19</sup> He traces a written account of the Irish Dreamtime to circa 1700 BC. Ireland, as a separate entity, as an island, came into being around 11,000 BC. Before the rising sea level at the end of the Ice Age, a land bridge connected Ireland to Britain, which in turn was connected to continental Europe.<sup>20</sup> Mallory notes that the earliest evidence of human residents in Ireland dates to circa 8000 BC, which corresponds to the time of the earliest colonization, most possibly from Scotland.<sup>21</sup>

Most histories of the conflict in Northern Ireland begin with 1171, when King Henry II landed in Waterford, declaring himself the Lord of Ireland, and thus began the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, culminating in the Treaty of Windsor in 1175.<sup>22</sup> Four centuries later, during the reign of King James I and in the shadow of the Reformation, England extended its control. The years 1609 through the 1630s saw the organized mass settlement of Scottish and Northern English Protestants on half a million acres of arable land in the province of Ulster, which at the time was inhabited by Gaelic Catholics. This period, known as the Plantation, is widely recognized as the beginning of the ethnic and sectarian conflict. By the end of the 1630s there were as many as a hundred thousand Protestant settlers. In 1641, the Ulster Catholics staged a rebellion that involved massacres of more than four thousand settlers. A.T.Q. Stewart believes that event inflicted on Protestants a lasting fear of Catholics:

Here, if anywhere, the mentality of siege was born, as the warning bonfires blazed from hilltop to hilltop, and the beating drums summoned men to the defence of castles and walled towns crowded with refugees.<sup>23</sup>

R. F. Foster concurs:

What people thought happened in that bloody autumn conditioned events and attitudes in Ireland for generations to come.<sup>24</sup>

For seven years after the rebellion, Ireland was self-governed by Catholics. In 1649, however, Oliver Cromwell, on behalf of the English Parliament, crushed the alliance of Catholics and Royalists, restoring the dominance of the Protestants. Strangely, little has been written about how many Irish Catholics died during Cromwell’s campaign, though it is generally agreed that many more perished from famine and plague in the following years. Estimates range from 10 percent to more than 80 percent of the Irish population; if a median of about 40 percent were considered, the number who died would have amounted to more than six hundred thousand from a population of 1.5 million. If even the most conservative of these estimates is true, the protracted devastation among Irish Catholics over the next forty years would have bred a hatred that led to their support of the Catholic king James II in his attempt to regain the throne from his Protestant daughter, Queen Mary II, and King William III. One

of the first attacks was on the Protestant stronghold of Derry, which led to the Siege of Derry, during which the settlers barricaded for 105 days from April to August 1689. This event appears to have been etched into the psyche of Ulster Protestants and entrenched their siege mentality. The siege was broken by the army of King William III, who subsequently defeated James II at the Battle of Boyne in 1690.

The triumph of this battle, which has since been marked each year by Protestants on July 12, led to the imposition of the Protestant Ascendancy, a set of government policies privileging those of the Anglican Church over all others (including Presbyterians, then known as Dissenters). The privileging of Anglicans remained a political, economic, and social reality for more than two centuries. The policies were accompanied by the Penal Laws, which restricted the practice of Catholicism and significantly disadvantaged Catholics economically, especially with land ownership. By the time these laws were eased in the late eighteenth century, Catholics made up 75 percent of the population, but they held only 5 percent of the land.<sup>25</sup> In the south and west of Ireland, Protestant landlords would lease small holdings to Catholics.

The nineteenth century saw a growing divide emerge between the north and south of Ireland. By the early eighteenth century, with continuing migration from Scotland and northern England, Protestants had become the majority in the north, while Gaelic Catholics constituted the majority in the south. Ulster grew in wealth with industrialization and became one of the leading producers of linen in the world. The south of Ireland, however, had become an agricultural economy that was severely limited by inefficient small landholdings, a factor that contributed to the Irish Potato Famine from 1845 to 1849.

Foster notes: “Where the Famine struck hardest, reflects fairly accurately the prevalence of subsistence farming on tiny holdings: the west and south-west, upland parts of Tipperary, Cavan. Death rate figures show that areas like East Leinster, and north and north-east Ulster were not hard hit by comparison—Ulster least of all, with its diversified economy.”<sup>26</sup> The population of Ireland fell from more than eight million to less than six million (from the 1841 to the 1851 census); a recent re-evaluation suggests that one million may be attributed to the famine and that the rest were emigrated.<sup>27</sup> The exacerbation of suffering during the famine by the British government’s failure to act and by its allowing food to be exported, leaving most of the relief work to private initiatives while compensating only the landlords up to more than three million pounds added to a deep resentment among Catholics toward the government and drove the movement demanding devolution and Home Rule. These tensions led to the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and independence in 1921.

Three overlapping, meta-narratives of psychological significance grew out of this centuries-long history: (1) a story of hatred emerging from the colonization of Ireland and the oppression of the Gaelic Catholics by the English for more than seven centuries marked by rebellions raised and crushed and the suffering of the Great Famine that was perceived to be inflicted by the colonizer; (2) the sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants, characterized by a never-ending cycle of massacres—retaliation—vengeance—riots—and more killings, which began in the Plantation era and continued for more than three centuries; and (3) the geographical, economic, and ethnic divide between North and South of the island, with the Protestants of Ulster holding a privileged position yet feeling insecure in their minority and never quite recovering from the traumatic history of their early settlement.

This third narrative underpinned the partitioning of Ireland that created Northern Ireland.<sup>28</sup> For the next one hundred years, while the Republic of Ireland flourished as a nation, the tensions and legacies of the first and second narratives across the whole island appeared to have been sequestered into Northern Ireland, which erupted into the thirty-year conflict known as the Troubles. These narratives and the events that marked them have been embedded in the cultures of Catholics and Protestants, north of the island. These themes appear in folklore and ballads and in these communities’ ways of being in the world and with each other.

## **A Framework for Working with Culture**

To undertake the work of cultural transformation for peacebuilding, we need to understand how these historical events came to be embedded into their respective cultures. What was their process?

Before I propose an answer to this question, I would like to outline a model of culture that I developed in my work with traumatized collectives. I view culture as the mind of a collective. If we were to think of the identifiable physical elements of a collective—its people, institutions, networks, and so on—as the equivalent of the brain, then its culture would correspond to the mind. It is well beyond the scope of this article to discuss the many different concepts and definitions of culture, except to acknowledge the classic work by A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, which, from the perspective of anthropology, integrates 150 definitions and proposes the following:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit or implicit, of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts.<sup>29</sup>

More recently, Baldwin and colleagues examined more than three hundred definitions, highlighting recent contributions from cultural studies/critical theory, communication, and social construct theory and proposed a shift in focus from patterns of human behavior/way of life to processes that construct meaning, identity, and power dynamic.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of culture that I propose here incorporates both patterns and processes. Popular discourse identifies music, art, food, fashion, literature, language, folklore, customs, and rituals as culture. These are the most apparent elements of culture, which I refer to as cultural products. Next, we have the creators and their processes for producing these cultural products, which I refer to as cultural instruments. These instruments have two distinguishable components: structures or entities and processes. Entities are the “who and what” that create cultural products; they include individuals, organizations, and social institutions. If we are thinking of art, music, and literature, the entities (as individuals or collectives) are the artists, musicians, and writers, while their corresponding social institutions include all those that support production and distribution, such as the media and social media and the marketplaces that use and enjoy them. The other aspect of cultural instruments concerns the process of production. Here we might consider not only the creative process but also broader, complex influences of historical, social, economic, and political factors.

The model of culture I have outlined might be compared with what Pierre Bourdieu describes from a sociological perspective. In his book *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu considers art to be tangible, “symbolic goods” that are produced under the influence of social reality at three levels: the field of power relations in society, the position of the agents (creator/producer), and the producer’s habitus (i.e., the structured and structuring dispositions that generate practices).<sup>31</sup> From my understanding, what Bourdieu means by “habitus” corresponds to what I call “cultural instruments.” Some might argue, however, that habitus includes the values, norms, and the many nonspecific, difficult-to-describe ways that influence our way of being in the world. I call these “cultural substrates.” Historical events, and more important, how we experience and respond to them are all cultural substrates. I return to this point later.

Many of my colleagues have found this framework consisting of cultural substrates, instruments, and products to be accessible and useful. The model outlines how cultural substrates are turned into products by their instruments, which consist of structures (individuals, collectives, and institutions) and their respective processes. To illustrate how this model might take shape in operation, we might consider how an event can lead to the creation of an anthem.



A musician might write a song about his or her experience of an event that occurred in the life of a large collective. This private creation of a product involves the personal transformation of a substrate (the experience of, and response to, an event) by an instrument (musician) into a product (the song). The song could be considered a cultural product even if it were not shared but remained in the private world of the musician. Once shared and enjoyed among friends, that song might be considered a basic or simple form of a cultural product. If that song is recorded and played multiple times on radio stations or streamed online, it acquires a greater status as a cultural product. If that song resonates with a large proportion of the collective within which that original event occurred, and especially those who were present at the time of its occurrence, it acquires a special meaning as a cultural product. If that song resonated with more and more people within that collective resonated with that song, including those who were not present at the event and the generations following, it would acquire the status of an anthem. Within this model, all those who were involved in distributing and promoting the song, including those who enjoyed it, would be considered cultural instruments.<sup>32</sup>

These mechanisms can similarly be applied to the formation of folk culture and public policies. Public policies, I believe, however elaborate or complex, begin with an individual and his or her experience of events and the daily world; in this instance, the product is the idea that arose from that experience. It remains a private idea until shared, further developed, and promoted, until it reaches a level of acceptance within social power structures (public institutions, governments) that gives it the status of a public policy. Some might suggest that these later processes are usually intertwined with political processes. If so, it would bring into relevance the role of values, ethos, and assumptions, as well as power dynamics and group processes.

Some forms of cultural substrates are simple and some are complex. Values and ethos are complex forms of cultural substrates, while the assumptions we make about ourselves, others, and how the world works underpin what is important to us; assumptions are the simpler forms of cultural substrates. The simplest forms of assumptions are sometimes referred to as basic assumptions; they are assumptions that are not generally apparent<sup>33</sup> and operate in the realm of the unconscious.<sup>34</sup> Another important feature of basic assumptions is that they are not derived from reasoning, and the person who is proposing the idea or belief usually does not see the need to provide a rationale—it is a “given.” In the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, a Protestant from Shankill Road in Belfast might be bewildered if asked why he thinks Catholics should be feared and why they cannot be trusted; that Catholics are to be feared and that they are untrustworthy are givens. A Catholic from the Falls Road might equally well assume without question that Protestants are privileged and unforgiving. Even though most would explain this attitude by their recent experiences, and others would argue that “everyone in my community would agree” to support their position, few would understand the origins of their basic assumptions. Furthermore, most would not see the need to search for an explanation, for after all, these are givens.

In a discussion of the origins of these basic assumptions, A.T.Q Stewart notes that the fear inspired by the 1641 massacre “survives in the Protestant subconscious as the memory of the Penal Laws or the Famine persists in the Catholic.”<sup>35</sup>

The historical events in themselves are not sufficient to embed a lasting memory. The response of those who survived and the response of the generations that follow contribute to this process. There are also the complex issues of the historiography of traumatic events and processes by which collective memories are made, both of which are highly relevant but well beyond the scope of this article for further consideration.<sup>36</sup> From a psychological perspective, the shared experience of these events and their collective response create basic assumptions. The experience of the initial terror of the massacres, the response by those present, the later recounting of that experience, and the response to it by others and following generations

created some of the most “basic” assumptions that underpin society in Northern Ireland. The process of recording these first-hand experiences and their subsequent embellishment and politicization would have transformed those early assumptions into more elaborate assumptions tinged with emotion and prejudice. This is one of the ways historical events become embedded in our shared consciousness, which, in essence, is our culture.

## **The Impact of Trauma**

Historical events that were traumatizing for the majority of a collective might also be transmitted across generations through what is known as transgenerational transmission of trauma. This concept, which has become well established in the past forty years, was developed through studies of Holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren and confirmed by studies of survivors from other atrocities and wars and the children of the veterans of these wars.<sup>37</sup> Transmission can occur through three mechanisms: (1) in a general sense, the traumatic experience affects the mental health of the survivors, which then impacts their child-rearing and family environment; (2) in a more specific way, the parents’ preoccupation with unresolved issues relating to their traumatic experience becomes the predominant agenda for the whole family—their children grow up without developing their own mind and adopt their parents’ preoccupation as their own; and (3) the final mechanism, called projective identification, is unconscious. Projective identification occurs when survivors of a historical traumatic event are unable to talk about it and might unconsciously collude among themselves to avoid the subject altogether, for it is too painful to even think about. It is postulated that these memories are disavowed and projected into their children, who carry them unconsciously in their mind and pass the memories on to the next generation.

More than a century ago, Sigmund Freud proposed that when an experience and its memory cannot be held in the conscious mind, it is either repressed into the unconscious (therefore, forgotten) or disavowed and projected into the external world or into another person (as in denial).<sup>38</sup> He also proposed that individuals unconsciously recreate that experience, as if to give themselves another chance at mastering that original encounter. This phenomenon is known as “re-enactment,” which is to be distinguished from the conscious and deliberate acts of memorialization that seek to remember and commemorate. Bearing in mind this distinction, one might consider the events of the 12th of July among Protestants in Northern Ireland each year as commemorations that involved processes of memorialization. When these rituals break out into violent riots with Catholics, however, they might well be unconscious re-enactments of traumatic events of the past three hundred years of conflicts.

If these riots have been the manifestations of deeply held, unprocessed, and unresolved trauma from the three hundred years of conflict between Protestants and Catholics, the necessary cultural transformation for lasting peace must reach a deep level. Some would disagree with my suggestion that those in the present are unaware of the link between the recent riots and the historical events. Earlier, I quoted several historians who have written about this link. There are likely to be many more who have considered such a link in their understanding of the causes of the conflict. Those who have worked with traumatized individuals would undoubtedly have encountered many such people who, when asked, “What happened?” could tell them. This knowledge by itself is often an intellectual fact isolated from personal emotional significance. The process of therapy usually involves their asking three more questions. The first two—“How did what happened affect me?” and “How do I feel about what happened to me?”—constitute a process by which an emotional link is made with their traumatic experience. Once they have understood the emotional impact of what until then was only an intellectual fact, they can begin to make sense of what happened. This final stage usually involves asking the fourth question, “Why did it happen?”

I have found that this process, which consists of efforts to answer these four questions, is applicable not only to individuals but also to collectives trying to find healing for their historical trauma.<sup>39</sup> These four questions have recently been used by a group of senior Japanese academics and community leaders to frame their first interdisciplinary series of symposia, addressing the long-term effects of their country's traumatic experience and role in the Second World War. One aim of these symposia is to encourage extensive conversations in Japanese society about the war. For seventy-five years these conversations did not take place, in part to avoid tension from possible conflict and in part because of a conspiracy of silence, a phenomenon that often occurs in the aftermath of massive, collective trauma. The discussions during these symposia among historians, sociologists, and mental health clinicians reached some of the deepest, painful episodes of their history, stirring up feelings of guilt, shame, and humiliation.<sup>40</sup>

A similar set of conversations about the traumatic experiences of Protestant and Catholic communities from the past three hundred years would be necessary if these two groups were to address their respective historical trauma and bring about a cultural transformation. There is, however, an added layer of difficulty for Northern Ireland. The more recent trauma from the Troubles has heightened the sensitivities of all involved and the risk of triggering encapsulated trauma from the past is very high. I consider some of the issues relating to such pitfalls and their consequences in an article titled, "The Impact of Trauma on Peace Processes" published in an earlier issue of this journal.<sup>41</sup>

The results of an extensive survey of the trauma from the Troubles undertaken by the Commission for Victims and Survivors were published in 2011.<sup>42</sup> The study found "an estimated 39% of the study population have experienced a conflict-related traumatic event" and "an estimated 8.8% of the Northern Ireland adult population met the criteria for PTSD at some point in their life while 5.1% met the criteria in the previous 12 months." These figures compare with a twelve-month prevalence rate for PTSD between 1 percent in Europe<sup>43</sup> and 3–4 percent in the United States.<sup>44</sup> Significantly, but not surprisingly, conflict-related events were also more prevalent among those aged 35–49 (46 percent) and 50–64 (44 percent).

These figures suggest that if in-depth conversations were to be held in these age groups (which most community leaders fall into) about the traumatic history of Northern Ireland, almost every second person would have experienced a significant conflict-related trauma. Further consideration should be given to the dynamics of groups of which a large proportion may have experienced significant trauma. Traumatized groups have unique dynamics with the intragroup tendency to find scapegoats within, and an intergroup tendency to create enemies, if there are not existing ones; these tendencies often operate simultaneously. When the group is further stressed, which might occur when emotionally challenging memories are recalled or tension develops between members, it regresses with predictable outcomes. This regression begins with a propensity for binary thinking, which could deteriorate to unitary thinking where, rather than two views (black and white), there is only a single perspective with no possibility of an alternative view. This shift in the way people think is followed by a heightened preoccupation with boundary (symbolic and geographic) and identity. Further regression leads to splitting and fragmentation and, finally, an implosion characterized by intragroup conflict, domestic violence, and suicide. I have observed these patterns of behavior among various traumatized groups and communities in Northern Ireland. I understand they have presented a challenge in cross-communal activities in interface neighborhoods. They would also contribute to added difficulties in groups that were to come together to address their historical trauma and cultural transformation.

In the next article, I discuss how some of these challenges might be overcome with a trauma-informed approach to cultural transformation.

## **Collective and Cultural Trauma**

When we consider the traumatic history of Northern Ireland that has been passed down from generation to generation for the past three hundred years or that was experienced in the thirty years of the Troubles, we tend to think of the experience of individual minds. When we think of traumatized groups, we tend to consider the individual members of the group. In the preceding discussion of the behaviors of a regressed group, I have in mind the group as a whole; that is, the psychology of the group as a single entity is more than the sum of its individual members. Studies by proponents of collective psychology first appeared more than a hundred years ago, with publications such as *The Psychology of the Crowd* by Gustave Le Bon in 1895 and *The Group Mind* by William McDougall in 1920. By the mid-twentieth century, these conceptualizations have fallen out of favor and are now discussed dismissively as mob psychology and herd mentality.

Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in these ideas, which are reflected in conceptualizations of what is known as “large group psychology” and “very large group psychology,” with singular entities comprising hundreds and thousands. One of the leading proponents of this psychology is Vamik Volkan, who has used it to address conflict and violence at a societal level and within international relations and diplomacy.<sup>45</sup> When one is applying large-group psychology, the focus shifts from the individual members of the group to the collective. This shift might be conceptualized as moving from the minds of individuals to a singular consciousness, a collective mind. Since I use the term “collective mind” throughout this article, I would like to summarize its key features because they are relevant to the task of cultural transformation.

1. Collective psychology is pertinent to cultural transformation because both are concerned with shared experiences and shared responses to those experiences. These experiences are embedded in a shared consciousness. If we conceptualize this phenomenon from a psychological perspective, we can understand it as a singular group mind or collective mind. Or perhaps from a sociological perspective, we can view it as a social network or simply, as I am proposing here, as culture. In my work with collectives, this last concept tends to be most relevant and accessible to communities, for they would speak of the culture of their communities.
2. If we were to think of shared, collective, or social consciousness interchangeably with culture in the context of Northern Ireland, we find three domains of consciousness/culture: the Protestant consciousness, the Catholic consciousness, and their overlapping consciousness. I use the term “overlapping” rather than “shared” in this context because I have observed, in many instances, a great reluctance to acknowledge that which is common between them.
3. It might be assumed that each of these three prescribed consciousnesses has a corresponding deep area that is not easily accessible, which might be called “the unconscious.” I do not know whether the boundary between their respective unconscious could be as clearly demarcated as their conscious domains. Donald Winnicott has postulated that there is an area where the consciousness of the mother and infant overlap, a zone he calls the “transitional space.”<sup>46</sup> There is a growing appreciation within psychology for a similar space in our close, personal encounters, where there is an overlap of subjectivity, referred to as “intersubjectivity.” Is it possible that the deeper we go into the respective “consciousness” of the Protestant and Catholic communities, the more likely we are to find a space, perhaps a transitional space, where there are common and shared elements and sufficient overlap for us to consider some collective equivalence to intersubjectivity between individuals?

4. While some of the cultural transformation that might be achieved within the Protestant and Catholic communities would add to the peacebuilding effort, the creation of a truly shared consciousness in the transitional space between them, with its own intersubjectivity and culture, I believe, would lead to lasting peace. I discuss this point further in the next article.

We have one more aspect of collective psychology to consider before we discuss how cultural transformation can be achieved. In collective psychology, the equivalent of the concept of transgenerational trauma discussed earlier is cultural trauma. In this situation, a collective consciousness can be affected in such a deep and far-reaching way that the shared experience becomes embedded in the culture and changes it significantly.

Over the past two decades, Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues have been influential in introducing the notion of cultural trauma, specifically, the way in which social mechanisms within a collective come to consider certain shared experiences as traumatic and use them to shape their identity.<sup>47</sup> Their work has been instrumental in informing the contributions of critical cultural theory, museology, and historiography for a range of public policy issues such as nationalism, racism, slavery, and genocide. During the same period, Vamik Volkan has highlighted the use of chosen trauma to encourage a form of nationalism that has often led to violence and conflict.<sup>48</sup>

Alexander defines cultural trauma as follows:

When members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.<sup>49</sup>

In my work with the desert Aboriginal people of Central Australia, I have witnessed a different kind of cultural trauma. There, the traumatic experience is not a definable event but a persistent and pervasive destruction of a way of being, through colonization and dispossession. I call this “complex cultural trauma” and define it as occurring when the apparatus or system through which a collective makes sense of its experience is corrupted, distorted, compromised, or destroyed. I distinguish this kind of cultural trauma from that Alexander and his colleagues identify in its relevance beyond collective identity, highlighting the damage to the holding function of culture through the loss of a system of reference, which the Aboriginal people relied on to make sense of their traumatic experience.<sup>50</sup>

If we apply these two kinds of cultural trauma to Northern Ireland, we can identify key historical events that left indelible marks on the collective consciousness of the opposing sectarian communities and thus changed their identity. Moreover, we could recognize a distortion of their culture that is characterized by a predominant tendency to make sense of experiences in terms of their relationship with their enemies. A striking outcome that bears both kinds of cultural trauma is the refrain heard often among the youth in Northern Ireland: “I don’t know who I am, but I know who I am not.” The cultural repertoire that they have inherited either is rejected for its association with the conflict and violence of the Troubles or is no longer useful in a post-conflict situation. What remains, however, is the basic (cultural) assumption that the Other is either bad or to be feared.

Considering the cultural trauma discussed so far, it seems inadequate to propose any kind of cultural transformation toward peacebuilding without also addressing the healing of shared traumatic experiences. In the next article, I consider how these elements might be addressed through what I call “cultural work.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maria Power, ed., *Building Peace in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> A BBC poll on April 20, 2021, found 76 percent agree that “there is still a potential for violence in the future” (“NI 100: Majority Believes NI Will Leave UK within 25 Years,” BBC News, April 20, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-56777985>) and in the Centenary Poll of May 1, 2021, 68 percent “believe that the prospect of a united Ireland could jeopardise peace” (Ivan Little, “Centenary Poll: ‘Irish unity would jeopardise peace in Northern Ireland’—Survey Confirms Hardening of Views in Unionist Community,” *Belfast Telegraph*, May 2, 2021, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/centenary-poll-irish-unity-would-jeopardise-peace-in-northern-ireland-survey-confirms-hardening-of-views-in-unionist-community-40377774.html>).

<sup>3</sup> Henry Ridgwell, “Belfast Riots: Fears of Return to Sectarian Violence as Brexit Stokes Divisions,” VOA, April 8, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/europe-belfast-riots-fears-return-sectarian-violence-brex-it-stokes-divisions/6204330.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Alex McEwen, *Public Policy in Divided Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999); Claire Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Timothy White, “The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Peace in Northern Ireland,” in Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict*, chap. 3.

<sup>6</sup> The Northern Ireland Executive Office published the “Together: Building a United Community” Strategy May 23, 2013; “Interface Barriers, Peacelines, and Defensive Architecture,” Belfast Interface Project, 2017, available at <https://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/publication/interface-barriers-peacelines-and-defensive-architecture>.

<sup>7</sup> David Capener, “Belfast Housing Policy Still Reflects Deep Division,” *Guardian*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/oct/03/northern-ireland-shared-communities-economic-inequality-religion-neighbourhood>.

<sup>8</sup> “Integrated Schools,” Department of Education, 2021, retrieved December 4, 2021, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/integrated-schools>.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Todd, “Social Transformation, Collective Categories and identity Change,” *Theory and Society* 34 (2005): 429-463.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Findlayson, “The Problem of ‘Culture’ in Northern Ireland: A Critique of the Cultural Traditions Group,” *Irish Review*, no. 20, Ideas of Nationhood (Winter–Spring 1997): 76–88; Cathal McCall, “Culture and the Irish Border: Spaces for Conflict Transformation,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 2 (June 2011): 201–221.

<sup>12</sup> Robbie Meredith, “Culture in NI ‘used as a continuation of conflict,’” BBC News, November 2, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-41838993>; Jonathan Gorvett, “Northern Ireland Is in a Culture War. Brexit Is Making It Worse,” *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/31/northern-ireland-culture-war-brex-it/>; Phil Ramsey and Bethany Waterhouse, “Cultural Policy in Northern Ireland: Making Cultural Policy for a Divided Society,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy*, ed. Victoria Durrer, Toby Miller, and Dave O’Brien, 195–211 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland*, 178.

<sup>14</sup> “Explainer: What Is the Irish Language Act and Why Is It Causing Political Deadlock in Northern Ireland?,” *thejournali.e.*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-language-act-explainer-3851417-Feb2018/>.

<sup>15</sup> This paper, “The Potential Role of the Arts in Healing the Trauma of the Troubles and Building Peace in Northern Ireland—a Personal Reflection,” was widely distributed and introduced me to wide range of stakeholders in Northern Ireland as an interested outsider.

<sup>16</sup> Eugen Koh, “The Cunningham Dax Collection: A Unique Mental Health Resource,” *Australasian Psychiatry* 22, no. 1 (February 2014): 41–43, DOI: [10.1177/1039856213517951](https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856213517951).

<sup>17</sup> Eugen Koh and George Halasz, “Back of House/Under the House: Some Psychoanalytic Aspects of the Acquisition and Exhibition of Art by Survivors of the Holocaust,” *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2011): 74–88; published online February 15, 2011 in Wiley OnlineLibrary, DOI: 10.1002/aps.276. This article highlights some of the issues relating to the art of traumatized individuals and their communities.

<sup>18</sup> Eugen Koh, “Cultural Work in Addressing Conflicts and Violence in Traumatized Communities,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 31, no. 1 (June 2021), <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol31/iss1/3/>.

<sup>19</sup> J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Irish Dreamtime* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *Oxford Illustrated History of Prehistoric Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> J. P. Mallory, *The Origins of the Irish* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Treaty of Windsor” (2022), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Treaty-of-Windsor>.

<sup>23</sup> A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster, 1609–1969* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 52.

<sup>24</sup> R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1988). Foster writes: “[This] estimate of 4000 casualties is too high, a figure of 2000 may be nearer, but must remain speculative. Retaliatory attacks on Catholics soon added many more fatalities. These figures are arresting enough. But the number of victims killed in the initial massacre rapidly became inflated to fantastic levels, affecting both Irish historiography and Protestant mentality,” 85. It is unclear why Foster doubted that figure of 4000, he offered no rationale. It is unlikely that he was simply ‘pro-Catholics as he, later, barely mentioned the extent to which Irish Catholics perished during Cromwell’s campaign.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>27</sup> C. O. Grada and Joel Mokyr, “New Developments in Irish Population History 1700–1850,” *Economic History Review* 37, no. 4. (November 1984): 473–488, cited by Foster in *ibid.*, 324.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Townshend, *The Partition* (Dublin: Allen Lane/Random House Penguin, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

<sup>30</sup> J. R. Baldwin, S. L. Faulkner, M. L. Hecht, and S. L. Lindsey, eds., *Redefining Culture: Perspectives across the Disciplines* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Polity Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>32</sup> This aspect of cultural instrument is different from the notion of “cultural amplifiers” used by Bruner and Vygotsky, which relate to internalization of culture in the development of the cognitive capacity of the mind, as discussed in Michael Cole and Peg Griffin “Cultural Amplifiers Reconsidered,” in *The Social Foundations of Language and Thought*, ed. David R. Olson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), [https://lchcautobio.ucsd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Cole-1980-Cultural\\_Amplifiers\\_Reconsidered.pdf](https://lchcautobio.ucsd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Cole-1980-Cultural_Amplifiers_Reconsidered.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Edgar H. Schein considers the concept of basic assumptions in the unaware domain of organization culture in “What Is Culture?,” in *Sociology of Organisations*, ed. Mary Godwyn and Jody Hoffer Gittel, 311–314 (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Wilfred Bion was among the first to use the term “basic assumptions” in reference to the ways groups operate automatically under the sway of the unconscious forces within their group mind. W. R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups* (London: Tavistock, 1961).

<sup>35</sup> Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Introduction to *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Thomas Anastasio, Kristen Ehrenberger, Patrick Watson, and Wenji Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Yael Danieli, ed., *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma* (New York: Plenum Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through. (1914) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Strachey, J. (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 145.

<sup>39</sup> Eugen Koh, “The Healing of Historical Collective Trauma,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 15, no. 1 (2011): 115–133, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.1.1776>.

<sup>40</sup> The framework for this project is outlined in Eugen Koh and Tadashi Takeshima, “The Long-Term Effects of Japan’s Traumatic Experience in the Second World War and its Implications for Peace in Northeast Asia,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 32, no. 2 (2020), 1–13, <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol32/iss2/5/>; an abridged report of the proceedings of the five symposia that took place in 2021 will be published in this journal.

<sup>41</sup> Eugen Koh, “The Impact of Trauma on Peace Processes,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 33, no. 1 (2021), <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol33/iss1/4>.

<sup>42</sup> *Troubled Consequences: A Report on the Mental Health of the Civil Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Commission for Victims and Survivors, October 2011, <https://www.cvsni.org/media/1435/troubled-consequences-october-2011.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> J. M. Darves-Bornoz et al., “Main Traumatic Events in Europe: PTSD in European Study of Epidemiology of Mental Disorders Survey,” *Journal of Trauma Stress* 21, no. 5 (October 2008): 455–462, DOI: 10.1002/jts.20357.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald C. Kessler, Patricia Berglund, Olga Demler, Robert Jin, Kathleen R. Merikangas, and Ellen E. Walters, “Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62 (2005): 593–602, doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593.

<sup>45</sup> Sverre Varvin and Vamik Volkan, eds., *Violence or Dialogue: Psychoanalytic Insights on Terror and Terrorism* (London: International Psychoanalytic Associations, 2003); Vamik Volkan, *Psychoanalysis, International Relations and Diplomacy: A Sourcebook on Large-Group Psychology* (London: Karnac, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," chap. 1 in *Playing and Reality*. (London: Tavistock, 1971).

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Volkan, *Psychoanalysis*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," chap. 1 in Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma*.

<sup>50</sup> Koh, "Cultural Work in Addressing Conflicts and Violence."