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## **Cultural Work in Peacebuilding among Traumatized Communities of Northern Ireland 2: Talking about Culture**

**Eugen Koh**

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### **Abstract**

This article is the second of two that describe a psychodynamically informed understanding of the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and an approach to cultural transformation called “cultural work” aimed at building peace among the state’s traumatized communities. The conflict between Protestant and Catholic communities has extended well into the cultural domain and is often weaponized to attack the Other. Conversations about culture quickly become stuck in a quagmire of identity politics. This article describes a psychodynamic trauma-informed approach to cultural conversations involving an in-depth analysis of culture that avoids becoming stuck. It outlines a framework and set of preconditions that enable such deep conversations and reports on a pilot project involving community leaders from both sides of the conflict as well as those who are non-aligned. This project demonstrated how these seemingly innocuous conversations about culture got to the heart of many of the political issues related to the conflict without becoming stuck. Furthermore, they reached the deeper unspeakable and unresolved problems that affect peacebuilding; most notably, trauma, suicide and violence.

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In this second article, I discuss an ongoing project called Talking about Culture, which involves a focus group in Northern Ireland consisting of leaders from Protestant and Catholic communities and others who consider themselves non-aligned. The issues that have already emerged from this project highlight the unique challenges and opportunities in peacebuilding through cultural transformation in the context of Northern Ireland. I begin by defining what I mean by “cultural work” and outline some of the necessary conditions that may enable such work to take place and identify some key features and processes involved.

Culture can be an extremely sensitive subject. When I first presented a public lecture about cultural change in Belfast, a man in the audience objected to the suggestion that there was a need for change and expressed great concern about what he saw as the growing tendency for a “homogenization of culture.”<sup>1</sup> In many circumstances, the idea of change is unsettling. In that moment, I felt he was telling me something about his culture being under threat. It was unclear to me whether he was referring to the general sense that traditional cultures were being overtaken by modernization or that local cultures were being threatened by globalization or, perhaps more specifically, that his culture was being swept aside by the culture of a more powerful and dominant group. I sensed in him, however, a terrible anxiety that his unique culture was under siege in post-Troubles Northern Ireland.

It is difficult in this era of global upheavals to find people who are not concerned about a threat to their way of life, which in essence, is their culture. People who come from countries that have survived colonization but are now displaced by conflict are sensitive to the loss of their culture or fear that it is being pushed aside by another. Their anxieties are not just about the present or an unknown future; they fear a repetition of the past. These sensitivities are heightened by trauma, historical and recent. Traumatic experiences are invariably accompanied by shame and humiliation; just as physical injuries expose one’s vulnerabilities, psychological injuries strip bare one’s defenses, exposing the fragile, emotional self. In my experience, the best antidote to humiliation is respect. Consideration for the culture of others must therefore be framed with respect or by a parity of esteem, especially when parties disagree, for culture is what holds us and makes us feel secure. It is always prudent to ensure that the Other feels secure, since the Other’s sense of security impacts on our own safety.

In Northern Ireland, conversations about cultural transformation are challenging because of these sensitivities. But there appears to be an added problem with the politicization of culture, or in everyday terms, culture is “weaponized.” This issue of weaponization was regularly raised during Talking about Culture sessions. For conversations about culture to proceed in a manner that is open and deep, we need to create an environment that is safe and supportive enough to encourage genuine engagement and dialogue. I discuss how this might be achieved when I address the preconditions that need to be established before conversations can begin.

## **Defining Cultural Work**

Cultural work is the process through which collectives address aspects of their own culture by examining, strengthening, and modifying it, and when necessary, creating new elements together.

Cultural work is a dynamic, ongoing process. The direction of the process is not always linear. It can move in different directions and at times may appear to be going in circles. Also, it is open to influence by factors within and beyond the group. I use the term “work” to emphasize the active and deliberate effort involved.

In saying that this work addresses certain aspects of culture, rather than culture in an abstract and general sense, I am pointing out that this work is focused. Though it usually

involves an exploratory phase, it would necessarily focus on one aspect at a time. This approach contrasts with the common tendency to talk about culture without a defined aim or purpose.

I have sought to distinguish cultural work from cultural intervention. The former concerns collectives addressing their own culture; the latter involves an imposition of change by external actors or forces, as is commonly seen in colonization or totalitarian systems. A sense of ownership in the processes of cultural work, its deliberations and outcomes, is important if any change is to be sustainable.

Collectives begin doing cultural work by examining aspects of culture through conversations and reflections and by re-evaluating and thinking about other ways of being or doing. This initial stage is critical, because people do not often think to question their own culture. They usually assume that there could not be a problem with their own culture because it has guided and held them in their way of being in the world and has offered a sense of security across generations. Even if some acknowledge that their way of life might be problematic, they do not usually dig deep and question their basic assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

I include strengthening as one element of the process to suggest that the reinforcement of good aspects of one's culture is as important as modifying the elements that create difficulties. I use the word "modify" rather than "change" because it is less anxiety provoking. I also prefer to use the term "transformation" because it is less radical than "change." The idea of change can be threatening to those who are traumatized, and no less so than it is to the rest of us living in an era of global upheavals and uncertainties. I have been careful to address the anxieties of potential participants in such a process because their sense of threat and insecurity might impact negatively on participation, receptivity, and ownership.

It is not enough, however, to speak only of cultural modification; sometimes radical change and transformation is necessary. Furthermore, sometimes cultural change or transformation involves not altering pre-existing elements of culture but creating new ones. Cultural work encompasses the strengthening of pre-existing culture, the modification of some elements, and the radical change of others.

Many members of a group that is doing cultural work may feel reassured by being told that they can keep and even strengthen aspects of their culture that they identify as "tradition." They are more willing to embrace a new way of being if they can keep some of the lasting elements that have enabled them to feel safe in the world.

It might be useful at this point to clarify the difference between culture and tradition, because I have observed much difficulty in differentiating the two, especially in my encounters in Northern Ireland. Culture is dynamic; it is usually adaptive and evolves according to circumstances. It is informed by the past, holds us in the present, and guides us into the future. Tradition, however, is static; it is about preserving the past or ensuring the continuation of an aspect of culture from the past into the future. Tradition is the subset of culture that remains static. The culture of traumatized communities often becomes frozen in time or is said to be "stuck in the past." Traumatized communities find it almost impossible to distinguish their culture from tradition.

I include in the definition of cultural work the need to undertake this work together as a collective. This is because culture is a shared aspect of our collective life. Thus, the process of addressing it must be undertaken collectively, where overlapping history, subjectivities, interests, and concerns can be considered. Furthermore, a high level of participation by members of a collective is more likely to ensure acceptance and sustained ownership.

## **Cultural Work and Cultural Transformation**

The aim of cultural work is usually, but not always, to transform culture. Sometimes, it is about making aspects of culture more relevant to a present-day predicament. I had the privilege to

observe a group of Aboriginal women leaders rediscover an aspect of their culture that enabled their people to talk about the problem of domestic violence in their communities and, more broadly, the relationship between men and women. In an attempt to understand how trauma had affected their communities, these women had tried with little success to bring up these issues among themselves at various stages in a series of workshops. When they finally did feel able to talk about it, toward the end of my three years working with them, they found it difficult to go further than blaming the men for their trauma, leaving themselves stuck in the familiar perpetrator-victim paradigm. Because they had brought various aspects of their culture into these workshops, I encouraged them to bring a Dreamtime story (*tjukurrpa*) that might relate to their predicament.

The following day they brought some figurines made of desert grass along with a series of paintings that told the Dreamtime story of how a man was trapped in a tree and the women who were traveling with him tried to free him without success. As a storm was approaching, the man asked the women to continue their journey and assured them he would catch up with them once he found a way to free himself. The women cried, "We will not leave you until you are freed." The women sought the help of a *ngangkari*, a traditional healer, who was able to use the forces of nature to break open the tree and free the man.

The Aboriginal women explained that the tree from the Dreamtime story was, "like what colonization has done to us; it trapped us." When I pointed out that they had just found a way to talk about their difficulties without solely blaming the men, they told me that the story helped them to realize that it was a problem that could be solved only "by the men and women working together." The story touched an aspect of their culture that they had known for a long time, though they had not seen its relevance to their situation today. During the ensuing weeks, the news about the relevance of this story spread rapidly across the thousands of kilometres of the central and western deserts because many women knew this *tjukurrpa* and could relate to it.<sup>3</sup>

Two possible explanations for this apparent disconnection between cultural heritage and present life are cultural dispossession from colonization and compartmentalization. Such disconnection from traditional cultural heritage is often found in modernized societies. Reconnecting with cultural heritage in ways that help members of a group see things differently is a kind of cultural transformation that could be used in peacebuilding. This idea of cultural reclamation, however, might cause some to think of conservatism rather than of the progressive thinking that is usually associated with peacebuilding.

Cultural work does not take sides with either conservative or progressive ideals. Its definition includes no ideological assumptions and its aim is to develop culture in an adaptive manner with the present circumstances. In some situations, it might well be more adaptive to be conservative; in others, progressive ideas might be more helpful for the survival of a collective.

Proposals for cultural transformation usually begin with the belief that the status quo needs changing, and it is often assumed that the stance must be consistently progressive. This assumption, however, is not accurate because today there are many segments of Western societies that believe their present situation is too liberal and who see a need for a return to conservatism. The proposition for cultural work to achieve cultural transformation outlined in this article is not based on any specific political ideology. Attempts to place cultural work and transformation to achieve a political aim is more akin to what I earlier defined as cultural intervention. It is forced on a collective by either an external power or an internal faction.

While a key characteristic of cultural work is that it is "owned" and undertaken by the majority of a collective, it would usually begin with a small group and gradually increase to a more substantial part of the collective before it is finally embraced by the majority. The initial idea for cultural transformation might come from an outsider. In that case, the process begins as some form of cultural intervention. To be considered cultural work, however, it must then

expand to include most of a collective. It is not important who initiates the process, as long as the process includes the key characteristics of a parity of esteem, openness to dialogue, and inclusivity.

## **Preparation and Preconditions for Cultural Work**

### **Frame**

It is critical that those setting out to undertake cultural work to achieve cultural transformation clarify from the outset their understanding of a common purpose and expectations; in psychotherapy, we refer to this statement of purpose and expectations as the frame. Even when participants agree on a common purpose and expectations for their group, individual participants might have an additional, “side agenda” that emerges from time to time. For example, a participant who is committed to engaging with deliberations about peacebuilding may also be concerned about social housing or climate change. These unacknowledged agendas often distract the group from the agreed-on focus and add further complication to what is already a complex task. Once there is an agreement about the common purpose and aim of the group, the next step is to develop a shared understanding of how they will work together to achieve the common aim.<sup>4</sup>

### **Trauma-Informed Approach**

One of the first, necessary “shared understandings” is a general appreciation that most postconflict collectives have experienced significant trauma. Earlier I described three key features of a traumatized collective: heightened sensitivity to perceived judgment and the triggering of a past traumatic experience can expose the collective to guilt, shame, and humiliation; a deep sense of insecurity is often accompanied by a siege mentality; a safe and supportive environment must be established before the group embarks on the cultural work. This third element takes time and constitutes a large part of the task, setting the foundation for the group’s work.

### **Culturally Safe Space**

The following list presents some of the shared understandings (or ground rules) that have been adopted to create a culturally safe space:

- All cultures deserve to be respected because they are uniquely meaningful and valuable to each group of people, especially in their role of holding the group secure.
- Everyone is an expert on his or her own culture and each should refrain from commenting about another person’s culture.
- An engagement with another person’s culture should begin with a sense of curiosity and genuine interest rather than judgment, which is often regrettably premature and inaccurate.
- Participants of a group operating in a long shadow of colonization need to be aware of a tendency to make comparisons (insecurity stemming from colonization about the value of one’s own culture) with unspoken and implied superiority and inferiority.
- It takes time for trust to grow. Most of the interactions in the group will initially be between participants and the facilitator; but as trust and familiarity builds, participants will feel confident to interact among themselves and begin a dialogue with each other about their respective cultures.

### **Emotionally Safe Space**

For participants to delve into aspects of their culture that may connect with painful historical events and their more recent experiences of trauma, they must meet in an environment where they feel safe enough to recognize and share their feelings. Painful feelings such as guilt, shame, and humiliation are more likely to be endured if others in the group respond with empathy, support, and respect. While the creation of such an environment requires a basic level of trust, an individual's experience of such a supportive situation will lead to an even greater trust. Only when a group finds a safe and supportive environment characterized by mutual trust and respect will they be able to engage with each other substantially as they examine their respective cultures together.

### **Politically Safe Space**

A local leader in Northern Ireland once told me that every square foot in the area outside of the Duncairn Centre in North Belfast is politicized: the Protestants' footpath is on this side of the road and the Catholics' is on the other side; this bus stop belongs to Catholics, while Protestants will need to use the bus stop down the hill and walk back up; someone wearing an orange T-shirt is considered provocative, while another wearing a green scarf is asked to leave it by the door before coming into an interface meeting. What does it mean to have a politically safe space in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict? Should such a space ban all symbols of identity, or should everything be allowed and those who are present be required to accept it? In my approach to creating politically safe spaces, participants are encouraged to be thoughtful about what they bring into the space, giving due consideration to the possibility of causing offense and provocation. Such preparatory work is necessary for all participants to come together with the right frame of mind.

### **Emotional Work: A Precondition to Cultural Work**

Groups that have not addressed their emotional experience of trauma, grief, and loss will usually have only a limited capacity to undertake cultural work. They are more likely to be preoccupied with the need to avoid stepping on the landmines of unresolved past trauma. Discussions in these groups are often bogged down with the minutiae of history, going around in circles, or simply stalled with long, uncomfortable silences. The emotional work of mourning loss and working through past trauma usually occurs once a sufficiently safe and supportive environment has been established. This work may involve the sharing of emotionally laden personal stories. Facilitators and members of the group who may not be comfortable with such experiences should be assured of the importance of such emotional work.<sup>5</sup>

### **Regaining the Capacity for Complex Thinking**

I am often struck by how individuals and groups can gain a capacity to think through difficult situations once they have addressed some of the emotional issues that had previously paralyzed them. They seem to make a shift from previous tendencies of binary or unitary thinking,<sup>6</sup> and regain a capacity for complex thinking. Relieving some emotional burden also seems to release a newfound creativity, along with a kind of lateral thinking that enables them to see old problems differently. Perhaps more important, they achieve a new sense of ownership of their problems and renewed confidence to address them, marking a shift from a previous sense of passivity, victimhood, and propensity to blame.

## **Talking about Culture: An Overview**

The aim of the Talking about Culture project is to find ways to address cultural issues that affect peacebuilding by facilitating conversations among leaders of communities and civil society. “Conversations” might seem like too simple and too vague a concept to address something as complex and far-reaching as culture and in a situation as complicated as Northern Ireland. The effort to find a solution to the deep, cultural issues emanating from a complicated and entrenched sectarian conflict that has gone on for more than three hundred years with occasional flareups, including, most recently, three decades of sustained violence from which the two sides are still recovering, would appear to require much more than simple conversations. Many might be more assured by the familiar approach consisting of a comprehensive strategy developed through multi-sectoral engagement and consultations with stakeholders set out in a report that invites more consultations, with the final recommendations outlined in a public policy document that would inform a tender process for projects that might turn some of the recommendations into real world applications. A project that consists simply of conversations would be unlikely to attract funding.

In Northern Ireland even the simplest conversations about culture are politicized and in a more open-conflict environment, they are “weaponized.” But because I believe that almost all efforts in conflict mediation and peacebuilding begin with a conversation, I called this project Talking about Culture. I have learned that through face-to-face conversations individuals and collectives can begin to understand and respect their differences, while slowly developing trust through their common ground. The notion of a simple conversation is attractive to the ordinary person facing the challenge of finding peace in everyday life; simple conversations are often widely embraced at the grassroots level where the majority of the masses are situated. Simple conversations are deceptively powerful. The ideas that emerge can be easily and rapidly spread across a population because conversations themselves are a modality of such transmission; they create the space and opportunity for people to engage with the shared elements of their collective life, which is their culture. Through dialogue in this domain we come to identify the deepest sources of conflict and find a new way of being and relating. To put it in the context of what I understand culture to be: the formation of culture begins with our collective response to shared experience. Since the greater part of sharing common experiences involves conversations, this modality must necessarily constitute a large part of the process of cultural transformation.

While many of the people I met in Northern Ireland agreed that conversing about culture is one of the first steps in cultural transformation and peacebuilding, they were also quick to point out that such conversations often become stuck in a quagmire of identity politics, and tensions soon rise with the threat of conflict, involving various weaponized elements of culture. Is it possible to talk about culture with the aim of examining it together in a group made up of Protestants, Catholics, and non-aligned without having the conversation become stuck or embroiled in conflict? Is it possible for such a group to discuss differences in culture while valuing commonalities? Is it possible to cohesively consider the elements of culture necessary for peacebuilding that do not currently exist and how these new elements need to be created? The remainder of this article suggests ways to make these challenges possible.

Between 2015 and 2019, I visited Northern Ireland four times and delivered a series of lectures and led workshops and informal discussion groups about conflict, trauma, and culture. That effort engaged several hundred people across the sectors. I intended to visit Northern Ireland again in 2020 but my plans were scuttled by the COVID pandemic. Bryson Care, which sponsored my visit in 2019, asked whether we could continue our planned conversations about culture online with groups of leaders from communities and civil societies.<sup>7</sup> My task was to facilitate these group discussions from Melbourne, Australia. Over the ensuing two years, we



held numerous group conversations using Zoom software. The following is a description of how the meetings were conducted, their proceedings, and outcome. So far, two stages in this project have been completed: a pilot and a continuation.

## **Pilot Stage**

The aim of the pilot stage was to establish whether it would be possible to have constructive conversations about culture across sectarian divides and be inclusive of non-aligned participants in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Three groups were involved in the pilot stage. Each group consisted of participants who identified themselves as Protestant, Catholic, or non-aligned, roughly distributed as 50 percent, 35 percent, and 15 percent, respectively. The first group consisted of ten staff from Bryson Care, the second consisted of eleven community leaders (about half were former prisoners/combatants and included two representatives of migrant groups), and the third consisted of five leaders from civil society, including religious groups (five others in this group were invited and had initially expressed interest in attending but later withdrew). The first and third groups met three times each; the second met four times. Each session ran between one and one and a half hours, with two-week intervals between meetings. The meetings were organized by three staff from Bryson who had recruited and supported the participants. They took part as participants in the first group and remained as observers in the meetings of the second and third groups. They met with me between each meeting to discuss progress and offer feedback. They provided invaluable advice on contextual issues that guided my responses to potentially challenging situations.

The trial began with staff of Bryson Care who had an interest in peacebuilding. I had assumed that there would be a high level of goodwill among them, and that they would be forgiving of any mistakes on my part as a facilitator. I approached them as a practice group to test various approaches, identify potentially sensitive issues, and observe possible group dynamics, especially those emerging between individuals from different backgrounds. I also assumed that I could rely on their being forthcoming with feedback and guidance that would be useful in later groups. Many in the group expressed some reservations about the project as they recalled previous, difficult attempts to talk about cultural issues across the sectarian divides; some were concerned that it would soon be stuck and become “political,” which I took to mean there would be disagreements and possibly conflict.

The group began by exploring some of the issues listed in the preceding section involving the creation of a culturally, emotionally, and politically safe space and a trauma-informed approach. To establish a common and broad understanding of culture, I asked them to consider the metaphor of a cake and the process of baking it (in keeping with the model of culture discussed in the preceding article). I pointed out that the ingredients that go into a cake and how they are mixed and baked determines the final product. The ingredients would correspond to what I had proposed as “cultural substrates”; the process of mixing and baking, along with the baker and the equipment that is used (including the oven), are the “cultural instruments.” The cake itself is the “cultural product.” When we think of culture we tend to focus only on the tangible final products. When we think about cake we usually focus on our enjoyment of eating the cake, the texture and how it tastes, not on its ingredients or how it was made. The staff/participants related to this metaphor instantly and pointed out that insufficient attention had been given to the social institutions that created and reinforced certain cultures. It was quite apparent to them how often similar ingredients (e.g., events) can give rise to different cultural outcomes. Different cultural instruments (e.g., social institutions) had played a major role in creating different cultural products (i.e., outcomes), despite using the same cultural substrates (i.e., ingredients, events).

Toward the end of the first session, in preparation for the next, the participants were asked to put themselves in a scenario:

I would like you to imagine that we are starting a new Northern Ireland on planet B, and each of you has been asked to bring some of your culture with you. There is only enough room for three pieces of luggage. It is recommended that in the first piece of luggage you pack an aspect of your culture that would help you to feel comforted and secure if you were to fall ill or become stressed or traumatized. In the second, please pack something from your culture that will help you to relate to people from a different background. In the third piece of luggage, please pack some of your cultural substrates (ingredients) and instruments that we can use to build a new culture together.

The second and third sessions consisted of discussions about the various cultural elements that each participant brought. This format was carried out with each of the three groups. The second group, which consisted of community leaders, found the process so stimulating and helpful that they requested an extra session to continue their discussion.

I presented the outcome of this pilot project at a two-day conference of some two hundred community leaders organized by Bryson Care.<sup>8</sup> In my lecture on the first day, I discussed some of the issues relating to having conversations about culture and cultural work that I highlight in the earlier parts of this article. The lecture on the second day covered some of the key findings from the project, the greater part of which I present here verbatim:

I was very impressed by how seriously all the participants took the “homework.” Many commented on how they pondered their culture all week, thinking about which aspects of their culture to bring and which to leave behind. I invite you to reflect for yourself on whether you can relate to any of the things that the groups shared.

Please take note that I am asking people to bring aspects of their culture. This exercise is not about building a totally new culture, but about examining one’s own culture and strengthening it. It is not about pulling the house down, but rather, doing some renovation and perhaps, building some extensions to make the house bigger and better.

In the first group (staff of Bryson Care), on the culture that will help them feel comforted and secure when unwell, stressed, or traumatized, many suggested how “having a cup of tea with family and friends” can be very assuring. There was a general agreement that the sharing of food is always nice and connecting.

One of the participants said she would bring her faith, another said more specifically, “prayers.” A few people said that their faith and its rituals were very “anchoring” for them, which is especially important in turbulent times.

One participant wanted to bring her tendency to question things and not simply accept things as they might appear, in order to feel safe. Another wanted to bring aspects of her culture that encourage her creativity and imagination, helping her to think outside the box.

For the second item of luggage that would include aspects of one’s culture that help them relate to others from different backgrounds, many spoke about the importance of “an open mind,” “respecting differences,” “being mindful about exerting dominance,” “exchanging stories,” and of course, “sharing food” and “hospitality.” Someone spoke about bringing an attitude that regularly asked, “What can I do for you?”

In their third piece of luggage containing ingredients that could be used to build or create new culture, including experiences, values and assumptions, they mentioned “honesty,” “authenticity”— “being true to oneself—being genuine,” and “patience.” A couple of them added, “negotiation skills and sensitivity.” One said, “real equality,”

and another included, “really listening to each other,” as well as, “a belief that we all have to get along.” One participant said, “It would be nice if we could just start with the assumption that everyone is good, not the other way round.”

After addressing the scenarios of what to take with them, the group was interested in talking about what they wanted to leave behind.

One said she wanted to leave “the way that culture doesn’t want to change.” Another raised, “class structure” and “blind obedience.” One wanted to leave behind, “culture that excludes, like the misuse of flags and emblems.”

Many spoke about how they didn’t want to bring the tendency to “pigeon-hole people in their boxes . . . like making assumptions about their background . . . or assuming which side they are on.”

I was impressed by all the thoughtful responses from the participants in the first group, theirs were almost textbook responses to change culture for peacebuilding. Though I shouldn’t have been surprised, as they were all seasoned workers who had been working in this field for many years. They were, however, surprised that the discussions on culture were stimulating and hopeful, and didn’t become politicized as they had previously experienced.

I expected the next group (consisting of community leaders) to be more challenging, as I anticipated a more political focus. I understand you have seen a recording of their responses to the discussions with me.<sup>9</sup> I would like to tell you what happened in some detail to give a sense of what the discussion was like.

The first session was much the same, as in the third group, except for the fact that time was needed for introductions and settling in, as most people didn’t know each other. That session ended, just as it did with the first group, with the participants being given the scenario of starting a new Northern Ireland on a planet B.

The second session began with the participants engaging in the exercise and sharing a wide range of responses. When contributing to the discussion about culture that helps them feel comforted and secure, ideas included, “the blueprint of the British welfare state,” “artifacts that celebrate culture,” “literature and education,” “membership of a like-minded people, a brotherhood or fraternity,” “culture of Christmas and its emphasis on family,” and “values such as fairness, honesty, and respect.” A final contribution added, “the ability to laugh at ourselves; humor, it contributes to resilience.”

Someone recalled a program on the “Nazi death camps” and how humor helped some of the Jews to survive. There is a saying that some situations can be “so bad” that we don’t know if we should laugh or cry, I suggested. There was much humor as we talked about Irish jokes and how an Irish man would often be accepting of such humour. I was told, “Despite all the seriousness of the Troubles, the Irish are quite light-hearted underneath.” Equally, I thought to myself, beneath much humor is a great deal of pain and suffering.

I was soon made aware that an important aspect of Irish culture is the humor at the Wake, “You know it is a good wake when there is a lot of laughter, we recall the funny things in that person’s life.” I added that each culture has their unique sense of humour and one can usually discover one’s own tribe, so to speak, by seeing who is laughing with you. One also feels safer among those who laugh with them.

Someone reminded us that an important aspect of the Irish culture is to make someone feel welcome and there is a traditional Irish saying, *Cead Mile Failte*, which means, “a hundred thousand welcomes.” I was subsequently told that humor at a wake is a way to help a stranger to the community feel welcome.

I mentioned that I was surprised that no one had brought up “sharing a cup of tea,” which was a common response of another group for whom I had facilitated similar discussions. There was general agreement that this would have been a useful addition. This led to a discussion on food and cuisine, with someone saying, “North of the border, or south of the border, the Irish breakfast is the same.” There were some misgivings about fries, but there was a general agreement that the cooked breakfast was very much the same all over Ireland.<sup>10</sup> There was also agreement that the sharing of a meal was something that made people feel safe.

The discussion on commonality did not last long, as attention turned to differences in music, specifically, musical instruments. The Northern Irish Protestant drum, the *Lambeg*, is distinctly different from the *Bodhran*, the Celtic Irish drum, I was told. My mind drifted briefly to the song by Linda Ronstadt/Stone Ponies, “Different Drum,” which begins with, “You and I travel to the beat of a different drum.” I have checked the designs of the two drums on the Internet; the *Lambeg* certainly looks different to the *Bodhran*, and their resonances are different too. But could their beats be in sync, at least on some occasions?

The third session got straight to the heart of the matter. “Culture in the context of Northern Ireland is more complex than what you hear in the media or what you read; there is the issue of class. During the conflict, the working class fought more for their culture than the upper class and middle class.”

I wondered out loud about the complex relationship between culture and religion. One said that it is difficult to generalize, as for some people their culture is closely intertwined with religion, while for others it is more related to social class.

It was highlighted that, “there is a fear of each other’s culture in Northern Ireland,” and when I inquired as to where this fear comes from, several people pointed to the problems of segregated education and segregation in general (more than 90 percent of public housing still lives in segregated areas).

One of the most significant passages of discussion throughout this series of meetings was on language. “A major issue is the question of the Irish language and who owns the Irish language,” one declared. Several participants from a Protestant background shared their personal experiences of being excluded from using the Irish language. One was specifically told by nationalists at a public meeting that he did not have the right to use the language. I was surprised that most participants from a Protestant community expressed an interest in the Irish language.

There was a strong agreement among them all that the Irish language has often been weaponized to exclude or diminish those from the Protestant culture. One expressed concern that the Irish language is being used to obliterate his culture. An example cited was the naming of places and institutions, like a proposal to rename the Queen’s University.

Participants with a Catholic background emphasized that “no one should be excluded from the use of the Irish language, nor should it be used to exclude anyone. . . . It belongs to all the people. . . .”

This weaponization of language is part of a broader politicization of culture, a recurring theme throughout the discussions of the third session. One participant put it succinctly, “In Northern Ireland, culture is used as a weapon by both sides of the communities—leaving us with a fear of the Other.”

It seems to me that both sides appeared to be operating under a zero-sum psychology. I explained that zero-sum psychology is a mentality where there can only be one winner and the Other is a loser. Or if the Other is a winner, I am the loser. If one culture is deemed important, the Other must, by implication, be less important, or

unimportant. There is no possibility of both being equally important. There is no possibility of both sides being winners (or both sides being losers).

So, if the Irish language is used to name a place, the implication is either the English language is not important, or vice versa. It seems as if one language must replace another, rather than coexist with equal respect and importance.

Such is the zero-sum mentality; the possibility of coexistence (win-win situation) is not entertained. A zero-sum mentality is also a “two party mentality” and is unable to accommodate the third and other parties.

Two of the participants were relatively new migrants to Northern Ireland. Their participation brought into awareness of the “Others” in Northern Ireland that are not aligned with either the Protestant or Catholic faith. It highlighted the existence of a cultural domain in Northern Ireland that is outside of the two historic groupings. I understand that this third grouping has grown significantly in the past twenty years since the end of the conflict and could be contributing to the creation of a so-called Northern Irish culture: a mix of all three groupings.

The fourth session was open for any follow-up on what had been discussed so far. One participant raised the issue of segregated education and the problems it created. This led to a discussion on the selective teaching of history in respective schools. All agreed on the importance of history; “History, whether you like it or not, shapes us into who we are.” The question of contested history was raised: “There is only one slice of history, but there can be two or more interpretations, facts stand for themselves.”

The discussion returned to the teaching of history in Northern Ireland. “No one taught us the history of Northern Ireland, only about the mainland, about Kings and Queens, we were not taught about the first world war.” Another Protestant added, “We were only taught about 1066, not about Willie McBride.” A Catholic participant asked why the headstones of Unionist veteran graves from the First World War were not attended to and whether this was widespread. Several Protestants in the group said it was widespread and spoke of how that part of Northern Ireland history has sadly been neglected. When I asked, “Why?” their responses included, “it was a dirty history” and, “too many truths have been hidden in our history.” “There is a whole history that affected us—from the unionist or nationalist point of view.”

The significance of the First World War in Northern Irish history did not occur to me until some weeks after that meeting. Specifically, that it was the last time men from the North and South of the border fought together and not against each other, as many would do in the Civil War and for the next hundred years. I wondered if there is one version of Northern Ireland history, that only begins in 1921, with all that occurred prior to that year being subsumed under British history and another version of history in the Catholic communities that is traced back to ancient Celtic history.

If I have understood correctly, the dominant British version of the First World War did not give due acknowledgment to the Irish sacrifice, with Ireland having to subsequently assert their contribution through a great deal of documentation after independence. I wonder if the Northern Irish Protestant contribution has been (and continues to be) neglected, as suggested by the neglect of their veterans’ graves. I feel that there is an unspoken sadness about this and the lack of recognition for their terrible loss, among the Protestants in the group.

A discussion on culture would seem quite incomplete without explicitly addressing the issue of “cultural identity,” especially in Northern Ireland. The participants in the meeting were reluctant to engage in what they viewed as a politicisation of cultural identity that reduced who they were to “only Green or Orange.” The discussions that

emerged over these past four meetings demonstrated that their sense of identity was much more complex, especially for the participants from Protestant communities.

I had been wrong to form the impression that people from Protestant communities, (Unionists, Loyalists) saw themselves as only British. Such a reductionistic view is an oversimplification that may have been influenced by the politicised conversations I had had with the so-called political elites and academics. These meetings, particularly the discussions about language, showed me that there are Protestants who want to reclaim their Irish heritage.

It is quite possible that there are Protestants who can trace a pure lineage to the Plantation era and will continue to see themselves as only British. Though I think even they would have absorbed some aspects of the Irish culture, in the way most migrants do. I am beginning to think of the Protestants in Northern Ireland as having “dual cultural citizenship or heritage” but again, I could be wrong. I am still learning. But if this is so, to deny them of the Irish cultural heritage would be to rob them of a part of themselves. From my limited understanding, I see that they have been denied by both their Irish cousins who weaponised their culture to exclude them, as well as their British cousins who demanded an allegiance for political expediency, without consideration for their own cultural complexities and richness.

I think this short series of discussions was quite successful in having both Protestant and Catholic community leaders explore their respective cultures together in considerable depth. This was made possible by (a) the creation of a safe and supportive space; (b) the courageous and generous spirit of the participants; and (c) their ability to resist the politicisation of culture, which has too often led to fear and paralysis.

The third group of civic leaders was a small group of only five. A few representatives of political parties were invited; they expressed interest but did not attend.

The participants of this group also responded to the provided scenarios with interest and much of what they said had already been brought up, so I will not repeat it. This group, however, articulated something quite important that had not been explicitly mentioned in the previous two groups. Right from the outset, the issue of who was included or excluded was on the table.

A youth leader welcomed the opportunity to be included in these meetings but highlighted how the youth are generally excluded from the political process or discussion about the future of Northern Ireland. Many have felt so disillusioned that they have disengaged from the political process, or indeed, any process. They are lost. There seemed to be a disconnection between those who went through the Troubles and those born afterwards. I thought to myself about the potential correlation between the high suicide rates among the youth and the impact of transgenerational trauma in Northern Ireland.

The youth leader reiterated comments from the older generation, like, “I went through the conflict, what do you know about trauma.” I have heard similar comments spoken in Northern Ireland, just as I have heard from many children and grandchildren of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust and Cambodian Killing Fields, back in Melbourne. The generation that suffered directly, often have no idea, or are dismissive of the suffering of the generations that follow them. This is what happens in transgenerational trauma.

The leader from a Muslim faith expressed frustration that those who do not identify as either Catholic or Protestant, are not included in any ongoing Northern Ireland narrative. These comments highlighted who is excluded. They also raised the important question as to where those who are not aligned fit into what has almost exclusively been

a binary narrative. She cited the example of how a Hindu man was killed and the media was only concerned about whether the killer was Protestant or Catholic, with no concern for what had happened to the man or his family.

The presence of non-aligned participants highlighted how they struggle to find a place in the Northern Ireland narrative. There seemed to be an automatic assumption that since the dominant Northern Ireland narrative has been one of conflict, it will always be this way. Is there, or can there be a narrative that goes beyond conflict?

The generosity and goodwill of this small third group was so strong that I decided to set them a challenge for their third and last session. I asked them to bring something about their culture that was difficult to talk about or indeed unspeakable. They did not shy from the challenge. Given the condition of confidentiality, with the understanding that what was shared would not be repeated outside the focus group, I will only discuss what was shared in general terms without personal attribution as to who said what.

The first “unspeakable” was, “the things that happened during the conflict,” which included killings and other unlawful acts. My mind turned to the exhibition of Colin Davidson, *Silent Testimony*, which I saw at the Ulster Museum in 2015. I recalled his moving, large portraits of people who lost someone through sectarian killings. But it was the painting of Jean McConville clutching a pillow, by Paddy McCann at the Metropolitan Arts Centre that still unsettles me. I have often considered the possible impact of the disappearance of people during the conflict on the whole population of Northern Ireland over those three decades. Even though only 16 people were recorded to have disappeared, the thought that anyone could just vanish would have driven a deep fear in the communities.

The second “unspeakable” was the violence against women, not only during the Conflict, but that which is still happening but remains too difficult to talk about. This was raised by several women in the group and the rest of the group was quick to nod in quiet agreement, perhaps reflecting the continuing difficulty of speaking about it.

The third unspeakable was suicide.

The group struggled to talk about it. They didn’t know what to say except to acknowledge that it is a problem.

I understand that the suicide rate in the two decades since the end of the conflict has consistently been three times higher than during, or before, the conflict. And I have been told more than once, by many community workers that I have spoken to in recent years in Northern Ireland, that more people have died by suicide since the conflict than all the people during the conflict.

This third group demonstrated how such a high level of mutual trust and goodwill enabled them to bring up the unspeakable of their culture. It confirmed my belief that if a safe and supportive environment can be created, frank discussion of considerable depth can take place.

## **Discussion**

These two lectures on cultural work and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland were well received. Those who participated in the pilot projects unanimously confirmed that it is possible to have a respectful conversation about culture across the sectarian divides without its becoming politicized or weaponized in conflict. These seemingly innocuous conversations about culture got to the heart of many of the political issues related to the conflict. Furthermore, they reached the deeper unspeakable and unresolved problems that affect peacebuilding, most notably, trauma, suicide, and violence.

The community leaders, Protestants, Catholics, and non-aligned, were interested in continuing their discussions and I had the privilege of facilitating their monthly meetings online for another year following the conclusion of the pilot stage. By the end of the first year of their continuing conversations, they had established a sufficient degree of mutual understanding for the respective differences in their cultures, and with that, a sufficient sense of security and trust. When the group moved into another year of conversations, they seemed ready to talk about how their cultures might relate beyond simple opposition, that they could perhaps co-exist, and that perhaps some commonality may soon be found.

During the discussion following the two lectures, I was asked where to go from here. I commented that while the project illustrated it is possible for people from all sides in Northern Ireland to come together to examine their cultures, that was only a beginning. I asked them to imagine what it would be like to have cultural conversations like those they had participated in taking place throughout all areas of life in Northern Ireland; imagine some national forms of conversations that involve communities, civil societies, and government. I highlighted the critical role of the media and public institutions (such as museums, schools, and churches), in creating safe and supportive spaces for such conversations to take place. I noted, for example, that in Australia, the national broadcaster, ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), has taken the lead in recent years to create a national conversation by setting aside a week of programming around a difficult topic each year. Civil societies and the education sector have gradually followed. I also highlighted the important role of those in the creative industries in leading nuanced critique of the respective cultures.

The challenge for the creative sector, however, is how not to allow its efforts to be weaponized. An example that succeeded in this regard was the curated exhibition *Silent Testimony* by Colin Davidson at Ulster Museum, which consisted of extra-large portraits of people who lost loved ones during the Troubles. The accompanying text described how and where they were killed, without identifying their religious background or those of the perpetrators.<sup>11</sup> Artists are uniquely placed in this process of cultural work.<sup>12</sup> They are “licensed” to be critical of their own culture as well as having the task to transform ordinary and adverse experiences into symbolic forms that could be shared and propagated, which are some of the early stages in the process of creating new culture. Creative works such as paintings and exhibitions, literature and drama, music and concerts, and other art forms and venues can provide a necessary, safe and supportive space for us to explore together our shared experiences and undertake cultural work. In these spaces, we are often forced to grapple with material that is simultaneously challenging and nuanced, which is a key characteristic of effective cultural work.<sup>13</sup>

This article describes only the beginnings of just one form of cultural work that may be undertaken to build peace in Northern Ireland. There are likely other forms that are more suited to different situations. They would share the common aim of addressing the underlying substratum of their respective systems and communities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This incident occurred when I presented a lecture titled “Art, Trauma and Cultural Change” at the Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast on October 3, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Basic assumptions are those ideas that do not appear to have a basis or rationale: “It just is” or “It is given.” This notion is discussed in some detail in the preceding article.

<sup>3</sup> I obtained permission to share this story more widely; it is described in Eugen Koh, “Cultural Work in Addressing Conflicts and Violence in Traumatized Communities,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 31, no. 1 (2019), <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol31/iss1/3>.

<sup>4</sup> Readers who are familiar with the work of Wilfred Bion and group analysis will recognize this process as part of the effort to establish a work group to resist the regression to basic assumption groups at times of stress.



<sup>5</sup> The notion of emotional work and examples of it are described in some detail in my work with the desert aboriginals of Central Australia as described in Koh, “Cultural Work.”

<sup>6</sup> While binary thinking accepts that there are two different and opposite views, unitary thinking is unable to consider there are other views. This concept is discussed in more detail in the preceding article.

<sup>7</sup> Bryson Care is a subsidiary of Bryson Charitable Group, the largest, and possibly the oldest, charity in Northern Ireland providing community-based care services and a range of community-building projects.

<sup>8</sup> This two-day conference was a virtual meeting held online on March 24 and 25, 2021, to conclude DARE to Lead Change (Dialogues about Race and Ethnicity), a project supported by the European Union’s PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

<sup>9</sup> Participants of the conference were shown a recording of the group of community leaders discussing their experience of the project on the first day of the conference.

<sup>10</sup> In this lecture at the Bryson conference, I said “all over Ireland,” which was politically incorrect; it should have been “all over the island.” If it were simply a slip of the tongue, it might suggest that deep in my psyche I have not accepted the Partition or that I was tapping into the psyche of the group or the collective psyche of Northern Ireland, a resistance to the Partition?

<sup>11</sup> Colin Davidson, *Silent Testimony*, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.nmni.com/story/silent-testimony-story>.

<sup>12</sup> The term “artists” is used here in the broadest sense to include musicians, playwrights, writers, and so on. It can also include curators and many more who are involved and influenced the creative arts.

<sup>13</sup> Some of these ideas were first outlined in an unpublished paper I wrote in 2015 that was widely circulated: “The Potential Role of the Arts in Healing the Trauma of the Troubles and Building Peace in Northern Ireland—a Personal Reflection.”