After a generation of violence, the Good Friday Agreement brought peace to Northern Ireland in 1998. A decade later, however, Northern Ireland has yet to experience a true resolution of its long standing conflict. Significant segments of the population continue to harbor deep-seeded suspicions of the ‘others’ and distrust characterizes most of the political rhetoric. With the final constitutional status of Northern Ireland still in question and the continued clash over the acknowledgement and protection of the identities of the two dominant ethno-national groups, Northern Ireland has experienced a virtual standstill in its progress towards a sustainable peace.

The current political and social insecurities within Northern Ireland have left both unionists and nationalist in fear of having their respective identities subjugated to that of the opposition community. This paper argues that it is the conflict over the preservation of each group’s identity that has effectively prevented reconciliation within society and thereby threatened the development of a sustainable peace. Through the analytical framework of Social Identity Theory (SIT), this paper will examine real and perceived threats experienced by both identity groups through the structure of the Good Friday Agreement and the resultant social institutions. By investigating the way the identities of the respective groups are formed and defined, this paper will also examine whether the situation in Northern Ireland would be aided best by resolving the uncertainty over Northern Ireland’s constitutional future or by addressing the identity issue more directly by encouraging the development of an inclusive understanding of a Northern Irish identity. Using data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS) this paper will examine the changes in self-reported identity since 1998. This investigation will also include an examination of the data from the Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) in order to begin to predict the direction intergroup relations are likely to travel in the next ten to twenty years.

Good Friday Agreement
The Good Friday Agreement (hereafter the Agreement) of 1998 was born of negotiation and strategic compromise at the elite level. The document attempted to address the identity concerns of both major factions as well as facilitate reconciliation between the parties (Campbell et al. 319-320). As with all documents born of compromise, however, the Agreement accomplished these goals only partially on paper and even less in action (Porter 4).

One of the most significant issues addressed by the Agreement was the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Article 2 of the Agreement provided for the self-determination of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland by majority vote of the residents of Northern Ireland. Until this vote can be conducted, however, Northern Ireland is to remain part of the United Kingdom. This provision marked a significant compromise on the part of both factions. While it facilitated the end of the violent conflict, the concession merely postponed the resolution of this important question indefinitely (Rolston 92). With the issue still unresolved, current politicians continue to pander to the radical extremes of Irish nationalism and British unionism. The Northern Ireland Assembly established by the Agreement has become the new battleground of the ethno-nationalist causes on both sides of the debate. Lacking the political incentive to compromise, extremist rhetoric continues the conflict and reinforces the old stereotypes and perceived threats to the identities of both the unionists and the nationalists (Mac Ginty & du Toit 17-18).

The Agreement also attempts to facilitate reconciliation between both factions by addressing issues each side finds important, including the recognition of victims of violence and prisoner releases in Articles 6 and 10 respectively. Bill Rolston argues that the popular interpretation and implementation of the Agreement, however, reinforced the wartime perceptions of unionist victimization by the extremist republicans and that victims of state violence were largely forgotten (92-93).

Despite differing interpretations of the text and implementation of the Agreement, the document does explicitly recognize the equal legitimacy of both ethno-nationalist groups. This represented an attempt to establish a “parity of esteem” for the two dominant ethno-nationalist groups. Originally parity of esteem was embodied in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement in which the British and Irish governments agreed to respect “the identities of the
two communities in Northern Ireland, and the right of each to pursue its aspirations by peaceful and constitutional means” (Finlay 118). Parity of esteem in Northern Ireland is understood to be the equal legal recognition and protection of the identities of the two dominant ethno-national groups. The term became convoluted, however, as politicians began using it to their personal advantage. In 1995, Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin, called for the British government to “remove all anti-nationalist symbols and appearances from the six-county statelet [Northern Ireland] by providing ‘parity of esteem’ in that area and by eliminating as far as possible all obvious and visible difference between there and the rest of the island of Ireland” (Mac Ginty & du Toit 20).

The policy of parity of esteem was renewed through the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. While moderate unionists and nationalists were generally willing to accept this arrangement, the more radical unionists and republicans saw the official recognition of the other identity as diluting their respective identities (Finlay 119). Acknowledgement of the legitimacy of both identities in the Agreement was taken so far as to allow residents of Northern Ireland to claim British or Irish citizenship, or both if one so chose (Finlay 119; Todd 656). By acknowledging both identities as legitimate and equal, the Agreement attempted to open space for reconciliation. The end result, however, appears to be the continuation of old intergroup tensions as each community has segregated itself from the other and refused or neglected to address the issues of political and social reconciliation.

There has also been disagreement over the interpretation of the parity of esteem policy. Generally, the unionists interpreted the parity of esteem to be on the individual level, which would allow for the recognition and protection of an individual’s rights to equal opportunities and representation. Nationalists, on the other hand, interpret the parity of esteem to include protection of communal rights, which would require recognition of the group’s language and culture (Finlay 120).

**Reconciliation**

As one of the last provisions of a peace agreement to be implemented, reconciliation is an often lauded but rarely practiced process in post-conflict societies. The primary goal of all peace processes is the immediate cessation of hostilities. Once that goal is achieved, however,
the peace process is often considered complete, at least by intervening parties who prefer to leave the completion of the process to the leaders of the post-conflict society. The cessation of violence marks the first step towards peace, but “[w]ithout attention to the structural and social/psychological dimensions of the conflict, particularly at the grassroots level, it would be impossible to sustain a peace process” (Racioppi & O’Sullivan 362). A reconciliation process is used primarily to address such social and psychological dimensions of post-conflict societies in parallel with structural reforms in order to facilitate the cooperative cohabitation of former combatants in a mutual society. This process is neither easy nor short, however. The continued pressure and support of the intervening parties could be used to mediate between the parties during the difficult reconciliation process to create positive intergroup relations.

Reconciliation is a term that is widely used in post-conflict situations although the meaning of this process in a post conflict setting is widely disputed. This process can be directed towards individuals or groups. It can be conducted at the local or national levels. Reconciliation can also occur privately or publicly. For the purpose of this paper, reconciliation will be understood as a public process intended to open a dialogue between conflicting parties that will facilitate the peaceful and cooperative cohabitation of diverse groups through mutual understanding and respect.

In Northern Ireland, many have developed a distrust of the term reconciliation. Lesley McEvoy, Kieran McEvoy and Kirsten McConnachie argue this negative connotation stems from the association many have between the word reconciliation and the “community relations” movement encouraged by the British and Irish governments prior to the 1998 Agreement (82). The community relations program emphasized the differences between the groups. The intention was to acknowledge the legitimacy of each group in order to counteract fears of subjugation and assimilation held by both sides (Porter 51-52). The distrust of the process that developed, however, was reflective of the perception by both sides that a reconciliation process would effectively “problematize” their respective identities and political goals at the expense of acknowledging other factors including the influence of the British government in the conflict (McEvoy et al. 98).
The majority of the problems associated with the community relations program can be explained by the timing of its implementation. Societies deeply divided by long periods of violence are incapable of reconciliation during or immediately after the end of the conflict. In these early stages the wounds are too fresh and the groups have not had time to deal with the past. John Paul Lederach argues that only after the past is dealt with can the space for a common future and reconciliation be opened (Ramsbotham et al 234). Due to the early implementation of the community relations program the communities were denied the time necessary to heal within themselves and therefore denied the ability to heal between the communities, which can only happen after healing is achieved at the individual and intragroup levels. The negative reaction by both communities described by McEvoy, McEvoy and McConnachie has effectively prevented subsequent reconciliation projects from wide acceptance or success. In order to allay the distrust of reconciliation incited by the community relations program, those responsible for designing and implementing any future reconciliation mechanism in Northern Ireland will be challenged to gain the participation of both ethno-national groups and to carefully balance acknowledging both the similarities and differences of each group (Porter 67).

While some see the process of reconciliation as previously implemented in Northern Ireland as limiting the process by addressing only unionists and nationalists, others see the community relations style of reconciliation as too inclusive. Unionist historian A. T. Q. Stewart, for example, claims that reconciliation can only happen when one side (presumably the minority group) assimilates into the other culture. This view essentially holds that reconciliation is impossible among groups with different identities (Porter 24). For obvious reasons, this line of reckoning is exceptionally threatening to nationalists because it is assumed that, due to their minority status, theirs would be the group forced to abandon its identity. Unionists are not entirely comfortable with the idea either as they perceive the possibility of their identity as being branded as the root of the problem and the call for the dilution of their identity in favor of social harmony (McEvoy et al. 98). This reflects a larger challenge with reconciliation in general; the fear of what reconciliation requires of an individual or a group (Porter 57). Some fear reconciliation means the loss of one’s identity. Others fear reconciliation equates to being forced to forget the past. Still others fear that reconciliation would require them, individually and as a group, to forgive the other, itself a form of denial or forced amnesia (Ramsbotham et al. 234-235).
The issue of forgiveness in reconciliation is particularly sensitive. Much like reconciliation in general, forgiveness is often seen as a good thing unto itself and, therefore, something that should be actively encouraged. While it is indeed difficult to pose reasonable arguments against forgiveness as an ideal, the way in which forgiveness is incorporated into a reconciliation process can be extremely influential. In Northern Ireland the issue of forgiveness is particularly sensitive because there is no consensus about who should be sorry and whose actions were justified. Both groups claim victimhood and both have legitimate claims to that title (Porter 23). Research conducted on the process of forgiveness in Northern Ireland has shown that the presence of strong negative emotions such as anger and fear significantly impact the ability of individuals to forgive. Only after these emotions are acknowledged and expressed can an individual successfully approach the issue of forgiveness. Similarly, victimized individuals need to be able to see the wrong-doer as human before forgiveness can be achieved (Tam et al. 120-121). While it may be appropriate for reconciliation programs to attempt to address the negative emotions and perceptions of victimized individuals, it may not be appropriate for these programs to expressly aim to induce forgiveness among participants. Forgiveness is an intensely personal experience that cannot be reasonably demanded of anyone during a reconciliation process (Damelin E-mail). A person will deal with her or his emotions in an individualized way on an individualized schedule. There are those who fear the results of not actively pursuing forgiveness within divided societies. Without forgiveness, many believe it is more difficult, if not impossible, to break the cycle of violence and revenge (Porter 45; Tam et al 120). The potential dangers of forcing forgiveness on a society, however, may be equally grave.

Despite the many reservations towards reconciliation held in Northern Ireland, there are many who embrace the potential for stable and durable peace offered by reconciliation processes. Generally, reconciliation projects have focused on the grassroots level of participation. No national mechanisms have been used thus far. These projects have been facilitated through the financial support of the European Union’s Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The belief was and is that local groups are better equipped to respond to the specific needs of their community and by dispersing funds to these types of organizations the money would reach the communities faster (Racioppi & O’Sullivan 370; Byrne et al 94). Preference was given to groups that attempted cross-community projects.
The funds were also expected to be used to address local structural inequalities. As mentioned above, without addressing underlying structural and political inequalities, reconciliation is essentially a lost cause (Racioppi & O’Sullivan 364-365; Byrne et al 87). In fact the majority of the funds were used for economic and structural development projects and approximately 25-30% of the funds went to programs focused on social inclusion (Racioppi & O’Sullivan 371).

As with any large bureaucracy, however, the Support Programme for Peace was plagued by complaints of unequal or exclusionary access to the funds, difficulty of the application process, and waste of funds on a bloated administrative system. The Protestant groups accurately noted that the Catholic groups were receiving a larger proportion of the funds than their statistical proportion of the population would deem appropriate. This was the result of greater need for the funds among Catholic communities as well as the higher number of applications for funds that came from Catholic organizations (Byrne et al. 94). Despite the honest reasons for the discrepancy in financial distribution, the Protestants began to perceive the Support Programme for Peace projects as biased against them, which challenged both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the programs in general (Byrne et al. 90). In order to counter this loss of legitimacy, agencies working for the Support Programme for Peace projects began actively recruiting Protestant groups in an attempt to even the distribution and keep the Protestant community involved in the process (Racioppi & O’Sullivan 382).

Some nationalist groups also complained of exclusionary acts by the Support Programme for Peace projects. Funding was often denied to programs aimed at the revival of the Irish language because of the association of the issue of the Irish language with the nationalist cause. It was believed these projects were refused funding because of their apparently extreme political ties (Byrne et al. 100).

Despite the many challenges and complaints aimed at the Support Programme for Peace projects, a significant number of community development and solidarity projects were funded through the European Union. Grants were dispersed for everything from sports equipment for community teams to major structural and capacity development programs (Byrne et al. 93; Racioppi & O’Sullivan 371). The effectiveness of these programs, however, is difficult to determine. What is certain is that structural inequalities persist: both Protestants and
Catholics continue to live in segregated communities, and recent evidence shows an increasing polarization in the political arena. It has been suggested that Northern Ireland needs a more unified reconciliation program for the six counties. Whether or not the society is ready or willing to participate in such a large scale program, however, is in question.

Should such a national reconciliation project be established the goal should be to allow all sides to acknowledge the suffering of both their group and the other’s and to form common ground for communication and future relations. Reconciliation between groups can aid in creating social and political stability through the restoration of dignity and “dealing respectfully with those who assisted or were complicit with the violence” (Minow 23). In regards to Northern Ireland specifically, a reconciliation process would ideally be aimed at encouraging mutual understanding of the fears of assimilation experienced by both sides in order to open up a safe space for each to collaborate while maintaining their distinct identities. Using Social Identity Theory, it is possible to examine the current way in which these groups perceive each other and use this analysis to discover the barriers to a successful reconciliation process (Mac Ginty & du Toit 15).

Social Identity Theory

Originally developed by Henri Tajfel (1919-1989), Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that an individual’s self-concept is defined by one’s group affiliation. Group identities are subsequently formed through the processes of categorization and comparison. The identity of a group is based upon the group’s relative status as compared to a designated “out-group” (Ashforth & Mael 21; Muldoon et al. 91). The goal of the individual as a member of a given group is to use the status and successes of the community to improve one’s own self-esteem. Tajfel argues that individuals need distinct and positive identities, which they gain by comparing their in-group with a comparable out-group perceived to be of a lower status in order to enhance one’s self-esteem (Mac Ginty & du Toit 15-16). If one is forced to compare the in-group to an out-group perceived to have a higher status, however, this comparison can be used to mobilize in-group members to action to improve the relative status of the in-group members (Taylor & Moghaddam 74-75; Mac Ginty & du Toit 16-17).
In the context of Northern Ireland, SIT explains the ferocity with which both unionists and nationalists defend their separate and distinct identities. This theory can also be used to explain what Harold Jackson has termed the “double minority problem” in Northern Ireland. This refers to the perception by both groups of a minority status. The unionists, who are predominantly Protestant, perceive their minority status when compared to the Catholic population throughout the entire island of Ireland. The nationalists, who are predominantly Catholic, perceive their minority status within the borders of six counties (Finlay 132). This double minority problem has left both groups feeling insecure about the safety of their respective identities. Due to the fact that both groups are comparing themselves to out-groups they perceive as being in superior positions, each community is compelled to defend their current positions and attempt to improve them where possible.

**Religious Identity**

From the beginning of the conflict in Ireland, partisanship has been strongly associated with religious affiliation. For many, religious identification is so culturally ingrained it is not consciously defined (Muldoon et al. 96). Overall, both groups have displayed a general unwillingness to “crossover” to identify with or support the political stances associated with the other religious group, which may be a form of response to the need to maintain distinct identities from one another (Coakley 592).

While self-categorization predominantly follows religious lines, identification with a particular group relies less on disagreements over theology, than on disagreements over interpretations of history and group culture. The expression of the collective memory and culture of groups is often considered to be essential in the preservation and continuance of an identity group (Conway 310; Coakley 578). Conflict over which interpretation of history would dominate in Northern Ireland has been of considerable concern for some time. The unionist collective memory has long dominated the official public sphere in Northern Ireland (Conway 312). Nationalists used the officially recognized unionist memory to construct a unique memory in keeping with their different perspective. This new memory was used as a comparison point with the unionists and was incorporated as part of the distinct identity of the nationalist community (Conway 313).
Studies with the youth of Northern Ireland reveal that religious identity continues to be of particular importance in the younger generation. In 2003 88% of 15-17 year olds identified themselves as belonging to a particular religion. When asked if their religious identity was important to them, 70% of Catholic youths and 59% of Protestant youths responded affirmatively (Mitchell 23). Religion is interpreted by Northern Ireland youth as a means by which a sense of purpose and belonging is transmitted in society. Family bonds are also seen to be strengthened through the religious identity of the group (McLaughlin et al. 606-607).

The past 15 years, however, have witnessed a decrease in the number of people in Northern Ireland officially affiliating with a particular religious group. Protestant denominations have reportedly lost the most individuals to the growing “no religion” group (Mitchell 23). These increased instances of “believing without belonging” have been noted as individuals choose to avoid the social and political associations with the different religious groups (Muldoon et al. 96). Analysts have found that most people continue to conform to the traditional positions of their religious group of origin even after deciding not to formally identify themselves with a particular religion (Mitchell 29). This is evidence of the fact that despite the strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethno-national identification, the ethno-national identity can be formed and maintained without the religious component.

National and Political Identity

As stated above, the Agreement opened a variety of options for the people of Northern Ireland to choose to identify with in terms of national and political identity. Also, despite evidence that it is not necessary, there continue to be strong correlations between one’s religion and one’s choice of national and political affiliation (Mitchell 29). In the 2006 NILTS, a majority of Protestants (63%) described themselves as British, while a majority of Catholics (61%) described themselves as Irish. Although these numbers have dropped slightly since 1998, they reflect the continued close association between religion and national identity. Overall, Protestants tend to conform to the unionist identity more than Catholics conform to the nationalist identity (Croakley 591). Since 1998, however, there has also been an increase in the number of both Protestants and Catholics (26% and 23% respectively) who choose to describe themselves as ‘Northern Irish’ (NILTS 2006).
It is important to note, however, that the current constitutional status of Northern Ireland has invited competing notions of national identity. Research suggests that many who identify themselves as British define their identity in terms of political ideology rather than cultural distinctions (Todd et al. 334). Those who identify themselves as Irish, on the other hand, generally separate the issue of citizenship from their national identity (Muldoon et al. 94). These individuals emphasize cultural traditions over political ideologies when defining their nationality (Todd et al. 334). These discrepancies reflect the criteria each community is using to compare itself to the other. In an attempt to create positive and distinct identities each group has chosen to identify with characteristics each value. Unionists value the right of British citizenship because the group perceives British citizenship as having positive connotations and it is not something perceived as valuable to nationalists. Nationalists choose to use emphasize culture over citizenship because those cultural traditions are perceived as positive and not valued by the unionists. Also, citizenship for nationalists is not as stable a criteria to use as a basis for identity because of the disconnect between Irish citizenship and residence in the United Kingdom.

Particularly noteworthy is the generational differences in responses to questions about national identity. The 2004 Young Life and Times Survey revealed that 16 year old Catholics were more likely than their adult counterparts to identify themselves as Irish. The same year 16 year old Protestants were more likely than their adult counterparts to identify themselves as Northern Irish (Muldoon et al. 91). In a qualitative study, young people from Northern Ireland were questioned about their national and religious identity. Among the responses was a noted pattern of expressing the view of one’s nationality being inextricably linked with one’s religion and even that the two were interchangeable (Muldoon et al. 98).

Although not as consistent as the correlation between national identity and religion, the correlation between religion and political ideology remains strong (Coakley 587). The percentage of Protestants who consider themselves to be unionists remains high at 69 percent, which is down from 76 percent in 1998. Catholics, however, have not maintained as strong of an affiliation with the nationalist cause. With a slim majority of 53 percent, most Catholics do continue to embrace the nationalist title. The number of both Protestants and Catholics who describe themselves as neither unionist nor nationalist has risen since 1998 from 24 percent to 30 percent of Protestants and from 33 percent to 42 percent of Catholics (NILTS 2006).
There is evidence that the Protestants and Catholics who state they are neither unionist nor nationalist are disproportionately represented among those who identify themselves as Northern Irish suggesting the development of an alternative identity outside of the traditional two community paradigm. Despite this, however, the majority of those who choose to be neither unionist nor nationalist still identify their nationality as either British or Irish (Coakley 587). The results of the last two Northern Ireland Assembly elections also present a challenge to the apparent development of an alternative political identity.

The 2003 and 2007 Northern Ireland Assembly election results show an increasing pattern of political extremism through the election of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF) over the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and other smaller parties. The first Assembly election in 1998 resulted in the UUP winning 28 seats with over 21 percent of the vote. The SDLP won 24 seats with nearly 22 percent of the vote. The DUP won 20 seats with 18 percent of the vote. And the SF won 18 seats with over 17 percent of the vote (CAIN 1998). In the next Assembly election in 2003, however, DUP gained an additional 10 seats and over 25 percent of the vote. Sinn Féin gained an additional 6 seats and over 23 percent of the vote. UUP gained 1 additional seat with over 22 percent of the vote. The SDLP lost 5 seats and earned only 17 percent of the vote (CAIN 2003). Finally, in 2007, DUP and SF again gained seats (6 and 4 respectively), while SDLP and UUP both lost seats (2 and 9 respectively) (CAIN 2007). These results suggest that despite the refusal to identify as unionist or nationalist, the political environment in Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly polarized and extremist.

The increased proportion of Protestants and Catholics who do not describe themselves with the traditional national and political labels of their respective groups provides hope of the ability to develop a more inclusive national and political identity (Muldoon et al. 91). Enthusiasm over this prospect, however, should be tempered due to recent research that questions the universal appeal of the label Northern Irish. Evidence suggests that the Northern Irish label has been favored more by Protestants due to the perception of the label being more politically safe than the traditional unionist label. Catholics, however, have not been able to incorporate this new label into the community’s ethno-national identity as well as Protestants (Todd et al. 334). This may be explained by the fact that the label Northern
Irish is deemed less threatening to the citizenship based identity of the Protestant-unionist community than to the culturally based identity of the Catholic-nationalist community.

An interesting trend observed through survey research was the high degree of association of the individual with one’s immediate locality of residence and the low attachment to one’s country claimed by residents of Northern Ireland. This was particularly evident in the 2004 Eurobarometer in which 89 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland claimed to be very or fairly attached to their town or village and only 67 percent claimed to be very or fairly attached to their country, the later being relatively low in comparison to the rest of Europe (Coakley 586). This low attachment to the country can potentially be explained by several factors. The confusion over the issues of citizenship, nationality and residency has the potential to confuse the residents of the six counties over which country they should identify with. Also, the lack of resolution to the constitutional status has removed incentive for encouraging identification with a particular country. The challenge for Northern Ireland is to find a way to encourage the development of a common identification with a specific country as a means of providing an overarching and inclusive unifying identity for both the nationalist and unionist communities. Evidence from Northern Ireland suggests that certain kinds of contact between the two communities can foster the development of more inclusive conceptualizations of one’s identity.

Intergroup Relations

Identity is not a static concept in Northern Ireland. Research has shown that changes in identification correlate to changes in one’s immediate social situation. Transferring from a religiously homogeneous school to a heterogeneous school has been shown to have a significant impact on the self-categorizations of young people in Northern Ireland (McLaughlin et al. 602). Interviews with individuals in mixed marriages have also revealed the tendency of many to adopt expanded understandings of national identity, which embrace a more inclusive understanding of national identity in Northern Ireland (Muldoon et al. 95-96). This suggests that increased exposure to members of the out-group has a significant effect on one’s self-categorization as it affects the perception of the out-group and therefore how one compares the in-group to the out-group.
Despite these findings, Northern Ireland remains an intensely segregated society. Many continue to admit that they have had little to no contact with members of the out-group as education and housing remain intensely segregated (Muldoon et al. 96; McLaughlin et al. 600). Those in mixed marriages often cite instances of prejudice or rejection exhibited by their extended family (Muldoon et al. 96-97). Children of mixed marriages often face stigmatization by the community (Muldoon et al. 97). The NILTS shows consistently high support for increased mixing of the religions in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and social events. In spite of this apparently high support for intermingling, however, only 13% of Protestants and 11% of Catholics reported sending their children to mixed religion schools (NILTS 2006). It has been well documented that responses to these questions are commonly inaccurate due to a response bias towards answers that are considered socially acceptable or politically correct (Coakley 574-575).

The churches continue to play a major role in structuring community interactions through liturgical and social events. With communities relying upon the churches for social events, the opportunities for members of both religions interacting are few (Muldoon et al. 97). The Catholic Church also continues to play a significant role in the educational system, with the majority of Catholic youths attending parochial schools. Although the Protestant churches do not have parallel educational mechanisms, Protestant clergy are exceptionally active in party politics (Mitchell 40).

Attempts have been made to facilitate intergroup contact. The cultural diversity programme attempted to expose both groups to each other through cross-communal meetings and events (Finlay 38). This sort of cross-communal contact was a practice favored in the community relations program before the Agreement was signed. Both communities, however, displayed resentment over this kind of forced and contrived contact (McEvoy et al. 90-91). Most of these programs have since been relegated to the educational system to design and enact (Finlay 41). Due to the segregated nature of the schools and the continued communal dismissal of these projects, however, they have made little apparent impact.

Intergroup Perceptions
During the peace process in the late 1990s, perceptions of the intentions of both sides were overwhelmingly negative. Both unionists and republicans interpreted the intentions and actions of the other as threatening to their respective identities (Mac Ginty & du Toit 19-20). Lack of interaction between Protestants and Catholics has resulted in widely divergent perceptions of the status of the other in society. In surveys conducted by Roger Mac Ginty and Pierre du Toit from 2001 to 2003, Protestants reported a significantly lower sense of confidence that their cultural traditions were protected in Northern Ireland than the perception of Catholics of the security of their cultural traditions. This has been attributed primarily to the perceived preference that the Catholic cultural traditions have received in recent years, reflecting the relativity of the intergroup perceptions (Mac Ginty & du Toit 25-26). Similar results were found by the NILTS during the same time period. Since 1998, however, the perceptions of the role and protection of the cultural traditions of each group has been largely neglected by the NILTS.

Among the youth of Northern Ireland traditional intergroup stereotypes are promulgated due to the lack of contact with members of the other group. Even amongst the children who do have contact with individuals from the other group personal affection for individuals has been expressed while general intolerance for the group as a whole remained intact (McLaughlin et al. 605). Despite this, responses to the 2007 YLTS show that 82 percent of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland either “Agree” or “Strongly agree” that relations between the communities would improve with more cross-community projects. This response from the younger generation suggests that the prospect for future acceptance of increased cross-community projects is positive.

Conclusion

The long history of animosity, distrust and violence in Northern Ireland has left deep rifts between the nationalist and unionist communities. To complicate this situation, many of the policies implemented by the governments of Ireland and England to encourage reconciliation between these communities have left one or the other resentful and suspicious of reconciliation processes. The continued self-segregation of these communities has resulted in the increased polarization of the social and political environment. From the evidence already gathered in Northern Ireland, it appears that breaking through the patterns of segregation and
increasing cross-communal contact is going to be essential to facilitating the transformation of the inter-group relations between the nationalists and the unionists. Increasing the amount of contact between members of both groups can aid in the process of moderating the currently polarized politics, and combating the stereotypes and misunderstandings currently used by each group for intergroup comparisons for the sake of developing a distinct and positive identity. This cross-communal contact, however, must be endorsed by leaders of both communities and not forced upon society as had been done through the community relations and similar programs in the past. These forced interactions have only resulted in increased resentment and distrust between the communities and towards the programs themselves.

If a reconciliation process is to succeed in Northern Ireland, the members of both groups are going to have to overcome their current prejudices. Each group will also have to go through the slow and often difficult process of redefining its identity vis-à-vis the other as the perceptions and information used to compare the groups change. This process could be facilitated through a formal reconciliation process, once again, the process would need to be endorsed by community leaders and participation would have to be voluntary. In order to gain this voluntary cooperation and participation, the negative view of the concept of reconciliation would need to be changed. This process will likely take time but the opinions recorded through the YLTS suggest that the younger generation is already developing the attitudes needed to make a reconciliation process feasible.

In addition to patience and elite support from both communities, a successful reconciliation process is most likely going to need to be national. While grassroots reconciliation projects can be beneficial, in the case of Northern Ireland a unified process implemented throughout the six counties would ensure universal access to the process as well as overall accountability. Much of what has plagued Northern Ireland has been discrepancies and misunderstanding in the actions of one group or the other. A unified process with accountability to some form of supervisory authority would help to prevent problems of uneven implementation.

Alongside the reconciliation process, significant structural and institutional concerns would also have to be addressed to ensure a successful process. Economic and social disparities
would have to be addressed. Official policies should respect the traditions and perspectives of both communities. Of these policies, one of the most important is the officially recognized history to be taught in schools. By unifying the perceptions of the residents of Northern Ireland can attempt to unify their vision of the future. Such an undertaking, however, is likely to be contentious and is best conducted through the joint efforts of historians from both communities working together.

The ideal outcome of a reconciliation process in Northern Ireland would be the development of an inclusive overarching identity that would allow both nationalists and unionists to identify with the same country while safely maintaining their respective traditions and cultures. Whether such an outcome is possible is difficult to say. For the time being, it is important that steps be taken to move the unionist and nationalist communities towards a more sustainable and cooperative understanding of peaceful cohabitation. By redefining the cognitive associations with the concept of reconciliation and by designing a national process that was not threatening to either ethno-nationalist group, Northern Ireland can begin the process of healing.

For practitioners of conflict resolution there are important lessons to be learned from the struggles of Northern Ireland to achieve reconciliation within its post-conflict society. First, the process of conflict resolution cannot end with the signing of a peace agreement. Once the violence ends societies must confront the difficult task of rebuilding institutions and social cohesion. Without consistent pursuit of the long-term policies and processes necessary for the rebuilding of society, post-conflict situations often risk stagnation or a return to violence.

Second, reconciliation is usually a slow but important process that post conflict societies must experience. There is, however, an important element of timing and design that must be taken into consideration. Attempts to reconcile opposing parties too soon can be extremely detrimental, as can be seen in Northern Ireland. The early and coerced implementation of the community relations program made many in Northern Ireland distrustful of the process of reconciliation and what it entailed. This distrust has effectively prevented the implementation of any large scale reconciliation process in Northern Ireland and allowed the continued segregation and distrust of nationalists and unionists.
Finally, reconciliation as a process needs to be better understood by the field of conflict resolution. The definition and role of reconciliation in post-conflict societies continues to be widely debated. The interaction and relationship between individual and communal reconciliation needs to be better understood. The role of forgiveness in all levels of reconciliation should also be examined. Research should also be conducted to determine the preconditions for successful individual and communal reconciliation. By identifying these factors, conflict resolution practitioners will be better able to determine when the reconciliation process should be pursued and by whom. Through an increased understanding of the process of reconciliation, practitioners can more effectively address the challenges of deeply divided societies in order to facilitate sustainable peace and cooperation.
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