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Reconciling polarized relations: Disintegration and social dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland

Social Integration: Concept, Challenge, and Critique

The concept of social integration has immense analytical relevance to the practice of peace-building. Its ideals of human rights, non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, recognition, and mutual accommodation of difference are admirable. Where such integration exists, violence is less likely to develop when disagreements arise. This paper addresses challenges to these worthy ideals, because the link between the social integration process and building peaceful just relations is not automatic. The concept of social integration has practical value in contexts where there is the will to develop harmony. Good intentions undoubtedly are the driving force behind building peaceful social relations. However, while resolute goodwill is the basis for trust-building experiences in situations where advantaged groups have misunderstood others and disadvantaged groups have reasonable grounds for mistrust, in working together across differences, 'good-will is not enough' (Narayan 1988: 34). Trust-building requires openness to difference and herein lies a major obstacle to participatory dialogue in the social integration process in Northern Ireland.[1]

In this paper, I make four main points. First, Northern Ireland has many extremely positive policies that aim to further social integration. While these policies are essential in fostering progress, they do not necessarily change the 'hearts and minds' of people in divided communities, but we can hope that over time, they do challenge prejudices and practices. Second, there remains significant social disintegration. Indeed, I write this shortly after we have experienced the worst riots and civil disruptions for over a decade. My next two points cover some explanation of this remaining conflict. Third, a large part of the social dynamic of conflict revolves, I believe, around a widespread reluctance to be open to difference. Fourth, the only way to break this deadlock in civil society, workplaces, and politics, is to work dialogically at developing a common, shared future. Implicit in the paper are two critiques of the social integration model. One is that clear-cut models do not always work in times of crisis; hence the underlying principles need to

[1] When I write on Northern Ireland, I clarify my 'inside-outsider' status as an Australian, 'working *in* the culture, yet *outside* of mainstream identities' (Porter 1997b: 863).

be adaptive and contextually grounded.[2] Another is that while toleration and coexistence are preferable to exclusion, fragmentation, and polarization, and are important goals in transitional periods, ultimately recognition, mutual respect, and reconciliation are more demanding long-term ideals.

Shared Future in Northern Ireland

Since the 1998 Agreement,[3] Northern Ireland has some extremely progressive social policies and legislation.[4] For example, the government released a substantial policy document titled *A Shared Future. Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* (2005) containing the language of reconciliation, 'moving away from relationships that are built on mistrust and defence to relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust' (2005: 4). This language is powerful. 'Due recognition' of differing traditional identities 'implies an absence of relations of domination and subservience and the presence, rather, of relations of reciprocity' (N. Porter 1996: 191). The policy document states that in order to establish a shared society that is defined by tolerance, differences must be resolved through dialogue. This document acknowledges that 'the *underlying difficulty is a culture of intolerance*, which we will need to remedy if we are to make Northern Ireland a more "normal" society – the sort of society we would all be proud to live in' (2005: 10). The entire stress on the shared future is to seek a dynamic society that is comfortable with diversity, willing to engage in dialogue, and be committed to the common good within a culture of tolerance. This document stresses the importance of relationships, that there is 'an onus on all of us to play a part in initiating, encouraging and developing dialogues' in safe contexts where we can 'create those conversations' that build trust in relationships (2005: 17).

The language in this influential policy document is strong in its ideals of a shared, dialogical, tolerant society. Such language is to be commended in a society that has pirouetted around issues in fear of offending and where claims to neutrality and silence pervade, particularly in the comfortable middle-classes who have not borne the brunt of the conflict.[5] The language is also welcomingly robust in condemning visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism as 'abhorrent in a democracy' (2005: 23). This language is crucial. For too long, sectarian violence while not defended is culturally accepted by many. In a society where symbols confirm the cultural identity of one tradition but provoke tension to the other main tradition, there is even the suggestion in *A Shared Future* that, 'if we are serious about moving to a normal society then *the display of any flag on lamp-posts should be off limits*' (2005: 29).[6] In addressing the importance

[2] A model framework is useful so long as stakeholders are aware that stages are not always progressive, that in a conflict or post-conflict context, there may be movement back and forth across stages and that cross-cultural differences are significant in utilizing those dialogical approaches that are most suitable to local contexts.
[3] The Agreement is also known as the Good Friday Agreement and the Belfast Agreement. See www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf.
[4] These changes come as a result of the Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and include the Human Rights Commission, Equality Commission, Parades Commission, Criminal Justice Review, British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference, Policing Board, the reformed Police Service Northern Ireland, a Racial Equality Strategy, and a Victim's and Survivor's Commission is to be formed.
[5] The oft-quoted line of the poet Seamus Heaney is apt, 'Whatever you say, say nothing'.
[6] If this suggestion is translated into law, it is likely to provoke anger and the surreptitious placing of flags late at night. Trying to adhere to this legal requirement will be enormously difficult. Yet the goal of removing all potentially exclusivist or offensive flags sends important signals to all communities.

of the workplace in challenging sectarianism and racism, the document seeks to '*enable dialogue and engagement that help build relationships and move beyond neutrality and silence*' (2005: 51).

Social Disintegration

Yet despite this positive policy document and the progressive equality legislation that has emerged post-Agreement,[7] and the recent IRA decommissioning of weapons, 'segregation, polarization and social division are endemic within Northern Ireland's society, rather than being confined to one relatively small section of it' (Jarman 2005: 11). Social disintegration and sectarianism remain deeply embedded. Most schools are separated by religion, inter-faith marriage is low, many public spaces are deemed the property of a particular community, and residential segregation is typical. Urban division remains prominent, particularly in the interface areas between Catholic/Protestant estates, and is marked by paramilitary graffiti, brick walls, steel fences, barriers blocking access to roads, flags, murals, painted kerbstones, bars on shop windows, and boarded house windows. 'All of this creates a chill factor that has the effect of making the members of the other community feel uneasy in venturing beyond the borders of their own social environment' (Russell 2005: 26). Sectarian and racist attacks are regular, inter-communal rioting continues, as do punishment attacks, petrol bombs, and feuding between and within paramilitary groups. Where there is fragmentation, exclusion, and polarization, there is minimal coexistence, collaboration, or cohesion.

None of this is entirely surprising given that whilst many parties did engage in direct dialogue, the 1998 Agreement was reached without face-to-face encounters between the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, who relayed messages down corridors.[8] I reiterate that models tend to break down under tensions.[9] Given this tendency, what often facilitates the realization of the underlying principles of models are ad hoc activities that grasp any opportunities for meaningful dialogue and, generally, are non-conventional and/or lift protagonists out of their immediate environment. Cross-community programs to take young people from economically deprived segregated areas to exchange visits elsewhere give insight into other cultures and an opportunity to meet young people from 'the other side' who they wouldn't meet whilst at home. The newly reformed PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) in visiting other European nations to learn about integration have found value in playing soccer to break down formal restraints and to create bonds of solidarity. Prior to the 1998 Agreement, political parties of all persuasions went to South Africa and anecdotal accounts abound of drinking and singing with those from 'the other side'. A model is a standard, a pattern, a paradigm, but peace-building must be flexible, maximizing all opportunities to be creative and contextual. Often, these opportunities cannot be fitted neatly into a model.

Elsewhere, for example, often the Australian flag flies alongside the Indigenous flag as a statement of inclusivity.

[7] The Northern Ireland Act 1998 Section 75 (2) places a statutory requirement on public bodies to promote good relations between diverse groups and to move beyond passive co-existence models toward pro-active community relations that encourage the challenge to sources of divisions.

[8] It should also be noted that the Democratic Unionist Party and the UK Unionist Party were elected to the negotiations but withdrew with the arrival of Sinn Féin. In some ways, these parties contribute to 'spoiler violence', with those who choose to 'remain outside the negotiations from choice…to ensure that agreement is not reached' (Darby and Mac Ginty 2000: 233).

[9] Fieldwork to test and review the conceptual framework of social integration needs to appreciate this possibility and not be discouraged by breakdowns.

Openness to Different Identities

I am suggesting that one of the biggest obstacles to social integration is an unwillingness to engage in dialogue with those who are perceived as different. Too often, 'misunderstanding, distrust, fear, and ignorance objectifies "the Other" and prevents opportunities for constructive dialogue' (Porter 1997b: 867). All of us must face countless 'others'. Who we are emerges in relation with others and because of these relationships. 'We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things significant others want to see in us' (Taylor 1992: 32-33). Unless one is open to this dialogical nature of identity, the paradoxical nature of selfhood as being constituted through difference is distorted, and an ugly, exclusionary politics of identity can prevail. I am referring particularly to exclusionary, divisive identities that are formed by sectarianism, and which do not recognize the legitimacy of other identities.

I am arguing that, 'where diversity is seen as a *threat*, identity politics is a *hindrance* to conceptualizing and assisting politics because it *fosters separateness*; where diversity is seen as a *positive* dimension to a multicultural society, then a politics of difference is an *asset* because it *listens to and respects the voices of the other*' (Porter 1997a: 89). A principled defence of difference respects those differences that are mutually respectful of others' differences and provides a benchmark to prompt situations or activities where the assertion of identity politics ought not to be made.[10] The controversial Orange marches are a classic case of the potential lack of respect for differences. The Orangemen might argue that it is 'their right' to march down a particular route, but rights need to be balanced with responsibilities in order for social integration to occur. What often happens is that there is argument between Orangemen/loyalists, local resident's groups, the Parades Commission, community leaders, political representatives, and the police, but there is no consensus. Where it can be reasonably shown that 'the traditional route' causes offence to residents in a nationalist/republican area through vitriolic flags, songs, and banners, suggestions or rulings of the need to reroute occur, and this generally results in standoffs, local violence, and civil disruption, further polarizing fragile community relationships.

Certainly, there is an important need for the freedom to assert identity otherwise there is a frustrated sense of belonging. Processes of social integration must deal constructively with distinctiveness, diversity, and commonality in public and social life. Without diversity there is the suppression of difference and without commonality there is insufficient basis to develop a shared sense of civic belonging. Shared interests can only emerge when an accessible public culture is non-exclusionary, non-threatening, open to constructive criticism, and citizens feel secure about democratic change. In order for Northern Ireland to develop a sense of shared integration, 'simply tolerating each others' differences for the sake of co-existence is a minimum standard. A deeper understanding

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[10] Careful restraint is part of mutual respect. A recent example highlights a serious failing. Father Alec Reid is the Catholic priest who witnessed the IRA decommissioning and Reverend Harold Good, the Protestant decommissioning witness. At a public meeting with both on October 12 2005 that intended to be a positive civic dialogue, Father Reid, provoked and offended by comments in the audience who were questioning his integrity, compared the unionist community to Nazis for their past treatment of Catholics. He apologised, but much damage has been done in undermining community respect and the significance of decommissioning (which is a big stumbling-block in any hope of cohesion).

of the concept, however, means being committed to the celebration and embracing of differences as the building blocks of a civic culture' (Russell 2005: 31).

Importance of Dialogue in Searching for Commonalities

As I have suggested above, openness to diversity is more likely to emerge when there is dialogue with others from differing backgrounds and a sense of shared belonging. Language is central to understanding this basis for shared belonging, and working through the violence in Northern Ireland. Body language, facial expressions, tacit codes, and cultural cues are learnt early as well as a familiarity with the significance of colours, wall murals, graffiti, name, and place.

Dialogue transforms social relations, but sustaining dialogue through challenges as presented in conflict and post-conflict contexts is difficult. The importance of dialogue is not to reach consensus, but to further mutual understanding 'with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement' (Benhabib 1992: 9). Disagreements will always arise, but Benhabib points to what she calls 'ordinary moral conversations' where we are trying to come to terms with other's views, including those with whom we have radical disagreement, and must use judgement to make sound decisions and come to mutually acceptable decisions. Where there is deliberative disagreement, there needs to be principles of accommodation based on mutual respect of differences. Such 'ordinary conversations' don't naturally occur in places where there is heavy segregation, where distrust, ignorance, and misunderstanding prevail, and where there is an absence of will to change among many people and politicians. For social integration to occur there must be 'the commitment to deal creatively and constructively with the inevitable tensions between contradictions, conflicting views, opposing priorities and plural narratives' (Porter 1998: 57).

In order to deal with inevitable disagreements, individuals, women's groups, inter-faith groups, and interface community groups form alliances that do not come easily in a divided society, but require '*a creative structuring of a relational space between collectivities marked by problematic differences'* (Cockburn 1998: 211). Creating this space often is personally risky, but necessary to work with diversity in all its complexity - with its messiness, confusion, ambiguity, contradiction, contestation, uncertainty, and partial understandings. 'The goal of deliberative democracy is not to work through differences to an agreement; it is to attend to the variety of differences in order to formulate new possibilities and solutions' (Porter 2000a: 157). Creating dialogical spaces where there is fear and mistrust is rarely clear-cut. Such spaces often appear murky, where uncertainty, doubts, major disagreements, and irresolvable dilemmas dominate and there are only the vaguest hints of shared aspiration. Yet, 'it is in these hazy spaces that new possibilities arise, old views are revised or discarded, and visions of change emerge…The responsibility to engage in deliberation means finding all spaces that foster dialogue across differences' (Porter 2000b: 179). Many of these spaces are unconventional; they occur in informal contexts and don't precisely fit into stages in a model.

Listening is a crucial part of dialogue and a crucial part of the deliberation needed in order to make sound judgements that really do address people's needs. Listening necessarily opens politics to differences. There must be a willingness to question one's own assumptions and practices in the light of other's views. This willingness requires a

readiness to face the otherness of the other, in an engaged manner. 'It takes seriously people's stories about what they need to live well' (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 60). Listening is risky, there is always 'the possibility that what we hear will require change from us' (Bickford 1996: 149). In this sense, 'dialogue exemplifies a kind of fair interaction that hinges on an equality of vulnerability among participants' (N. Porter 2003: 109), a reciprocity of recognition of distinct personhood.[11] Such reciprocity is most likely when there is also mutual empathy, when all parties to the dialogical exchange 'take an imaginative leap' whereby they 'try to see themselves as others see them and try to see others as they see themselves' (N. Porter 2003: 110). In Northern Ireland, there are community groups who engage sincerely in open dialogue, questioning their own views, listening to others and trying to see new angles.[12] '*Between speaking and listening lie the spaces wherein we accept the responsibility of the risk to dialogue across differences*. No matter how difficult the situation, the spaces must be open' (Porter 2000b: 178).

A concept of social integration thus needs a 'public language' capable of restoring ideas of solidarity, reciprocity, and interdependence as central to humane citizenship (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Membership as a citizen in a political community incorporates: the *political* representational legitimacy of those elected; the *legal* formal rights and duties of citizens; and the third *psychological* dimension (Carens 1996-97: 112). It is possible to have political legitimacy and legal formal rights without a sense of belonging. Without feelings of identification and attachment, divided loyalties and discord quickly arise. For example, in Northern Ireland, cultural symbols of language, flag, anthem, tradition, and mythology are identified with separate communities. Single-identity work attempts to empower previously marginalized communities and enhance confidence in cultural identities. The value of such work is contestable. I suggest that often it widens a 'them/us' mentality.[13] There is a 'deep connection between violence and belonging' (Ignatieff 1993: 188) because bonds to one group often bolster hostility towards outsiders.

As discussed, in divided societies, norms of morality, language, identity, culture, and tradition clash across differing traditions and undermine any felt need to understand others' traditions. Without the search for common understandings, fear of 'the other' is sustained and collaborative community projects appear unimaginable. A local 'Community Dialogue' group finds a useful question to be, 'What future would I find bearable, which my enemy would also find bearable?' (Lennon 2004: 138). Leaving aside for the moment, the persistent caricature of 'the other' as 'enemy', this is a fundamental

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[11] Norman Porter qualifies how important this fair interaction is in a place like Northern Ireland 'where fear of losing out to the "other" acts as a serious impediment to engagement' (2003: 109).

[12] See for example the cross-community group, 'Community Dialogue' who encourage understanding among groups divided by conflict (www.communitydialogue.org) and Lennon (2004), or the think-tank 'Democratic Dialogue' who seek to address social problems through reasoned debate (www.democraticdialogue.org), or 'Healing Through Remembering', a cross-community project that undertakes extensive consultation on ways to deal with the past (www.healingthroughremembering.org).

[13] Others differ. Lundy and McGovern (2005) argue that in a deeply divided society where there is the remaining legacy of suspicion, hostility, and disillusionment, dealing with the past is complex. They argue that 'a "single identity" "bottom-up" approach can meet the contribution to post conflict transition by engaging with communities that have been on the "frontline" of the conflict and have suffered disproportionately as a result' (2005: 49). Other views exist. Over 70 percent of publicly owned housing is segregated into estates that are more than 90 percent Protestant or 90 percent Catholic. 'Single identity neighbourhoods negate the opportunity to create "a sense of civic unity"…[because]…many people see themselves as members of their communities first, rather than citizens' (Russell 2005: 24).

question of coexistence. 'Where divisions prevail, looking for *common purposes* permits alliances that otherwise might not form' (Porter 2003: 252-3). Such alliances are the hallmark of women's peace-building, and often develop because of the common need of women, whatever their political persuasion, ethnicity, religion, status, or tribal connection, to have to attend to the everyday material needs of children, the ill, and the elderly. In many situations of conflict, this permits women to leave aside, albeit temporarily, what divides them, in order to solve the common problems that unites them.[14]

Peace agreements generally bring some period of negative peace; the cessation of violence, but the real task of peace-building is ongoing in building sustainable positive peace. I suggest that we expand the concept of peace-building beyond conventional usages in the post-conflict reconstruction stage so as to ensure an inclusivity that is intrinsic to the social integration process. A lasting peace is more likely to be sustained when there is a lively, safe, civil society and where informal, ad hoc, grassroots peace work occurs at all stages of conflict. Women's coalitions across divides are of particular significance in this social integration process. As prime nurturers, they have so much to lose when community bonds break down and hence, as mentioned above, they often struggle together to put aside political, ethnic, religious, cultural, and tribal differences to prioritize human security needs. 'Peace-building is a *process* that needs to flow through the pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict stages' (Porter, 2003: 262; Porter 2006). Social integration as a process of building peaceful social relations is an ongoing task.

From Polarization to Coexistence to Reconciliation

The social integration ideal talks of reconciling polarized relations in protracted conflicts through mediation and reconciliation in order to move to coexistence. The ideal seems to assume that in strengthening coexistence with civic dialogue, a tolerance for diversity will follow. 'With coexistence, members of conflicting groups may indeed still mistrust one another, but they often undertake parallel or even joint activities' (Ogata in Chayes and Minow 2003: xiii). To move beyond coexistence, members of conflicting groups need to engage in joint activities that build security and a modicum of mutual respect, and through recognition of the need to be interdependent actors with a shared future, start to imagine living together in peace. Perhaps coexistence is insufficient an ideal.[15] Particularly when resentment and mistrust remain, a tolerance of difference is not the same as an embrace of difference. Undoubtedly, toleration aids peaceful coexistence, but toleration can range from resigned acceptance, to benign indifference, moral stoicism, openness to the other, or to an endorsement of difference (Walzer 1997: 10-11). Only when there is respectful recognition of difference can there begin the work of dealing with the hurtful past that permits movement toward reconciliation. In Rwanda, post-genocide, the immediate cry was understandably for justice not reconciliation, this through *gacaca* and community healing was to begin later. Many Serbs and Bosniaks coexist without being reconciled. Many white South Africans are not reconciled to a change of status but know they must coexist with black South Africans.

[14] I refer particularly to meeting basic needs of shelter, clean water, and food, as well as dealing with war-rape, family ex-combatants, trauma, and the need for economic livelihood.
[15] Michael Ignatieff suggests that justice and historical truth are not even preconditions of coexistence (2003: 328) but amount to a shallow coexistence (2003: 329).

I would agree that 'you can have coexistence without any heart-to-heart reconciliation at all. Political enemies, historical antagonists, do not have to be reconciled before they can sit in the same room. You can coexist with people you cheerfully detest…being reconciled to the world as it is—contributes to the sort of cold coexistence achieved in post-conflict situations ' (Ignatieff 2003: 326). However, Ignatieff goes on to say that where there is no common narrative of the painful past, some sense of shared historical truth, 'the daily coexistence that develops is bound to be shallow, vulnerable to the first incident or atrocity that recalls the suppressed past' (2003: 329). Coexistence is crucial to social integration, but the search for lasting peace should seek deeper ideals.

To test the links between social integration processes and peace-building, and the role of participatory dialogue to facilitate these processes through international fieldwork, much practical, local work needs to be done to further the spiritual healing of reconciliation.[16] While the United Nations and the international community are indispensable in strengthening regional capacity-building, peace-building must be localized. Without adequately dealing with the pain, hurt, grief, anger, distrust, and sense of loss in dealing with the past, there can only be a minimal sense of coexistence. Undoubtedly, coexistence and the absence of violence are preferable to explicit hostility. Thus, all forms of participatory dialogue that further a sense of inclusion into integrative, social transformation are worth pursuing.

But ultimately, it is important for grassroots peace-builders, NGOs, and the UN to aspire toward the ideals of collaboration, cohesion, and reconciliation. As Norman Porter writes, 'reconciliation matters. And if it mattered enough to enough of us in Northern Ireland, then we would have it' (2003: 1). A strong conception of 'reconciliation entails embracing and engaging others who are different from us in a spirit of openness and with a view to expanding our horizons, healing our divisions and articulating common purposes' (N. Porter 2003: 8). In Northern Ireland, indifference, fear, bitterness, exclusionary interests, misunderstandings, confrontational tactics, and antagonistic divisions continue to thwart the acceptance of diversity, the need to pursue common ground, the desire to forge an inclusive belonging, and the humility to seek reconciliation. Dialogue is indispensable to reconciling polarized relations.

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[16] By this I am not implying that reconciliation is solely a theological concept or that churches or faith groups are necessarily best suited to the task. I am simply suggesting that the pain, hurt, grief, trauma, and need for forgiveness, apology, and healing are spiritual needs that may have political, economic, social, cultural, and religious ramifications.

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