Deconstructing dominant narratives of peace: LGBTQ perspectives on conflict transformation in Northern Ireland

Fidelma Ashe
Ulster University

The paper discusses findings from an AHRC funded project titled LGBTQ Visions of peace in a Society Emerging from Conflict. In ways, this was a complex project that combined methodologies in Arts and Social Science, but its central aim was very simple. The creation of visions of peace in societies emerging from conflict becomes dominated by the powerful groups that brokered the peace. Working with a range of NGOs the project aimed to facilitate the participation of LGBTQ people in developing and disseminating alternative visions of peace. As such, the project located LGBTQ people as agents of social change within Northern Ireland.

As Primary Investigator, I worked with the Focus Identity Trust, Gender Identity Ireland and the Rainbow Project to gain access to LGBTQ friendship and support groups across Northern Ireland. I found that the visions of peace articulated by the participants were embedded in the ideals of inclusivity, diversity and plurality. Their visions also promoted an interrogation of more mainstream conceptualisations of core peacebuilding concepts including, parity of esteem, equality, justice and security. A project team that included specialists in creative arts methodologies, namely, Catherine Gander (Maynooth) and Steffi Lehner (QUB), facilitated the public articulation and dissemination of these visions through image and performance. ¹

Methods

I conducted 14 focus groups with people from different backgrounds to uncover how LGBTQ visions of peace have been shaped by the conflict and the post-conflict environment. Each focus group met 1-5 times over a 6 month period. Collectively, the focus groups recorded the responses of 20 participants to group explorations of 5 thematic areas below.

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<tr>
<th>Thematic area 1</th>
<th>Dominant and subjugated perspectives on peace</th>
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<td>Thematic area 2</td>
<td>Inclusion/exclusion before 1998</td>
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¹ For further information on these aspects of the research contact the PI in the first instance.
### Key findings

In terms of parity of esteem in shaping peace, the participants agreed that a number of social groups, including LGBTQ people had not been included as equals in terms of building a peaceful society. Most agreed that ethno-nationalist issues dominated peacebuilding and the social position of other groups within peacebuilding discourse and practice remained marginal (see also Ashe 2009; 2012; Ashe and Harland 2015; Ní Aoláin 2016). One of the participants explained: ‘Peace was delivered along religious lines and for religious purposes. It was meant to address and manage the two communities. It wasn’t intended to promote that kind of equality.’ The negative political and religious rhetoric surrounding sexual and gender minorities during the conflict became softened to some degree during peacebuilding, but its effects on social inclusion were preserved. Participants viewed these negative discourses as eroding their parity of esteem with other identities in terms if inclusion in building the peace even further.

### Equality

The participants identified forms of inequality across a range of social institutions (see Ashe 2018a; see also Department of Education 2017; Nagel 2016). Employment law including, section 75 legislation was viewed as a weak mechanism in terms of protecting LGBTQ rights in the workplace. Some schools were viewed as particularly exclusionary in terms of LGBTQ pupils and inequality in schools was a core concern for younger participants (see also department of Education 2017). Transgender participants felt they had been failed by a range
of professionals and demonstrated significant fear in relation to frontline welfare services, particularly when those agencies became involved in family life.

**Justice**

Participants agreed that the peace process had not delivered justice for LGBTQ people. In focus groups older participants recalled their experiences of the troubles including the fear of disclosing identity and the criminalisation of sexuality. They argued that many LGBTQ left Northern Ireland to live in more liberal societies. In other words, LGBTQ people had been exiled from their communities through homophobia and transphobia. The historical legacy of the treatment of LGBTQ people during the conflict for many participants had not been addressed. The failure to properly resource LGBTQ groups particularly in rural groups, the failure of the assembly to pass legislation to equalise marriage (see also Nagel 2016), and its failure to address the equality of transgender people were given as examples of how the peacebuilding process had not succeeded in correcting the historical inequities of the past.

**Security**

All respondents indicated that they had experienced high levels of insecurity during peacebuilding (see also Kitchin 2002). Many participants spoke about their general fear of homophobic or transphobic attack. Some indicated high levels of hyper-vigilance in particular social arenas. Fears increased after reported homophobic or transphobic attacks in their locale. All agreed it was high risk to show same sex affection in public.

The history of policing in Northern Ireland is complex and policing became entangled in the meta-conflict (see Ryder 2004). Yet there were a range of issues that related directly to sexual and gender minorities in relation to policing reform after 1998. The focus group participants indicated low-levels of confidence in the police service. Two participants indicated that they preferred to rely on paramilitary groups for protection from homophobic and transphobic acts. Other respondents identified paramilitary groups as a source of great fear. In general, focus group participants felt that LGBTQ people did not have parity of esteem in terms of policing priorities and processes. Focus group data indicated that historical memories and perceptions of policing during the conflict continue to shape contemporary perceptions. During the conflict, the historical relationship between the police force and LGBTQ people resulted in deep distrust.
The research data suggested that the history of policing in the region increased the prospect of negative experiences of the PSNI being interpreted as evidence of the persistence of institutional bias against LGBTQ people in the police force. There were low-levels of confidence in reporting homophobic and transphobic incidences and crimes to the PSNI (see also Jarman 2012) and participants raised issues concerning interaction with call handlers.

**Recommendations**

- The research suggests that political, civil society and front-line welfare agencies can increase LGBTQ people’s parity of esteem, equality, social justice and security.

- LGBTQ articulations of insecurity should guide both policy and practice in transitional societies; advocacy groups should have access to policymakers and a broad range of LGBTQ groups should be resourced appropriately to address all aspects of their constituencies’ needs during peacebuilding.

- Civil society organisations can play a role in preserving forms of LGBTQ exclusions and inequalities during conflict; consequently, they can play a central role in reducing forms of LGBTQ insecurity during the conflict transformational period.

- Policing reform in transitional societies must prioritise LGBTQ security, and where historically shaped low levels of confidence and trust between sexual and gender minorities and the police permeate the conflict transformational phase they must be addressed through institutional change and monitoring.

- The media have an intellectual duty to move beyond debates concerning the ‘morality’ of legal changes designed to dismantle the sexual and gender inequities of the past. The media can play an important role in terms of exposing the effects of the persistence of those historical inequalities on the security of LGBTQ people in Northern Ireland (see Ashe 2018b).

**Conclusions**

The focus group data indicates that LGBTQ people stretch the boundaries of key peacebuilding concepts. Their visions of peace highlight the need to deal with multiple historical inequalities
not simply inequalities between homogeneously constituted ethno-nationalist identities. There visions reflect a desire for a forward-looking, progressive and secure society for all our citizens. Civil society and frontline welfare agencies can play an important role in actualising those visions.

References


**Author Contact email:** f.ashe@ulster.ac.uk