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Running Heading: LOYALIST PARAMILITARY DISENGAGEMENT

Leaving Violence Behind: Disengaging from Politically Motivated Violence in Northern

Ireland

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### Abstract

This article explores the processes involved in leaving social movements or disengaging from terrorist activities by providing an analysis of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Red Hand Commando (RHC) transformation away from politically motivated violence towards a civilian non-military role. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to gain an understanding of participant accounts of leaving violence behind and disengaging from terrorism. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed the interplay of individual, organization and societal level processes in incentivizing and obstructing disengagement from politically motivated violence. The findings resonate with other case studies exploring the processes involved in disengagement from political violence among other terror groupings across the globe. The results are discussed in relation to a number of topics, including the implementation DDR in post-conflict societies, the dynamic role of collective identity in the engagement in and disengagement from politically motivated violence and the role of prison in shaping disengagement from politically motivated violence.

**Key Words:** disengagement, de-radicalization, terrorism, Northern Ireland, political violence.

## Leaving Violence Behind: Disengaging from Politically Motivated Violence in Northern Ireland

While the research literature exploring ‘radicalization’ and the engagement in politically motivated violence, commonly referred to as terrorism, has been growing exponentially since the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 (see Horgan, 2005); the research exploring the psychological processes which underpin disengagement from armed militant groups has been much more limited (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009a; Ferguson, 2010a, Vertigans, 2011). This study aims to address some of the problems which have led to the dearth of research on this topic by exploring the processes of disengagement from politically motivated violence with members and former members of loyalist paramilitary groups who were active in shooting and bombing campaigns throughout the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s until the signing of the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement (The Agreement: Agreement Reached in the Multi-party Negotiations, 1998) in 1998 and beyond. The study will utilise Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1995; 1996) in the analysis of the data created by a series of semi-structured interviews with members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Red Hand Commando (RHC). It is also important to note that this study aims to explore disengagement rather than de-radicalization, as these two processes are viewed as separate and not necessarily compatible (Horgan, 2009a; Ferguson, 2010a).

During the Troubles in Northern Ireland loyalist paramilitary groups including the UVF, RHC, the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF; created in a UVF split in 1996) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) operating under its ‘nom de guerre’ of the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) were responsible for killing approximately 983 people, or 27.4% of all Troubles related fatalities (Smyth & Hamilton, 2004). Loyalist paramilitary groups are pro-British armed militant groupings which employed political violence and sectarian murder to

sustain the political status quo in Northern Ireland and maintain Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom in the face of Irish republican attempts to force the British Government to withdraw from Northern Ireland. Thus loyalist violence has been conceptualized by observers as 'conservative,' 'pro-state' or 'preservational' terrorism (Bruce, 1992; Harmon, 2010), while the members of loyalist groups like to regard themselves as 'counter-terrorists' due to their violent struggle against armed republicanism.

While the UVF and RHC were primarily groups focused on employing a range of violent means, from bomb attacks to assassinations and sectarian murders aimed at frustrating the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Irish nationalists more generally, by the late 1970's the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) was emerging to provide political analysis for the organization and acted as the political voice of the UVF. The PUP gained more prominence after the reaction to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 and they played a key role in the loyalist ceasefires of 1994 and the negotiations leading up to the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 (see McAuley, 2004 for a detailed discussion on the development of the PUP and its relationship with the UVF).

During the last 15 years since the acceptance of the Belfast Agreement the UVF and RHC have been involved in a process of transformation towards a non-military and civilianized role. This process is part of a self motivated and self policed disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme (Edwards, 2009; Ferguson, 2010b; McAuley, Tonge & Shirlow, 2010). In May 2007 the organization made a statement in which the UVF and RHC leadership declared "as of 12 midnight, Thursday 3 May 2007, the Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commando will assume a non-military, civilianised, role" (UVF Statement, 2007, May). The statement detailed the background to the organizations move from military operations to greater involvement in conflict transformation and

community development. The statement also indicated that “all ordinance has been put beyond reach”.

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009 the organization made a statement that they had decommissioned all UVF and RHC weapons (Statement by UVF on Decommissioning, 2009, September) and the complete decommissioning of these groups was verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) in September 2009. The 2009 statement also indicated that this act of “rendering ordnance totally, and irreversibly, beyond use” would “further augment the establishment of accountable democratic governance in this region of the United Kingdom; to remove the pretext that loyalist weaponry is an obstacle to the development of our communities and to compound our legacy of integrity to the peace process.” However, the UVF sanctioned murder of Bobby Moffett on the Shankill Road on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2010 (24<sup>th</sup> Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission, 2010), the recent targeting of dissident republican activists, the co-ordination of street protests and sectarian rioting, participation in organised crime and continued involvement in ‘paramilitary style attacks’<sup>1</sup> (25<sup>th</sup> Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission, 2010) only too clearly demonstrates this process is not as complete as the UVF/RHC leadership portrayed and illustrates the challenges these organizations face in transforming from an illegal military force into a civilian community focused organization.

Within political psychology there is a substantial body of literature surrounding engagement in political protest and how people sustain political protest (see van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2007; 2013). In particular, Klandermans and his colleagues (1997; 2003; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2007) provide a well-developed theoretical framework to explain routes into protest movements and the social psychology of protest. In doing this, Klandermans (1984) utilizes an expanded resource mobilization theory which incorporates

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<sup>1</sup> Paramilitary style attacks are commonly referred to as punishment shootings or beatings were the victim is shot in the arms or legs or assaulted with bats or cudgels.

social identity approaches and shared emotions to chart individual engagement in social protest and how people sustain engagement in social movements. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, research on the processes involved in leaving social movements or armed militant groups or disengaging from terrorist activities is much more limited (Klandermans, 2003; Horgan, 2009b) and what research we have probably produces more questions than answers (Ferguson, 2010a).

The current knowledge available points to a complex process incorporating the interplay between micro, meso, macro and exo factors (see Horgan, 2009a). Research also tends to report a range of *push and pull* factors (e.g., losing faith in group ideology, burn out, change of circumstances, etc.) in studies exploring extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliated groups (Horgan, 2009a; Rashwan, 2009; Vidino, 2011), Euskadi Ta Astatasuna (ETA; Reinares, 2011), members of British/Irish loyalist and republican paramilitary groups (Ferguson 2010a), neo-nazi groups (Blee , 2002; Bjorgo, 2009) and in the wider social movement literature (Klandermans, 2003).

In addition to these factors, research has also demonstrated the role of *critical incidents* such as traumatic events which provide the militants with a ‘wake-up call’ which prompts individual disengagement (Ferguson, 2010a; Garfinkel, 2007; Reinares, 2011; Vidino, 2011). Prison and the experience of incarceration have also been shown to be important to the disengagement process. At the most basic level incarceration plays a role in at least temporarily forcing the militant to disengage in the violence by taking them off the ‘battlefield’. Although, it can also provide the militants with the space to consider their ideology, reflect on the conflict and develop longer term strategies which can include non-violent approaches to achieving their political goals (Ashour, 2011; Ferguson, 2010a; Reinares, 2011).

Disengagement from UVF and RHC violence is not simply based on individuals voluntarily or involuntarily leaving violence behind. It must be remembered that this is a process guided by a wider organizational disarmament context. Therefore, the individual militant's narrative around disengagement will invariably draw on organizational context and leadership influences, as has been found in other disengagement processes (Ashour, 2011; Horgan, 2009a). It may also be difficult to disaggregate individual motivations from this wider context. Indeed, one of the greatest limitations in applying a psychological approach to research on social movements and collective action is that because psychology is ahistorical and employs a level of analysis which is focused on the individual it can be devoid of context (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2007).

Another major short coming with research on militant or terrorist groups is the dearth of studies which are actually based on systematic face-to-face interviews with members or former members of these armed groups (Silke, 2001; Horgan, 2009a, 2009c). Yet having an understanding of how individuals have disengaged from politically or ideologically motivated violence is key to understanding how to bring about a decline in the current threat posed by terrorist groups (Cronin, 2006). Thus case studies which explore disengagement from politically motivated violence based on the experiences of key protagonists within disengaged or disengaging armed groups are highly valuable (Cronin, 2006; Horgan, 2009a; Vidino, 2011).

This study will build on research focused on social protest movements and disengaging armed militant groups by exploring individual accounts of disengagement from loyalist paramilitary violence. As these accounts are located within a wider context of organizational disengagement taking place against a background of the peace process in Northern Ireland, we would expect these individual accounts to draw on a range of micro, meso, macro and exo factors to anchor this disengagement process.



As we are interested in the individual's interpretations of their experiences, we will draw on biographical-narrative method (Wengraf, 2001) and IPA as analytical tools to aid us in understanding how the participants construct and interpret their personal and social realities. IPA developed from the theoretical backgrounds of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Moran, 2000) and aims to explore in full, individual personal and lived experience, and examines how participants make sense of their personal and social world.

## Method

### *Participants*

The 11 participants in this study were adult males, all of the participants were members or former members of the UVF (n = 9) or its affiliated grouping the RHC (n = 2). The majority of the participants were also former prisoners (n = 9) who had served lengthy sentences (5 to 16 years) for committing scheduled offences related to their participation in politically motivated violence under the Northern Ireland Emergency Provisions Act, these offences included activities such as murder, armed robbery, use of explosives and attempted murder. All interviews took place during 2008/2009 in Belfast against a back drop of increasing dissident republican violence and UVF/RHC moves towards disarmament and demobilization. All participants were contacted through opportunity sampling via political and community organisations in Belfast and were invited to participate in a study exploring their involvement in past violence and the current peace process in Northern Ireland. The study had gained prior ethical approval from the ethics committees for both institutions.

### *Interview Procedure*

The structure of the interviews and the initial style of questioning were based on Wengraf's (2001) biographical-narrative method, with aspects of the structure being characteristic of IPA (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). The interview procedure began with

an invitation for the participant to provide a biographical account of their personal experiences and events related to their membership of a loyalist paramilitary group. Then a series of semi-structured follow up questions and nudges to elaborate were employed to explore participants' experiences of the current situation in Northern Ireland and inevitably addressed the impact of the violent conflict and coming to terms with the move towards a more 'civilianised' role for the paramilitary groups in post-agreement Northern Ireland. This combination of biographical-narrative and semi-structured interviewing allows the participant to chronologically outline their experiences, then provides the researcher with opportunities to ask research directed questions, prompting further reflection and the presentation of additional detail to their biographical account informed by the specific questioning (Chaitin, 2003).

Participants had the opportunity to develop themes themselves and were probed to continue with their elaborations (see Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood, 2010 for a detailed step by step guide to this interview process and the theoretical rationale behind it).

Participants were able to speak for as long as they wished, with the interviews lasting between 40 and 200 minutes. All interviews were recorded to a digital voice recorder. In order to build trust and make the participants feel at ease, each interview was conducted in an environment selected by the participant. All three authors were involved in interviewing the participants and generally two authors were present for each interview.

### *Data Analysis*

As with our previous work (see Ferguson, et al., 2010; Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood, 2007) the qualitative analysis was based on principles common to IPA and thematic analysis (see Smith, 1995; Smith, Jarmon & Osborn, 1999). The first author conducted a detailed analysis of each interview, annotating and coding each participant's transcript fully before starting the next one. A second level of analysis follows during which

the transcripts are examined line-by-line with the first author noting anything of psychological interest. This analytical process involves the participant and researcher engaging in a dual process or double hermeneutic. Firstly, what the participant reports in their interview, is an interpretation of their own experiences and secondly, through the first and second level of analysis the researcher is involved in a phenomenological description of this process followed by an interpretation of the participant's interpretation (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

After these annotations, the transcripts were re-examined by the first author and broad themes were developed for each transcript in turn and these themes became more focused with successive readings of the transcripts and construction of code summary documents. This process reduces the data down and establishes themes based on the body of evidence in line with Smith's (1996) recommendations of analysing interview data from groups. In this case, summary documents of master codes were determined for each individual without attempting to read the next individual's transcript. This was done to reduce the tendency of codes from one interview determining the construction of themes identified in subsequent transcripts. Eventually, a set of superordinate master themes was achieved by identifying relevant extracts across all participants. Rereading the transcripts and summary documents helped the first author to identify themes that were repeated across individuals and to identify themes that were specific to particular individuals.

The second author independently conducted a mini-audit of the transcripts and summary documents and agreed with the coding and themes identified in line with accepted procedures (Yin, 1989). This audit enhances the coherence of the analysis (Yardley, 2008), allows new themes to emerge, modifies existing themes and determines that the emerging themes represent the data.

## Results

Extracts from the transcripts of the interviews will be used to illustrate the narrative accounts of different individuals and to allow the reader to see how the researchers' interpretations were reached and how the themes developed. The themes presented here fall into two main superordinate themes, the first one explores factors which enhance disengagement from violence, while the second explores the barriers to disengagement from politically motivated violence, both these superordinate themes include a number of distinct sub-themes.

### *Theme 1: Incentives to Disengage from Violence*

This superordinate theme contains a number of sub-themes which relay factors which pushed or pulled the participants towards disengaging from political violence and towards non-violent community or political activism in particular. The first sub-theme of *life changes* clusters together factors which push the participants towards a reformulation of their activities based on changes related to growing older, getting an education, family responsibilities and thinking about the future of the next generation. The second sub-theme relates to *finding space to think*. Ironically, for most of the participants this meant reformulating their thinking while serving prison sentences for terrorism related offences, but for the others it meant leaving Northern Ireland for periods of up to a decade. The third sub-theme *transformative leadership* relates to the importance of organizational disengagement in forcing individual disengagement. The final sub-theme *vision of a shared future* seems counter-intuitive, in that these proponents and perpetrators of violence are pushed towards leaving violence behind because they have developed a vision of a peaceful shared future for Northern Ireland, with Protestants and Catholics, both North and South of the border coexisting together.

#### *Sub-theme 1: Life Changes*

The majority of participants related how various life changes contributed to their decision to move away from violence and pursue non-violent activism. These life changes related to getting older, gaining an education, realising they had family responsibilities and beginning to think about the next generation. The participants also reflect on their experiences and conclude that they do not want the children of Northern Ireland to 'have to' continue to conduct the conflict and as a result be harmed.

But you sort of, I was going to say you mellow out but you don't, sort of experience gives you a wee bit more of a common sense approach to things and you start trying to see things from more than just the one perspective. (Participant 1)

When you do thirteen years in prison when you come out you wouldn't be much use for doing anything else in that line of business. (Participant 2)

The quotes above illustrate how aging impacts on disengagement in two different ways, firstly the participants report 'mellowing' or 'cooling down' and beginning to see points of view beyond those commonly held within working class loyalism. Secondly, they report that being a paramilitary is a 'young man's game' which places the person under a lot of physical and psychological stress and this takes its toll. But it is also related to how operationally effective the former prisoners would be post release as they have been off the battlefield for an extended period of time and are well known to the security apparatus, thus they lack the effectiveness they once had.

All the participants came from urban working class Protestant backgrounds and none of them stayed in school beyond the age of sixteen. Many left school because they got caught up in the excitement and danger of the conflict and gradually drifted into active participation in the violence. This immersion in the conflict becomes all encompassing and it isn't until they are arrested and imprisoned that they find the space to re-focus on their education. In

turn, this educational expansion alters world views and begins to motivate the participants to look at the long term situation in Northern Ireland.

I learnt more in jail than I learnt on the street all my life. Oh aye. I mean it's all self-taught. I mean I took a few courses like accountancy and book keeping and sociology, you know what I mean. (Participant 4)

Then this experience of prison education teaches the participants to value education and see the importance of education in improving the lives of their own community outside the prison gates.

I mean if you're going to develop a community like our working class community here, then they need educating, they need some form or some level of education to qualify for the jobs, to qualify to get them into the positions to give them the quality of life, and if that doesn't exist then they will turn to paramilitarism and a lot of them do because most of our kids leaving school now leave with nothing. (Participant 5)

All of the participants noted the importance of children and their families in influencing their decisions to leave violence behind. For some it was having their own children post-release, or returning to families after serving long prison sentences which helped to steer them away from the violence of their past. For others it was a focus on their fictive children, or the future children of Northern Ireland more generally. Because these participants have 'lived' the conflict and endured the violence at the sharp end, they believe they understand the impact it has on a person both physically and psychologically better than most, and they want to stop the cycle of violence being revisited on the next generation of Northern Ireland.

The other thing is that I have children of my own and I certainly wouldn't like them to have the same life experience as I have. (Participant 2)

*Sub-theme 2: Finding Space to Think*

This was the most frequently expressed sub-theme to emerge from this study and was presented by every participant as they discussed their route out of politically motivated violence. For the former prisoners, this space to think was provided by spending years in the Maze Prison, for the paramilitaries who had managed to remain active and evade detection by the police, this resulted from being able to spend years outside Northern Ireland encountering different people, conflicting perspectives and new surroundings.

Prison just gives you an opportunity to be detached from the conflict, it's a dubious way to be detached but you're detached from it and it gives you time to think, you come out with pretty clear ideas in your head. It's pretty difficult after that period of time when you're away and you go back and see your friends and colleagues from before and some of them are thinking in exactly the same way as they did in the early seventies. How's this happening like? And then they think because you've been in prison it's softened you or broken you or whatever but that's not the case it's just common sense, pragmatism, you can't go on killing each other forever, some time you're going to have to talk so why not do it now rather than go through another ten, twenty or whatever years of conflict. (Participant 2)

I've been involved for something like thirty-five years and the next stage obviously when you get involved in the conflict, the more operations you carry out, the more you get involved, the bigger chance you've got of getting caught or killed. So I was caught, and put in prison, so I had those prison years where, and it should be no surprise to anybody, because some of the best leaders in the world developed their political thinking in prisons, Nelson Mandela... so it should come as no surprise that people in prison do develop because you've been removed from the conflict.

(Participant 11)

The participants themselves see the importance of having this space and in their work as community activists they try and create the space to allow other members of their community to think and reformulate their ideas about the conflict and its legacy.

I think what you need to do is to take people out of the picture and bring them back off their hide and have them look at it. I mean to try to give you an analogy of it, it's like watching your son grow up, or your child grow up, you never notice them growing from little child up to a man or a woman. You just don't notice it, and all of a sudden ten years later wasn't that quick. How did you grow up so quick, but being away and coming back and you notice the change in things. (Participant 5)

*Sub-theme 3: Transformative Leadership*

Although the narratives produced by the participants generally relate to their individual disengagement from loyalist paramilitarism, many of them place that disengagement within a process of organisational change with the UVF and RHC. In particular they acknowledge the role of the leadership within the organisations in directing the 'rank and file' members towards a cessation in politically motivated violence.

I've seen people at the top and it's starting to filter slowly, slowly, slowly. A lot of stuff now going on is the foot soldiers, the ceasefire soldiers...and I know there are these thoughts within organisations, how do we address these kids? How do we basically get rid of them, you know what I mean, without them falling into ruin the way the LVF went, you know. (Participant 6)

*Sub-theme 4: Vision of a Shared Future*

One of the key incentives to move to a non-militarised role was the need to create a shared peaceful future for Northern Ireland. Many of the participants articulated this as one of their driving motivations. Indeed many of the former prisoners were in new relationships with



Irish Catholic women and spent time working across the community divide to facilitate this transformation in Northern Irish society.

We can pretty much stop them achieving what they want, and they can pretty much stop us achieving what we want, so why don't we start working out that under those conditions neither of the two of us is going to get what we want, so we'd better start thinking of something else, a similar methodology to achieve what we want. What we want is a better way of life, to achieve some stability and normalness. (Participant 8)

*Summary of Theme 1:* This first superordinate theme clusters the incentives the participants articulated when discussing their pathway to disengagement from politically motivated violence. The narratives illustrate a process where the wisdom of age, the changing nature of family responsibilities and educational development combine in the space created by imprisonment or relocation outside the country. This freedom from the day-to-day cycles of violent action and reaction on the streets of Northern Ireland facilitates a reformulation of ideas about how to achieve political goals and create a new shared and equal Northern Ireland. It must also be remembered that although these participants individually disengaged from violence, they did so as part of an organisation which was involved in internal dialogue and a reformulation of the conflict, led by the generation who were provided the space to think behind the walls of the Maze prison, so their realisations both shaped and were shaped by the organisation they belonged to and its leadership.

*Theme 2: Barriers to Disengagement*

This second superordinate theme consists of sub-themes around factors which pose barriers to individual and group level disengagement from politically motivated violence. The first sub-theme of *fear of disintegration or drift into criminality* explores how the speed of disengagement needs to be checked against the organization's ability to hold the group together. The second sub-theme relates to the paramilitaries being *rejected and labelled by*

*the mainstream*, with this marginalization leading to the misunderstanding of their positive role in conflict transformation while also erecting barriers to their full participation in society. The third sub-theme is closely related to sub-theme 2, in that it explores the problems the former prisoners face in *competing with professionals* involved in the community sector as they seek to find employment and build community capacity in the areas in which they live. The fourth sub-theme examines the *legacy of the conflict* and how the polarization and acceptance of political violence constructs psychological barriers which hinder disengagement. The final sub-theme is *lack of direction and leadership* which explores the fragmented nature of loyalism and the lack of people available to provide political inspiration and channel activities in a new direction.

*Sub-theme 1: Fear of Disintegration or Drift into Criminality*

All the participants discussed their fears that the peace process would leave paramilitaries 'redundant' and this would in turn lead to the development of a schism within the UVF, such as that witnessed in the 1996 with the birth of the LVF, or that members would use their unique skill sets to seek out new criminal opportunities. Participant 7 elucidates these views and the apprehension felt amongst the rank and file members as they look to an unstable and unknown future.

At this point in time, the paramilitaries are disintegrating or mutating into gangs because it's, since 1994 when the ceasefire was called, it's what do you do now mate, we're redundant aren't we... How do paramilitaries justify their existence if there's no conflict? Yes, we've tried to move and alter culture, trying to get people involved in the community, trying to get people involved in politics and some people just want to be by themselves, so we do try. (Participant 4)

Some of the participants also linked this disintegration to either a lack of visionary leadership (further discussed in sub-theme 5) or the lack of opportunities to move into political or

community work due to the fringe position of loyalism in these two arenas (discussed further in sub-themes 2 and 3). These failings were usually contrasted with the ability of Sinn Fein to offer alternative post-conflict occupation to former IRA combatants.

There's people out there need big bank balances and need their houses paid for, they need their holidays paid for. And they're not letting that go. And that's the big issue that I have, coz the kids in the street still look up to them. To break the strangle hold is gonna take a good man. Davey Ervine<sup>2</sup> was good but you couldn't break him in twenty-two bits which you would need to do, twenty-two of them coz we haven't got one like him anymore. (Participant 4)

I accept you have people for whom paramilitarism is the only thing that has given them anything, any status in life and they're reluctant to relinquish that and within loyalism it's even more difficult because at least the IRA have a big political project and a mandate in the Sinn Fein. It's were a lot of their former IRA volunteers who have got themselves the necessary skills to do things and they are easily absorbed into all that, where as we have nowhere to absorb our people. (Participant 2)

The participants also felt the only way to get around this barrier was to offer the former combatants opportunities to re-build their lives and careers away from paramilitarism.

Therefore the key to stopping this drift into criminality or factionalism was to offer jobs and training to re-skill the volunteers, so they could financially provide for themselves.

You know, because they're talking about they are going to pension people off, that's fine, but how do you turn round and say to somebody's that's had 36 years service and who sees themselves as still having something to offer? How do you go to that guy and say, right, you are no longer in the organisation? So we have to find a role

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<sup>2</sup> David Ervine was a UVF member and former prisoner who became leader of the PUP and was elected to the Northern Irish Assembly. For a detailed biography see Sinnerton (2003) or Moloney (2010).

for those people to say look you can come here, but what you've been doing in the past is no longer needed. (Participant 3)

Yes, it's a slow, slow journey. We have to offer them something. We have to replace the drug dealing, where they're getting their income. We have to give them something. There's no sense saying well give that up, for them to go and sit on the dole [welfare benefits]. (Participant 6)

*Sub-theme 2: Rejected and Labelled by the Mainstream*

All the participants felt that barriers were raised to stop them from taking a normal civilianised role in the post-agreement environment of Northern Ireland. The main barrier was how they were viewed and negatively labelled or stereotyped by the wider unionist community, general society and/or the media.

I've never been a fan of his politics, but I've been an interested fan of his poetry. It's Rudyard Kipling and I think he wrote the Thin Red Line [Tommy] and you should get to look at it. It's quite brilliant in terms of heralding the soldiers who go off to war and weren't they quite brilliant and wonderful and of course, when they come back and are in the pubs, it's "chuck them out, the brutes". I think there is a bit of that. The support of a community is mercurial, I think, in that it is dependent upon their sense of fear or their sense of need. (Participant 8)

There were also barriers to former prisoners gaining employment due to regulations and restrictions placed on them due to being former prisoners.

In a conventional British army you come home, your demobbed and you can go home, seek a job or do whatever you want. In an unconventional army, you can't do that you know, because for instance me an ex-prisoner you know, and there's some 15,000 maybe ex-loyalists prisoners over 30 years. You're debarred from certain jobs, you're discriminated against in certain things you know. (Participant 7)

*Sub-theme 3: Completing with the Professionals*

Related to the barriers discussed above the participants were also forced to compete with 'professional' community workers for resources. They also felt that these professionals were only involved to build their own careers and didn't understand the problems faced by the loyalist working class community. However, because of their legitimate professional status they were able to access funding which was not available to the former combatants seeking to transform their 'own' communities. This competition also challenged their ability to find gainful employment in the community sector.

Unfortunately on top of that, a lot of community schemes or community organisations have now become so professional, but they're so professional that they've lost touch with what they're actually meant to be doing, and lost touch with what they should be delivering and who in the community they should deliver to. You know a lot of the funding through the European Peace thing it went to churches. Go on a Sunday and see how many people are in the church, so who are they preaching to. You know, how can they identify with the community? You know, the only people who can identify with the community, to a real heart level, is the people who've lived in it. And unfortunately they've so many professionals, now it's a profession, being a youth worker or a community worker is now a profession. (Participant 10)

There was also a feeling that these professionals and an expanding community focused sector had benefited from the peace process, a peace process the participants played a role in creating and were involved in maintaining, yet was alienating them. They also felt that the professional community workers were only interested in monetary and status rewards, rather than helping the alienated loyalist communities. Some also commented that for some mainstream politicians and community groups keeping the loyalist communities down served a purpose.

There's a terrible scam goes on in local government and the middle class are part of it, right. You get this money that comes in, and I know it's for something simple, but you get this money comes in for your community initiatives and they bring these people in who've done all their community relations work out of a book and they say "oh I know what to do in this area" you know, "I remember reading about that in a text book" and they say "right this is what we'll do, we'll throw a million pounds into North Belfast and that will get this and that" and then they turn around and say, "but you don't want to give it to that group there because they're UDA dominated or there's a UVF influence so we can't give them it because that will fall into the hands of paramilitaries". And what they don't realise is that there are people like me who gave their liberty in defence of their community, rightly or wrongly, and it would be very silly for me to spend sixteen years in jail and to leave it at that and not come out and want to try and give something back to the community. (Participant 1)

*Sub-theme 3: Legacy of the Conflict*

The participants viewed one of the hurdles to a non-violent future was the culture of violence and segregation which had been created by the Troubles, which fostered psychological pressures to support or accept political violence. The key aspects of this were the levels of ethno-political segregation in post-agreement Northern Ireland, the development of enemy images during the conflict and the pervading perception that there was a military solution to the political problems inherent in Northern Ireland.

I think that the emotional difficulty of dealing with the other side- let's look at governments for example. Governments spend billions to vilify their enemy, and then when the conflict ends, they have to talk to the enemy they've just vilified. Billions! You only realize what a damn good job you did vilifying them when you have to talk to them. And it's a bit like that for communities as well, that the other side could

never be honourable, never be decent, never be genuine, never be real, and meanwhile back at the ranch having espoused that for as long as I can ever remember, then a society goes to talk to each other and we get into trouble because they've done such a good job of vilifying one another in the past. We don't trust each other and- the failure of trust is not the issue, our not trusting each other, how could we? We don't know each other. (Participant 8)

Another aspect of the violence was related to the fact that the participants had to work in an environment where there is still a threat from dissident republicans, and this threat made it difficult to move forward while this threat was in place.

And then we got a threat. Girl lifted the phone, and said there's a threat. So we phoned the Shinners [Sinn Fein] and we said "look what's the craic?"...and basically their answer was "well you know we can't speak for everyone"... You know, some of them have moved, don't get me wrong, some of them moved but its just people fell back into their trenches and it was hard to get away from. It was hard to move on from there. And I know that some people within our own community are still not talking. (Participant 3)

#### *Sub-theme 5: Lack of Direction and Leadership within Loyalism*

This sub-theme explores the barriers created by the diversity amongst the rank and file membership in terms of political outlook and reasons for paramilitary membership. This was often coupled with a distrust of the political leadership offered by the PUP and resulted in organizational change being a slow process, likened to 'turning a tanker'.

It's [involvement in reconciliation and community development] led to a lot of frustration [among the UVF leadership] because if people had have told me during the 1994's ceasefires that the UVF was still gonna remain as much intact as it is today I would have found it hard to believe but then as one who has worked towards trying to

create a transition I realise all the difficulties involved ...you just don't wind down thirty years of militarism and paramilitarism just like that, you can't turn it off.

(Participant 2)

While the participants praised the leadership (theme 1, sub-theme 3) for assisting in directing the organization towards a non-militarised role, they also blamed the lack of capable leaders within loyalism for the difficulties in moving away from violence and criminal activity.

The educated, your articulated, you never got them in loyalist paramilitaries, I mean that was one thing that there was a major, major shortage of, you had nobody to speak, to formulate policy, to talk about strategy, to talk about the way forward, it didn't exist. You had one or two thinkers, but not in the same degree as you would have had within the republican circles, so it was more or less a blind man fumbling in the dark, where do we go from here and how do we go from here, how can we be used? (Participant 5)

Who have we got to speak for us? Unionist politicians? David Ervine is dead.

Who've we got now, we haven't even got a vote. Sinn Fein's got all their votes.

They've took over the nationalist vote. (Participant 4)

So while in theme 1, the leadership is shown to offer direction and promote organisational change, there were barriers to the message filtering down and being accepted by all the rank and file. Unfortunately the only way to remove these barriers is to have better communication processes, which is difficult in a secretive organization. Or have more leaders capable of taking the rank and file with them, which were perceived to be lacking among the UVF, RHC and within wider loyalism.

*Summary of Theme 2:* This second superordinate theme explores the factors viewed as hurdles to both individual and organisational level disengagement from violence. The sub-themes explored issues related to the need to keep the organisation together, which invariably



meant that any progress would be slow and therefore would attract criticism from outside the organisation. The participants also felt that loyalism was placed on the fringes of the unionist community and that paramilitaries were viewed as ‘bad men’ and therefore found it difficult to gain access to gainful employment due to the negative labels and employment restrictions imposed on former prisoners. This alienation was enhanced by the development of professional middle-class community workers who were more able to gain funding and legitimacy. Decades of violence had also left Northern Ireland divided and obsessed by violence, which made it difficult to leave the violence behind. Finally the theme examined how a lack of leadership, the fragmentation of the membership and the lack of communication within the organizations meant that it was difficult to ‘turn the tanker’ and propel the membership away from paramilitarism and criminality.

#### Discussion

The findings demonstrate the complex interplay of external and internal factors involved in assisting or hindering disengagement from armed paramilitary groups. They also illustrate the importance of organizational change and leadership (or the lack of it) in channelling the individual towards disengagement from political violence. Many of these push and pull factors resonate with research focused on other armed militant groups from across the globe (for examples see Bjorgo, 2009; Horgan, 2009a; Rashwan, 2009; Reinares, 2011; Vidino, 2011). This demonstrates that by researching case studies of disengaged or disengaging armed groups researchers can discover commonalities in the disengagement process which transcend the political, religious or ideological motivations held by organizations or individual group members.

The challenges to loyalist disengagement are in many ways reflective of Northern Ireland’s position as a post-conflict society (see Mac Ginty, Muldoon & Ferguson, 2007) and many of these challenges are reflected in other societies with a history of intrastate conflict

which are struggling to successfully implement DDR (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Kabia, 2010). DDR (see UN DDR Resource Centre, 2010) processes aim to deal with the problems arising out of ex-combatants being left without livelihoods and support networks. In this study, the participants' report that the largest obstacles to their full integration into society relate to a lack of legal economic opportunities, negative stereotypes and legislation which undermines their economic activity and ability to fully contribute to the peace process taking place in Northern Ireland. This is a reflection of the nature of the Northern Irish model of reintegration for combatants, in that, support for reintegration was promised in the Agreement, but was never fulfilled (Ferguson, 2010b). However, this lack of strategic oversight led to former prisoners and ex-combatants taking greater responsibility for their own DDR by creating self-help initiatives to foster reintegration into their respective communities. This self-help approach to DDR is beginning to be viewed as a success story that could be exported for use with other groups in conflict and post-conflict situations (Rolston, 2007). Additionally, while being marginalized and stereotyped as 'men of violence' can hold back DDR, this label also provides the former-prisoners the credibility needed to encourage others within their communities to renounce violence and participate in peaceful interaction with the other side (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009).

These participant accounts illustrate the depth of commitment many former combatants have to building peace and a shared future for Northern Ireland. These commitments are bound up within their political and collective identity, and while this politicized identity was once a key driver in their participation in political violence, it is now an important reason for their engagement in peace and community work. Research has shown that collective action is contingent on holding a strong collective identity (Huddy, 2001) and how once people are spurred into action, it is difficult to simply switch it off (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2007). The accounts provided here, demonstrate the dynamic

role of identity in collective action, and how movement away from violent militancy is not a precursor for or by-product of de-radicalization. Instead for these participants, their active engagement in conflict transformation is an affirmation of their continued radicalization and strong attachment to their collective identity.

It must be remembered that each and every one of the former combatants pointed out the importance of having the space to think and reformulate the conflict in shaping their disengagement. For most of the participants this came about through long periods of imprisonment or exile from Northern Ireland. This suggests that it is important to create the conditions which allow combatants the space and resources to begin to constructively develop and pursue non-violent alternatives to the group's political and ideological goals. Therefore, it would be appropriate to explore the role of imprisonment and/or alternative methods of incarceration for politically motivated prisoners in order to develop strategies and prison regimes which can provide and manage the reflective space necessary to develop the transition from violent to non-violent ideologies and methodologies. Perhaps one approach would be to explore methods which reproduce Deutsch's (1994; 1994a) conditions for productive conflict within a prison or ceasefire environment in order to create the space for critical reflection and the reformulation of a non-violent strategy.

The narratives also suggest that a change in the traditional oppositional politics of loyalism vs. republicanism may be underway, with many of the participants indicating greater commonalities with republicans than middle-class unionists. Indeed many participants viewed the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (PIRA) successful transformation from paramilitary group to a political/community focused organization as a model worth replicating. These narratives also illustrate the intra-group complexities and strains within loyalism and wider unionism which are indicative of the complex inter and intragroup

dynamics of the Northern Irish conflict; complexities which are often over looked in much of the research on the Northern Irish conflict (see Ferguson & Gordon, 2007; Gallagher, 1989).

Most research and policy endeavours to understand and promote the disengagement of armed groups are led by Western counter-terrorism agendas. However, these narrative accounts of the incentives and barriers to organizational transformation into a non-military civilianised organization resonate more with the psychology of organizational change or change management than counter-insurgency strategy. Therefore, agencies seeking to promote disengagement from terrorism should explore the organizational psychology literature on how to implement successful organizational change in order to facilitate the transition away from political violence.

The use of IPA methods has allowed the development of a comprehensive perspective of individuals' interpretations of disengagement which would not have been possible through either a survey or via quantitative mapping. However, while IPA methodology is intended to gain deeper insight into the lives of a relatively small sample that share important characteristics it can only provide a partial analytical account rather than a fully definitive account. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to a population as a whole (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

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