

Crossing the Rubicon: Deciding to Become a Paramilitary in Northern Ireland

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Crossing the Rubicon: Deciding to Become a Paramilitary in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland has endured a history of violence since its inception in 1922. The last forty years have been characterised by sustained political conflict and a fledging peace process. We conducted a series of interviews with individuals who had used violence to pursue political goals during the conflict. This article focuses on the processes involved in their joining of paramilitary groups and engaging in violent actions. The participants' accounts resonate with factors that other researchers have identified as being antecedent to paramilitary membership, such as having the support of the immediate community (e.g., Crawford 2003; Silke 2003). However, the rational decisions that are revealed in these accounts also show that participants engaged in rational decision making as opposed to being mindlessly provoked into membership in response to an environmental stimulus. These results highlight the degree to which individuals bear, and accept, personal responsibility for joining a paramilitary group (as opposed to membership simply being stimulated by uncontrollable dispositional or situational forces).

Northern Ireland was formed when the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921 partitioned Ireland into two political entities. Northern Ireland was formed from the predominantly Protestant six counties of the north, and remained an integral part of the United Kingdom. The majority of the island (the remaining twenty-six counties), which was predominantly Catholic, split from the United Kingdom. Initially this was known as the Irish Free State, and became the Republic of Ireland in 1949. Significant violence has occurred in almost every decade since the inception of Northern Ireland. However, the focus of this article will be the latest and most sustained period of violence that began in the late 1960s when claims by the Catholic population of Protestant discrimination in jobs, education, housing and local elections led to a civil rights campaign which quickly escalated into violence, resulting in the deployment of British troops in 1969 to try to restore order (Whyte 1990).

Over the last forty years, the conflict in Northern Ireland has been responsible for over 3,700 deaths and more than 40,000 injuries, with civilians bearing the brunt of all deaths (53 percent) and injuries (68 percent) (Smyth 1998; Smyth and Hamilton 2004). The vast majority of deaths have been attributed to paramilitaries (87 percent of the total; 59 percent by Republicans, 28 percent by Loyalists), with a minority (about 11 percent of the total) caused by the security forces (Smyth 1998).

The Northern Ireland peace process, which began with the signing of the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993, followed by the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, and finally leading to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, has resulted in a reduction in paramilitary activity, but not to a disappearance of violence. Paramilitary groups are still involved in murder and vigilante-style punishment attacks.

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In conjunction with this violence, post-1998 Northern Ireland still suffers an annual cycle of dispute and civil disorder surrounding controversial Orange Order demonstrations and increasing residential segregation (McKittrick et al. 2004, Police Service of Northern Ireland 2005; Shirlow 2003).

The persistence of Northern Ireland's *Troubles* (as the conflict is euphemistically known) and the long resistance to diplomatic or political intervention has been due to a clash "between a culture of violence and a culture of co-existence" (Darby 1997, 116). In other words, there is a proportion of Northern Ireland's populace that embrace conflict and uphold their community's paramilitary activists as heroes, while rejecting the peace process as a series of concessions to the other side. This clash of cultures has the potential to derail the current peace process in Northern Ireland and has prompted recent research to explore the processes involved in joining a paramilitary group (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2005a, 2005b) and the potential for future violence (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2007). This article will begin by reviewing the research exploring the antecedents of militant activism in Northern Ireland before progressing to discuss an important additional factor which was extracted from an analysis of face-to-face interviews with current and former Northern Irish paramilitaries conducted by the authors. This additional dimension involves a process initiated by exposure to direct or indirect political violence, which stimulates a period of deep reflection resulting in the individual committing themselves to engage in political violence to change their current circumstances.

1. The Road to Militant Activism

It must be noted that paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland are not irregular militias who assist the regular military, as in the common definition of the term. The Northern Irish paramilitary groups that are the focus of this article, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), are armed insurgent groups whose members are viewed by supporters as "resistance fighters" or "counter-terrorists" and by opponents as "terrorists".

Research focusing on the reasons why people join armed insurgent groups or commit acts of terrorism has generally

explored intra-individual explanations, with terrorists being labelled or diagnosed as mad or sociopathic (for review, see Silke 1998). Traditionally they have been seen as possessing psychological disorders that make them capable of committing murderous atrocities (see Horgan 2003; Silke 1998 for reviews). However, there is a growing awareness that these reductionist explanations based on individual abnormality are inadequate and are often no more than wishful thinking (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2005a, 2005b; Horgan 2003; Louis and Taylor 2002; Oberschall 2004; Silke 1998; Victoroff 2005). Darley (1999) indicates that these cognitive strategies are founded on a general motivation to view the majority of society as normal, and therefore non-threatening, thereby making us able to consider ourselves predominantly safe.

Victoroff's recent review of the research (2005) suggests that an understanding of violent insurgency requires a more comprehensive analysis than has traditionally been undertaken. In addition to intra-individual factors, such an analysis would need to incorporate wider social factors and the dynamics of the conflict. Reviews of research on terrorism (Silke 1998, 2001; Victoroff 2005) have also exposed the shortcomings of terrorism research, generally concluding that the quality and validity of the research is poor. For example, 80 percent of studies relied on the secondary analysis of data from journals, books, or other media for their findings, while only 13 percent of data are derived from interviews with terrorists (Silke 2001). Despite these methodological shortcomings, research with individuals from insurgency groups from across the globe has consistently uncovered an inventory of factors that increase the likelihood of participation in a campaign of violence. Some of our own previous work has supported the efficacy of these factors, which include: (a) The existence of a grievance or perceived injustice by a sub-group of the population (see Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2005b for first hand accounts; Crenshaw 2003); (b) Age and gender (terrorist acts are generally committed by young males aged 15 to 25) (Silke 2003); (c) Past family involvement with or support for the movement (promoting membership through historical connections within the family) (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2005b; Crawford 2003); (d) Community support for the insurgent group, or high status associated with membership of the group (Burgess, Ferguson, and

Hollywood 2007; Post, Sprinzak, and Denny 2003); (e) Coercion or conscription into the movement (Bruce 1992); (f) Eventual membership as the result of an incremental process of increasing acts of insurgency (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2005a); this process may start with relatively mundane behaviour such as spray painting, before progressing to destroying property and finally becoming involved in injuring and killing opponents (Oberschall 2004). (g) Vengeance as the individual's motivation, feels a need to hit back and right wrongs (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Crenshaw 2003; Silke 2003). And finally (h), obviously to become a member of an armed group there must be an organisation that the individual has the opportunity to join, and that wants his or her membership (Silke 2003). These studies indicate the complexity involved in trying to unpick how the antecedent conditions impact on the individual. This study aims to explore the role of the risk factors involved in joining armed paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.

2. Method

Our research is based on face-to-face interviews with paramilitaries or former paramilitaries. In keeping with previous research on complex issues that directly impact the lives of individual participants (Smith 1995), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in the current study as the analytical methodological tool. IPA is concerned with how people *think* or what people *believe* about the topic under discussion and is particularly appropriate for detailed studies of small groups and for research that addresses decision-making processes of participants. IPA is based upon Husserl's phenomenology whereby the experience of individuals is privileged in the research endeavour (Smith 1996). The IPA approach acknowledges that a "real world" exists, but attempts to gain an insider's perspective of the living conditions and experiences prior to engaging in a more critical and abstract interrogative process of interpretation.

The authors conducted a detailed analysis of each interview, annotating and coding each participant's transcript fully before starting the next one. 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 system of

analysis is in line with Smith's second recommendation of analyzing interview data from groups (1996). 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 to completely determine 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 researchers to identify themes that were repeated across individuals and to identify themes that were specific to particular individuals. The overall list of themes included such issues as abuse of authority, denial of basic human rights, support of the wider community, and awareness of risk. Here, we present a subset of the themes that most directly address participants' interpretations of how they became involved in paramilitary violence. We also draw on interviews conducted with peaceful campaigners in order to illustrate the points we make.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Although our previous findings support many of the above inventory of terrorist induction, and most of the interviewees demonstrated an accumulation of these expected antecedent factors, we would like to point out here how participants' accounts also add another important dimension to eventual membership in a paramilitary group. We interviewed eight members of the IRA and eight members of the UVF and discovered that in addition to this list of risk factors, the interviewees had each instigated their violent activism after a *critical incident* that had precipitated a period of reflection in the potential new recruit. Such critical incidents generally involved a notable example of unjust victimisation at the hands of an outgroup. So, for those living in a Catholic community, examples would include being attacked by the British military. For those living in a Protestant community, examples would include being attacked by members of the IRA. On the face of it this type of experience may appear to fall neatly into the seventh of the above inventory, *hitting back in vengeance*. Our concern is that such a simple way of describing paramilitary membership may suggest almost a stimulus-response relationship between perceived injustice and action. To view the relationship between victimisation and paramili-

tary membership in this way may mask the sophistication of the processes individuals engage in prior to committing themselves (or not committing themselves) to a period of sustained violent action. It may also underplay the degree to which individuals are responsible for their own decision to join a paramilitary group. In the following section we draw on interview excerpts to illustrate participants' experiences.

For each of the participants these critical incidents were attacks on themselves, their family or their wider community. For example a former member of the UVF decided to become involved in terrorism after he heard that a young man with the same name, age and background as him had been killed by one of the twenty-two bombs the IRA exploded on Bloody Friday in 1972. He explains the impact this had on him:

And I thought, "That's my fence sitting days over," and I joined the UVF. And there's so many stories like that where you talk to Republicans or Loyalists and you find out there was a moment. There was a moment when they crossed the Rubicon.

The demographics of this participant did indeed fit with many of the antecedents described earlier. He was a young man living in a community that would be supportive of his action and he knew that the UVF existed and would welcome his membership. The following account though is from a young woman (less typically associated with paramilitary activity) and she indicates how her experience led her to decide to join an opposing paramilitary group, the IRA, after witnessing police and security forces violently engaging a group of protestors:

... a lot of [peacefully protesting] women and children would have been beaten with batons and it was just messy. You begin to think, "this is not good" ... I decided in '69 when the troubles really began and I'd watched a lot of people being hurt and a lot of friends die for standing up for what they believed in. I quickly, not through anger, but through sadness and fear, decided, "OK, I'll take up this cause and I'll try and bring change".

We can see that these accounts mark decisions being made rather than these individuals mindlessly responding to unfortunate environmental events. This is once again underlined in the account of a young man (at that time) who engaged in a sustained period of reflection prior to joining the IRA. He had run to help a teenage boy who had been shot by an army sniper. The boy died and the participant described withdrawing to an abandoned building for a period of hours in order to decide how to act. He explained this incident as being one in a series that had had an impact on him, but the first that had made him stop in such a deliberate fashion and consider joining the IRA. This type of experience is echoed in the comments of another member of the UVF, also a young man at the time of the re-emergence of violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite originally having no intention to become involved in the conflict, incidents such as the death of a former school friend (the first policeman to be killed in the modern conflict) were significant milestones on his journey to eventually deciding to engage in paramilitary activity:

I can remember things like running down the street, my father was in the British Legion the night the first big bomb went off in the town and I was running down the street expecting him, and I remember the relief when I seen him walking down past the fire station you know and he was OK. And all those things just impacted on you and there's no religious or political motivation for it at that time, it was just purely personal.

In a sense, there is no way of being certain which incidents will impact a person to deliberate about whether they will join a paramilitary group. Indeed Jaspers (1970) believes that this analysis may be outside the realm of objective scientific study. However, the larger incidents, such as the Bloody Friday bombings and the Bloody Sunday shootings will probably increase the chances that some will engage in just this type of deliberation. This point was also mentioned by many of the non-combatants we interviewed. They also recognized that critical incidents acted to fuel recruitment into Northern Irish paramilitary groups. In one interview a peaceful civil rights activist remarked how large-scale violent confrontation provided people with a critical incident that increased IRA membership:

It's easy, after Bloody Sunday, for ten or twenty young fellas to be so angry. They've seen their mates shot and they go down and see about joining the IRA.

Another non-violent individual, though, gives us a greater understanding of the very personal nature of the decision to join a violent campaign. This individual had lost a brother in the Bloody Sunday march. Yet his contemplation of action took him in a different direction to similar young men in his neighbourhood. He said:

You felt you had to help through that whole period of time. I would not carry a gun. I've never had a gun in my hand in my life. I've experienced the pain of losing someone and I wouldn't wish it on anyone else.

It is clear that people can experience the same objective victimisation yet react differently and that reaction may not simply be due to the number of "risk factors" a person has (e.g., being a young male within a supportive community), but critically also involves the volition of the individual. In this sense the members of paramilitary groups are truly more responsible (and generally our participants acknowledge this) for their actions than research that focuses on dispositional factors (for a review see Silke 1998) or simple responses to environmental circumstances (e.g., Zimbardo 2004) may have suggested.

These quotes illustrate how the use of military force to tackle problems may lead to more violence, creating the destructive spiral that Crenshaw labels an "action-reaction syndrome" that serves to fuel further conflict (2003, 95). It should also be remembered that in the cases cited above the individual was not the target of the aggression. All that was needed was that s/he identified with the person or persons who were subjected to the violence and s/he perceived this assault as an injustice to them and their wider community.

Burgess et al. (2005a; 2005b) also demonstrated that it is not simple exposure to these events that results in taking up arms. Indeed, many of the participants who suffered from indirect and direct violent experiences did not join paramilitary groups. Instead they became involved in peace work or civil protest or simply did nothing. Previous re-

search shows that only a small section of the populace take up arms regardless of the brutality and oppression they collectively face (Crenshaw 2003; Silke 2003). All of our interviewees who took action, whether peaceful or violent, reported *periods of reflection* after these critical incidents during which the individual consciously considered how he or she would act to change the status quo, or hit back at those who were threatening their community. This act of reflection is an important consideration as many insurgents project a view that they had no choice, that the socio-political conditions forced them to use violence (Crenshaw 2003). The fact that these individuals do make a conscious decision to engage in terrorism is further demonstrated by the fact that not everyone from an oppressed and/or victimised community engages in terrorism, serving to underline the essential personal choice involved in becoming a paramilitary. These findings have support from two other recent studies. In a study of why adolescents join legitimate and illegal armed groups across the globe Brett and Specht (2004) interviewed fifty-three adolescent males and females from nine armed groups involved in various conflicts across the globe in addition to young serving British soldiers. While the key factors involved in their interviewees deciding to join an armed group (ranging from the LTTE to the Mojahedin) map very clearly to the antecedent factors listed previously, they also note the importance of a *critical moment*, (such as the death of a family member or having their homes come under attack) in distinguishing those who decide to join an armed group from their peers who do not. Additionally, Talari's interviews with six incarcerated Indian Islamic insurgents (2007) also suggested that particular socio-political incidents (e.g. the Babri Mosque demolition and the communal riots in Gujarat) the interviewees had experienced acted as the key *turning points* in their lives as they made the transition from civilian to insurgent. It was the change in attitudes, motivations, emotions caused by these events that began their transformation into a violent insurgent, not their prior religious beliefs or exposure to radicalisation processes. Indeed the philosopher Jaspers (1970) recognises the importance of the "grenzsituationen" or *boundary situations* created by having to deal with a situation that prior knowledge or rational objective reasoning cannot prepare a person to overcome. Jaspers believed having to deal with these boundary situations (such as facing death, the death of a child, or an inevitable

struggle) causes a radical change in an individual's thinking, rousing them from normal spontaneous instinctive thinking, creating a radical change in personality and world view in which they take responsibility for their new future, and that is confirmed by the experiences reported by the participants in our study (see Salamun 1998 and 2006 for further discussion of Jaspers' philosophical conceptions).

As noted, the interviews point to intra-individual causes based on the decision-making processes experienced by an individual following a critical incident, which combine with demographic characteristics such as age, gender, employment status, level of education, and family and social history. Another important ingredient that is added to this mix involves the dynamics of the violence, with our interviewees reporting that the use of violence on communities will be reciprocated with violence from some members of that community, while other members will offer support and succour. This indicates that terrorism is not simply a precursor of military intervention but also a likely result of perceived injustice and violent oppression.

This data adds to a growing understanding of the complexity involved in attributing the causes for terrorism. These findings build on previous research and illustrate that normal people can choose to do abnormal things (such as engage in terrorist activity) under abnormal circumstances (Crenshaw 2003; Silke 1998, 2003; Horgan 2003). The data generated is based on semi-structured interviews with individuals who were involved in armed insurgency, rather than following an approach based on secondary accounts or an analysis of open source material, therefore this study addresses some of the shortcomings common in this area of research (see Silke 2003; Horgan 2003; Victoroff 2005). Also the findings provide a new and novel avenue for further enquiry which may go some way to addressing the concern that to fully understand why people engage in insurgent activities the research needs to focus on the dynamics occurring at the intersection between psychological dispositions, prior experiences, socialization and the external environment (Crenshaw 1986; Victoroff 2005).

4. Conclusion

The findings offered support for most of the antecedent factors linked with involvement in armed insurgency (such

as living in a community supportive of the use of political violence and having access to armed groups that welcomed their membership; see Burgess, et al., 2005a, 2005b; Crawford 2003; Crenshaw 2003; Oberschall 2004; Post et al., 2003; Silke 2003 for more detail), with the exception that none of our participants were coerced or conscripted into a paramilitary organization; all were volunteers who actively decided to seek membership of an armed group after witnessing a critical incident.

Importantly the findings also demonstrate that the individual has agency and plays an active role in determining the boundaries of their own actions. The findings also indicate that acts of political violence are not the acts of "evil" men, and neither are they due to purely switching on and off social situational factors as proposed by Zimbardo (2004, 47) in which the social circumstances in which the interviewees were immersed acts as "a barrel filled with vinegar [which] will *always* transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles – regardless of the best intentions, resilience, and genetic nature of those cucumbers".

Instead the findings suggest that researchers should move towards researching and potentially manipulating the decision making processes an individual experiences when faced with a critical incident or boundary situation which causes them to self-reflect and imagine an altered future in which they purposely challenge the status quo and strive to act in a manner which will alter the socio-political situation. A deeper understanding of these processes which take place after a critical incident will help build a better picture of how the antecedent factors combine with the individual to produce someone who is willing to alter their social-political environment through violent confrontation with those who are challenging them, their family or the wider community they identify with.

In addition to suggesting this potential new avenue for research, the findings also address some of the limitations common to this area of research (see Horgan 2003; Silke 2003; Victoroff 2005) and demonstrate the complexities involved in attributing the causes for terrorism.

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