

Disengaging from Terrorism: A Northern Irish Experience

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Abstract

This article explores the disengagement and deradicalization experiences of Northern Irish loyalist paramilitaries from the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Red Hand Commando (RHC). Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to develop an understanding of how the former combatants interpreted and made sense of their disengagement from violence extremism in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Agreement. The analysis of the interviews focusses around push and pull factors which either promote or hinder their ability to move away from violent extremism. The results find a resonance with recent research exploring disengagement and deradicalization processes with terror groupings across the globe and the ideological spectrum. The findings are discussed in relation to a number of topics, including the role of prison, barriers to disengagement, continued commitment and radicalization after desistance from violent extremism, the role of life changes in promoting disengagement and how organizational pressures contain and influence individual disengagement.

Key Words: disengagement, deradicalization, terrorism, Northern Ireland, extremism, radicalization

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While research on radicalization has begun to overcome many of its well discussed shortcomings (Silke, 1998, 2001) and is beginning to provide the necessary data to allow the development of comprehensive models which conceptualize and theorize radicalization (Ferguson & Binks, 2015; Kruglanski, et al, 2014; Moghaddam, 2009) research and knowledge on the processes of disengagement and deradicalization from terrorism is much more limited (Feddes, 2015; Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood, 2015; Horgan, 2014a) but growing exponentially, with some models now beginning to be proposed (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014; Barelle, 2015). Along with the increasing volume of research literature the diversity and number of deradicalization or disengagement programs have risen over the last ten years (Horgan, 2014b) with programs and interventions now taking place in numerous countries across the globe.

It is this exponential growth in the both literature on deradicalization and the increasing use of deradicalization programs which motivated me to return to the findings from my recent papers on disengagement (Ferguson, 2010, 2011, 2014; Ferguson, et al. 2015) to re-examine the findings in light of recent advances in the field. Therefore, this article will explore the processes of disengagement from violent extremism 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 literature on deradicalization (Bjorgo, 2009; Feddes, 2015; Horgan & Braddock, 2010) has tended to create a conceptual distinguish between disengagement and deradicalization. In which disengagement is conceptualized as a *behavioural* change. In disengagement the individual desists from or reduces their use of violence. While deradicalization seeks both *behavioural* and *cognitive* change. Therefore, in deradicalization the individual desists from using violence, and also moderates the extremist beliefs and attitudes which underpinned this use of violence.

In reality, these concepts are much more complex, with issues such as negotiating what is extreme and what is moderate (Feddes, 2015; Sedgwick, 2010), group level versus

individual disengagement or deradicalization (Ferguson, 2011; Horgan, 2009) and the interplay between a complex variety of micro, meso, macro and exo factors in promoting or hindering an individual's disengagement or deradicalization (Ferguson et al, 2015; Schmid, 2013).

These complexities become even more pronounced when researchers attempt to evaluate or compare existing disengagement/deradicalization programs (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016). For example, what would be a successful recidivism rate for terrorists, and how would we know the program created this low rate of recidivism? These key questions need to be answered before these programs can be fully evaluated. Especially as research consistently demonstrates that rates of recidivism amongst terrorists released from prison can be very low in comparison to ordinary criminals, despite the political prisoners not having participated in any deradicalization program (Shirlow & McEvoy, 2008; Silke, 2011).

Bjorgo (2013) has suggested that most members of extremist groups will eventually simply leave. This eventual exit would probably come about due to the amount of physical, psychological and socio-economic stress and strain placed on individuals leading this life (Barelle, 2015; Bjorgo, 2011; Reinares, 2011) and the natural process of aging and changing priorities in life (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Ferguson, 2011). Indeed much research demonstrates that many rehabilitated extremists who have chosen to disengage from employing violence are still committed to the ideals which underpinned its use (Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson, et al., 2015; Sukabdi, 2015) suggesting that deradicalization may not be a necessary condition for leaving violence behind and reintegrating into society (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016) just as engaging in political violence does not mean the perpetrator is radical or has been radicalized (Della Porta & La Free, 2012).

As with research on radicalization, most research on deradicalization tends to report a range of *push and pull* factors (e.g., losing faith in group ideology, reality not meeting expectations, etc.) in studies exploring extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliated groups (Horgan, 2009; Rashwan, 2009; Vidino, 2011), Euskadi Ta Astatasuna (ETA; Reinares, 2011), members of British/Irish loyalist and republican paramilitary groups (Ferguson 2011; Ferguson et al. 2015), neo-nazi groups (Blee, 2002; Bjorgo, 2009) and other extremist groups (Barelle, 2015).

Clearly identity is a core aspect of these processes, and research illustrates 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). So likewise, in disengagement or deradicalization it could be assumed that's the extremist's identity, identity strength and identity change at personal and social levels will be crucial in facilitating these processes.

In addition to these factors, research has also demonstrated the role of *critical incidents* or *turning points* such as traumatic events which provide the militants with a 'wake-up call' which prompts individual disengagement and for some a move towards deradicalization (Altier, et al., 2014; Ferguson, 2011; Garfinkel, 2007; Reinares, 2011; Vidino, 2011). Prison and the experience of incarceration have also been shown to be important to disengagement and deradicalization processes (Sukabdi, 2015). 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, 2011; Reinares, 2011).

The final step in this process is the successful reintegration of disengaged fighters back into society. Just as financial compensation was a greater motivator for engagement in insurgency in Iraq than ideology (O'Connell & Berard, 2005) reintegrating former violent extremists back into society will require secure employment along with appropriate training or educational opportunities (Bertram, 2015; Dwyer, 2013; Norricks, 2009; Porges, 2014; Stern, 2010). For example, Sukuabdi's (2015) research with incarcerated Islamist extremists in Indonesia demonstrates how it is important to tailor these economic and educational opportunities to the individual's skills and interests, rather than just attempting to train batches of disengaged fighters for the same career track post disengagement.

Additionally, like many ordinary prisoners, former politically motivated prisoners often face barriers to their reintegration due to their possession of a criminal record (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Visher & Travis, 2003) which bars them from enjoying the same rights and privileges as other citizens thus making it difficult for them to play a full part in community life. Therefore, to curb recidivism initiatives aimed at reintegrating former violent extremists

need to provide social and economic opportunities which allow them to secure their financial future, re-establish their connections with family and community and become full productive members of society.

Also dealing with the psychological well-being of former extremists or combatants is an important but often overlooked factor (Ferguson, 2014; Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood, 2010; Stern, 2010) especially as many will be traumatized due to their violent extremism (Mac Nair, 2002) but may be in a position where they are unable to seek professional psychological support due to the illegal nature of their violent actions. Jamieson, Shirlow and Grounds (2010) illustrate the profound nature of these problems for former politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland with their survey demonstrating that 40% of the former republican and loyalist prisoners they sampled had GHQ scores indicative of mental health problems and a similar percentage were taking prescription medication for anxiety and/or depression, while 51% suffered intrusive dreams related to either their incarceration or their conflict related experiences which may be indicative of underlying PTSD.

This paper will build on this deradicalization research by exploring individual accounts of disengagement from Northern Irish 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. In particular, as the disengagement process studied here is guided by a wider organizational disarmament context the individual militant's narratives around disengagement would be expected to draw on organizational context and leadership influences, as has been established in other disengagement processes taking place elsewhere across that globe (Ashour, 2011; Horgan, 2009).

Loyalist Paramilitaries

The Protestant working class response to the outbreak of the Troubles was fragmented and gave rise to the mobilization of numerous paramilitary organizations. Over time as these groups became more structured, two main paramilitary organizations took shape and dominated the violent reaction of the loyalist working classes across Northern Ireland (Ferguson & McAuley, in press a). One of the main groupings where the Ulster Defence

Association (UDA), which also operated under its ‘nom de guerre’ of the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) and had an associated youth wing in the Ulster Young Militants (UYM) and the other significant grouping was the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), their sister organization the Red Hand Commando (RHC) and their associated young wing the Young Citizen Volunteers (YCV). While a split within the UVF in 1996 led to the creation of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF). Between them loyalist paramilitaries are responsible for killing almost 1000 people, or 27% of all Troubles related fatalities (Smyth & Hamilton, 2004).

It must be remembered that in Northern Ireland the term ‘paramilitary’ is a euphemism for ‘terrorist’ and loyalist paramilitary groups are pro-British armed violent extremist groups 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).

As the focus of this article is on the UVF/RHC grouping, it will briefly concentrate on their history and reactions to the peace process in Northern Ireland as a background to the analysis. Although the UVF surfaced in 1966 it only began to organize and recruit heavily in the early 1970s. The UVF’s primary aim was to employ 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. However, 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 in public.

Since the acceptance of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 the UVF and RHC were 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; McAuley, Tonge & Shirlow, 2010). Almost ten years after the signing of the Belfast Agreement in May 2007 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 and indicated that “all ordinance has been put beyond reach”.

On June 27th, 2009 the organization 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. This 2009 statement also proposed that decommissioning 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.” The interviews this study took place against this backdrop of an organization moving towards disarmament and demobilization in 2008/2009, while at the same time taking a ‘watching brief’ on the increasing dissident republican violence which was taking place at this time.

Participants & Data Analysis

The participants in the research described here and in the original Ferguson et al (2015) article were members or former members of the UVF (n = 9) or 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. The interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith 1995) which aims to explore the individual’s personal and lived experience, in this case the participant’s account of their transition away from using political violence to meet their political aspirations².

² For a detailed reflection on conducting these interviews and some of the problems inherent in conducting research with paramilitaries and former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland see Ferguson (2015). Mark Burgess and Ian Hollywood were also involved in conducting these interviews.

Findings

The themes raised through the IPA analysis were structured around push and pull factors which either promoted the participant's ability to disengage from violent extremism or blocked their disengagement and reintegration into society.

Aging and Burnout

As with other research on deradicalization or disengagement with other extremist groups (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013) some of the main factors for promoting disengaging were related to *life changes* and how aging and prison education and imprisonment changed the participants and as a result, they 'mellowed' over time.

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.

In addition, many reported the impact of *burnout* due to the physical, psychological and socio-economic pressures of being a paramilitary as commonly reported in the wider literature (Barelle, 2015; Bjorgo, 2011) and how this pushed them towards disengagement from violent extremism.

Social Relationships

In line with research on radicalization (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood, 2005; Sageman, 2004; Bond, 2014) and deradicalization (Altier et al., 2014) the role of social relationships and *family ties* were important in participant disengagement decisions. In particular, having children and not wanting them to continue the fight and suffer the associated physical and psychological hardships was key in their decisions to move away from violence.

You know sometimes it took violence to push it along that way, but everything that I've done, you know I've justified that my end goal has not been anything other than to have peace and to have a good society for all of Northern Ireland, for equality, what I want for my kids I want for everybody's kids. And what I want for my family I want for everybody's family.

Romantic relationships also played a role in disengagement and some of the participants were in romantic relationships with Irish Catholic women post-release from prison.

Prison

As the majority of the participants had spent a considerable portion of their lives incarcerated in the H blocks of HMP Maze or the cages at Long Kesh their prison experiences were vital in shaping their disengagement from violent extremism. For most of the participants prison had provided them with the *space to think* and develop their ideas and begin to explore non-violent alternatives to the political problems of Northern Ireland. The role of prison in providing this space to think is noted by this former loyalist prisoner.

I went to prison in 1980 and if you've any sort of grey matter in your head at all you have to start and analyse why you finished up in prison and just my thinking just reinforced the fact that everything wasn't as black and white as I had seen it. 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.

Therefore, having the time and space in prison to further your education, to hold discussions and become more politically astute or radicalized offers the opportunity to reflect on the conflict and reformulate solutions to it, which become more abstract and move away from the purely military to the political.

Imprisonment also had some significant negative impacts on the participants, for example, the *label of ex-prisoner* is stigmatizing and can become a barrier to re-integration through limiting job prospects and economic opportunities post release. For example, Jamieson, Shirlow and Grounds (2010) explored the impact of their incarceration on being refused employment and found that 55% of former politically motivated Northern Irish prisoners had been refused employment due to their imprisonment, while 78% reported

financial problems. These figures clearly indicate the overrepresentation of former political prisoners among the unemployed and the disadvantage their convictions and incarceration have on successful employment, even though there is a voluntary employers code in Northern Ireland (Recruiting People with Conflict-Related Convictions: Employers Guidance, 2007) which states that conflict related convictions should not bar former politically motivated prisoners from employment, unless their conviction was “manifestly incompatible” with the job (p. 5). This problem is illustrated by a former loyalist prisoner.

I mean, I’m still running about chasing a wage and not having a full time job, so that’s a problem. Any job I apply for, they want to know your record. Even though you’re out 10 years, 12 years, they’re not willing to give you a second chance. Some people will. Most people won’t, you know.

Also the participants discussed how former paramilitaries were labelled as ‘bad men’ in the wider community and blamed for the ills of society and the violence of the Troubles. Indeed, in a recent interview with Billy Hutchinson leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and former prisoner (Ferguson & McAuley, in press b), he remarks that as the history of the Troubles is being written and as each side to the conflict attempts to push their chosen narrative this marginalization of loyalism will continue to worsen. The labelling and stigmatization of political or ideological prisoners is also viewed as a barrier to reintegration and deradicalization in other conflict zones, for example amongst Indonesian Islamist extremists (Sukabdi, 2015) and are clearly issues which need to be dealt with to reduce recidivism among former violent extremists.

The Role of Leadership and Organizational Barriers to Disengagement

While the participants discussed their individual disengagement, they tended to discuss it against the wider organizational change taking place within the UVF/RHC. In particular, they pointed to the role of the leaders within the UVF/RHC, and figures in the PUP in pushing the members towards decommission and reintegration.

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.

While on the other hand they also bemoaned this slow pace of change and placed the blame for this glacial movement on the lack of capable leadership figures within the loyalism and a fear that a more accelerated programme of change would lead to fragmentation or feuding. Therefore the pragmatics of ensuring organizational integration, especially within a secretive organization means that movement towards demobilisation and reintegration is slow and cumbersome, likened to ‘turning a tanker’ by some of the participants.

The diverse and broad membership of the organizations meant it was difficult to keep the volunteers on track with the move towards a more civilian role and support for a peaceful political solution to the conflict. Indeed, there was pressure placed on participants when they began to move ahead of the membership in their support for the peace process. One UVF commander who had become involved in politics with the PUP discussed the problems of connecting the rank and file volunteers with wider organizational goals and the larger political project:

Now I know when I say that publicly, [fair treatment for Catholic minority] and I do say it publicly, it goes down like a lead balloon. I’m sort of too soft on the other side, or I’m a traitor and my death threats from the loyalist unit here, are like confetti, they’re literally confetti.

While the participants in this study have left violence behind and at times provide critical or dissenting voices within loyalism they did this within the context of the Northern Irish peace process and an organizational commitment to civilianize. Which meant that while they may have been threatened or subject to assault for their views and public statements by members less supportive of these changes, they were not subject to the violence and brutality discussed by Koehler (2015) in his analysis of some of the defectors from German neo-Nazi groups. Indeed, their treatment was more congruent with the experiences of the ‘type a’ defectors he interviewed (Koehler, 2015, p. 39).

The Legacy of the Conflict

As with other sustained conflicts, such as the Basque conflict (Alonso, 2011) having lived with decades of political violence and believed in the effectiveness of violence (Burgess,

Ferguson & Hollywood, 2007) makes it difficult to leave violence behind. As discussed by Alonso (2011) and Ganor and Falk (2013) sustained exposure to violence can create sub-communities of violence which facilitate the continuation of politically motivated violence through the glorification of the conflict and the perpetrators of political violence which can create barriers to peaceful coexistence and conflict transformation (Ferguson & Cairns, 2002) and make it difficult for former political prisoners or desist from violence on release from prison (Ganor & Falk, 2003). Many of the participants discussed how the culture of violence in Northern Ireland, especially amongst the working class communities bound to paramilitary groups impeded both the participants and the organizations from giving up physical force on two levels. Firstly, at a macro level as a military strategy to the political problems in Northern Ireland, and secondly, at a meso level as a means of dealing with local community issues around criminal antisocial behaviour through punishment beatings and shootings. The macro level problem is discussed below:

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.

Interestingly, many of the participants were involved in community based activities which aimed to breakdown this culture of violence through educational initiatives or restorative justice projects. Many of these activities could be viewed as counter-radicalization activities, as they were aimed at trying to challenge the culture of violence, and demonstrate to young people how violence was not effective and that the conflict should not be glorified.

Something has to switch on, you know and I believe, I don't know whether it was the jail done that or what done that, maybe it was having the family done that or just

basically going hold on a minute, where are we going here? But something switched on, you know and I know that I've seen it with other people, it switching on, you know and, we tried to expose as many people from our community as possible to that, hoping that this might be the thing that'll do, that'll switch them on.

The above quote from a former UVF prisoner illustrates that aim of his community work is to get young people to 'switch on' and gain a different perspective from the sectarian and divisive narrative propagated through the culture of violence in the streets of post-agreement Belfast which facilitates continued fascination with paramilitary groups. Indeed, perhaps counterintuitively their status as a former political prisoner gives them the necessary credibility to sell this counter-radicalization narrative to young people, as clearly illustrated by this former prisoner:

We were talking about the conflict days [with a group of young men in a community group]... and one of them or two or three of them eventually said "I would love to live in those days", and I just lost it. I said "do you have any idea, you know it seems glamorous now", I said "but wait till you're carrying a coffin of your mother and father dead in the street, or you're carrying a coffin of your wife or your brother, or your best mate down the street", and it's getting this message through that it wasn't glamorous, it wasn't nice, it was ugly, it was rotten, and it's people like myself and others, we have to get this message out to the younger generation, that it wasn't glamorous. You know it's easy sticking up murals glorifying [the violence of the past], but it wasn't [glorious], you know, which is why we are trying to get rid of them and replace them with other stuff. By constantly glamorising you are attracting, and filling the minds of the kids with crap, and it's only people who, like myself, who came through it and who were involved in the conflict and carried the coffins of their mates and seen the atrocities who can make them see the horror of the conflict.

Continued Commitment

It was also clear from the interviews that even though many of the participants were engaged in this counter-radicalization work they had not become deradicalized. So while there were clear behavioural changes, in that most were now working on building community capacity or were involved in community politics, ex-prisoner support groups, youth work and education

initiatives, rather than engaging in politically motivated violence, they could not be considered to have become deracialized. This UVF volunteer illustrates this depth of commitment, during his engagement in political violence and now in his engagement with local politics:

You know, the other thing is I'm a single parent with three kids. People say to me coz you've brought the kids up on your own you've done this, for the last I think 7 years I've been a single parent. They say you're a good dad, I say no I'm not because at each point over the last few years I've been willing to go to jail, I've been willing to die and leave my children. Such is the strength of my conviction.

The only limited evidence of a cognitive change towards a deradicalization of their beliefs, was that there was a greater belief that violence was not going to solve the problems faced by Northern Ireland's working class Protestant communities in particular or Northern Ireland more generally, as illustrated by this former UVF prisoner.

The ceasefires came then people had seen that I'd been off to university and I was sort of working in this type of thing [community work] and ... they came and said would I be interested, I was the type of person they were looking to get back involved in the PUP, and I was sort of a bit reluctant and you know thought how would that work with me working with young people and all that. But I followed [David] Ervine and [Billy] Hutchinson and I liked their message, and I thought this is what this community needs.

It was also clear from these narratives that for many participants they had actually become more radical through their time in the organization or especially whilst in prison rather than less. In line with research from other extremist groups (Stern, 2010) many discussed how they had lacked any deep historical or political insight when they first engaged in violent extremism, and many didn't take the time to reflect on why they had committed the terrorist offences that led to their incarceration until they faced the initial UVF/RHC debriefing when they were imprisoned.

Discussion

The themes raised in the analysis demonstrated the interplay between societal, organizational, family and individual level factors which aided or hindered individual accounts of desisting from violent extremism in Northern Ireland. Interestingly these accounts resonate with much

of the research being conducted elsewhere on right-wing or Islamist disengagement and deradicalization processes (for example, Bjorgo, 2009; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Barelle, 2015, Sukabdi, 2015). In particular, they demonstrate the importance of breaking down barriers to reintegration. The narratives reported here and in other studies, illustrate that the largest obstacles to full integration into society relate to a lack of legal economic opportunities, negative stereotypes and legislation which undermines the interviewee's economic activity and ability to fully contribute to Northern Irish society, rather than any enduring radicalized ideology (see also, Bertram, 2015; Stern, 2010; Sukabdi, 2015).

The research also illustrates that some of the factors which encourage radicalization, such as family ties and romantic relationships (see Bond, 2014; Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood, 2008) are also important pull factors in deradicalization. This is an avenue well worth further exploration, especially with recent research illustrating the potential of Rambo's (1993) research on religious conversion to provide a model for understanding both the transformational processes involved in radicalization (Ferguson & Binks, 2015) and deradicalization (Sukabdi, 2015).

For most of the participants in this study prison was key to both their radicalization and their disengagement from violent extremism. As one former prisoner said "the political thoughts, political ideals didn't exist" when he was initially incarcerated, yet on his release he becomes involved in the PUP and now is a committed community worker. Prison provided the *space to think*, to formulate political strategy, reanalyse the conflict, get an education and discuss how to bring the conflict to a close. So the prisoners became more radical, and more ideologically driven, but also more sensitive to non-violent political solutions rather than purely military ones while incarcerated.

Although 18 years have passed since the signing of the Belfast Agreement the legacy of the Troubles still promotes a culture of violence which facilitates recruitment to armed groups and hinders moves away from political settlement and conflict transformation in parts of Northern Ireland. Perhaps paradoxically, the former perpetrators of political violence may offer the best means to challenge these cultures of violence and disrupt the radicalization of another generation of young people, so it would be worth considering how governments and civil society groups can support these former men of violence in their preventative work.

In terms of the wider disengagement vs. deradicalization debate, this research clearly illustrates that full deradicalization is not a necessary component in desisting from violent extremism. Yet it could also be argued that there has been a partial deradicalization in a narrow sense amongst the participants (see Clubb, 2016 for a further discussion of the ‘narrow vs. broad’ deradicalization debate) as the interviewees have desisted from violence and are involved in counter-radicalization work and publically promoting non-violent solutions to Northern Ireland’s political problems. Therefore, these accounts illustrate that it can be the continued commitment of the extremist which fuels their non-violent peace building activities and counter-radicalization work. This would suggest that efforts made to bring about the complete deradicalization of violent extremists may be impractical and potentially counterproductive, especially if the efforts hinder a swift reintegration in line with recent findings from elsewhere (Sukabdi, 2015).

The challenges to disengagement reported here are in many ways reflective of Northern Ireland’s position as a post-conflict society (see Mac Ginty, Muldoon & Ferguson, 2007), but they are also reflected in the challenges faced in other countries struggling to deal with the legacy of political conflict and implementation of DDR programs which aim to deal with the problems of what to do with fighters in the peace, and how to re-establish them as fully integrated and productive members of society (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Kabia, 2010).

Finally, most research and policy endeavours aimed at understanding and promoting the disengagement and/or deradicalization of armed groups are linked to counter-terrorism strategies. However, the narratives presented in these accounts resonate more with the psychology of organizational change or change management than counter-insurgency strategy. Thankfully, there has been a move within the wider deradicalization literature to explore these approaches (Altier, et al. 2014) and hopefully more practitioners will heed this advice.

Similarly, many disengagement or deradicalization programmes are facilitated by counter-terrorism, policing or criminal justice agencies (Bertam, 2015; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016). These may not be the best placed agencies to facilitate this work, indeed, Dwyer (2013) demonstrates how having the probation service involved in supporting former political prisoners would actually be counterproductive in Northern Ireland. So it is worth considering

how disengagement/deradicalization programmes could be administered by civil society groups or other branches of the government not associated with security and incarceration in order for them to be tailored more sensitively to the needs of the people undertaking them.

To some extent Northern Ireland may also be able to provide some models for how this may be facilitated, in particular the role of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) in facilitating the reintegration of former combatants through the distribution of EU funding would be worth exploring and perhaps recreating in other settings.

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