

How Proximity and Space Matter: Exploring Geographical & Social Contexts of Radicalization in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The “specificity problem” is one of the longest running unanswered questions in research on terrorism. This problem focuses on the fundamental question as to why do only a few people radicalize when many appear to have been exposed to at least some of the same causes of radicalization? The current study seeks to help answer that question through comparative research with two sample populations in Northern Ireland. In-depth interviews were carried out with 17 former paramilitary members and 12 paramilitary sympathizers. The interviews explored factors which distinguished those who became actively involved with paramilitary groups versus those who did not. The results discussed here found that geographic proximity to intercommunity violence flashpoints/interfaces was strongly associated with increased paramilitary involvement. Thematic analysis found this effect was mediated by two additional factors: (1) levels of exposure to violence and (2) levels of community isolation. The findings are discussed in relation to the wider literature on radicalization.

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed enormous research effort to identify the factors, processes and environments which drive radicalization, and have produced a range of sometimes very different models and perspectives for understanding the issue. Despite much progress, important questions still remain to be addressed. In particular, researchers have repeatedly drawn attention to the specificity problem.¹ This asks why do only a few people radicalize when much larger numbers appear to have been exposed to at least some (and often many) of the causes? Alex Schmid referred to this question as “perhaps the greatest mystery” facing terrorism studies.² Certainly its importance cannot be understated. In the long-term, increasing our understanding of the specificity question can help to prevent the emergence of terrorism overall and help to identify better safeguards for those vulnerable to terrorist pathways.

One promising avenue to make progress on the specificity problem are calls for more research which looks beyond the biographical backgrounds and contexts of the perpetrators of terrorist violence (who traditionally attract most research attention)

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but also to expand this focus to individuals who support terrorism but who are not directly involved in terrorist offending. As Schuurman flagged:³

... trying to understand involvement in terrorist violence by looking only at actual perpetrators of such crimes obscures exactly those counter-examples of non-violent radicalization necessary to bring to light what sets both apart in terms of personal background characteristics, involvement-process dynamics and the influence of group as well as structural-level variables.

A resolution to the specificity problem, then, depends not just on developing a better understanding of terrorists, but equally on developing a fuller understanding of compatriots who share many of the same traits, characteristics and contexts, but who did not progress to involvement in terrorism. This realization has led to research increasingly scrutinizing role variation within terrorist movements⁴ and also to consider differences between supporters, nonviolent radicals and violent terrorists.

Some work has started to explore the issues involved here. For example, Rogelio Alonso conducted detailed semi-structured interviews with 27 supporters of different terrorist groups in Northern Ireland and the Basque country in Spain.⁵ Alonso was interested in understanding why these individuals had not become actively involved in terrorism given that they appeared to share many of the background and environmental characteristics of individuals who had. Analysis of the interviews suggested a number of factors which appeared to inhibit involvement in terrorism. These included factors around a “lack of precipitant events and connectedness at a vulnerable age” and “alternative socialization away from the subculture of violence”. Alonso flagged that his research was highly qualitative and very exploratory and offered only “a partial analytical account”, but it did signpost some useful avenues for further work to tackle.

Key to making progress in this area however is an ability to conduct comparative research. As Alex Schmid has warned, ultimately:

We will only have good answers to [the specificity] question if research is conducted not only on terrorists, but also on control groups that share many of the same characteristics as deemed “typical” for terrorists themselves.

The focus of the current study reflects these concerns and attempts to conduct a meaningful comparison between individuals who became directly involved in terrorist violence and those who supported such violence but never became direct perpetrators.

Considering the Radicalization Spectrum

For any research on radicalization, a key issue relates to what elements of radicalization will be examined? Research has flagged that potentially hundreds of factors can be involved in radicalization processes. Jensen et al., for example, provided a meta-analysis which identified over 400 different potential factors across economic, social, ideological, societal, cultural, behavioral and psychological domains.⁶ Few studies, however, can realistically attempt to examine all 400 plus factors and most inevitably will select a narrower focus.

In selecting the focus for the current study, the research noted Alonso's findings with regard to the inhibiting effects of a "lack of precipitant events and connectedness at a vulnerable age" and "alternative socialization away from the subculture of violence" in terms of his study on supporters. It was also informed by Jensen et al.'s work which flagged ten conceptual constructs which included group bias with inclusion of in and out-group pressure and threat, cognitive frame alignment (aligning with social norms within a group), community crisis, psychological reward including significance and physical vulnerability including community distress. They concluded that in-group community cohesion and identity, when under threat or victimization and perceived as a grievance or injustice, were key contextual components from which escalation into violent extremism from a support role can occur.⁷

Within this overall context, it is worth noting that geographical space has been flagged as one potential factor in radicalization. More recently this has been particularly considered in the context of certain physical spaces facilitating exposure to extremist ideologies. For example, Kruglanski et al.'s quest for significance model of radicalization which has a role for physical spaces such as mosques and madrasas as places where individuals can "encounter the terrorism-justifying ideology".⁸ Other radicalization models note that physical spaces are important in terms of providing an arena where groups of individuals can meet and interact. For example, Helmus notes the importance of "bottom-up peer groups" in the radicalization process, highlighting the importance of venues. He identifies religious settings advocating violence and prisons as particularly important in these terms.⁹ Neumann and Rogers referred to such venues as "places of vulnerability" and as "gateways" which can facilitate both exposure to extremist ideology and also create and sustain social connections to people who endorse such ideologies.¹⁰ These assessments though have largely restricted themselves to considerations of an exposure to extremist ideas narrative, and broader considerations of the potential role of space in radicalization has been underdeveloped. Further, the overall evidence supporting a link between physical space and radicalization has been limited, often anecdotal in nature and usually much more conceptual than empirical.¹¹ As a result, some more recent assessments have increasingly questioned the degree to which such physical spaces can be accurately viewed as incubators of radicalization.¹² The current study seeks to provide some more empirical evidence on the question of the potential role of physical space in radicalization, and also to go beyond explanations built primarily around an exposure to extremist ideology narrative.

Space and interaction can play a strategic role in conflict.¹³ Community distribution and dispersal in an area or country experiencing political violence can accelerate or reduce support for the warring factions or, as in the case of Northern Ireland, opposing paramilitary organizations. The current study, however, sets out to provide novel evidence of how this process manifests and which situational and psychological factors contribute to the process. The current study also attempts to address the concerns for resolving the specificity problem and in particular by helping to address the lack of comparative research in the area which has been flagged by many authors as a major barrier to progress. In order to achieve this, the current study accessed two groups, one composed of former paramilitary members and one composed of paramilitary sympathizers. The use of these two groups allows the identification of important

differences and similarities between those individuals who become directly involved in terrorism and those who are similar in many respects but who do not progress. In this regard, the research seeks to usefully contribute to the debate around the long-running specificity problem in radicalization research.

The Northern Ireland Context

Northern Ireland continues to offer terrorism research an exceptional source of data. At a global level, few regions over the past fifty years have experienced terrorism to the extent Northern Ireland has, or for as long. In Northern Ireland itself, some 3,700 people were killed during the major conflict phases between 1969 to 1998. Most of these victims have been civilians. At least a further 45,000 people, again mainly civilians, have been maimed, many horrifically, and tens (if not hundreds) of thousands more have directly witnessed terrorist violence and associated civil disruption. Approximately another 150 people have been killed as a result of violence connected to the conflict in mainland Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and elsewhere in Europe.¹⁴

As noted by John Morrison and Paul Gill:

The long history of The Troubles gives an insight into all aspects of a terrorist conflict. ... The access researchers now have to primary sources from the Northern Ireland conflict, including interviewees and primary documents, is second to none. ... [Such] analysis ... has a significant part to play in developing our understanding of individual and organisational involvement in terrorism. ... It is incumbent on us as scholars of terrorism to continue in our endeavour to fully understand this case. It is both irresponsible and reckless to ignore the case of Northern Ireland just because the country is now ostensibly at peace.¹⁵

However, despite the great potential, many researchers have flagged that Northern Ireland data has been underused in addressing some of the key questions facing terrorism studies research. As Gill and Horgan observed:

... curiously absent from much of the astonishing array of literature ... are empirical, data-driven perspectives of those who engaged in non-state paramilitary activity throughout the Troubles. There are notable exceptions of course, but by and large empirical analyses of political violence in Northern Ireland at the individual level have been scarce ...¹⁶

The current study aims to help address this scarcity while at the same time conducting work of value in relation to the wider specificity question in terrorism studies. In doing so, it echoes the recent work by researchers such as Ferguson and McAuley who have stressed the point that Northern Ireland offers a direct opportunity to address some of the weaknesses surrounding terrorism research.¹⁷ This can be seen in access to primary source interviews with perpetrators. Such individuals remain in relative terms a hard to reach community (especially in the aftermath of the Boston College “Belfast Project” where research interviews with former paramilitaries have ended up being used as evidence in criminal investigations and ongoing court cases). Northern Ireland also offers potential access to primary source

interviews with supporters – individuals who could be regarded as radicalized in many respects but who did not become directly involved in violence. As Schuurman has highlighted this is a population that in some respects can be even tougher to identify and access than former perpetrators, yet whose comparative value is enormous.¹⁸ One solution he highlights is to focus on historical cases where potential access may be easier, which represents yet another potential benefit from a focus on Northern Ireland.

Radicalization and Escalation into Violent Extremism

For the purpose of this research, radicalization is defined as “the process by which individuals enter into violent extremism.”¹⁹ As Neumann argues, there are various subsections within the overarching term of radicalization, but a fault line exists between that of “cognitive radicalisation”, the development of extremist views, and “behavioural radicalisation”, as in physical actions of extremist behavior, or violent extremism.²⁰ Radicalization is increasingly recognized as a process involving a range of individual factors and context dynamics.²¹ Within this process it is suggested that ideological, social, psychological and political drivers can combine at differing levels, as Ferguson and McAuley assert in their exo to micro narrative.²²

Normative Considerations

As Neumann discusses, the clarification of normative views for each individual is a necessity in order to ascertain what is “extreme”.²³ In the Northern Ireland context, communities remain highly segregated geographically, ideologically and socially.²⁴ Individuals brought up within areas of ethnopolitical divide and under threat from other opposing groups experience levels of isolation, mainly within Housing Executive estates and working-class areas. A majority of geographical areas within Northern Ireland have some degree of community division, impacting individual's schema from limited socialization within groups and an ever-decreasing circle of social contacts the more involved they become in their respective paramilitary organizations. That isolation, to its varying degrees, provides greater opportunity for contributing factors for escalation to be compounded which includes proximity and exposure to violence, group cohesion through isolation, and continuous out-group real and perceived threat.²⁵ As Neumann argues, a baseline from which someone would be considered “radicalised” from, has to be ascertained as a starting point to assess relative influencing factors, particularly if attempting to ascertain universal psychological drivers across contexts. For those residing in areas of ethnopolitical segregation and particularly with higher levels of sectarian violence as in the Northern Ireland context, the architecture of belief systems is generally already affected from a neutral standpoint. Experiential threat, in-group bias processes, social movements and the counterculture within those communities all lend to a differing baseline to measure from.

All of these issues tie into the requirement to identify the baseline psychosocial and psychosocial factors associated with geographical placement, segregation, proximity to violence, and the relationship these may have to a higher potential for involvement in violent extremism.

Geographic Dispersal and the Northern Ireland Conflict

The emergence of “The Troubles” in the late 1960s was sparked initially by violence connected to civil rights protests. Widespread unrest and civil disturbance was followed by the resurgence of some existing paramilitary organizations and over time the formation of several new ones.²⁶ At the beginning of the “Troubles” Catholic and Protestant areas became highly segregated, especially within Housing Executive estates in major towns and cities across the North.

The creation of isolated communities, and of “space” and barriers between them, resulted in less contact between populations. While this reduced some friction it also facilitated high levels of intergroup distrust, particularly when social and governmental structures appeared to fail those communities.²⁷ In local contexts where physical distance declined between the two communities, to the point of each group bordering on the other, there was a graduated increase in unrest, threat and violence.²⁸ This included an increase in the number of deaths the closer one moved to interface areas with higher rates of sectarian violence and opposition.

Observing such a trend brings into question the mechanisms of radicalization which have been highlighted in terrorism research. Wider research suggests that the major drivers of radicalization have been mainly within a micro level focus²⁹ with individual grievance and injustice,³⁰ social and group dynamics³¹, social identity³² and marginalization and discrimination³³ being some of the more prevalent factors. In a Northern Ireland context, a range of factors have been flagged of particular significance within the radicalization dynamics of the region. These have included the role of communities as conduits to violence,³⁴ community cohesion under perceived threat,³⁵ socioeconomic deprivation, discrimination,³⁶ isolation and injustice³⁷

Researchers in recent years have been moving away from linear models of radicalization instead seeking individual components common across conflict contexts.³⁸ The pathway or route approach, as argued by John Horgan makes the point that individuals do not progress in a straight line through stages of radicalization, but drop in or drop out based on exogenic circumstantial or environmental situations or events. Within such a framework, the geographic context of isolated communities, and their degrees of exposure to violence, can become a “hub” which can effect or augment the impact of other factors.

The perception of threat to a community during conflict can increase levels of in-group support and out-group bias.³⁹ In-group cohesion during threat and sustained violence, causes increased discrimination and hostility toward out-groups.⁴⁰ Much research has noted that increased cohesion and defence of the in-group community can further out-group division though a collective grievance process.⁴¹ Loss of self-esteem and a quest to regain value and significance can emanate from a struggle against an out-group and potentially increase the risk of escalation into violent extremism.⁴²

Levels of isolation and perceived group threat can also be linked with the cohesion of community groups.⁴³ The closer to a border with a rival antagonistic community, the greater the potential experience of threat and violence. As a result, proximity to such a border can be hypothesized to lead to an increase in community cohesion, with, for example in a Northern Ireland context, an increase in potential support for paramilitary activity and ideology. It can also be hypothesized to link to increased isolation, potentially resulting in increasing recruitment into paramilitary groups.

Exposure to heightened levels of violence can precipitate escalation for some members as discussed previously. Research focused on the Palestinian/Israeli border conflict, for example, has emphasized the role of emotions in sustaining retaliatory violence.⁴⁴ The influence of negative emotional states within an intergroup context and the likelihood for reciprocity through fear and stress can underpin ethnocentrism, particularly in the case of prolonged exposure.⁴⁵

In a Northern Ireland context, Zeitsoff previously investigated exposure to terrorist and violent events and the development of anger and reciprocity.⁴⁶ Zeitsoff discussed the normalization of threat and high stress levels in many areas for extended periods in Northern Ireland. As Hirsch-Heolfe, Canetti, Rapaport and Hobfoll emphasized in their research on the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, the effect of stress on threat perception can increase the perceived level and imminence of threat. Stress can also tie into the factors of cohesion, exposure to violence and isolation.

The impact of proximity to interface flashpoints on radicalization factors is an important question in the realms of human geography in conflict environments. The potential exists for interactions between these factors to increase the likelihood of individuals becoming directly involved in violent extremism. The current research aims to explore these issues in the context of Northern Ireland by drawing on samples of both former paramilitaries *and* sympathizers. Through in-depth interviews insight can be gained on a range of factors which can help distinguish between those who became actively involved with paramilitary groups versus those individuals who were sympathetic to such groups but who did not become active. In doing so, this research aims to help shed important light on the long-running specificity question

Methodology

A criticism of terrorism research has been an overreliance on secondary sources of information and a lack of research based on direct access to individuals. This has raised questions about the reliability of much research and has also meant that many important research questions and themes have been poorly explored.⁴⁷ Historically, there has been some difficulty in producing quantitative data, partly due to a lack of access to participants and sometimes also due to issues associated with interviews using non-structured formats.⁴⁸

In an effort to help tackle some of the existing weaknesses in the research literature, this study used direct interviews and systematic survey. The focus of the interviews was to explore factors associated with individuals becoming actively involved with paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The methodology used a between groups qualitative design.⁴⁹

Participants

Two groups were recruited, one of past active paramilitary participants and the other of sympathizers to a paramilitary organization. The sample size was 29 participants in total, with 17 former paramilitaries and 12 sympathetic participants. A purposive sampling process was used to recruit the participants. The first author had access to gatekeepers and introductions to potential participants were also facilitated through

(1) *Extern*, a social enterprise which supports and re-integrates marginalized individuals into the community, including ex-offenders and (2) *Combatants for Peace*, a Northern Ireland group of ex-paramilitary prisoners engaged in international peacebuilding. Snowball sampling was used to recruit further participants. Snowball sampling is a common method in areas of social sciences where referral is used to gain access to further contacts and participants.⁵⁰ This is a non-probability sampling strategy to gain contact with subjects who have the same position, experiences, characteristics, or attributes required for a study. The strategy is mainly used when subjects are part of a concealed group, hard to reach or where a level of trust is required to gain introduction to another member of the group.⁵¹ This is a well-established and recommended approach in terrorism-related research.⁵²

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society Human Research Ethics⁵³ and the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct⁵⁴ and was approved by the ethical review procedures of the authors' university. In this area of research, the main considerations are for the welfare and protection of the participants within the scope of the information provided.

Process

Fieldwork was conducted by the first author in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland between July 2019 and August 2020. Interviews were conducted at locations negotiated with the approval of the participants. 29 interviews in total were conducted. 24 were conducted in person and five were conducted via Skype following the introduction of Covid-related restrictions.

Interviews took place on a one-to-one basis and typically lasted between one and a half to three hours. Participants were provided with an informed consent form and an information sheet. A voice recording device was used as well as taking notes. For any participant who preferred not to be recorded, a notebook was used to record interview responses. This applied in 8 cases. The audio recordings were assigned to a participant number and transcribed. Both files, audio and text, were kept in secure encrypted storage at the author's university and both files destroyed at completion of the research. All data was anonymised with only the participant's number assigned to all files.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. In addition to structured questions the interviews covered themed questions and participants were permitted to expand on areas of interest, highlighted by the answers given. As Horgan notes, semi-structured interviewing allows "the researcher to pursue alternative lines of enquiry... thus permitting a broader interpretation of responses".⁵⁵ An opportunity for asking further questions was allowed after each themed section to explore additional topics.

Results

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis.⁵⁶ The general focus of the interviews was to explore factors associated with individuals becoming actively involved

with paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. Thematic analysis was assessed as a particularly applicable analysis framework. One striking finding was the prominence of the role of geography across both groups. This was the major theme identified among the sympathizers and also featured in 71% of the interviews with the former paramilitaries. The following sections explore in more detail how this theme featured in the interviews and draws linkages with some of the other significant themes.

Active Group

The Geographical Factor

Analysis of the interviews identified a link between sustained threat, exposure to violence and geographical proximity to interfaces/flashpoints. Increased exposure at community interfaces and flashpoints appeared to increase in-group cohesion, and solidify in-group belief systems against out-groups considered a threat. There also emerged an overlap with exposure to violence within communities and proximity to heightened conflict leading to increased paramilitary involvement. The greater the sustained threat, the greater the impetus for community protection, as well as legitimization of reprisals and offensive action. According to the sympathetic group interviews, this heightened support for paramilitary protection where it was perceived that government forces were less effective.

Small differences in geographical location, to the degree of a few streets, increased the level of threat and the potential for recruitment into paramilitary organizations. Participant 2 and 12, for example, were both from areas close to an interface point in Belfast, Participant 2 from a loyalist area a few streets back from an interface and Participant 12 from a nationalist area directly on the interface. Geographically, they were almost on opposite sides of a dividing road.

Participant 2: "You know what? I actually can't answer why in that small area ... why the people didn't join a paramilitary organization or become involved in any way with paramilitaries. Because if you crossed the road where I lived and you went to another small neighbourhood, there would have been loads of people joined but in that particular area where I live one street away, a lot of people didn't."

Interviewer: That area that was close by where there was a bigger proliferation...

Participant 2: Yep, that was closer to the interface... that's the answer. It was the interface. ... as you get closer to interfaces, there is more chance of you of you becoming involved...

Interviewer: Because your community is actually more under attack?

Participant 2: Yes. Yes. You have more schools on the interface as well. Yep. Yep. Definitely. you're only talking about across the street. It's not too far away, you're talking about a two-minute walk. Not even a two-minute walk. And the difference in people who was involved....That area had their own loyalist band - we didn't have a loyalist band in the area where I lived. Right. And that's probably because again, it was closer to a Republican area."

Participant 12 voiced the following:

"we was right on what you now call the interface point. And it was, it was it was tough. It was always attacks going on, always being harassed and, always house searches. And,

you know, it was just constant. And then, if you were trying to go to school, you know, you were you were getting stones and shit thrown at you ... Then if you would've lived somewhere else, would not have had the threat all the time but at the same time, you would have lost that community

So, I mean, even when I moved to a few streets back, you know, it just wasn't, it just wasn't the same. You know, it was a bit, it was a bit quieter.

In response to the questions of how the participant thought location and being on the interface made a difference to people becoming directly involved with paramilitary groups:

"But, you know, if you're if you're under threat, you kind of start looking for other people that feel the same way. Safety in numbers and all that. And, bang, there you go, you've got a group of people that [you] can actually talk to about what's going on."

There was also a shifting of boundaries and loss of ground in the early conflict. Housing Executive estates began to move residents to same religion areas while residents who were a minority in the estates elected to move due to safety concerns. The partition and then creation of single religion areas increased intergroup threat,⁵⁷ in-group bias⁵⁸ and heightened support and reliance on local paramilitary groups for protection.

Participant 17, an ex-prisoner and former Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF)⁵⁹ combatant had originally grown up in a dominantly loyalist but mixed area which become a loyalist stronghold on an interface in Belfast. He recounted the contact and friendships with members of the Catholic community before they had to move out due to threats and security concerns. He believed that if they had been left alone, many people in the immediate area would not have become actively involved. However, even though there was initial cross community contact and acceptance of the other community, when the community saw Protestant families being moved to house Catholic families, this led to increased support for the local paramilitary groups. This is explained by Participant 17 who claimed this was a main consideration for him to become active:

"Interviewer: Okay. What was your main motivation from being sympatheticYou've kind of already answered it, but from being sympathetic to the cause and progressing on to becoming active..."

Participant 17: To defend my Community so it was.

Interviewer: Did you....was it also from actually seeing what was happening to your community?

Participant 17: Yes. oh aye Yes. Because the same.....my community was interface - it was just one street stopping us, we would see them coming in at eight o'clock in the morning wrecking houses or, on the interface, keep calling it interface, but you have four or five streets, there were an awful lot of protestants were living in them houses but them protestants were pushed out to make way for nationalists to move in - they were saying well that will happen to us. They'll push us out. I can remember seeing, this street name and then that street name, that was my district. They were going to get that street and then they were going to get this street and as I say, my district was wiped out. And and that's what really got to us ..."

Participant 10, an ex-prisoner and former member of the UFF also voiced similar views:

Interviewer: Do you think that if you were from a community that was under fire, so to speak, reasonably consistently, where you're actually seeing the community being affected, were people much more likely to escalate?

Participant 10: 100 percent, 100 percent - if you look at the history of the Shankill Road, for example, and you look at the prison, you look at that C Company and the UFF from 1989/1990 to the cease fires in 1994. There was two areas operating. That was that Lower Shankill, which is obviously the peace line with the Falls. And then you look at north Antrim and Londonderry, you know, north Antrim and Londonderry is still surrounded, still under siege from 1688, so them two parts of the organisation were more active than anywhere else”.

Participant 10 also brought the subject of area and escalation into activism with regards to the experiences of a friend. Participant 10 was originally from a rural loyalist area but due to parental divorce, his father moved to an area of Belfast close to an interface where he would visit. He made friends with a boy close by on the interface and recounts:

“Well, I would dare say in my school there would have been very few [involved with paramilitaries], very, very few, you know. Whereas I have a friend who, when he went to jail, there was something like eleven out of the 15 guys he had went to high school were all with him.”

Participant 11, from a loyalist suburban area of Belfast describes the perceived threat from others living on a bordered interface area and witnessing violence as key factors in becoming active:

“If you’re seeing that and you live in an area surrounded by people you think are against you, what do you think is going to happen?”

Although the following reference is a crossover with exposure to violence, it also illustrates the point of exposure to more consistent threat levels the closer you come to the interface. Participant 15, an ex-prisoner and former Irish National Liberation Army (INLA)⁶⁰ combatant, makes the point in response to the question of what could have happened to cause him not to escalate into active involvement. The participant was brought up beside an interface in West Belfast in one of the most affected areas during the troubles.

“Maybe if I hadn’t been so close to the interface and seen what happened to people in the community there, with the searches and how the security forces were. That stayed with me”.

Exposure to violence and the perception of threat are key recurring features connected to higher rates of paramilitary membership and militarization. Participant 7, from a loyalist area of the Shankill Road on the interface, discussed the implications of living on the interface and the impact of threat, reprisal, and defence in the specific area where he resided:

“Looking back yeah. Living on the interface you took the brunt of it so most people had to defend themselves. You were living in it every day. Watching people’s houses burning in the street from firebombs ... Where I lived most people were involved in some way. Then I was asked [to join the paramilitary group], well I kind of asked, I was told to think about it. I already knew where I was headed.”

Isolation and Group Cohesion

The cohesion of community groups is interlinked with isolation and group threat.⁶¹ It also connects with identity development and the association with communities in

conflict and the categorization of self and of others. Participant 1, from a nationalist suburb in Belfast and a former INLA member explains the association between identity and in-group cohesion:

“You see at that sort of late teenage years, young people and especially young men create identity, acceptance, self-worth and all the rioting and all played into that. Because you now had an identity; you were with people who were doing the same thing as you. There was an obvious enemy and shooting and bombings going on in between it all. It was exciting. It was all different things going on there.”

Although cohesion amplifies with increased isolation and threat, there remains a symbiosis between the wider represented community and the paramilitary organization and its tiers. Participant 4 from Divis in Belfast (on the interface) mentions this in his interview. As a former INLA member and ex-prisoner he noted the importance of both the relationship and cohesion with the supporting community:

“The importance as I seen it was, was that the support was there. For what you did, for what you were doing. The support was there from the community even then, if you don’t have a community supporting you, you’ll not exist, you’ll collapse from within. But the people had your support, and the people had your back. They were letting you use houses, were letting you use this ... were supporting you in every way and so on ... were hiding you and so on.”

Soboroff observed that cohesion and trust diminish with increased group size, with a maximal degree of cohesion and trust of group sizes between four and six people.⁶² Those findings were upheld in the interviews where participants noted that the group becomes “tighter” the smaller the circle becomes. As participant 12, a former Provisional IRA member from an interface area of West Belfast put it:

“You know, it’s not you would have lost the friends and the kind of... tight knit, tight knit community, as it’s like the more you were attacked the tighter everybody became. You know, everybody had ... had each other’s back.”

Participant 6, from a housing estate in Newry and flashpoint was an ex-prisoner who had been a member of the Official Republican Movement (ORM).⁶³ He discussed the support of the local community and in-group including the way the supporting structure of the community could enable defensive or offensive action.

“People became a lot closer. Very willing to defend the area and the group. Rather, from the point of view where there was a structured program that could last for years. The group was threatened, (bang on table) action could be taken immediately if deemed necessary.”

Group isolation also represents a safety mechanism of withdrawal in response to threat or violence. There are differing degrees of isolation experienced and noted through the interviews. Geographical isolation of communities provided protection, creating an ethno-territorial divide. This also provided an opportunity for paramilitary organizations to become the only option for community-based protection against opposing forces.

The former paramilitary interviewees also referenced this, explaining that increased degrees of militant activity required increased degrees of isolation. The isolation provided security for planning and execution of attacks and defence, as well as protection

for the group from potential information leaks. The increased isolation provided powerful consolidation within each cell, enhancing commitment and facilitating group legitimization of actions. A pattern of ever-decreasing circles of interaction developed within the supporting community and the paramilitary organization in response to threat. The theme is exemplified by Participant 12 who was from a rural republican area and past active IRA member:

“And as that circle got tighter and tighter, you know, you you kind of spoke to less and less people ... You still spoke to them, but, you know, you couldn’t tell them things. You can’t tell them what you were doing and where you were going or why. I think it might have been pretty different, you know, if I hadn’t been in that environment day in, day out.

Interviewer: How important to you was it being in that group?

Participant 12: It’s like you share experiences that nobody else shares. You’re the guys that have to deal with THAT stuff. You have the fear of ... the fear of God in you. You don’t tell about what’s happened, what you’ve seen or what you’ve done. You just, you just can’t. They don’t understand. It’s ... It’s too difficult ... You can’t trust people. You know, it kind of gets pretty lonely whenever you’re down to sort of two or three people in the world that you can kind of trust. And that’s not even your wife.”

Similarly, a former UFF member who was brought up in a rural loyalist community which was frequently targeted by republicans, describes the isolation in response to the increased threat from being known to opposing groups and higher levels of active engagement:

“I’ll be totally honest. It takes a bit of time and it takes a lot of experience to get to there. Whereas near the end, I would have been talking with maybe just one person. But that was my learning and through mistakes that were made in the past that I would have been talking to maybe one person - and saying right, me and you will talk about this. You go and now do what you have to do, But don’t be fucking coming back to me or don’t be on anybody else, or letting them know what we were talking about.”

This was also endorsed by participant 6, a former member of the Official Irish Republican Army, who recounted the increased camaraderie within the group:

“There are less people that you can talk to or be around. You know, this is a kind of, it’s a different, different circumstances. Like-minded people, people who I thought at the time obviously had thought it through as well. So no disagreement, felt the same, felt secure with each other.

Participant 3, an ex-prisoner, former UFF member and UDA official highlighted how the processes of isolation, distrust and cohesion resulted in a hardening of relationships within a small circle and increasing distrust of those outside that circle, including wider group members:

“But the fact of matter is that there was that camaraderie. During them times, it wasn’t as if ... Belfast was a slightly different wee place. You couldn’t go everywhere. You couldn’t go, you wouldn’t go there. Certain people, if you weren’t involved in certain things, you could go into the town. If you’re involved in stuff, you didn’t feel comfortable outside of certain areas. So you would have went to certain clubs and in them certain clubs there was certain fellas exactly the same as you, who knew you and you knew them, and you were alright there. You would have gone down to here, some of the bars down here. You would have

gone further up to Finaghey and that there, to those sort of clubs where you felt safe. And that's basically what it was. When I went to them clubs, I was going to them clubs with them fellas. The first person to call for me in the morning was them fellas. The last person, people I seen at night was them fellas, in fact they became my fucking life. And now you can sit and say it like, but it did, it consumed your whole life...

Interviewer: There's a trust element? Because you don't know who to trust?

There's only certain people you can trust and to be totally honest, we had ... at one stage we had ... in our wee squad, I think we had something like 80 men. And I say it here, wee squad, 80. Now out of those 80 men, there's probably only 20 you would trust. Only 15 or 20 I would have had total trust in. That I knew that if the boss turned around and said, "I want you to go and do this" to somebody and such and such is going with you, if I had been ... the thing is, if it had been somebody that I didn't like I'd have said "no,... bring him, let him come with me, I'm not going with him". And stuff like that there. That's the way it was."

The Sympathetic Group

Geographical Factors

Interestingly, the themes of geographical influence on escalation and proximity to direct violence at the interface or flashpoints appeared more often in the interviews with the sympathizers than among the active paramilitaries. The sympathetic group, however, had less participants directly from interface areas. The sympathetic group also showed higher levels of exposure to external influences and they reported lower levels of experiencing group isolation.

At a theoretical level, the interviews also revealed reference to contact hypothesis⁶⁴ and underpinned the relevance of exposure to violence,⁶⁵ intergroup threat⁶⁶ and in-group cohesion. It is also evident that in general the sympathetic group recognized that their different geographical locations played an important role in their not becoming a paramilitary member. For example, participant 11 lived on the edge of a republican area which bordered an affluent and professional mixed area in Belfast. He had friends who traveled from an interface area elsewhere to attend his school:

"The entire situation was a mess. I didn't see much living in Andersonstown right on the edge with Balmoral, so it was probably different for me compared to other people I knew. They were living in Beirut so I understood why they would get involved ... If you talked to some of the others who lived around there, they saw a lot and I know some people had their beliefs strengthened as they saw more ... Also, If I lived somewhere else, if I had lived on the peace line or in bandit country, it would be hard not to join unless you had something else going on in life to take you away from all that. That's probably another way I may have ended up joining..."

Participant 5 shared a similar perception of geographical areas with heightened violence from opposing groups. He lived on the outskirts of a loyalist suburban area in Belfast with an interface approximately half a mile away. He had experienced the death of close friends who were involved in paramilitary activity and lived on the peace line:

"I can understand many of them getting involved, especially where they lived and under the threat all the time. If I had lived there I probably would have gone the same way as

well or completely the other way and been a pacifist. Some people never had a chance. They were from areas that were under threat night and day and their whole lives were surrounded by it. Some of my friends, that's all they talked about, like they didn't have a future in anything else and then stopped talking. ... Probably growing up on the line and being surrounded by it twenty-four seven. Or maybe losing a family member where it was closer, more personal. Or maybe not being in the job I'm in, less to lose. But being part of something does make a difference already. If I wasn't in the job I'm in that is meaningful, I might be looking for something else meaningful in my life and I suppose that could be football or terrorism or in some cases both."

This was also mentioned by Participant 8 who grew up on an interface in Belfast and experienced family killed and injured in the conflict:

"If you grow up where I did it's hard not to be sympathetic, you know yourself, you know people and see stuff. The ideas I had weren't from politics and that, they were from living there and I had my views really long before I understood the politics. We were under threat, family killed and I think that breeds more sympathy because you're stuck in a situation you have to watch your back all the time".

The isolation effect within areas which became single identity, consolidated local community in-group bias, support and cohesion. On a macro level, navigation between areas of loyalist and nationalist communities was a consideration, which culminated in communities only traveling and engaging in "safe areas". The perception of continued potential threat and being in the "wrong area at the wrong time" which could result in opportunistic attack, also increased the effect of in-group bias. As Participant 3 recounts:

"You didn't know anybody from another area. It was just isolation. Your wee area was there and you just stayed in it-you didn't go out. You stayed in it. Especially when more troubles came. It was isolation. You wouldn't have went to a bar in the town. You wouldn't have went to a club anywhere. You wouldn't have went to visit people anywhere else. Just as I was saying, you were ghettoised."

Participant 6, previously involved in a political party from a loyalist rural area notes this in the discussion of factors causing escalation and also non-escalation:

"It's purely threat and loss. You can blame government decisions and mistakes all you want but if you take away living in an area of threat then the chances of getting involved go down. All they have to do is to look at the mixed areas in Northern Ireland. The areas that are removed and have a bit more mix in them, they aren't hot spots. They don't have interfaces. There are areas in Belfast that became interfaces that were mixed to start with but families moved out when the troubles started and the areas become less integrated."

Participant 2, originally from an area close to the interface and with family members having been previously involved in loyalist paramilitaries, recounts individual responses from attacks on the interface area:

"Well, back then for me, when I seen there was people that just picked up guns and just done what they had to do. They weren't asked, they were just protecting their own area. They weren't involved in paramilitary activity. There are actually people I know today that I know that done it and some of them regret it, what they did. But then again, they were attacked in their own area and I thought it was a great way to protect their own area from other organisations."

The Role of Exposure to Violence

Personal, family and community exposure to violence found those in the active group seeking retribution or “justice” from those considered out-group responsible parties. Participant 17, a former UFF member and ex-prisoner who had discussed the loss of physical ground within community to the opposing nationalist community, clearly defines the reason for his escalation:

“I was a member of the Tartans and when my friend got shot dead during a riot I says right, we have to do something, we have to defend our area. By ourselves so I progressed into the UDA.”

He also flagged the death of a friend as another factor behind his joining the UDA:

“That would be in a riot when my friend got shot dead. And that’s when it really struck me that, you know, I have to do something.”

This is echoed by Participant 8, a member of the Official Republican Movement from a flashpoint area of Newry who experienced continual exposure to violence from security forces and opposing factions. The participant was shot and recounted that friends and family had been injured and killed:

“But anyway, we were attacked by them and we sort of got closer together, actually. You know, we look after ourselves and defend ourselves whatever way we could, because, you know, there’s numerous attacks on us. I was shot myself during these attacks. You know, and a few comrades and that in Belfast, as you know there were a number of people shot dead. Yeah. I was lucky I didn’t lose mine too at that time. It’s dangerous times for everyone.”

Prior exposure to violence appears to be an important escalation factor in combination with proximity to interfaces and flash points. Participant 9, a former Provisional IRA member from Newry noted the role exposure to violence played in his radicalization:

“if it all happened again, I would probably do the same again. Maybe a lot of others wouldn’t. I had friends killed and family injured, and I think that would probably count towards having to do something. But maybe it all had to happen the way it did to get here now.”

Cohesion, Isolation and External Contact

Analysis of the interviews showed a difference between the active and sympathetic group with regard to contact with other individuals and groups. A majority of the sympathetic group made reference to exposure to external influences reducing out-group bias and categorization of self and others. Those members of the group who did not reside on the interface or flash points experienced more intergroup contact through education, sport or work. There is also evidence of individual contact contributing more to decategorisation. Ferguson discussed the role of individual over intergroup contact, with findings that individual contact produces increased understanding and trust than intergroup interaction.⁶⁷

Additionally, increased belonging with additional in-groups reduces in-group bias within conflict or threat scenarios.⁶⁸ This was exemplified by Participant 12, who had been involved in the loyalist youth faction the Tartan Gangs, but who subsequently experienced interaction with other communities through competitive football and through interpersonal relationships.⁶⁹ In his assessment, he did not continue with full indoctrination due to this contact with other communities:

"[sport] was probably one of the best things for intercommunity intercultural everything. So it was you know, It broke down all those barriers. You would have seen that first hand, especially with soccer. ... And where I grew up in, my background would have been living in a mixed estate before the troubles and then people being put out of the estate and becoming a single identity estate. Playing against another football team from another area, you know. And it was great. But there were difficulties. But it was great, it broke down the barriers. ... What brought me over from the tartan gangs was meeting somebody from the other community. So in terms it wasn't so much an incident or an event. It was the relationship. So it was I turned my back on my friends over in the tartan gangs. They all got sworn in, became members of organisations."

The combination of moving from a particular geographical area and experiencing less in-group isolation worked to decrease prejudice and in-group bias. As other research has long flagged, contact and common alternative goals can override division and increase tolerance.⁷⁰ Such processes can also be seen in the account of Participant 8, from a republican area and forced into contact with other groups as a result of University education. He was also exposed to Provisional IRA members within the gym he trained in but made the point that the overriding purpose of individual goals in the sports environment, transcended the political divide:

"If I hadn't had a decent education and that. I was the only one in the family that had gone to University and was training and that as well. It didn't help that the gym was full of provies. But still no one cared about that really and no one really spoke about it. It was only a leisure centre gym to start with but it was away from the area and my friends were there, not at home. You know what it's like, everyone is more interested in themselves in the gym! I wanted a way out, not a way in."

Participant 6 vocalized the importance of integration and contact in reduction of conflict, although sympathetic to loyalist paramilitaries. From a background as a former political organization councilor and having completed University education to Masters degree level, the participant accentuated the change in mixed communities at the beginning of the conflict.

"The areas that are removed and have a bit more mix in them, they aren't hot spots. They don't have interfaces. There are areas in Belfast that became interfaces that were mixed to start with but families moved out when the troubles started and the areas become less integrated. If you take away the balance of opposing views, you take away the objectivity"

This was also mentioned in response to what the participant felt was the main influence on escalation:

"Isolation. The more the areas become isolated and broken up the more of a problem you have. Look at Northern Ireland and the difference in the mixed areas to the sectioned areas."

Discussion

The specificity problem has rightly been recognized as one of the most significant challenges facing terrorism studies in general and our understanding of radicalization in particular. Several authors have flagged the important role comparative research can play in resolving the issues at the heart of the problem. Only comparative research which can meaningfully contrast the experiences, characteristics and environmental contexts of terrorists with control groups will facilitate better identification of how different factors work and interact to either facilitate or inhibit radicalization. As researchers such as Schuurman have flagged, control groups composed of supporters of terrorist groups and ideologies can be especially useful to this effort as they have been exposed to many of the same radicalizing factors as active terrorists.

The current study attempted to play a role in this endeavor through comparing the experiences and perceptions of a group of former paramilitaries with those of paramilitary supporters. Overall, the results find support for the hypothesis that greater proximity to areas of violent conflict increased potential radicalization. This effect became stronger when other factors were also present, particularly when there was strong in-group cohesion, reduced contact with external groups, and an increased perception of group threat. Thematic analysis further suggests that two other factors also had an impact: exposure to violence and community isolation. Increased group cohesion was influenced by higher real and perceived threat and isolation was influenced by greater exposure to violence.

From the interviews, respondents from both the active and sympathetic group identified bordering opposing community flashpoints of continued violence as “hubs” of escalation. Those living directly on the interface areas and beyond voiced opinions from personal experience, awareness from friends, associates, or local knowledge that a fulcrum exists in such areas. The impact of such flashpoints dissipates as proximity is reduced, even to within a few streets. The interviews illustrated that potential active involvement in paramilitarism increased the closer an individual lived to a violent interface area. Those living further away from such flashpoints were more likely to be sympathizers rather than active members. This impact of geography was an effect that was recognized by both groups of interviewees.

Pulling together the three key factors of (1) proximity, (2) exposure to violence and (3) community isolation, revealed some additional underlying mediating factors which deepen the links. These mediating factors include community violence and support,⁷¹ increased or distorted perception of threat and concurrent stress⁷² and group cohesion, particularly under circumstances of in-group grievance, distrust of conventional political processes for community protection and representation⁷³ and loss of personal and group significance.⁷⁴ The combination of these, at the right time and place for individuals vulnerable to escalation through isolation, greater exposure to violence and threat, reassertion of the group view and prejudice from the associated increased cohesion, could be powerful determinants of being swept into the last stages of violent extremist action.

Closer proximity to an area of threat and attack appears to intensify the effects of in-group isolation through a need for community protection. For those in the direct “line of fire”, isolation can increase further, particularly amongst those who become actively involved in paramilitarism. Echoing some other research findings, the reduction of external contact with other groups becomes pivotal and reduces opportunity for

significance, increasing the attractiveness of paramilitary involvement as a means of “doing something that matters”.⁷⁵ Within a conflict environment, increasing group cohesion occurs from a combination of factors, including potentially distrust and grievances toward government protective structures.

The current study faced a number of limitations. The complex nature of data collection of hard-to-reach concealed communities in the form of ex-combatants from paramilitary organizations and a control group of sympathetic supporters, brings with it limitations in the form of small sample sizes.⁷⁶ Potential participants are relatively few in number overall and they require a degree of trust with gatekeepers to facilitate direct contact. As these samples are collected through snowball sampling techniques there is also the potential for representativeness bias. Further, as the interviews were based on the past conflict in Northern Ireland, accounts of personal experiences and past decisions and opinions may have been subject to faulty memory creation and distortion.⁷⁷ Finally, the study faces limitations in terms of its geographic setting and the context-specific elements of Northern Ireland. Further research in other countries is needed to examine the extent to which these factors can play a role in alternative contexts.

Nevertheless, the findings of the study do suggest a role for geographical space in radicalization processes. Those living as part of “front line” communities in a Northern Ireland context had greater exposure to a range of psychological, emotional, and experiential drivers toward radicalization. These communities appeared more vulnerable to the influence of existing militarized groups and saw heavier recruitment of active members. The increased level of isolation experienced by these communities close to, or on the front line, contributed to group cohesion and confirmation of a segregated group view. The results overall provide additional insight into the mechanisms of group dynamics in relation to perceived threat, increased exposure to violence, and the likelihood of becoming actively involved in violent extremism.

The findings overall suggest that geographic proximity to intercommunity violence flashpoints and interfaces is associated with increased involvement in violent extremism. A potential policy implication is that of community intervention through the utilization of community groups for interface areas. These could be utilized where community leaders from rival communities already have dialogue and problem-solving capability with opposing group community leadership. There are currently models in operation in Northern Ireland, such as the Belfast Interface Project, which are aimed at the regeneration of peace line areas and cross-community work to reduce exclusionary attitudes, and to increase intercommunity contact. The findings from this study support such efforts. The introduction of similar models could produce a more targeted approach to specific areas in “mid” rather than post-conflict violence with adjustment for cultural differences.

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