Conflict in Northern Ireland: Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory and Social Dominance Theory

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Partition does not depend upon a physical boundary which can be removed by political action; it depends upon very important differences in outlook by two groups of people; and though these differences may be accentuated by political division they will not necessarily disappear as a result of enforced political union. The real partition of Ireland is not on the map but in the minds of men. (J.C. Beckett, 1966)

Complexity and Multiplicity of Historical Underpinnings

The history of Northern Ireland is one rife with identity conflict, stemming from centuries ago, continuing on into the late 21st century. The conflict can be understood in broad strokes as being between two main groups. The first group is the unionists, who comprise roughly sixty per cent of the population of Northern Ireland, tend to see themselves as British, are predominately Protestant, and want the northern area of the island to remain part of the United Kingdom. The second group in the midst of the conflict is the nationalists, who make up an increasing proportion of the population (roughly forty per cent), tend to see themselves as Irish, are predominately Catholic, and wish to be a part of a united Ireland (Dixon, 2001, p. 2). In effect, Northern Ireland can be observed as a place where the British and Irish nations coincide; the resulting co-nationals, British unionists and Irish nationalists, aspire to be a component of two distinct states (p. 2). Generally speaking, the conflict lies in the sovereignty of the state, and the two aforementioned warring factions hold intensely differing views on the future of a divided nation. Despite the seemingly binary conflict that has ensued in the region, the complex history of Northern Ireland is difficult to map out, given the role of overlapping identities at bay, which will be discussed toward the close of this article. Nevertheless,
the following article will attempt to elucidate the dispute through the application of the principal social psychological theories that suit the subject.

Before proceeding with an overview of the social psychological theoretical implications of intergroup relations present in Northern Ireland, it is imperative to begin with a brief review (although somewhat difficult to do so, given the complex and lengthy history of the region) of the historical foundations from the start of the 20th century.

Although culture, economics, and geography all played a significant role in the formation of political identity in Britain and Ireland, it was religious affiliation that became the most prominent identifier of national identity in the region as Irish Nationalism developed in the 19th century (Gillespie, 2008, p. 2). The preceding statement is quite telling. The years of conflicts could not be simply understood through the use of a purely singular component, so it is crucial to focus on the emergence of identity conflicts (which encompass multiple facets). That said, the outbreak of World War I and the Easter Rising of 1916 by republican radicals created a major shift in the framework of debates between Protestants and Catholics from one of “home rule” for Ireland, to one of independence from Britain (p. 2). Although the rebels lost, they reorganized as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the political party Sinn Fein. In 1920, the British passed the Government of Ireland Act, which partitioned Ireland. The subsequent outcome of the conflict left both sides unsatisfied; 26 of Ireland’s counties became self-governing, while the remaining 6 counties in the northeast (home to the highest proportion of Protestants) remained subordinate to Parliament in London, thus securing the region politically and governmentally as a state of the United Kingdom (Doumitt, 1985, p. 2). Subsequently, negotiations between Republicans and British
representatives led to a treaty entitled the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921). The IRA and Sinn Fein split over this treaty, and a civil war ensued; the opposition Republicans maintained the IRA and Sinn Fein, and fought against those former comrades who accepted the treaty as fair and legitimate and the new Irish Free State (White, 2001, p. 137). In the years following, the IRA maintained their organization and refused to recognize partition and the governments in Dublin and Belfast. The result of the partition led to increased tensions between Republicans and unionists and extreme measures of political violence. Between the years of 1939 and 1945 and from 1956 to 1962, the IRA engaged in unsuccessful violent paramilitary campaigns in England and Northern Ireland, in an attempt to create a unified Ireland (p. 137-138).

The partition also held much deeper implications for conflict. Britain’s answer to unionist demands was the establishment of a permanent boundary between the north and south. Nevertheless, it did not solve the problems of growing Catholic versus Protestant abhorrence and the resulting acts of violence (Doumitt, 1985, p. 33). Thus, the situation became much more politically charged; the ensuing events were perceived with much greater sensitivity by both unionists and nationalists alike. The region in question revolved around a relatively straightforward debate regarding the political structures to be in place at the time and for the future, but the debate shifted to be more of a concern about breaking away from the English and Protestant oppressors. Because of this, the situation at hand could be considered more of an intergroup conflict than ever before. Darby (1997) acknowledges that while the early conflict mainly centered upon breaking away from the dominance of the UK, the emphasis of the following debates shifted to relationships within the island between the division of counties; in spite of this, the
debate was altered once again in the late twentieth century. Thereafter, relationships between Catholics and Protestants within Northern Ireland took on the defining role of the Irish conflict (1997, p. 40). W.F. Moneypenny hinted at the complexity of the conflict and multiple identities at bay, in stating, “The Home Rule struggle is a struggle between two nations, the Protestant and the Roman Catholic, or as, to avoid the semblance of ministering religious bigotry, they had better perhaps be called, the Unionist and the Nationalist”. Because of the new formation that the conflict began to take on, the unstable, violent relations between these two groups will be the focus for the purposes of this essay.

It would be an understatement to assert that the new state in Northern Ireland created a major rift between the Protestants and Catholics, or unionists and nationalists. Decades of political violence ensued following the new geopolitical arrangement, and the world watched with a close eye throughout the resulting backlash. There was no end in sight; the conflict became more convoluted each day. In effect, the division between the Catholic and Protestant communities deepened, widened, and became increasingly bitter and seemingly more irresolvable than ever before (O’Malley, 1983, p. 1). In response to the violence and irreconcilable minority status of the Catholic population, there stemmed a civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland that echoed the one proceeding throughout America. The campaign sought to remedy the causes of distress that Nationalists and Catholics to which had succumbed since the founding of the province. In 1969, the British Army landed in Northern Ireland; Catholics originally welcomed them, but this attitude was ephemeral. Clashes resulted between the two groups, and proved to be the catalyst for the re-emergence of the republican movement. Violence reached its peak in
1972, when 14 civilians were shot during a civil rights march in Derry, and became a historical event in history known as ‘Bloody Sunday’. The violent aftermath of the historical event was so severe, brutal, and prolonged that it could not be ignored by anyone involved in Northern Ireland (Craith, 2002, p. 11). Further, the terror and destruction that dominated everyday life and society in the region augmented the sectarian divide and could not be solely explained as merely an extreme by-product of the previous polarization (11). Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the violence that occurred in the region did not solely involve Catholic nationalists, but was also Protestant unionists and British forces alike. As a result, the growing complexity of the situation is highlighted. The conflict involved three groups (Catholics, Protestants, and British forces) now, not solely the two native groups that are commonly associated with the “Troubles” of the island.

Due to the sharp contrast of identities in Northern Ireland and the resulting violence, it is crucial to analyze the history of the region in terms of the relation between identity and conflict. Through research, there are attempts to link identity and conflict; many social scientists regard the link between these concepts as extremely important and necessary for the resolution of future conflicts. Specifically, addressing clashes of identity is necessary to reduce conflicts between groups (e.g., Kelamn, 1997; Kriesberg, Northrup, & Thorson, 1989). Furthermore, to reinforce this point, Kelman (2004) notes that the future time perspective of a social group is linked to its identity and to preservation of its morale, and improvement of the low self-esteem of a minority group is a necessary stipulation for improving the group’s relations with other groups (p. 8). Riek, et al. (2008) sums up the indispensable, explanatory role of social psychological identity
theories in reducing conflict best, by emphasizing that recognizing the fundamental significance of a social identity, perceived group boundaries, and the nature of relations between groups is vital for truly understanding the conflict. This recognition and subsequent understanding will ultimately result in reconciliation between the previously conflicting groups. (p. 256). Moreover, when analyzing identity conflicts such as the highlighted clashes in Northern Ireland, the implementation of broad social psychological theories is of great importance so that the situation is not oversimplified. As Georgi M. Derlugian (2007) makes this point clear in that, “The usual ‘ancient hatreds’ or path-dependent explanation is about as correct as blaming the contemporary violence in Northern Ireland on the long-standing theological dispute between the two branches of Western Christianity” (p. 167).

Although religious affiliation clearly assumes a role in the conflict between the groups, there are a multitude of other facets to keep in mind when attempting to understand the reasons for, and history behind, the dispute in Northern Ireland. With this, the complex nature of identity conflicts is evident. Because of the aforesaid widespread notions regarding social psychological theories, it is ultimately necessary to examine the interplay of identities of the groups involved in conflicts, past and present, and not to focus on one basic aspect of them, as a method of prevention of future conflicts. Political violence in Northern Ireland is hundreds of years in the making; the violence is not simply due to differences in religion, national identity, or political aspirations. Conversely, it can be seen as a conglomeration of all of these factors. For the purposes of this article, Northern Ireland will serve as a case study for analyzing intergroup conflict
through the broad lens of social identity theory and social dominance theory, in an attempt to provide insight into the complexity of the history.

**Social Identity Theory: Overview**

Over the past two decades, social and behavioral scientists have greatly emphasized the role of self and identity in the causes and consequences of intergroup violence and hostility. One such method of analysis is social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1975, 1985), a social psychological tool regarding the role of self-conception in-group processes, group membership, and intergroup relations. The approach is unequivocally framed by the principle that collective phenomena cannot be adequately critiqued or explained in terms of isolated individual processes or interpersonal relations only (Hogg, 2006, p. 111). For this reason, the group, as defined by three or more people that take part in membership and share similar beliefs and attitudes, allow for the individual to psychologically construct a self-conception. Therefore, it is the intermingling of the group and individual self-conception that define the structure as a whole. This is an important point to keep in mind when conceptualizing the theory, which will be discussed below.

The concept of group membership is indeed paradoxical, which makes an analysis of individual members of groups and their actions, groups in the general sense, and intergroup relations quite complex. Furthermore, the conceptualization takes on greater meaning and complexity when it is viewed within a societal or national context. Overlapping layers of identities within these contexts add to the difficulties for any analysis to prove effective. Regardless, social identity theory’s aim, in part, addresses the
paradoxical nature of the group (i.e., the formulation of a “group” based upon the “individuals” of which it is composed), by taking into account both the group structure as well as the individual self-conceptions that are at play. Brown and Capozza (2000) share this point of view, by stating that the theory has been successful simply because it is both individualistic and social, attempting to tie both facets into once overarching concept (x). Additionally, Thoits and Virshup (1997) note that group- or category-based identities are collective-level self-conceptions; they are recognitions of the self with a collective group (115). Thus, the perceiver is identified to see himself in relation to others. Because of this, social identity theory serves as an effective mode of analysis and has seen great success in terms of use by social scientists and acclaim throughout the scientific community.

To further reinforce the all-encompassing nature the social identity theory method of analysis utilizes, Jussim, Ashmore, and Wilder (2000) stress that the theory can be implemented extremely effectively at the group level within a society and that the theory emphasizes the potential for group-based identities to advance bolstering for the status quo among higher power and status groups, and to foster intergroup antagonism and movements for political change among minority and lower status groups (p. 3). Due to the commonly agreed upon belief that Turner’s mode of analysis is effectual and powerfully explanatory, social identity theory has been used to address social phenomena for decades. Namely, topics analyzed through the lens of social identity theory have been prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, intergroup relations, political violence, negotiation, and language use.
To proceed, a general overview of social identity theory is necessary to serve as a jump-off point through which to analyze the identity conflicts in Northern Ireland. As noted by Marilyn B. Brewer (2000), the social identity theoretical perspective more specifically rests on the following two premises:

1. Individuals organize their understanding of the social world on the basis of categorical distinctions that transform continuous variables into discrete classes. Such categorization has the effect of minimizing perceived differences within categories and accentuating inter-category differences.

2. Since individuals are themselves members of some social categories and not others, social categorization carries with it implicit in-group-out-group (we-they) distinctions. Because of the self-relevance of social categories, the in-group-out-group classification is a superimposed category distinction with affective and emotional significance. (p. 165)

Brewer then goes on to note the framework for conceptualizing such social situations, in which particular in-group-out-group categorizations are made salient. The resulting schema is as follows:

(a) *assimilation* within category boundaries and contrast between categories, such that all members of the in-group are perceived to be more similar to the self than are members of the out-group (the *intergroup accentuation* principle),

(b) *positive affect* (trust, liking) selectively generalized to fellow in-group members but not to out-group members (*in-group favoritism* principle),
(c) intergroup social comparison associated with perceived negative interdependence between in-group and out-group (the social completion principle).

As clearly apparent in the numerous experiments and analyses that have implemented measures of social identity theory, national and ethnic identities serve as fertile testing ground. Capozza and Brown (2000) argue in accord with this point, declaring that both national and ethnic identity provide substantiation of the chronological and cultural fundamentals that can be associated with an identity (p. 8). For this reason and because social identity theory rests on assumptions regarding the interplay or identities, the decades of identity clashes and group conflict in Northern Ireland will serve as the primary case study, as will be seen later on in this essay.

Social Dominance Theory: Overview

Social Dominance Theory (SDT) was developed to “supplement” and integrate Social Identity Theory, not to oppose it (Jost et al., 2004; Sidanius et al., 2004). Thus, for the purposes of this essay (as has been the case within previous literature), SDT will serve a complimentary function to build upon social identity theory in the analysis of the case of intergroup relations in Northern Ireland. The basic foundation of the theory posits that multifarious human societies appear predisposed to systematize themselves as group-based social hierarchies with a solitary or a small number of dominant social groups and at least a single subordinate group. Further, such social hierarchies are likely based on “social class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or any other psychologically salient and socially constructed group distinction” (Sidanius et al., 1998, p. 138).

Clearly, the case of Northern Ireland fits nicely within this paradigm; it can be analyzed
through the lens of any number of group distinctions. However, for the purposes of this essay, the case will still be explained in terms of Protestants/unionists versus Catholics/Republicans, which will traverse the other aforementioned bases for social hierarchies.

Social dominance theory is not the first, nor will likely be the last, theory to observe the hierarchical and group-based nature of social organization (see, e.g., Gramsci, 1971; Lenski, 1984; Marx, 1972; Michels, 1991; Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1979). Despite the similar models that some of these theorists’ analyses employ in parallel with the conceptions implemented through the use of social dominance theory, social dominance theory differs from typical models due to the fact that it takes into consideration structural factors (i.e., institutional and societal factors) and psychological factors (i.e., attitudes), as well as their interplay (Sidanius, et al., 1998, p. 138). Furthermore, SDT includes a variable that is thought to facilitate social hierarchy, called social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO is defined as “a very broad orientation expressing one’s general support for group-based systems of social stratification” (p. 138). The three foundational mechanisms that are thought to facilitate the development and maintenance of group-based social hierarchy are as follows:

(a) *aggregated individual discrimination*, where individuals discriminate against members of subordinate groups and in favor of members of hegemonic groups;

(b) *institutional discrimination*, where social institutions allocate more negative outcomes to members of subordinate groups than to members of dominant groups (e.g., customs, laws, and institutional practices);
(c) behavioral asymmetry, where individuals’ social behaviors that contribute to the continued functioning of the group-based social hierarchy tend to vary as a function of the position of one’s group within that social hierarchy (e.g., the disproportionate number of criminal offenses committed by members of subordinate groups).

(p. 138-139).

The role of social dominance theory will be analyzed in the Northern Ireland context later in this essay. Similar to social identity theory studies, analyses that have implemented social dominance theory and social dominance orientation have served as a key component for many social and behavioral researchers that have attempted to examine the conflicts in Northern Ireland throughout the past few decades. The level of explanatory power of such methods will be discussed in further detail, which will aid policy makers in determining appropriate actions to take in future group conflicts.

Northern Ireland Conflict Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

In-group Favoritism

At the heart of the problems in Northern Ireland is mistrust. Centuries of conflict have generated hatred that make it virtually impossible for the two communities to trust each other…If there is ever to be a durable peace and genuine reconciliation, what is really needed is the decommissioning of mind-sets in Northern Ireland…trust and confidence must be built, over time, by actions in all parts of society. (Senator George Mitchell, 1999, p. 37)

The above quote highlights the issue of in-group favoritism in Northern Ireland, as well as the negative association with the out-group as defined by social identity theory. Specifically, Catholics do not trust Protestants, and vice versa. Because of this common conception, social identity theory has received a great deal of support in the context of research specifically conducted in Northern Ireland. In a study (Livingstone & Haslam,
2008) that tested 117 students from schools in Northern Ireland, the level of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility was examined. Results found that social identity theory is a valid method of analysis in the region. Specifically, the results were such that in-group identification was more predictive of negative intentions when in-group identity emphasized a negative association with the out-group. In addition, the findings suggested that the experience of conflict between in-group and the out-group predicts negative intentions and it does so by precipitating definitions of in-group identity that emphasize an antagonistic relationship with the out-group (9). Clearly, these findings within the context of the conflict of Northern Ireland, given to citizens of the specific geographic location, are extremely significant.

In another revealing study, Irving and Stinger (2000) recruited 121 students to generate statements that they thought would be representative of their (Catholic or Protestant) denomination’s perspectives. The findings clearly lent support to social identity theory. Catholics were found to exhibit a ‘social change’ pattern, whereby the authority of the British and Unionist hegemony was contested and the ideal of a united Ireland advocated (Stevenson, et. al, 2007, p. 107). Conversely, as would be expected under the SIT paradigm, Protestants espoused a counter pattern, such that their overall strategy was to defend the status quo. This finding suggests a Catholic active-minority, Protestant reactive-majority model (107). Thus, the in-group out-group distinctions are clearly defined in Stevenson’s research, with a particular emphasis on the Protestant and Catholic religious categorizations of each group. To add support to these findings, Niens and Cairns (2002) found that Catholics identify themselves with the minority, while Protestants see themselves under a legitimate government as the majority. Once again,
the religious categorizations are clearly evident within these findings, along with a noteworthy distinction between the majority and minority. These cases uphold the validity for social identity theory in the context of Northern Ireland, and point to its effectiveness as a method of analysis of identity conflict.

To add to the aforementioned research on categorizations and in-group out-group distinctions within Northern Ireland, Robert W. White (2001) argues that the British forces, Protestant paramilitaries, and Irish Republicans are motivated by social identities (p. 140). He emphasizes the notion that Protestant paramilitaries act in defense of their social group by killing members of the “other” out-group (Catholic social group), and that Irish Republicans target the security forces (British forces) in Ireland because they symbolize an oppressor of their “Irishness”. Lastly, the British take a ‘them versus them’ stance and view the violence as an Irish problem, involving Irish Protestants in opposition to Irish Catholics (p. 140). This type of analysis incorporates a social identity perspective on the issues at hand (whether the author implements this knowingly or not). The in-group and out-group dynamics are clearly laid out in White’s synopsis of the historical conflict.

A central theme in the history of Protestants (and for that matter, Catholics alike) is a feeling of “us versus them,” as noted above, which is a core component that underlies principles of social identity theory. The account of a former Protestant paramilitary emphasizes this perception:

In the seventies these communities were close-knit communities…You still had the extended family situation, and word-of-mouth and rumor was far more valid
than printed matter or television. But there’s no one thing, it was the whole situation at the time. You had segregated schools, you had segregated areas, you had a whole history dealt down to you by word-of-mouth about troubles, the IRA, and all that—that was all part of your dogma the whole way through your life. SO whenever the bogeyman appeared in 1970, this was the bogeyman we were told about. The bogeyman appeared and the rest became part of life—there was thousands and thousands, I mean, the vast majority of people were involved in it. So when your community felt threatened, you felt threatened. (Stevenson, 1996, p. 67)

Clearly, the in-group versus out-group conception is employed within the Protestant’s perception of events. Next, the conflict of groups in Northern Ireland will be more specifically mapped in accordance with Brewer’s (see above) theoretical framework of social identity theory.

Studies on intergroup discrimination in Northern Ireland also illustrate the principles of social identity theory quite well. In one study, indirect measures such as the “lost letter” paradigm were implemented that used Catholic and Protestant name cues, inferred discrimination on the part of Catholics in an area of high tension (Kremer, Barry, & Mcnally, 1986). Additionally, to highlight the opposite end of the spectrum, evaluations of face photographs rated as stereotypically Catholic or Protestant showed out-group discrimination among Protestants as a resulting finding (Stevenson, et. al, 2007; Stringer & Cairns, 1983). Each of the above findings clearly demonstrates the in-group favoritism principle. By showing discriminatory feelings against members of the out-group, both Catholics and Protestants reveal their negative feelings towards the
corresponding faction. A complimentary example of the in-group favoritism principle in Northern Ireland comes from the choice of friends by both Catholics and Protestants.

“Approximately 55% of the Protestants and 75% of the Catholics report all or most of their friends are of the same religion as themselves (a consistent result in surveys from 1968 to 1998)” (Hewstone, et. al, 2008, p. 202). This finding highlights the in-group favoritism quite poignantly. The question presented in these surveys used the term “friend”, which clearly carries with it a connotation of trust and liking. Furthermore, the vast majority of both Protestants and Catholics denote that their friends are within their respective religious in-group. The findings reflect a positive association with members of the in-group (of the same religious affiliation), and a negative association with members of the out-group. This creates a more solid boundary around the in-group, thus further ostracizing the out-group that is already beyond the boundary. One can logically conclude that the sharp division between in-group (friends, positive feelings towards) and out-group (not friends, negative feelings towards), a conflict between the differing groups would be likely to ensue.

**Social Completion**

An anarchy in the mind and in the heart, an anarchy which forbade not just unity of territories, but also ‘unity of being’, an anarchy that sprang from the collision within a small and intimate island of seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or to live apart, caught inextricably in the web of their tragic history. (F. S. Lyons, 1979)

Former archbishop Cahal Daly provides an insight into the social completion phenomenon of social identity theory in direct relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Archbishop Daly confirms that since partition, each side of the conflict (Protestants and Catholics) has behaved precisely the way in which the other side needed it to behave “in
order to justify and sustain its own perceptions of the other” (Dunnigan, 1995, p. 17). Because of this, each side of the conflict responds to the other to justify an attempt to suppress the violence committed against them. In this way, the two groups become interdependent, relying on each other and sustaining the behavior of not only themselves, but the other group as well. In this instance, response to the ‘first’ act of violence would be committed in a similar way, with similar views and relatively similar actions (p. 16). Thus, there is a perceived negative interdependence between the in-group and out-group, as is defined by the intergroup social comparison listed above. As Dunnigan confirms, each of the groups in question makes commitments to positions, attitudes, beliefs, resources, skills, techniques, and defenses, and letting go of any of these is “perhaps one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in deep-rooted conflict” (17).

**Northern Ireland Conflict Through the Lens of Social Dominance Theory**

The most worthless Protestant, even if he had nothing else to boast of, at least found it pleasing to think that he was a member of the dominant race. (W. Lecky, 1892)

*Aggregated Individual Discrimination:*

A clear-cut example of aggregated individual discrimination can be seen in the research of William Kingston, a McConnell Research Fellow at Trinity College in 1972. He analyzes what he terms a “deeply-rooted paradigm” that has long formed a part of the intellectual consciousness of the Ulster Protestant community. The paradigm is based upon assumptions such as:

Catholics are inferior, superstitious, and intolerant. Priests are viewed as symbols of inquisitions and the Roman Catholic Church as the enemy of humanity. Ulster Catholics are described as determined to ‘outbreed’ their Protestant neighbors and
eventually catch up with them in population. It is argued that this might even significantly dilute the clear two-thirds majority and privileged position of the Protestant population. Such a prospect continues to be alarming to Protestants who have traditionally controlled political and economic life. Ulster Catholics are viewed as an ‘aggressive minority’, no longer willing to remain quiet in the face of their inferiority. Since they are regarded as quasi-citizens, their loyalty to the Crown remains highly suspect because they continue to look to the Republic for encouragement and eventual union. (Doumitt, 1985, p. 33)

Through analysis of diatribes and perceptions regarding the conflict in Northern Ireland, Mark J. Hurley (1990) also explains the aggregated individual discrimination that the Britons and Protestants exhibit. He holds firm the belief that the evidence gives grounds for all Catholics and republicans in the region to resent an undeniable sense of superiority attributed to the British (p. 297). Additionally, there is a strain of prejudice and bias in the British culture towards all that is Irish; there have continuously been voices of dissent against this “warped partiality” (p. 293). As Fitzduff (2001) emphasizes, discrimination and segregation in Northern Ireland was not only prevalent, it became the norm (p. 256).

**Institutional Discrimination**

Social dominance theory has been posited to be used by institutions to uphold the relative privilege and power of dominant groups, thereby aiding in the preservation of the hierarchical nature of group relations; in other words, institutional discrimination functions not only to maintain group-based social order, but to reproduce this social order as well (Sidanius, et al., 1998, p. 139). This can clearly be seen in the case of Northern
Ireland, in which the British government instituted various acts and laws to secure and further develop the hegemonic position of Protestant unionists. Since the inception of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, plantation owners, deliberately intended for communities throughout the island to develop in isolation from each other in order to maintain dominance of the unionist planters over the indigenous Irish (Fitzduff, 2001, p. 256). Subsequently, the tactic to dominate the Irish (Catholics) infiltrated the political realm as well. For example, Crighton and Mac Iver (1991) argue that there was a deep fear of extinction among the Protestants in Northern Ireland, and this terror led groups to invest in political institutions that ensured their continued dominance (p. 138). To add to this, the Irish Bishops revealed similar beliefs in their testimony to the New Ireland Forum:

This virtual exclusion [of Catholics] from or minimal representation on public bodies together with the close association of cabinet ministers and Unionist politicians with the Orange Order convinced Catholics that those who exercise power in Northern Ireland were not prepared to treat them other than second class citizens. (1984)

Fitzduff (2001) asserts this position as well, citing several examples of institutional discrimination that create a minority status for Catholics. Namely, patterns of inequality include biased voting systems, unrepresentative policing, and a continuation of “ghettoization” in education, housing and workplaces have reinforced the subordinate group status of Irish Catholics. According to Levine and Campbell (1972), these patterns of inequality created a “Pyramid-segmentary” structure in the region; in other words, a
structure was created in which different categories of a social, political, cultural, and theological nature rarely coincided with one another.

**Behavioral Asymmetry**

According to Fitzduff (2001), it was because the unionist government in Northern Ireland failed to address problems of inequality and exclusion, that republican/Catholic and loyalist/Protestant violence began to escalate (p. 257). Behavioral asymmetry can be clearly witnessed in this case; the common conception is that the IRA has committed more violent acts than Protestants. Specifically, due to their lower status on the social hierarchy ladder, the subordinate group committed a disproportionate number of violent offenses throughout the years as compared to Protestant loyalists. The most comprehensive source of information now published on political violence associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland is the volume of Sutton, which lists 3,524 deaths that are directly linked to the conflict and occurred between July 1969 and December 31, 1993. According to Sutton’s summary of organizations responsible for deaths, the killings committed by the Republican Paramilitary are more than double those committed by the Loyalist Paramilitary (2056 versus 1020, respectively). Specifically, the IRA committed the most killings of any sub-organization within the Republican and Loyalist umbrella categories, more than quadrupling the number of deaths committed by any other group (Sutton, 2008).

Perhaps the justification for its use of violence by the IRA members can shed more light on this subject. According to Darby (1990) justification in this case is explained in moral terms, which depends upon the legitimacy of the regime against which one’s violence is directed (p. 61). In effect, the IRA sees their actions as a form of
“democratic violence” (Honderich, 1976). The concept behind this term is that the minority in question recognizes that in working democracies wealth and status give certain individuals distinct advantages (p. 101). Therefore, the implementation of violent force is seen as legitimate in the minority’s eyes, and is justified by the circumstances that prevail over them.

Implications

What is the outcome when people belong to a group that has relatively low status with respect to other groups and conflict ensues? Social identity theorists spent a great deal of time outlining how a low status group member can claw back to a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Brown, 1978; see also Hogg & Abrams, 1988). One of the options include engaging in social change to try to overturn the existing status hierarchy. Clearly, this can easily be applied to historical underpinnings in the case of Northern Ireland. Although there is a substantial lack of empirical evidence to directly support the claim, one could logically conclude that as Catholics in Northern Ireland enacted social change and were upwardly mobilized through violence committed by the IRA and the subsequent government proposals that were enacted (i.e., Good Friday Agreement, otherwise known as the Belfast Agreement), they attained a greater level of positive social identity. A further implication in relation to social identity theory can be found through analysis of correlational data from random sample surveys in religiously divided Northern Ireland. Hewstone et al. (2006) have found that the amount of intergroup contact was positively related to out-group attitudes, perspective taking, and trust. Based on their findings, the authors express a firm belief that contact between groups is an integral part of the solution in deeply segregated societies (116). Thus,
increased social mobility of low-status groups, along with positive contact between the conflicted groups in question, may lend a clue as to how identity clashes can be resolved.

**Shortcomings and New Directions**

Although there is evidence that social identity theory and social dominance theory have both contributed to our understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland (and intergroup conflict in general), there are some shortcomings to viewing the conflict in terms of the identities that are at war (for both SIT and SDT). The problems do not lie in the theories themselves as much as they do in the perception of identities from the observer standpoint. Some may argue that identities are not timeless abstractions that exist outside the extremely precise worlds in which persons exist (Buckley & Kenney, 1995, p. 1). Despite the reasonable and seemingly valid argument posed, one of the prominent issues regarding research and experimentation on identities and providing solutions to conflicts based thereupon is that it is extremely difficult to examine in a closed setting. Identities, unfortunately, are abstract in the sense that they are not easily measureable, which creates problems for policymakers and governments that are faced with the difficult task of identifying and solving identity conflicts. Furthermore, it is impossible to measure identity conflicts in a real world setting, outside of the laboratory (particularly during episodes of violent conflict as in the case of Northern Ireland).

Not only are identities extremely difficult to measure and analyze due to their highly ambiguous nature, they are also difficult to map out because they are oftentimes not singular (i.e., persons generally perceive themselves as having and are perceived to have, multiple identities; see Daniziger, 1997 and Holland, 1997). This difficulty may
not hold water as much in terms of research as it does in government discourse or community frameworks and planning. McCrone (1998) reinforces this point, in his noting that “the demise of overarching or meta-identities appears to have allowed a plurality of new ones to emerge from under the corpse” (p. 33). In the case of Northern Ireland, there is also a danger in breaking group identities into singular components. Political and sectarian violence highlights antagonisms between opposing groups, effectively reducing many societies in conflict to binary oppositions of this sort; by necessity, a multi-layered approach to tradition that does not confine itself simply to the formation of simplistic, dual symbols of Britishness and Irishness or the reintegration of a single local or global tradition should be enacted instead (Craith, 2002, p. 12 & p. 201).

Therefore, group identities must be recognized as flexible, fluid, and open to questioning. If this were the case (in a highly postmodern conception), and identities were conceived of as holding properties that are altered in new circumstances or by sharing social space with other people, heritages, cultures, or influences, there most likely would be less conflict (May, et. al, 2004, p. 34). Perhaps this viewpoint would change the community frameworks that are currently in place, as well as policymaking decisions and social welfare programs that pare off layers of communities’ identities that should be taken into consideration.

Specifically, both the findings of research taken up through implementation of social identity theory and social dominance theory may also fail to illustrate the complexity of intergroup relations because there is doubt as to whether Protestants or Catholics hold the majority status. In a “double-minority model” (Jackson, 1971), both groups have minority status; Protestants are the minority in Ireland as a whole, while
Catholics are the minority in Northern Ireland. Because the theories both fail to take into account the space component of intergroup dynamics, there has yet to be a satisfying answer to the question of what group should be considered the majority and which should be considered the minority (nor will there likely be an answer in the near future). Further, some researchers (Cairns, 1987) have argued that due to the fact that both groups possess positive identities, a “double-majority” should be implemented. Additionally, a “triple-minority model” has been suggested (e.g., Douglas & Boal, 1982), as an alternative to the double-minority model, in which the Northern Protestants are a minority not just in Ireland, but in the United Kingdom as well. As a result of this theoretical model, Protestants would be expected to show the psychological characteristics more poignantly than Catholics. These types of complications and competing models suggest the need to consider dimensions of identity that are more specific to space and geography (particularly in conflict such as this). On the other hand, due to the multitude of conceptualizations of the identity models that have been developed and are currently under development, not to mention the highly contested nature notions of the concept of identity as a whole, it is somewhat difficult to imagine that there will be a universal model upon which all researchers and social scientists will agree.

The abovementioned limitations highlight the need for a complimentary theory in studying complex social issues that center on identity conflict. Stryker’s identity theory (Stryker, 1980, 1987), could offer an alternative perspective that could add a new dimension to the theories outlined above. In contrast to social identity and social dominance theories, Stryker’s identity theory proposes “that people possess multiple
identities that comprise the self-concept,” and furthermore, that, “identities are hierarchically ordered into a structure of salience, defined as likelihood of activating a particular identity in any variety of situations” (Cassidy & Trew, 1998, p. 727).

Interestingly, Cassidy and Trew (1998) found that using Stryker’s identity theory, the identities of “student, friend, and family member” were much more likely to permeate the lives of the young participants than those identities based upon religion or nationality (735). Therefore, perhaps the research that has been carried out using social identity theory and social dominance theory is not enough to give a complete, accurate account of the identities at play in people’s lives.

If a theory that takes into account multiple identities (such as Stryker’s) serves as a complimentary model to the two outlined above, possibly we will have a much deeper understanding of intergroup relations and conflicts of identity. As noted by Livingstone and Haslam (2007), the content of such groupings can lead to positive intergroup relations by being broadly defined, such that variety and pluralism are essential constituents of that category (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel & Weber, 2003; cf. Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Further, the suggestion is made that “redefining group identities and intergroup relations in this way will be most successful (and most politically and socially progressive) if it goes hand-in-hand with the elimination of the group-based inequalities or injustices that beget conflict in the first place” (2008, p. 17). Clearly, this is easier said than done when applied to a real-world conflict that is comprised of a long history of violence and feelings of mistrust and hatred. Nevertheless, as it has been proclaimed time and time again, we must learn from history and use the lessons we have taken for future progress. Namely, if we can create a
more broadly defined conception of identities in the study of conflict, as well as attempt
to eliminate the aforesaid injustices that (specifically) minority groups face, we will be
one step closer to minimizing the psychological barriers of intergroup contact evident in
analyses such as the conflict in Northern Ireland. Further, “To promote peace and to
prevent the re-ignition of violence, the parties involved have to engage in reconciliation,
a psychological process that requires change in people’s often well-entrenched beliefs
and feelings about the out-group, their in-group, and the relationship between the two”
(Hecker & Pinder, 2008, p. 200). The literature on reconciliation is vast and helpful to
understand and combat group conflict. Therefore, applying a broad social psychological
theory to assess intergroup conflict that takes into account the multiple identities of the
parties in question, in addition to a well-laid out reconciliation process, policymakers and
governments alike can exponentially diminish the magnitude of violence between groups
that has taken place throughout our history, as well as prevent future conflicts.
References


