Published in final edited form as:

Peace Confl. 2011 November ; 17(4): 343–366. doi:10.1080/10781919.2011.610199.

Sectarian and Nonsectarian Violence: Mothers' Appraisals of Political Conflict in Northern Ireland

Laura K. Taylor^{*}, Christine E. Merrilees^{*}, Andrea Campbell^{****}, Peter Shirlow^{**}, Ed Cairns^{****}, Marcie C. Goeke-Morey^{***}, Alice C. Schermerhorn^{*}, and E. Mark Cummings^{*}

^{*}University of Notre Dame

^{**}Queens University

^{***}The Catholic University of America

^{****}University of Ulster

Abstract

Past research on peace and conflict in Northern Ireland has focused on politically-motivated violence. However, other types of crime (i.e., nonsectarian) also impact community members. To study the changing nature of violence since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland the current study used qualitative methods to distinguish between nonsectarian and sectarian antisocial behavior. Analyses were conducted using the Constant Comparative Method to illuminate thematic patterns in focus groups with Catholic and Protestant mothers from segregated Belfast neighborhoods. Participants differentiated between nonsectarian and sectarian violence; the latter was further distinguished into two dimensions – overt acts and intergroup threat. Although both nonsectarian and sectarian antisocial behavior related to insecurity, participants described pulling together and increased ingroup social cohesion in response to sectarian threats. The findings have implications for the study of violence and insecurity as experienced in the everyday lives of mothers, youth, and families in settings of protracted conflict.

Psychosocial processes are shaped by appraisal and subjective interpretation of daily experiences in conflict settings (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pat-Horenczyk, et al., 2009). The impact of conflict on psychological processes such as intergroup insecurity or social cohesion extends beyond those who experience violence directly (Haskuka, Sunar, & Alp, 2008). In settings of protracted political conflict, the subjective perceptions of different types of violence, such as nonsectarian or sectarian antisocial behavior, may vary and differentially affect feelings of individual or collective security (Bar-Tal, 2007; Bar-Tal & Jacobson, 1998). Though rates of physical violence may subside in the post-accord period after signing a peace agreement, distrust between former adversaries may persist setting the stage for the future re-escalation of violence (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laura K. Taylor, Department of Psychology, 200 Brownson Hall, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556. ltaylor12@nd.edu.
Laura K. Taylor, Christine E. Merrilees, Alice C. Schermerhorn, and E. Mark Cummings, Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame; Andrea Campbell and Ed Cairns, Department of Psychology, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom; Peter Shirlow, School of Law, Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom; Marcie C. Goeke-Morey, Department of Psychology, The Catholic University of America.

In the current study we explore the distinct influences of sectarian and nonsectarian threats on individual psychological processes and collective social responses, particularly insecurity and social cohesion. We use qualitative methods guided by three related research questions. First, to establish a contextually-relevant concept of community, we ask: “How do participants define and understand a sense of community?” Second, to capture possible differences between sectarian and nonsectarian violence, we ask: “What are the salient day-to-day events in the participants’ community?” Third, to examine processes related to these stressors, we ask: “How are individual and collective resources mobilized in response to identified events?” To address these research questions we conducted focus groups discussions with mothers living in Belfast. Mothers were selected to examine social ecological factors that may affect families and because maternal distress is an important factor for family well-being in contexts of sectarian conflict (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Merrilees et al., 2011). This research is timely given the changing nature of sectarian and nonsectarian violence in Northern Ireland, a setting of protracted conflict.

Perceived Neighborhood and Sense of Community

The first research question on participants’ a sense of community grew out of an emerging literature on how individuals are affected by factors at different levels of the social ecology in settings of community and political violence (Betancourt & Kahn, 2008; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns 2009; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). However, across this body of research there is no clear consensus on how to define or measure environmental influences, such as neighborhood effect, on psychosocial processes (Almedom, 2005; Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Byrnes, Miller, Chen, & Grube, 2011).

Burton and Jarrett (2000) summarize three approaches to study neighborhood effects: geographic site, social network, and inhabitant perception. The geographic site approach defines neighborhood by official boundaries such as census track, electoral ward, or postcode (Fagg et al., 2008; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). The social network approach defines neighborhood by interpersonal and group relationships which may or may not have reference to physical borders. The inhabitant perception approach defines neighborhood by the individuals’ understanding of the community, including both relevant physical and relational borders (Byrnes et al., 2011; Drukker, Kaplan, Feron, & van Os, 2003). This approach is more ecologically meaningful even though inhabitant perceptions may not coincide with official boundaries which can limit comparisons to government statistics. Despite this limitation, the current study adopts the inhabitant perception approach because it is the most consistent with the other subjective experiences underlying the individual and group processes of interest.

The inhabitant perception approach to study neighborhood effects may also advance understanding of segregated living patterns in Belfast. Across Northern Ireland, 35–40% of the population reside in segregated neighborhoods (Hughes, Campbell, Hewstone, & Cairns, 2007). In Belfast, many of these homogenous neighborhoods are also *interfaced*, that is, segregated from other groups by physical boundaries including peace walls, gates, or major roads. However, even those living in more integrated neighborhoods lead segregated lives

(Cairns & Toner, 1993; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006), including ingroup preferences in marital, educational, and professional spheres (Hughes et al., 2007). Situated in this reality, the current study explores how participants' daily experiences in interfaced neighborhoods influence psychosocial processes.

Sectarian and Nonsectarian Violence in Post-Accord Northern Ireland

Because violence and crime affect the daily lives of individuals and communities (Cummings et al., 2009; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Norris & Kaniasty, 1992), our second research question focuses on salient day-to-day events to examine how participants perceive the changing nature of violence in Northern Ireland. Historically, the sectarian conflict is a constitutional dispute between Catholics (Nationalists) who want to join the rest of the island of Ireland and Protestants (Unionists) who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom (Cairns & Darby, 1998). The most recent episode of sectarian violence, known as the Troubles, began in 1968 and officially ended in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement. Despite the signing of this accord, two dimensions of sectarianism persist in contemporary Northern Ireland. The first is realistic threat, or overt acts of sectarian violence and crime; the second is perceived threat, or the symbolic threat to the ingroups' value system and intergroup mistrust (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns, & Christ, 2007). Both forms of intergroup threat may contribute to feelings of insecurity and mistrust of the police further complicates responses to sectarian violence (MacGinty, Muldoon, & Ferguson, 2007).

Since the Belfast Agreement and decommissioning of paramilitary groups, there has been an increase in nonsectarian crime (Burgess, Ferguson, & Hollywood, 2007; Chief Constable's Annual Report, 2005). A recent report published by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), compared reported crime from 1998 to 2011. The report describes a shift in the crime profile from property damage to personal violence; from 1998 to 2010 the proportion of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery offences increased from 20% to 31% of all recorded crime (Police Reported Crime in Northern Ireland (2011)). Despite the changing dynamics of violence and crime in the post-accord period, few studies differentiate between sectarian and nonsectarian violence or the two dimensions of sectarian violence: overt acts and perceived threat. Recognizing the importance of multiple types and dimensions of violence, we explore how individuals experience vulnerability in the face of both sectarian and nonsectarian antisocial behavior and threat.

Insecurity in the Community and Social Cohesion

The third research question concerns the mobilization of individual and collective resources to address threat and insecurity. Emotional Security Theory (Cummings & Davies, 1996) provides a framework to explore how fear and anxiety about intergroup relations and appraisals of immediate and future threat may function in a context of political violence (Bowlby, 1973; Cummings et al., 2011). Originally conceptualized as an individual-level variable, emotional security also has a collective dimension linked to a contextually-relevant social group (Bar Tal, 2007; Bar Tal & Jacobson, 1998; Cummings et al., 2009). Protracted experiences of insecurity may result in increased vigilance to threat (Davies, Harold, Goeke-

Morey, & Cummings, 2002), including alertness to threatening cues, increased expectations of threat, and overestimation of danger (Gray, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ohman, 1993). Even after politically-related crime declines, intergroup insecurity may remain relatively stable and salient (Bar Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007).

Social cohesion is one mechanism through which collective resources may be mobilized in response to insecurity related to violence or crime. Although social cohesion may increase the perceived risk of crime in close-knit communities (Villarreal & Silva, 2006), it may also protect individuals from the negative effects of fear of crime (Coleman, 1988; Hallis & Slone, 1999; Sampson & Groves, 1989). Those who “feel close to the neighbors” and “look out for one another” report lower levels of fear of crime (Martinez, Black, & Starr, 2002). For direct crime victims, mobilization of neighborhood support is an effective strategy to mitigate fear of crime and lingering distress (Norris & Kaniasty, 1992). In addition to actual crime, collective angst in the face of existential group threat has also been linked to social cohesion through ingroup strengthening behaviors in experimental research (Wohl & Branscome, 2008; Wohl, Branscome, & Reysen, 2010). Social cohesion through the mobilization of community resources and neighborhood support may contribute to shaping a sense of security and well-being.

The current study investigates the subjective experiences of daily life in post-accord Northern Ireland, including the relationships among sense of community, sectarian and nonsectarian violence, intergroup insecurity and social cohesion. Rather than test specific hypotheses, the three research questions shape the focus group discussions designed to explore how social ecological factors and neighborhood dynamics affect mothers and families living in interfaced Belfast neighborhoods. This inductive approach aims to identify the salient factors influencing individual psychological processes and collective social responses to protracted intergroup conflict (Hammack, 2006; Jones, 2002; Muldoon, McLaughlin, & Trew, 2007).

Method

Rooted in the words and actions of participants, qualitative methods permit the discovery of new constructs and patterns (Vogt, King, & King, 2004) and illuminate day-to-day individual and community processes (Hallis & Slone, 1999). Focus groups are especially well-suited for gathering information on conformity, consensus, and disputes surrounding collective experiences, particularly when drawn from pre-existing social groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Frankland & Bloor, 1998; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Focus groups allow for a flexible and fluid conversation which is essential to understand relationships between risks and feelings of insecurity (Waterton & Wynne, 1998). The conversational approach strikes a balance between the informal nature of talk and the focused discussion of research topics (Puchta & Potter, 2004). This research method enables the analysis team to explore emergent themes and provide a robust description of participants’ experiences (Burgess et al., 2007).

Sample

To capture segregated living patterns we conducted focus groups in four interfaced neighborhoods, located in three of the Belfast's four zones: East, West, and North (Cairns & Toner, 1993; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). In the year prior to data collection these three zones accounted for 45.9% of the total offenses in the urban region and 16.6% of the total offenses throughout Northern Ireland (Chief Constable's Annual Report, 2005). Consistent with other interfaced neighborhoods, all of our study neighborhoods were homogenous (over 95% Catholic or Protestant) and working class, to help control for possible confounds due to socio-economic status. Population estimates of each neighborhood at the time of the focus group ranged from 1,000 to 4,800 inhabitants.

Each focus group included six to ten mothers ($N=32$) recruited through local community centers. Mothers ranged in age from 21 to 55 years old and they had an average of 2.75 children ($SD=2.02$, range 1–11). Participants had lived in their neighborhood for an average of 23.6 years ($SD=16.00$, range 1–55).

Data Collection

In spring 2006 two female psychology graduate students from the University of Ulster facilitated four focus groups, one in each neighborhood, to examine the research questions. Each session was convened in the local community center and lasted between one to two hours. The facilitators received informed consent and permission to record the conversations at the beginning of each session. Participants were asked to speak one by one so that their voices could be distinguished in the transcript. Recorded conversations were transcribed verbatim and, when possible, nonverbal behaviors such as long pauses or laughter were noted in the transcripts. Transcripts used a double slash, “//”, to distinguish a change in speaker but retain the conversational nature of the discussions and facilitators' questions were in italics. Proper names of physical markers, such as streets, were removed to ensure the anonymity of participants. The neighborhood are coded 1 through 4 and include C or P to refer Catholic or Protestant communities, respectively.

Focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured interview format (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). The interview schedule (Appendix A), developed collaboratively by the research team, includes a series of catalyst questions and follow-up prompts in simple, concrete language (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). Members of the research team from Northern Ireland reviewed the wording of questions to ensure cultural appropriateness. In order to allow participants to steer the conversation, the order of catalyst questions and follow-up prompts could vary between settings.

Data Analysis Procedures

Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally introduced the Constant Comparative Method which Maykut and Morehouse (1994) expanded to include specific procedures for team analysis. This method followed six stages. In the first stage of analysis, the team worked collaboratively to *unitize the data into chunks of meaning*. These smaller units of meaning could stand alone and were understandable without additional information. Units could be as short as a phrase or as long as a few paragraphs, and could be comprised of a single voice or

multiple voices (Waterton & Wynne, 1998). Each unit of data was assigned a code that tracks the speaker(s) and neighborhood ID along with an identifying tag word or phrase that captures the essence of the unit's meaning.

The second stage of analysis was a brief *process of discovery* which resulted in provisional categories for data analysis. After an initial review of the entire set of transcripts, the team generated an index of recurring words or phrases (Frankland & Bloor, 1999). Preliminary topics were clustered based on similarity and condensed into list of master themes (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). Although not exhaustive, these provisional categories and master themes provided an abbreviated skeletal map of the breadth of topics covered in the focus groups.

Following the process of discovery, the third stage was *continuous refinement*. The unitized data were categorized through a simultaneous comparison to all of the other data units or chunks (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). This stage was both systematic and iterative. As a new unit of data was introduced, it was grouped with similar units of meaning in the provisional categories. Initially, the criterion for inclusion in the provisional categories was if the data look or feel alike. Data units could fit into more than one category. If there were no similar groups, a new category was formed. Deviant cases were noted and included with relevant comparison units (Frankland & Bloor, 1998).

Once provisional categories amass six to eight data units, inclusion criteria were formalized into a *rule for inclusion* in the fourth stage of analysis. A rule for inclusion was a propositional statement grounded in the data that distills the properties and characteristics of the particular category. The rule reflected the collective meaning of the data units in each category. When a new rule for inclusion was drafted, the cluster of existing data units were reviewed for consistency and were re-categorized if they no longer met the rule (Frankland & Bloor, 1998).

After all of the data units were categorized, the *relationships and patterns across groupings* were explored in the fifth stage of analysis. Some categories stood alone. Others groups were similar and linked to other categories by writing new, joint outcome propositions. The sixth stage, a comprehensive review of differences and similarities across categories, illuminated a *convergence of themes*. The six stages of the Constant Comparative Method allowed for structured, iterative, and emergent data analysis that documented the pattern of themes and relationships relevant to the research questions.

Our data analysis team included three researchers – a post-doctoral fellow, a graduate student, and a B.A.-level research assistant – all with a background in developmental psychology and an interest in conflict and parent-child relationships. The analysis team, one male and two female researchers, read and re-read original transcripts and participated in all stages of data analysis. Through consensual validation all three researchers agreed on the final categories and over-arching themes (Muldoon et al., 2007). The analysis team collaborated with an external qualitative expert to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the constant comparative data analysis and final thematic construction (Yin, 1989).

Results

The results are presented following the order of the three primary research questions: sense of community and neighborhood dynamics, salient day-to-day events including nonsectarian youth antisocial behaviors and sectarian violence and tension, and mobilization of individual and collective resources.

Mothers' Sense of Community

Participants defined and delineated three dimensions of community: interpersonal/intragroup, physical, and social-structural. As demonstrated below in the largest neighborhood, their representations of community did not directly overlap with borders based on electoral wards but participants articulated the current nature of segregated communities in Belfast.

Along the interpersonal/intragroup dimension, individuals from all four neighborhoods described a strong sense of being close-knit: "Well us three live in the same street but the whole community is close-knit. We've been in the place for about eighteen years" (C3). "C1 is very close knit community, there's a lot happening here and a lot has changed but we are very close" (C1), stated another focus group participant. Members of other focus groups described their communities: "I would know everyone from the top of [the community] right down to the bottom" (C2). "Everybody here at the moment has really lived here all their life and their parents and family members. There's a lot of family around [the community], a lot of extended family. // And anybody who does go just comes back again" (P1). "I have a lot of friends in the estate [neighborhood] and I know I can call on them at anytime" (C2). These quotations depict three aspects of the interpersonal/intragroup dimension: everyone knows everyone, families often live near each other, and, there is a sense of connectedness within the community that approximates a larger, extended family or network.

An interesting exception to the overarching description of being close-knit, however, was that participants in the largest neighborhood also articulated awareness of subgroup differences and tensions within the neighborhood (also called an *estate*). When asked why these subgroup distinctions exist, the participants explained:

I think it is because they are mainly all out working. They wouldn't really have time to mix. // Maybe because they are snobs. // They are better educated. They have got more money as well and their children are better educated. // We moved from [another street] up in there. // Did you? // Aye. But the landlord would look down on me. (C2).

This example demonstrates how the geographic site approach to studying neighborhood effects may obscure important interpersonal and intragroup relationships within each neighborhood that may be captured by the social network or inhabitant perception approaches.

The second dimension of community emerged as participants identified and defined physical boundaries (e.g., fences, roads) relative to adjoining interface neighborhoods. The focus

group format facilitated a shared expression of the participants' understanding of implicit and explicit borders (Waterton & Wynne, 1998).

You would include Street1 so you would. // Street1, Street2, and all along there. // That's where I would have lived. Street1. It was always very quiet. Directly behind us we had the flats and that there. // Aye because the streets are open there at Street1.... // It goes right down past the greenway [park] before it would really stop. // Like Street3 and that. // Yeah. // Probably the bottom of Street4. // (C2).

In this excerpt, focus group members work collectively, using specific streets and parks as markers, to define the dimensions of their community. Consistent with the inhabitant perception approach, these physical borders are ecologically meaningful for participants even though they do not necessarily cohere with electoral wards.

The physical boundaries of the interfaced neighborhoods produced feelings of being trapped, "closed-off" (C2), "cut off" (P1), "blocked in" (C1), "in jail" (P1), and these feelings were related to a tendency to restrict their children's movement: "You have to keep the kids in. // ... // I'm the same. I let mine go [but] so far" (P1). They expressed a sense that construction of the physical boundaries was not necessarily their choice: "Well if you take the fence... that wasn't our doing, and I know that for a fact. Give them fences. So the fence it is" (C3). Another group expressed: "We are sitting ducks. There are only a couple hundred of us. // We don't want any trouble. We didn't ask to be put in the situation we are put it" (P1). The lack of control of the physical aspects of their environment increases the participants' sense of vulnerability.

The third aspect participants noted when describing their sense of community was the social-structural dimension. The community center was identified as a valuable resource for parents and youth across all four neighborhoods; however, this is not a surprising finding given focus groups were recruited through and convened in the centers. The community center is "open to you maybe seven nights a week. There must be six football teams go from that on a Saturday and they take in the kids every night of the week" (C3). Yet, despite the presence of local centers, participants also described a lack of institutions and organizations oriented toward constructive youth development.

Participants identified the lack of neighborhood upkeep as a source of problems within the community: "In our estates the streets are full of glass all the time and you have to worry about your children going out to play" (C2). One respondent reported to be "shocked" and "embarrassed by the rubbish, glass, dirt, and dog mess everywhere" (C1). Yet, in contrast to the collective reactions to sectarian violence described below, there was no indication of organized behavioral responses in order to address these intra-community concerns about the neighborhood.

Salient Day-to-Day Events in the Community

To better understand the changing nature of violence in Northern Ireland, including increases in nonsectarian crime in Belfast over the past decade, participants were asked to identify events that affected them, their families, and their communities. The three types of

risk factors emerged from these discussions: nonsectarian youth antisocial behavior within the community, overt sectarian violence, and more subtle forms of sectarian tension.

Youth antisocial behavior and nonsectarian violence—In terms of day-to-day concerns, participants reported that they increasingly worry about youth antisocial behavior and nonsectarian violence. These are acts that are perpetrated by people within their own neighborhood rather than acts of sectarian violence. In particular, mothers of teens stated that underage drinking and crimes associated with drugs were a primary concern: “In our day you never heard of cocaine or heroin. Everybody smoked the odd joint and that was about it. Now it’s everybody taking coke and all” (C2). Participants in other neighborhoods acknowledged similar concerns about their children’s exposures to drinking and drugs.

Youth antisocial behavior is not only a source of worry within families but also one of the primary sources of distress within the community:

I don’t feel threatened by the Protestants, no. // I would feel more threatened by our teenagers.// I would too. // I don’t think the trouble with the Protestants and all that has actually got worse or has changed or anything but with the likes of the teenagers... years ago you wouldn’t have heard anything about rapes happening in the area or people breaking into houses (C2).

Mothers also noted the increase in nonsectarian violence:

Coming out of bars, a girl got raped last week coming out of a club.... You can’t walk out of a club round here anymore; it never used to be like that, there was always someone about. I’m in my thirties and I am terrified to walk around at night (C1).

In these communities, nonsectarian violence often occurs outside of clubs and at night: “I have seen me going to the garage at night and if there’s a crowd of kids about drinking you are watching them like a hawk” (C2). Other forms of youth antisocial behavior occur throughout the day:

Joy riding first thing in the morning to last thing at night, it’s all the time. // It used to just be a night time thing but now it’s all the time, 12 o’clock in the evening and 8 o’clock in the morning. My wee lad leaves for school at twenty past eight in the morning and they are doing it then, running up and down my street (C1).

These examples represent the primary types of nonsectarian youth problems behaviors identified in the focus groups: acts of aggression, drug and alcohol use, loitering in stairwells and walkways, and joy riding.

The prevalence of youth delinquency was explained by the fact “kids today have no fear” because paramilitaries no longer provide a sense of security through social control violence: “We’re really glad to see the peace here but it’s worse now in that way because the kids have no fear of anything. // They have just taken over // Yeah” (C2). A second reason for the prevalence of nonsectarian acts was the lack of police efficacy: “It makes no difference anyway for if [youth] are caught and get a sentence, they are only going to come out and do

it all over again” (C2). The absence of a check on youth by both paramilitaries and police contributed to mothers’ day-to-day preoccupation with nonsectarian antisocial behavior.

Sectarian violence and threat—Participants identified two dimensions of daily sectarian stressors: overt violence and more subtle intergroup threat. Participants characterized sectarian as different from nonsectarian violence based on sectarian boundaries (e.g., where it comes from), time of year (e.g., marching season), or events associated with group identity (e.g., Celtics/Rangers game). Crossing sectarian lines that demarcate different neighborhoods is often associated with time of year: “It happens especially around the 12th of July or any other times there are parades. You still get frightened” (P1). However, sectarian acts are not constrained to specific periods. Their unpredictable nature increases strain on participants: “I have my children and then grandchildren. And one of the grandchildren went out around the corner and the next thing a bottle was threw over [the peace wall] and the child got split open so we’re still trying to be careful watching her. She’s only four years old” (C3). Families were affected by both annual cycles and unpredictable violent physical incidents, such as property damage and children’s exposure to sectarian violence.

Outside of crisis periods and direct physical confrontation, intergroup threat emerged as a distinct dimension of sectarian tension. Participants describe a sense of intimidation caused by the other group coming over/across/in, politically-themed name calling, and sectarian boundary markers. One participant described verbal threats: “They drove in here one night around six and my kids were playing in the street. They drove in and they shouted ‘you orange bitch’” [Protestants are associated with the Orange Order] (P1). In another focus group, one respondent shared: “[The curbs are] all red, white, and blue [United Kingdom’s colors] and they have flags everywhere. You can feel the hatred as you walk through. // Everybody is looking out the windows at you and you fear for your life. You honestly do. It’s so intimidating” (C2). The display of sectarian markers was related to participants’ heightened vigilance to threat, aroused suspicion, and increased perception of intergroup danger.

Participants also reported emotional strain and changes in behavioral patterns in response to sectarian acts and intergroup threat. One participant identified emotional “stress would be a major factor. Worrying about your children not being able to go outside the area, that would depress you a bit” (P1). Sleeplessness was related to this emotional stress, particularly in heightened periods of crisis:

And [the children] were just up all night. Maybe exams the next morning. Same as us, [who were] up all night having to get up and go to work the next morning. // I think at one point it was actually four weeks before we actually got to bed (many voices agreeing). // It was constant. We were walking around like zombies (C3).

Emotional strain was related to changes in parent and child daily functioning, such as monitoring and interruption of daily activities:

We have a green [park] and we stopped allowing our kids to use in case this was being used as taunting them to bring them [the other community] down. This was

our kids' play area that was built purposely for football. We ended up sending the children from in the area up to play elsewhere which wasn't fair (C3).

Participants also described how intergroup insecurity interrupted daily activities such as access to public transportation, shops, post office, and doctors: "The buses don't drive in and out of P1 ... There's nowhere in the estate [to shop] // You would have to go out of your way to travel to get your weekly shop and stuff" (P1). Geographic and social borders reinforced by sectarian threat add stress and strain to families living in these neighborhoods.

Similar to nonsectarian youth delinquency, participants described instances when the police were unresponsive to requests for protection from sectarian violence. One participant said: "I'm very bitter towards the police because of the amount of things that have happened on that interface and there's no reaction. I have no confidence in them anymore" (P1). Another participant explained her distrust of police:

You were actually out of your bed, phoning the police, I don't know how many times, describing the person. And when they came out, eventually I would say: 'He's standing up there, are you not arresting him?' And they wouldn't because I wasn't a good enough eye witness even though I [had] seen him. So that's the sort of problems that you have. That's why people don't trust, definitely don't trust the police at that stage because they weren't policing my home properly. They weren't keeping the safety of my children. My kids were brought up here (C3).

Participants also reported an unwillingness to call the police for help: "I think I would be more scared if I got the police out Nobody in C2 would phone the police" (C2). There were limited exceptions when individuals would mention alternatives, such as taking matters into their own hands or contacting community watch; however, the lack of an effective police response to sectarian violence and threat was a frequent issue of concern for participants.

Even beyond the physical limits of the interfaced neighborhoods, participants described how sectarian threat persists:

We actually took the kids away on a summer scheme and I was there personally, so... There was other kids all using it, and it's, um [a] council-run facility. And I heard kids being bullied with others coming up and saying: 'Where do you come from? Where do you come from?' I was standing there so I went over and approached the [man] that was with these kids. I said, 'Look, our kids have been through enough here and we have them away from it, and is there any chance you could chastise?' He says, 'Alright.' 'I understand,' he says. Then the kids, teenage boys, come back with a hatchet and the police had to be called. [We] had to be locked in the adventure playground. Now, we took these kids away and their parents had trusted them with us. We had to have a police escort and people from the C3 come up to make sure these kids was ok because you had to actually go down a fair way to come out. The wee boy with the hatchet shouted a torrent of abuse. These were wee tiny kids that had already seen this. So I mean it was unbelievable. We took them out of it and we were faced with this again, just that conversation: 'Where do you come from?' (C3).

This account demonstrates a convergence of two themes: parent concern for child exposure to sectarian threat and the relatively ineffective police response.

Mobilization of Individual and Collective Resources

Participants described the process of social cohesion, or pulling together in response to sectarian incidents. The sense of “togetherness” (C1) and “find[ing] everybody coming together” (C3) is strengthened by sectarian insecurity, particularly around annual events: “The whole marching season affects us in a big way. // Yeah it affects the [C1], the marching season in July. Everybody sort of pulls together then because they have to” (C1). Another participants explained: “If somebody hears something happening in this estate [neighborhood] you would get up and do something though even if it had nothing to do with you” (P1). Even individuals not directly exposed to specific incidents pull together to offer ingroup support in a collective response to sectarian threat.

Missing from these data, however, is a sense of pulling together to confront ingroup problems and nonsectarian youth antisocial behaviors. Participants were bothered by the lack of neighborhood upkeep, but did not mention any initiatives where they would come together to clean up the areas. One mother explained why she did not intervene in youth antisocial behaviors:

My wee lad was only three when he got bullied by two older lads and it went on until he was about six. He wouldn't go to the shop if they were standing there. You couldn't have went to the lads' parents or anything like that for they would just laugh at you and wouldn't see it as any problem. I can tell you, my wee lad was terrified (C2).

Another participant explained why there is no collective response to nonsectarian violence:

It's always someone who you know, that you have been out with that night; you know your attacker in these areas. They just fight amongst themselves, not everyone would get involved, but if someone get's attacked by [the other group] then the whole district would get involved (C1).

In contrast to the social cohesion when facing sectarian threat, participants responded to nonsectarian antisocial behavior largely with avoidance.

Discussion

We used the Constant Comparative Method to analyze focus groups with mothers from interfaced Belfast neighborhoods which illuminated thematic patterns in individual and group processes. Regarding the first research question about sense of community, participants perceived their neighborhoods as close-knit and they shared a common understanding of the physical and social boundaries. Relevant to the second question about daily stressors, this approach highlighted the subjective differences between sectarian and nonsectarian antisocial behaviors. Addressing the third research question about collective responses, participants described different psychosocial responses to insecurity such as pulling together in the face of sectarian threat. These findings are reviewed below and summarized in Table 1.

Focus group members articulated clear differences between sectarian and nonsectarian violence yet both types of antisocial behavior produced feelings of insecurity. Worry about nonsectarian problems, such as child exposure to drugs and alcohol, was compounded by the lack of ingroup accountability given the decrease in social control violence in the post-accord period. Despite concern for within-community antisocial behavior such as aggression, loitering, and joyriding, participants did not pull together in response to this type of threat. Rather, nonsectarian delinquency was related to socially-isolating behaviors and avoidance.

Participants also described two dimensions of sectarian antisocial behavior: overt acts and intergroup threat. Sectarian tension caused emotional distress and prevented participants from accessing basic services, yet it also mobilized participants to pull together (Martinez et al., 2002). Increased social cohesion may be an immediate fear response to the sectarian crime in the interfaced neighborhoods (Barlow, 1991). Social cohesion may also be related to collective angst about future sectarian violence; collective angst can be activated by reminders of past ingroup victimization such as flags, signs, and murals that depict the violence during the Troubles (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). In experimental research collective angst predicts ingroup strengthening actions (Wohl et al., 2010), lending support to the finding of pulling together in a naturalistic setting of sectarian threat.

Comparing focus group findings about violence to official crime statistics demonstrates how different sources of data may converge and diverge. Participants perceived an increase in nonsectarian antisocial behavior, consistent with the rise in nonsectarian crime post-accord Northern Ireland. At the same time, participants' perceptions of sectarian threat do not reflect the decreasing rates of sectarian violence since the Troubles. In addition, focus groups participants reported that they would not call the police; however, between 2001 and 2008 over 13,500 crimes were reported to the police within the four study neighborhoods (Police Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland, 2011). Research by Shirlow and Ellison (2009) has shown that in a similar Catholic neighborhood in Belfast, 79% of respondents reported they had or would contact the police. These findings emphasize how qualitative research can complement official statistics and provide new information about individual perceptions which are particularly relevant in conflict settings (Cummings et al., 2009).

There are methodological limitations to the generalizability of our findings. Although the sample was intentionally selected from urban, interfaced communities, trends in non-interfaced urban neighborhoods or rural areas of Northern Ireland may differ from our results. Reliance on the inhabitant perception approach to study neighborhood effects also limits comparisons to and corroboration with objective statistics and official crime reports (Almedom, 2005). Finally, focus groups introduce potential artifacts such as group think if an individual does not feel comfortable contradicting the group (Frankland & Bloor, 1998; Waterton & Wynne, 1998). Despite these limitations, our findings could be relevant to other situations of intergroup or political conflict (Cummings et al., 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Maxwell, 1998).

Future research could expand this study by examining complementary themes including specific emotional and cognitive responses such as fear, anxiety, anger, aggression, and

intergroup attitudes (Bar Tal, 2007; Gray, 1989; Wohl et al., 2010). Investigating delinquency, prosocial behavior, and peer relationships more broadly may also shed light on nonsectarian violence and youth outcomes (Barber, 2009; Punamäki, Qouta, & El-Sarraj, 2001). The relationships among violence, insecurity, and social support also warrant future attention, with social identity potentially playing an important role in these intergroup processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hammack, 2010; Merrilees et al., 2011).

In the current study we used qualitative methods to provide an in-depth exploration of the distinct influences of sectarian and nonsectarian threats on individual psychological processes and community dynamics, such as insecurity and social cohesion. With the changing nature of violence in the post-accord period, understanding the relationships among these factors has implications for the study of peace and conflict in Northern Ireland. The research approach could be applied in other conflict settings creating the potential for cross-cultural comparisons (Cummings et al., 2009).

Acknowledgments

This research was support by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Grant R01 HD046933 to E. Mark Cummings. We would like to thank the focus group participants and Andre Mansion and Stacey Scott for their collaboration. We would also like to express our appreciation to project staff, graduate students, and undergraduate students at the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Ulster.

References

- Almedom AM. Resilience, hardiness, sense of coherence, and posttraumatic growth: All paths leading to “light at the end of the tunnel”? *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. 2005; 10:253–265.
- Barber, BK. Making sense and no sense of war: Issues of identity and meaning in adolescents’ experience with political conflict. In: Barber, BK., editor. *Adolescents and war: How youth deal with political violence*. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press; 2009. p. 281–311.
- Barlow DH. Disorders of emotion. *Psychological Inquiry*. 1991; 2:58–71.
- Bar-Tal D. Sociopsychological foundations of intractable conflicts. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 2007; 50:1430–1453.
- Bar-Tal D, Jacobson D. A psychological perspective on security. *Applied Psychology: An International Review Special Issue: Political Psychology*. 1998; 47:59–71.
- Bar-Tal D, Halperin E, de Rivera J. Collective emotions in conflict situations: Societal implications. *Journal of Social Issues*. 2007; 63:441–460.
- Betancourt TS, Khan KT. The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience. *International Review of Psychiatry Special Issue: A global perspective on child and adolescent mental health*. 2008; 20:317–328.
- Bowlby, J. *Attachment and loss*. Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and Anger. New York: Basic Books; 1973.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1979.
- Burgess M, Ferguson N, Hollywood I. Rebels’ perspectives of the legacy of past violence and of the current peace in post-agreement Northern Ireland: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Political Psychology*. 2007; 28:69–88.
- Burton LM, Jarrett RL. In the mix, yet on the margins: The place of families in urban neighborhood and child development research. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*. 2000; 62:1114–1135.
- Byrnes HF, Miller BA, Chen MJ, Grube JW. The roles of mothers’ neighborhood perceptions and specific monitoring strategies in youths’ problem behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 2011; 40:347–360. [PubMed: 20414711]

- Cairns E, Darby J. The conflict in Northern Ireland: Causes, consequences, and controls. *American Psychologist*. 1998; 53:754–760.
- Cairns, E.; Toner, I. Children and Political Violence in Northern Ireland: From riots to reconciliation. In: Leavitt, LA.; Fox, NA., editors. *The psychological effects of war and violence on children*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers; 1993. p. 215–229.
- Chief Constable's Annual Report. Police Service of Northern Ireland. 2005–2006. Retrieved from http://www.psn.police.uk/index/about-us/chief_constables_annual_report.htm
- Clore, GL.; Schwarz, N.; Conway, M. Affective causes and consequences of social information processing. In: Wyer, RS., Jr; Srul, TK., editors. *Handbook of social cognition*. 2. Vol. 1. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1994. p. 323–417.
- Coleman JS. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1988; 94:S95–S120.
- Cummings EM, Davies PT. Emotional security as a regulatory process in normal development and the development of psychopathology. *Development and Psychopathology*. 1996; 8:123–139.
- Cummings, EM.; Davies, PT. *Marital conflict and children: An emotional security perspective*. New York and London: The Guilford Press; 2010.
- Cummings EM, Goeke-Morey MC, Schermerhorn AC, Merrilees CE, Cairns E. Children and political violence from a social ecological perspective: Implications for research on children and families in Northern Ireland. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. 2009; 12:16–38. [PubMed: 19229611]
- Cummings EM, Merrilees CE, Schermerhorn AC, Goeke-Morey MC, Shirlow P, Cairns E. Longitudinal pathways between political violence and child adjustment: The role of emotional security about the community in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. 2011; 39:213–224. [PubMed: 20838875]
- Davies PT, Harold GT, Goeke-Morey MC, Cummings EM. Child emotional security and interparental conflict. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*. 2002; 67:vii–viii.
- Denzin, NK.; Lincoln, YS. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2005.
- Drukker M, Kaplan C, Feron F, van Os J. Children's health-related quality of life, neighbourhood socio-economic deprivation and social capital. A contextual analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2011; 57:825–841. [PubMed: 12850109]
- Dubow EF, Huesmann LR, Boxer P. A social-cognitive-ecological framework for understanding the impact of exposure to persistent ethnic-political violence on children's psychosocial adjustment. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. 2009; 12:113–126. [PubMed: 19430904]
- Fagg J, Curtis S, Clark C, Congdon P, Stansfeld SA. Neighbourhood perceptions among inner-city adolescents: Relationships with their individual characteristics and with independently assessed neighbourhood conditions. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. 2008; 28:128–142.
- Frankland, J.; Bloor, M. Some issues arising in the systematic analysis of focus group materials. In: Barbour, RS.; Kitzinger, J., editors. *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London, UK: Sage; 1998. p. 144–155.
- Glaser, B.; Strauss, A. *Discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine; 1967.
- Gray, JA. *The psychology of fear and stress*. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1989.
- Guba, EG.; Lincoln, YS. *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1989.
- Hallis D, Slone M. Coping strategies and locus on control as mediation variables in the relation between exposure to political life events and psychological adjustment in Israeli children. *International Journal of Stress Management*. 1999; 6:105–123.
- Hammack P. Identity, conflict, and coexistence: Life stories of Israeli and Palestinian adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 2006; 21:323–369.
- Hammack PL. Identity as burden or benefit? Youth, historical narrative, and the legacy of political conflict. *Human Development*. 2010; 53:173–201.
- Haskuka M, Sunar D, Alp IE. War exposure, attachment style, and moral reasoning. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 2008; 39:381–401.

- Hughes J, Campbell A, Hewstone M, Cairns E. Segregation in Northern Ireland – Implications for community relations policy. *Policy Studies*. 2007; 28:35–53.
- Jones L. Adolescent understandings of political violence and psychological well-being: A qualitative study from Bosnia Herzegovina. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2002; 55:1351–1371. [PubMed: 12231014]
- Kamberelis, G.; Dimitriadis, G. Focus groups: Strategic articulations of pedagogy, politics, and inquiry. In: Denzin, NK.; Lincoln, YS., editors. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2005. p. 887-908.
- Lazarus, RA.; Folkman, S. *Stress, appraisal and coping*. New York: Springer; 1984.
- Leventhal T, Brooks-Gunn J. The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2000; 126:309–337. [PubMed: 10748645]
- Mac Ginty R, Muldoon OT, Ferguson N. No war, no peace: Northern Ireland after the Agreement. *Political Psychology*. 2007; 28:1–11.
- Martinez ML, Black M, Starr RH. Factorial structure of the perceived neighbourhood scale (PNS): A test of longitudinal invariance. *Journal of Community Psychology*. 2002; 30:23–43.
- Maxwell, J. Designing a Qualitative Study. In: Maxwell, J.; Bickman, L.; Rags, D., editors. *Handbook of applied social science research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1998. p. 69-100.
- Maykut, P.; Morehouse, R. *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. Washington, DC: Falmer Press; 1994.
- Merrilees CE, Cairns E, Goeke-Morey MC, Schermerhorn AC, Shirlow P, Cummings EM. Associations between mothers' experience with the Troubles in Northern Ireland and mothers' and children's psychological functioning: The moderating role of social identity. *Journal of Community Psychology*. 2011; 39:60–75. [PubMed: 21686048]
- Muldoon O, McLaughlin K, Trew K. Adolescents' perceptions of national identification and socialization: A grounded analysis. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*. 2007; 25:579–594.
- Norris F, Kaniasty K. A longitudinal study of the effects of various crime prevention strategies on criminal victimization, fear of crime, and psychological distress. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 1992; 20:625–648. [PubMed: 1485614]
- Ohman, A. Fear and anxiety as emotional phenomena: Clinical phenomenology evolutionary perspectives, and information processing mechanisms. In: Lewis, M.; Haviland, JM., editors. *Handbook of Emotions*. New York: Guilford; 1993. p. 511-536.
- Pat-Horenczyk R, Qasrawi R, Lesack R, Haj-Yahia M, Peled O, et al. Posttraumatic symptoms, functional impairment, and coping among adolescents on both sides of the Israeli Palestinian conflict: A cross-cultural approach. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*. 2009; 58:688–708.
- Police Reported Crime in Northern Ireland. Police Service of Northern Ireland. 2011. Retrieved from http://www.psni.police.uk/police_recorded_crime_in_northern_ireland_1998-99_to_2010-11.pdf
- Pucha, C.; Potter, J. *Focus Group Practice*. London: Sage; 2004.
- Punamäki R, Quota S, El-Sarraj E. Resiliency factors predicting psychological adjustment after political violence among Palestinian children. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*. 2001; 25:256–267.
- Sampson R, Groves W. Community structure and crime: Testing social-disorganization theory. *The American Journal of Sociology*. 1989; 94:774–802.
- Sampson R, Morenoff JD, Raudenbush S. Social Anatomy of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Violence. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2005; 95:224–232. [PubMed: 15671454]
- Shirlow, P.; Ellison, G. *Attitudes to crime, anti-social behaviour and policing in the Greater New Lodge*. Belfast: Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice; 2009.
- Shirlow, P.; Murtagh, B. *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City*. London: Pluto Press; 2006.
- Smith, J.; Dunworth, F. Qualitative methodology. In: Valsiner, J.; Connolly, KJ., editors. *Handbook of Developmental Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 2003. p. 603-621.

- Stephan, WG.; Stephan, CW. An integrated threat theory of prejudice. In: Oskamp, S., editor. Reducing prejudice and discrimination. Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers; 2000. p. 23-45.
- Tajfel, H.; Turner, J. An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In: Austin, WG.; Worchel, S., editors. The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole; 1979. p. 94-109.
- Tausch N, Hewstone M, Kenworthy J, Cairns E, Christ O. Cross-community contact, perceived status differences, and intergroup attitudes in Northern Ireland: The mediating roles of individual-level versus group-level threats and the moderating role of social identification. *Political Psychology*. 2007; 28:53–68.
- Villarreal A, Silva BFA. Social Cohesion, Criminal Victimization and Perceived Risk of Crime in Brazilian Neighborhoods. *Social Forces*. 2006; 84:1725–1753.
- Vogt D, King D, King L. Focus groups in psychological assessment: Enhancing content validity by consulting members of the target population. *Psychological Assessment*. 2004; 16:231–243. [PubMed: 15456379]
- Waterton, C.; Wynne, B. Can focus groups access community views?. In: Barbour, R.; Kitzinger, J., editors. Developing Focus Group Research. London: Sage; 1998. p. 127-144.
- Wohl MJA, Branscombe NR. Remembering historical victimization: Collective guilt for current ingroup transgressions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2008; 94:988–1006. [PubMed: 18505313]
- Wohl MJA, Branscombe NR, Reysen S. Perceiving your group's future to be in jeopardy: Extinction threat induces collective angst and the desire to strengthen the ingroup. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 2010; 36:898–910. [PubMed: 20519571]
- Yin, R. Case Study Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1989.

Appendix. Interview Schedule and Catalyst Questions

Please introduce yourself to group:

1. Age?
2. How long you have lived in the community?
3. How many children you have?

Catalyst questions and prompts:

1. Definition and understanding of own community
 - What does the word community mean to you?
 - Who makes up your community?
 - What are the physical aspects of your community? (i.e., boundaries, road, etc.)
2. Salient day-to-day events in own community
 - On a day to day basis, what aspects of your community affect you the most?
 - Have you noticed any change in your community?
 - What are factors that affect your wellbeing and that of your family?
 - What problems do you have within your community?
 - Follow up: How can you tell if an event is politically motivated?

- What types of antisocial behavior concern you?
 - Follow up: Where does the behavior come from?
- 3. Individual and collective resources and responses to those salient events
 - How do you deal with these tensions?
 - If you had a problem in your community, would you call the police?
 - Do you think the ceasefires have made any difference to your own situation?

General Distinctions and Patterns of Sectarian and Nonsectarian Antisocial Behavior in Protracted Intergroup Conflict in Belfast, Northern Ireland

Table 1

	Sectarian	Nonsectarian
Conflict	Routed in and related to the history of sectarian violence (e.g., Troubles)	Largely emerged post-1998 Belfast Agreement with the decrease in social control (e.g., ingroup policing)
Examples	Border or boundary markers and politically themed name calling; “[The curbs are] all red, white and blue [United Kingdom’s colors] and they have flags everywhere”	Use of drugs and alcohol; “We’re really glad to see the peace here but it’s worse now in that way because the kids have no fear of anything”
Group	Intergroup; Acts committed by “them” against “us”	Intragroup; Acts committed by one’s “own” against the ingroup
Examples	“We have a green and we stopped allowing our kids to use in case this was being used as taunting them to bring them [the other community] down”	“It’s always someone who you know, that you have been out with that night, you know your attacker in these areas”
Locale	Frequently in interface neighborhoods (where two homogenous neighborhoods border each other)	Frequently within a homogenous neighborhood
Examples	Sectarian boundaries (e.g., where it comes from); “...one of the grandchildren went out around the corner and the next thing a bottle was threw over [the peace wall]”	Acts of aggression, drug and alcohol use, loitering in stairwells and walkways, and joy riding; “I have seen me going to the garage at night and if there’s a crowd of kids about drinking you are watching them like a hawk”
Response	Increased insecurity and vigilance; Interruption of daily activities and feeling “trapped in”; Pulling together and ingroup social cohesion; Lack of police response	Increased insecurity and vigilance; Little articulated collective response to nonsectarian violence even though maybe more likely that the perpetrators are known; Lack of ingroup social control and police response
Examples	“You have to keep the kids in”; “Yeah it affects the [neighborhood], the marching season in July. Everybody sort of pulls together then because they have to”	“You couldn’t have went to the lads’ parents or anything like that for they would just laugh at you and wouldn’t see it as any problem”