



Considering community and transformation

'We'll never be the same' Learning with children, parents and communities through ongoing political conflict and trauma: a resource. Rosie Burrows and Bríd Keenan



Barnardo's

NORTHERN IRELAND

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

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Human lives and the patterns of society need to be considered together... We need to break down the compartmentalising in our own thinking, and think about individual and collective experience together
Parlett, 2000.



Context and conflict

Addressing the current cultural and political context is an essential aspect of the work. An active stance requires us to explore, examine and update our assumptions in the light of ongoing experience. It requires ongoing reflection and the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973) on how we are influenced by, and how we wish to influence, the groups in which we live over time.

What is abnormal (in relation to other northern European countries at this time) has become a normal part of everyday life. The unfinished business of the past is present in our lives. This unfinished business has been expressed variously throughout our history, most significantly as armed conflict throughout the past thirty years. Violations of human rights have been commonplace and conflict has been expressed violently.¹

All aspects of community life have been affected by our history. Our social relationships have been fragmented, with silence and avoidance on the one hand and hostile attacks on the other.

Conflicting discourses are used to express how we understand our experiences – including loss and bereavement, truth and justice, equality, civic and individual responsibility, community relations, crime and punishment, (innocence and guilt, perpetrator and victim), morality (right and wrong), religion (suffering, forgiveness, atonement, retribution), peacekeeping (paramilitarism and terrorism), therapy (healing, closure) and war (combatants).

Transforming our experiences of political conflict and in the aftermath of traumatic events will require consideration of:

- how we think / talk about our experiences
- our emotional and psychological responses
- our physical experiences and conditions
- our connections to others
- the effects on spiritual or belief systems.

Furthermore, it is important to understand how political conflict has been interwoven into other kinds of other unresolved trauma (violence within the family, developmental trauma, violence against women, poverty, exclusion, marginalisation). To understand the term 'victim' within these broader social and community contexts, we have used the definition of a victim as 'one who is subject to deprivation, unnecessary suffering, or oppression' (Lichtenberg et al, 1994).

Acknowledging how our communities have each been differently and similarly affected – making the invisible visible – is an important first step and an ongoing process. Community-based proposals for addressing this include the Eolas project (2003) and ADM/CPA (2003).

¹ Violence is considered to include relationships of domination, exploitation or oppression whether or not the violence is

expressed by physical means. In such oppressive relationships, the exploiter and exploited are dehumanised (Freire, 1973).

Transformation

Transformation can be seen as part of the process of peace-building and has been seen by many experts as bound up with the transformation of trauma (see map by Sider, 2001). Hence, Lederach (1997) proposes that peace-building centrally involves the transformation of relationships, and to be sustainable requires both structural and relational transformations. We have therefore taken an approach to community that embraces relational and structural issues.

Definitions

The term 'community' can be seen in two main ways:



a group that is defined by others from the wider society as a community

groups define themselves on the basis of some shared identity, experience, interest or concern (Gaffney, 2003).

In a basic sense, 'community' is often expressed in terms of boundaries such as territory, culture, race, language, gender and interest. Conflict, as in experiencing and expressing (or repressing) our differences, is inherent to community. However, 'community' is not expressed only in relation to another but also in relation to access and control of resources. It is necessary, therefore, to pay attention to both structures and relations.

Power and resources

Power, therefore, is also part of the definition of community. Consequently, the various forms of conflict do not emerge between communities merely out of ignorance or fear of difference, but difference in relation to access to resources needed for the health and well-being of the community.

Although some groups have a tendency to empower themselves and to influence, others have a tendency to disempower themselves and are therefore vulnerable (Lichtenberg, 1990).² These tendencies need to be viewed within a wider context of unequal power structures that shape and structurally reinforce and perpetuate such relations (gender, disability, ethnicity, age, class).

In terms of adult relations, the distribution of power can be seen to be a collaborative activity and not a characteristic of one person or group but of a relationship between people and groups.

A part of or apart from

Considering the term 'community' from the perspective of field theory, the dynamics of the community, like any other group, express the tension of being a part of or apart from the group as a whole (Gaffney, 2003). These polarities are expressed as the degree of acceptance of the norms of the community and minimising difference (a part of) as well as impeding admission to the community by emphasising separateness and insisting on difference (apart from).

The tension between the two polarities (a part of/apart from) implies movement and process rather than fixed positions. This does not mean, however, that we are endlessly moving back and forth like a pendulum but rather in the absence of fixed positions, individuals and communities are free to group and regroup around common interests in support of mutual self-interest.

Therefore, at a personal level, 'community' may conjure up memories and experiences of connection – belonging, protection, inclusion, recognition, comfort, safety and 'home'. However, the polar opposite must also exist in the field. Consequently, we may also have experiences of community as disconnection – disengaged, fractured, divisive, frightening, 'us' and 'them', threatened, marginalised, empty and meaningless.

At the level of daily life, there are many groups to be a part of or apart from and ways in which this is made possible (your own community, another's community, parent groups, religious groups, trade unions). Each and every group (community) implicitly or explicitly relates its development and well-being to how much it is a part of or apart from the current largest manageable group that provides a boundary around control of resources (the state or nation).

In our context this is contested. Its form and structure is the essence of the expression of difference particular to our context (independent Ireland, integral part of Britain or variations within these, for example, independent Ulster, federal status within Ireland, devolved government within the UK or joint sovereignty and so on).

² Vulnerability is being defined as taking in the influence of others, with or without awareness of doing so. Obedience to another without the decision to obey is a feature of oppressed groups. Lichtenberg

(1990) proposes that both the strong (oppressors) and weak (oppressed) are over-involved in each other's lives and thereby lose part of themselves in their relating ('the delusion of fusion'). It is therefore in the

interests of both to become more autonomous by identifying and acting on their true desires, thereby becoming healthily autonomous and interdependent, rather than merged and co-dependent.

Sectarianism, prejudice and discrimination

Recognisable characteristics of our contested context include sectarianism, prejudice / bigotry and discrimination. Although there are many differing ways to consider sectarianism, none of them capture the full complexity of the lived experience. Here are a few definitions.

- Sectarianism is primarily about structural / state power to discriminate against certain groups and is perpetuated by the state. Bigotry or prejudice at an individual or interpersonal level is primarily maintained or changed by structural and state power.
- Sectarianism is a set of negative attitudes and behaviours towards people of another group / community. It is defined by a sense of 'us' versus 'them', by a sense of an in group and an out group. Telling who is in your group and who is out has been a significant feature of life in Northern Ireland and has been widely documented (for example, Burton, 1979).
- Sectarianism is a complex form of oppression beyond political or religious bigotry, as it involves a complex mix of historical, cultural, economic, national and territorial factors. It is not simply prejudice plus power. It is experienced at three levels: individual, group / community and structural. It is maintained by a power component and imbalance at a structural level. It operates through ideas, individual actions and social structures (Brewer, 1991).
- Prejudice is an opinion or attitude about a group of people that may be based on lack of understanding or incorrect information. Discrimination is when people are treated unfairly because they are members of a particular group. Children here are said to be capable of recognising differences and holding prejudices from the age of three (Connolly, 2002).

Some of these definitions make reference to structural and power issues and some do not. They are, like many aspects of life here, contested terms that will accord with our current understanding. Whichever we incline towards, it is undoubtedly the case that our relationships have been shaped by changing relations between Britain and Ireland, with partition and the foundation of the state in the north as 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people' in the early twentieth century. Acts of violence, exclusion and discrimination, growing segregation based on politics / religion as well as by acts of friendship, solidarity and mutuality have characterised our experiences at personal and community levels.

We consider that in working here, our own attitudes and behaviours inevitably form part of the context or mutually interacting field, that is, there is no way to be above or outside issues of prejudice, bigotry and discrimination. Instead, we are each positioned according to our own political and psychological awareness, histories, interests and values.

Differences and similarities

In working with two groups in two distinct geographic communities, we experienced both ends of the continuum of connection and disconnection, as well as ambivalent and contradictory experiences in between these polarities. There were significant differences as well as significant similarities between the Protestant, unionist, loyalist area and Catholic, nationalist, republican communities that we worked in.

Differences

Historic relationship to the state

Degree of support and continuity or rupture, discontinuity and fragmentation of relationships within own community

Capacity to organise, to find self- and environmental support

Starting points in the work

Degree of hope and despair

Similarities

Changing relation to state, distrust of the state

Distrust of the 'other' side

Traumatic experiences of children, young people, adults and families

All women

Working-class, interface communities

These collective differences are not fixed but are constantly changing in response to ongoing political events and point to the importance of locating and addressing the person within the wider cultural context.

This is especially important when considering the diverse impacts of trauma on communities and their capacity to promote resilience and connection. Studies show that it is how the immediate family and wider community respond that matters most, and not only the traumatic event per se.

What became apparent in the work was the important link between the family and community. For example, where links between the family and community were fractured as a result of significant intra-communal conflict, the capacity to receive and give support within the community was diminished, with an accompanying loss of resilience and protection. On the other hand where the group experienced more connection within the community, safety was easier to establish and the exploration of the traumatic events more containable.

Whereas 'single identity' work is recognised as a vital first step, of ongoing importance in contexts where there is continuing danger and threat, different ways of working also need to be considered. Levine's work (1997) focuses on the physiological and nervous system responses to trauma – the personal and social nervous system. Such physiological evidence provides another tool for understanding and working with our own and others' automated patterns of reaction so that new possibilities can emerge and be sustained.

Resilience and risk

Our concern has been to understand and support the development of resilience in parents and children in a context where early family experiences have been impacted by the conflict.

Resilient individuals and communities can recover reasonably quickly from the impact of trauma and adversity. Resilience means being flexible as we meet new situations and the process of recovery from stress, trauma and setbacks. Resilience is linked to secure attachment at the parent–child level, as well as the resolution of trauma.

Less resilient individuals and groups tend to be marked by restricted flows of information and energy / blockages, automated patterns, less adaptive capacity and incohesion.

The ability to integrate experiences – even, and particularly, traumatic experiences – is the key process that influences our developmental pathways toward resilience or toward risk / vulnerability (Siegel, 1999).

Awareness of patterns (automatic reflexes and states of mind based on I / we are right, they are wrong) and deciding to try out other ways is necessary to changing systemic constraints (Siegel, 1999). Where states have become so engrained as to halt exploration of new possibilities, there is stagnation and a loss of resilience.

Creating opportunities for developing and co-creating narratives and repairing disruptions in connection are fundamental elements in this process (Siegel, 1999) and can be applied beyond the parent–child relationship to a wider community level. As Bloom (1997) proposes: 'A strong community focus on parenting and education can provide a core for the reestablishment of a sense of community and the ongoing practice of democratic principles.'

Transformation: political conflict and trauma recovery map

The diagram and description below have been adapted from Nancy Sider (2001) and included as one way of mapping and linking the interface between trauma and conflict in the community and the process of individual and collective transformation.

Stepping out of the inner trauma circle into the outer recovery and transformation circle involves the difficult process of mourning and accepting loss, rehumanising whoever has been dehumanised and finding meaning through social connection. This process is more spiral-like than linear, for as Siegal (1999) points out the mind is to some extent 'recursive' – that is, we go back over previous ground in a different way as we develop.



Inner circle of recognition

Traumatic event(s) (injury, pain, shock, denial)

1 REALISATION OF LOSS

filled with fear of realising the truth mixed with fear of the future

overwhelmed to imagine life without that which we lost

2 DENIAL AND SUPPRESSION OF FEAR AND GRIEF AS SURVIVAL TACTICS

trauma destroys our sense of security; denial helps us to suppress the pain as we go through a process of adjusting to loss

3 ANGER – WHY ME?

feeling the fury of hate and anger when severely wronged or abused

feeling anger toward the perpetrator as a way to maintain own dignity

anger often turns inward: did I do something to bring this about (picking at wounds)?

4 DESIRE FOR JUSTICE AND / OR REVENGE

may turn into a quest for revenge

rage and fantasies of revenge may bring relief at first, but increase the victim's torment: may feel like a monster 'just like them' (Herman, 1992)

5 TELLING AND RETELLING THE STORY IN A WAY THAT PLACES BLAME FULLY ON THE 'OTHER' SO VICTIM NEEDS TO TAKE NO RESPONSIBILITY

writing a history that supports the in group (victim's group) and demonises the out group (enemy / offender group)

placing the blame entirely on the 'other', so victim need take no responsibility

6 ACTS OF 'JUSTIFIED' AGGRESSION

victim becomes aggressor but still believes self to be the victim and continues round the inner circle again

Outer circle of recovery and transformation

- 1 MOURNING AND EXPRESSING GRIEF
 - fear of being overcome by tears
 - discovering that grief can be gradually dissolved
 - catching a glimpse of new life amidst the ashes

- 2 ACCEPTING LOSS AND CONFRONTING FEARS
 - survivors need to (1) gain a distance from the traumatic event(s) and (2) integrate the events into their lives
 - integrate the grief and pain by gaining an understanding of what happened and trusting themselves
 - deciding to remember and move on

- 3 REHUMANISING THE ENEMY – WHY THEM?
 - moving from self / in-group absorption to some recognition of the other
 - curiosity about the other, seeing the humanity in the other and beginning the slow transformation of relationship to the other
 - realising that not punishing the other does not mean forgetting what happened, but rather recognising that we can never truly 'get even'

- 4 BEYOND CO-EXISTENCE / FINDING A SURVIVOR MISSION
 - beyond mere co-existence, finding meaning, a survivor mission

- 5 COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL ACTION
 - realising that nothing we do to punish another person or group will help and therefore feeling freed up to better use our energies that were once consumed in resentment, and picking at unhealed wounds

- 6 REWRITING HISTORY, JUSTICE THAT RESTORES AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION
 - finding some purpose and meaning in the suffering
 - revising the trauma story to be constructive and honest
 - openly examining wounds on all sides and recognising mutual responsibilities
 - focusing on relationships and restitution, repairing social injury and building relationships, restoring victims and perpetrators
 - not forgetting or condoning what has happened

Key points

- Identification and alienation: we are each shaped by our historic and cultural experiences, 'life space' or 'field', as well as by how we currently identify with and / or feel alienated from communities of common experience, interest, and concern.
- Relational rather than individualistic: our lives overlap and we are interdependent. We each exist within a variety of collectivities or communities, and that rather than there being no such thing as society, the person does not exist except in relation to others.
- Continually co-created by human contact: 'community' is not a fixed, unchanging category. It is an evolving process based on real and authentic meetings between people and systems, in that 'there can be no sense of community within or across systems, if diversity and distinctiveness are undermined or ignored' (Clark, 1996). History can be rewritten.
- Contact boundaries: learning to trust appropriately her / himself with others and to keep her / his boundaries both safe and flexible is a developmental and ongoing process for us all, particularly important given experiences of violence that violate our personal boundaries. Recovery requires a reassertion of the integrity of our boundaries at both individual and communal levels. The more aware and able to articulate our own distinct needs and interests in the present, the more we are able to truly meet others and live at the boundary of real contact. That is, we have a clear contact boundary based on a sense of self that is able to assert, listen to and negotiate needs with others. Healthy relating is built from such collaborative meetings where individuals freely assert their interests and concerns as well as listening to and accommodating others' needs and concerns with minimal manipulation and coercion.
- Apply psychological considerations to communal efforts: paying attention to the nature of the process (how we are together) is important. Again, this implies a commitment to equality and democratic relating, that is, to reciprocity or a two-way flow of information and action rather than a one-way flow. In this way of being, there is a commitment to process as well as goals and tasks. We do not have the power to change others unless they want to change and efforts to support change need, therefore, to operate in ways that undo rather than replicate oppressive relationships. Democratic relations are based on dialogue and a mutual learning process. Finally, parallel processes can be identified that support a field perspective. For example, what happens in a family will mirror wider social relations; what happens between two workers will mirror their relationship to wider structures.

The need for mutual support and sanctuary: we each grow up experiencing the realities of power relationships at every level from the personal and interpersonal to the structural, and by attempting to survive and, if we can, thrive within our structured context. A personal, theoretical and political understanding of processes of victimisation is important in recognising the complexity of each aspect of the experience (see *Considering victims and workers*), as well as recognising how the personal and social nervous system is affected by such processes (see *Considering trauma and recovery*). It is important to create safe contexts that build resilience, communities of mutual support where we can explore rather than hide our differences and where common interests can emerge.

Finally, in considering community, the African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' reminds adults of our responsibility to attend to how we each shape and co-create the 'village'.

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