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Beyond the Orange and the Green. The Diversification of the Qualitative Social Research Landscape in Northern Ireland

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Abstract: The Northern Ireland conflict has been described as one of the most over-researched conflicts in the world. However, this is a relatively recent development. For many years, when the conflict was most intense, social scientists in Northern Ireland were silent and not vocal. The sectarian violence that dominated the life in Northern Ireland as well as the fact that the country was a fundamentally unjust society contributed to this silence. However, since the peace process began in the mid 1990s, a growing number of qualitative studies have been published, utilising one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions, in order to "make people's voices heard" and deal with the consequences of the so-called "Troubles". This paper looks into the emergence of a qualitative social research landscape in Northern Ireland beyond the conflict and explores issues so far neglected. It is argued that a number of factors have contributed to this, among them the availability of research funding to voluntary and community sector organisations that use their data to influence policy-making and equality legislation in a country which is still deeply divided along socio-religious lines.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction—Why Northern Ireland?

2. Social Research Until the 1994 Ceasefire

   2.1 Unwelcome social research

   2.2 Numbing violence

3. Social Research After the 1994 Ceasefire

4. The Expansion of the Policy Research Focus

5. A "Choice" of Methodology?

6. Conclusion

References

Author

Citation

1. Introduction—Why Northern Ireland?

Northern Ireland is a country, which is relatively small in size and has just under 1.7 million inhabitants. The fact that Northern Ireland exists in the first place is a result of a century-long conflict, which—few will contest this—has its roots in English and British colonialism. This is not the place to discuss (Northern) Irish history in detail; this was done comprehensively elsewhere (McGARRY & O'LEARY 1995; DARBY 1995). However, since the more recent past of the country is of direct relevance to the argument in this article, a brief snapshot of the events serves as a good introduction for those readers who are not entirely familiar with the history of Northern Ireland. [1]

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The first Anglo-Norman attacks on Ireland took place in 1169 and large parts of Leinster, the South-eastern province of Ireland, had been colonised two years later by King Henry II. In 1541, for the first time an English King (Henry VIII) declared himself as the King of Ireland. After Wales had been colonised by England five years before, Ireland became thus the first colony of the emerging British Empire. Anglican reformation was extended to Ireland, which then was predominantly Catholic. Over the next decades and centuries, the colonisation of Ireland was furthered by the export of many Protestant, English-speaking settlers to Ireland. From 1603 to 1778 Protestant land ownership in Ireland increased from 10% to 95% (O'LEARY & McGARRY 1993). Penal laws which had been introduced under Oliver Cromwell had deprived the Irish Catholics of many rights, among them the right to speak their own language, the right to practice their religion and the right to run their schools. However, all attempts to convince or pressure the Irish into becoming loyal (Protestant) followers of the English crown failed. Throughout history Ireland remained predominantly Catholic, and it wasn't until the 20th century when the last of the penal laws were officially scrapped from British law. [2]

It is probably because of the history of colonisation that outsiders to the Northern Ireland conflict in their great majority have taken side with the Irish Catholics rather than the Protestant Ulstermen who have insisted on making their case for their own identity which the majority of them say is British. Their view on Irish history has it that without the arrival of Protestants in Ireland, the whole country would probably still be as rural and underdeveloped as it was centuries ago. Indeed, industrial development predominantly happened where Protestants settled in Ireland: the North-east. In the height of industrial revolution, the Greater Belfast area was the second most prosperous industrial centre after Manchester. Textile and ship building industries boomed. In 1907, Ireland produced goods of the total value of 20.9 million Pounds Sterling, 19.1 million of those were accounted for by the Greater Belfast area. Catholics were of course excluded from this industrial development and the connected benefits as well as from the religious and civil liberation that Protestants claim they brought to Ireland. [3]

The partition of Ireland in 1921 came at a time when discussions about the future of the country—whether it should become an independent state or remain British—were at their peak and the conflict was about to escalate. Partition was seen as the best-case scenario if civil war between the opponents and supporters of Irish Home Rule was to be prevented. The predominantly Protestant six North-eastern counties became Northern Ireland, which remained part of the UK. The larger rest of Ireland gained independence as a Free State, which eventually became the Irish Republic. Ireland was partitioned in the most homogeneous way possible with regard to religious affiliation. At the time of partition, around 90% of the population in the Irish Free State were Catholics, whereas over 70% of the population in Northern Ireland were Protestants. This was designed to solve "the Irish question" for good, but of course it did not, especially not for the remaining Catholics in Northern Ireland whose situation did not improve but worsened as a result of partition. [4]

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When Catholics in Northern Ireland finally formed a Civil rights movement and took on the streets to demand fair treatment in the late 1960s, this led to civil unrest. The British army intervened in 1969, initially to secure the rights of the Catholic minority. However, the absent affiliation of the Catholic population with the British state and the slow progress in the implementation of fair rights for Catholics turned the Catholic population against the British army. The IRA reformed "to defend their own communities", and the following period saw the outbreak of severe sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. During this time many people suffered extensively. Residential, educational and social segregation increased. The "Troubles", as this period has become known colloquially, were only stopped 30 years later when the IRA called a ceasefire and the so-called peace process begun. However, residential segregation has not decreased and educational segregation has only fallen marginally. Currently, ninety five percent of children attend schools segregated by religion. Similarly, 80% of social housing is also segregated. [5]

As a result of the century long conflict in Ireland, Northern Ireland has emerged as a deeply divided society with religion—whether people affiliate with Protestantism or Catholicism—and nationality—whether residents say they are Irish or British—as key markers of identity. Very few cross-cutting cleavages and overlapping memberships in associations exist in Northern Ireland, and many political theorists have argued that this is the reason for the ongoing conflict. Others who believe in elite cooperation in order to achieve consociational arrangements and democratic stability—notably LIJPHART (1968, 1977) and McGARRY and O'LEARY (1990)—have argued that it is this failure of political elites to seek and find a compromise, which has proliferated and prolonged the Northern Ireland conflict. The 1998 Belfast Agreement ("The Good Friday Agreement") has provided a legal framework for the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, but the question whether the country is Irish or British, perhaps both, or maybe neither, is still contested. The Belfast Agreement did not provide an answer to this question. All it provided the people of Northern Ireland with were the legal mechanisms to answer this constitutional question in future. [6]

2. Social Research Until the 1994 Ceasefire

The Northern Ireland conflict has provided more than ample food for thought for a number of social science disciplines, including psychology, political sciences, history and sociology. One would expect a great interest of the social sciences in the Northern Ireland conflict, and indeed, it is now being regarded as one of the most thoroughly researched conflicts in the world (SMYTH & DARBY 2001, p.36). In 1993 a register of conflict-related research in Northern Ireland (Ó'MAOLÁIN 1993) revealed that there were 605 projects undertaken on the subject, an enormous number considering the small size of the country. Since the peace process begun, there has not really been a noticeable decline in conflict-related research, although the focus has changed, as I will show below. However up to the 1980s, very little had been published on the conflict, perhaps with the exceptions of an ongoing interest in the socio-religiously segregated educational system which has always existed in Northern Ireland (e.g. AKENSON 1973) and

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the denominational concern in whether or not the Northern Ireland conflict has religious roots. Then, most of the sociological research projects can be classed as macro-sociological. For this two main reasons can be found. [7]

2.1 Unwelcome social research

Social research potentially informs social policy making or, whether directly or not, at the very least scrutinises social policy making. Although this can in some respect also be said about medical research or biology, social research is the more obvious and direct informer of social policy makers. However, the social structures in Northern Ireland restricted critical research for many years. It is unquestionable that from the day of its creation Northern Ireland was a fundamentally unjust society in which Catholics and Irish Nationalists were openly discriminated against (WHYTE 1991). Unionist governments regarded Northern Ireland as a state founded for Protestants and run by Protestants. As McGARRY and O'LEARY put it: "Catholics were discriminated against because they were perceived as disloyal nationalists/republicans, not because they said the rosary or believed in the doctrine of transubstantiation" (1995, p.205). One of the areas of discrimination was the employment sector, and this was also reflected in the higher education system, in which the vast majority of employees were Protestants. It is unquestionable that research scrutinising the sectarian division and conflict would have revealed these inequalities. Addressing these social inequalities was likely to be met by severe opposition from the Protestant government in Northern Ireland and by at least feelings of unease in Westminster, which, after all, held overall responsibility for justice and equality in Northern Ireland. [8]

Until the formation of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in the mid 1960s, there was little organised opposition to the way Northern Ireland was run. British politicians mainly felt that the issue was best left alone. Later, when Northern Ireland was governed via direct rule from London, little criticism was openly voiced about the way the affairs were run because any disapproval could have been seen as weapon against political republicanism and nationalism, which could have also undermined the morale of the British troops and Royal Ulster Constabulary (the Northern Ireland police force). Both were involved in a hopeless guerrilla war against the IRA, which neither side could realistically win. [9]

2.2 Numbing violence

The open outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s had a particularly numbing effect on social research in Northern Ireland. The everyday military presence of the British army, curfews and paramilitary threats, the absence of democratic means of participation, the threat of falling victim to shootings or bombings—the generally very intense violence may have traumatised many social researchers and contributed to their silence. From 1969 to 2001, 3,523 people died in Northern Ireland in conflict-related killings (SUTTON 1994). Because of the deep socio-religious segregation, social research in Northern Ireland is almost always sensitive. Social researchers in Northern Ireland had to position themselves in the sectarian us-versus-them

divide, whether they liked it or not, and they were positioned there by others, not least those who they researched. Contact with people "from the other side" was risky, and again this applied to both researchers and respondents. This may also have contributed to the fact that many did not feel they could engage in this kind of empirical research. Conditions were unfavourable for any critical social research, but they were particularly problematic for qualitative projects, which could have put participants at risk if they were identified. Since Northern Ireland is not only a very small, but also a very closely-knit society, despite measures of masking informants the risk to be identified is relatively high compared to other societies. Bizarre enough, in terms of research funding in the 1970s, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the biggest funding organisation of social research in the UK, issued guidelines that determined that the ESRC would not fund research projects in Northern Ireland, which focused on issues of the Northern Ireland conflict. Hence, by far the most important social problem in Northern Ireland was *per se* excluded from being funded by the ESRC. [10]

SMYTH and DARBY (2001) provide a number of examples for the sensitivity that research on political, social and economic discrimination involved. In1969, the Fermanagh Civil Rights Association produced a report on the discrimination against Catholics in this local government council. In particular the report looked at the housing and employment situation in the Council. Although the county's population was almost evenly made up of Catholics and Protestants, it was found that out of the 370 employees in the Fermanagh County Council, only 32 were Catholic. In a more large scale study undertaken in 1973, it was found that Protestants were over-represented at all levels in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, but particularly at senior level, where over 80% were Protestant and less than 20% were Catholic. It is easy to see how the Northern Irish and British authorities could have done without these unpleasant reminders of the deeply discriminatory structures of government institutions in the country at a time when civil rights movements were particularly strong. However, the government was forced to introduce changes that eventually resulted in fair employment legislation in Northern Ireland. [11]

In 1994, the year of the first ceasefire of the IRA and loyalist paramilitary groups, the Guildhall Group, a cross-community initiative in Londonderry, Northern Ireland's second largest city, initiated a two-year research programme to investigate inner-city population migration. Findings revealed that the sectarian divide was increasing with large numbers of Protestants leaving the predominantly Catholic City side of Londonderry and settling in the largely Protestant Waterside, or leaving the City altogether (SMYTH 1995). In another publication the author reported that many of the meetings of the Guildhall Group had to take place secretly because some of the members of the action group held prominent positions in their communities which could have been compromised had it become known that they were meeting with the "enemy" (SMYTH & DARBY 2001). [12]

These three examples exemplify the social environment in which research took place during the time in which the Northern Ireland conflict was at its worst. In

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particular the lack of interest by the British establishment in matters of human right abuses in Northern Ireland and the level of neglect exhibited for decades towards their fellow Catholic citizens in Northern Ireland were of critical significance. Almost any social research undertaken in Northern Ireland was likely to criticise the role the British government had played in Northern Ireland. This was politically uncomfortable. It was not until the changes in the political landscape in Northern Ireland that social research grew to be an instrument for social policy information. It was also with this change that a qualitative research culture emerged and diversified. [13]

3. Social Research After the 1994 Ceasefire

When it was the socio-religious conflict in Northern Ireland that restricted the emergence of social research, in particular qualitative social research, then it is not surprising that it was the onset of more peaceful times in Northern Ireland in the mid 1990s that resulted in a boom in conflict-related research and, in this context, in the appearance of more qualitative research projects. The ceasefire of 1994 facilitated the Belfast Agreement of 1998 in which all parties committed themselves to the construction of a fair and equal society in Northern Ireland. Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act states that the public authorities have to promote equal opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation,
- between men and women generally,
- between persons with a disability and persons without, and
- between persons with dependants and persons without. [14]

Other pieces of legislation, which are also geared towards the creation of a fair society and are currently in place, are:

- The Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 (amended 1984),
- The Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 (amended 1988),
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995,
- The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997,
- The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998,
- The Equality (Northern Ireland) Order 2000. [15]

There are a number of governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental bodies that overlook equality issues in Northern Ireland. These are:

- The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission,
- The Equality Commission,
- The Fair Employment Commission (UK),
- The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. [16]

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The emergence of anti-discriminatory legislation and a number of governmental initiatives and bodies concerned with these issues was de facto an open invitation to social scientists to scrutinise if the new laws and commissions did what they promised to do. Catholics and Protestants have been equally sensitive towards these laws and whilst Catholics were understandably more optimistic than Protestants about their future, Protestants were unwilling to sacrifice what they believed were their rights. Although social research in Northern Ireland remained sensitive in relation to the conflict (KNOX 2001b), it was only consequent that a variety of community and lobbying groups used the new legislation to make their case for equality and justice—or the lack of it—and addressed issues that arose from the effects of the Northern Ireland conflict. Above all, there was a need to engage with the past and establish the human "costs of the Troubles". [17]

Just after the 1994 ceasefire, a major study took place—The Cost of the Troubles Study. It was undertaken in order to research and document the effects of the Northern Ireland conflict with particular emphasis on those who were bereaved or injured. A large-scale psychological study (FAY, MORRISEY, SMYTH & WONG 1999) was accompanied by 75 in-depth interviews (FAY, MORRISEY & SMYTH 1999, SMYTH & FAY 2000) as well as ethnographic material such as photographs, poems etc. written by those directly affected by the "Troubles" (DYER 1998). Whilst the statistics on the Northern Ireland conflict were certainly impressive, the personal stories and biographies were needed to gain an understanding of how the sectarian violence and segregation had impacted on people in Northern Ireland on a personal level. The Costs of the Troubles Study became a model for many more such research projects utilising mixed methods approaches or only qualitative methods that were looking at the Northern Ireland conflict in general or at specific population groups in particular. [18]

An increasing number of publications with personal accounts based on one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions appeared in the late 1990s. Political prisoners, for example, played a key role in negotiating the ceasefires. The acknowledgement of their political status led to an amnesty and the release from prison of those who were committed to the peace process. In a research project CRAWFORD, WHITE and DUFFY (1997) explored the social service needs of Loyalist political prisoners and their families. Similar studies were undertaken among Republican ex-prisoners and their families (TAR ANALL 2000). In 2001, McEVOY published a book entitled "Paramilitary Imprisonment in Northern Ireland—Resistance, Management and Release", which was based on interviews with both republican and loyalist prisoners as well as prison managers and staff. He investigated the political role of prisons in divided societies. [19]

BREWER, LOCKHART and RODGERS (1998) investigated informal social control and crime management in Northern Ireland, a similarly sensitive subject area, which also could only be done utilising one-to-one interviews based on a sample gained through snowballing. MAPSTONE (1994) and ELLISON (2000) critically investigated the role of the police service in Northern Ireland, which has been a key player in the conflict. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was made up of 90% Protestants and was very much regarded as a police force for

Protestants by both Catholics and Protestants. As in previous examples, these studies relied on a mixed methods approach, with qualitative one-to-one interviews being key to collecting sensitive biographical interview material. [20]

The human impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on children and young people was found to be particularly severe and significant. Those under the age of 24 accounted for 40% of conflict-related deaths (FAY et al. 1999). It was estimated that between 1969 and 1998, 257 young people under the age of 18 died as a direct result of the conflict. Special focus was therefore put on the effects of the "Troubles" on children and young people (SMYTH 2001). CONNOLLY, SMYTH and KELLY (2002) and CONNOLLY and HEALY (2003) found that children in Northern Ireland can recognise diversity and hold sectarian prejudices from the age of three; by the age of five or six, a considerable number of children display an awareness of sectarian and paramilitary violence; and by the age of ten or eleven, many have developed deeply entrenched sectarian opinions. These were important findings for the future of Northern Ireland and resulted in policy interventions in the educational sector. [21]

Other issues explored with biographical or ethnographic methods included punishment beatings (KNOX 2001a) and parades and membership of religious orders (BRYAN, FRASER & DUNN 1995, BRYAN & JARMAN 1999). The listed examples show that the most research projects served two purposes:

1. Contributing to an understanding of the effects of the Northern Ireland conflict and thus dealing with *history* and
2. Informing policy making and thus contributing to the *future* of Northern Ireland. [22]

With regard to this, SMYTH and DARBY (2001) suggest that social scientists should abandon the purist notions of "appropriate" roles of researchers and consider effective means of dissemination—i.e. impact on policy making—at the onset of their research in order to reach their target group. Not everyone would agree with this notion, but Northern Ireland in the past ten years has most certainly been one of the best examples of how current policy making and governance has been informed by social research. As stated above, qualitative research has played an increasingly important role in this process, firstly because in many cases it can address potentially sensitive and contested subject areas best, and secondly because qualitative data used appropriately is easier to understand for those who do not have the skills to interpret or analyse large scale survey data beyond a descriptive level. [23]

4. The Expansion of the Policy Research Focus

Peace in Northern Ireland furthered the diversification of qualitative research because changing legislation widened the research scope. However, there were also new funding opportunities that arose in the mid 1990s. A National Lottery was set up in the UK in 1993. The Community Fund was part of the National

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Lottery. Its mission was to give lottery money "to charities and voluntary groups to help those in greatest need". Through the lottery money, funding became available to charitable community and youth organisations with specific policy interests as long as they could show that they worked on behalf of people in need. This included the possibility to conduct research projects. Other funding bodies which also supported research projects outside the university sector included the Nuffield Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the European Union, which specifically set up a programme for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland that incorporated a research element. [24]

Often the strength of grassroots and community organisations lies in the access they have to in-depth knowledge of local concerns and to local people who would trust them with their personal stories and biographies. Their strength and ability does not lie in the expertise to run expensive large-scale surveys. A number of community organisations carried out such qualitative research projects focussing on issues of interface areas. These are neighbourhoods where religiously segregated residential areas are adjacent to each other and where violence and sectarianism has been most severe (BELFAST INTERFACE PROJECT 1998, HALL 1998, McGILL 1999, O'HALLORAN & McINTYRE 1999). [25]

Due to the Northern Ireland conflict many aspects of civil society had been neglected, and Northern Ireland lagged behind in the developments of modern citizenship. The peace process now made it possible to focus on these aspects. Social and community groups increasingly conducted their own social policy-orientated research projects, addressing issues and increasing awareness beyond the immediate effects of the Northern Ireland conflict, often on behalf of vulnerable people. Organisations that produced such research reports were for example:

- Youth Action with Save the Children on teenage mothers (DAVIS, DOWNNEY & MURPHEY 1996),
- Childline (1998) on young people using helplines,
- The Simon Community (2000, 2002) on homelessness,
- The Family Planning Association (SCHUBOTZ, SIMPSON & ROLSTON 2003) on sexual health of young people,
- The West Belfast Economic Forum with Save the Children (1996) on local drug use,
- Relate (FAWCETT 1999) on the needs of young people coming from divorced parents, and
- The Rainbow Project on sexual orientation and issues of homosexual people living in Northern Ireland. [26]

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Other issues that were researched using qualitative methods in the last decade after the ceasefire and not directly related to the Northern Ireland conflict include:

- Suicides, and self-harming especially among young males,
- Disability and care,
- Poverty,
- Integrated education and exclusion from education,
- Racism,
- Masculinity, homosexuality,
- Anti-social behaviour, juvenile justice, restorative justice and domestic violence. [27]

The qualitative methods used in these research projects include focus group discussions, one-to-one in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, participatory methods based on social and youth work approaches, and ethnographic field studies. In research with children and young people, experimental participatory focus groups were also used. In one project (BYRNE 1997) children wrote stories to enable the researcher to investigate issues about growing up in a divided society, including how children feel about authorities and how they think the conflict can be resolved. [28]

5. A "Choice" of Methodology?

It would be wrong to state that the majority of research projects in Northern Ireland now use qualitative methods. There is certainly a greater acceptance of qualitative data and sometimes even an expectancy to use quotes for illustrative purposes in reports based on large-scale data. However, quantitative research projects still constitute the vast majority of empirical social data collected by government, on behalf of the government or by universities. For example, since 1983 the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has undertaken a continuous household survey. Since 1999 NISRA has also run the Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, which is part of the British Household Panel Survey. Two Health and Social Wellbeing Surveys (1997, 2001) were conducted by the same agency. In 1998 a Northern Ireland crime survey was conducted by the Northern Ireland Office. Since 1989, social attitude surveys or election surveys are being undertaken in conjunction between the two Northern Ireland universities. Similarly, in the statutory sector many large-scale surveys were undertaken. To take just one example, the Health Promotion Agency of Northern Ireland, one of the largest statutory organisations which is engaged in regular research activities, has undertaken large scale surveys on:

- The health behaviour of school children,
- Mental health,
- Alcohol, smoking, drugs, and
- Breastfeeding. [29]

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It is noticeable that organisations and institutions that have the capacity and expertise to run large-scale quantitative surveys are also likely to do so. The government and statutory sectors which boast large research budgets can afford to undertake costly large-scale surveys that are mostly conducted using representative samples. Qualified staff can also analyse the data but more often than not this is contracted out to universities or private research companies or freelance researchers that also have the necessary qualifications. Social policy making is being informed through statistical figures. However, large governmental or statutory agencies often lack the knowledge of or the feelings for current issues in local communities. This is how qualitative research projects undertaken in voluntary and community organisations complement the statistics. When smaller organisations undertake surveys their sample frames are often small and non-representative. The preferred methods are focus groups, interviews or participatory methods. The research budgets are small, and the success of the project often relies on dedicated voluntary staff or short-term contract staff. The studies undertaken are mainly explorative and address issues that had not been researched comprehensively before. The significant advantage of these organisations is their close contact to the community in which they are based. Rather than through statistical evidence, social policy impact is sought through individual cases and stories. As such, it can be argued that it is the context and the constraints of the available resources that often determine the methods used in social research. Even though the social research landscape in Northern Ireland was significantly shaped by its central conflict, in this respect Northern Ireland is not different from other countries. [30]

6. Conclusion

Whilst qualitative research may have been restricted by a quantitative research paradigm, Northern Ireland is a good example for how a violent conflict and an unjust society restricted the ability of social scientists to engage in research for many years. Northern Ireland is also an example for how social research has been used to inform policy making in the recent attempts to peacefully create a shared future for people on both sides of the socio-religious divide. Qualitative social research has taken its place in this process. Powerful case studies and personal stories have at least softened the quantitative research paradigm that continues to exist. New funding opportunities made it possible for smaller organisations to conduct their own research. Whilst questions about the impartiality and purity of some of these studies continue to be raised, there is no doubt that the Northern Ireland social research landscape is now more diverse than it was before the mid 1990s. Thanks to qualitative contributions, issues taken up beyond the immediate effects of the Northern Ireland conflict that were previously ignored or under-researched have taken centre stage. [31]

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