

It's All In Our Heads:

What Cognitive Psychology and The Insight Approach
Can Tell Us About Disengaging Conflict

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Northern Ireland, from Easter until the rain washes the curbstones of the reds and blues, and greens and oranges, and the wind wears thin the flags that flutter above the streets, is adorned in divided patriotism; signs of the marching season. In the long, overcast days of late spring and summer British-Protestant-Unionist-Loyalists, one camp of this divided country, parade the streets of cities in towns, singing anthems commemorating the triumph of the Protestants in Ireland by King William of Orange in 1690. The marching culminates in what is now called Orangefest, or traditionally the Twelfth, which for Protestants is an honoring of history, for Irish-Catholic-Nationalist-Republicans, those on the other side of the divide, a pointed reminder of hundreds of years of Protestant oppression.

The Twelfth of July has historically been heated—paraders intent on marching the routes they please, through nationalist neighborhoods, protected by sympathetic police; nationalists building pyres of pallets, tires, chairs and broken hurling sticks, throwing stones and petrol bombs at the invading marchers. The year that power sharing began, 2007, nine years after the peace was signed, was one of the first Twelfth's that saw little incident. The marchers marched proclaiming Protestant supremacy. Nationalists set fires in dissent but let the Unionists have their day. This year, though, 2010, 12 years after the Belfast Agreement and 3 years since power sharing began, the violence erupted again. Video images are chilling. Mobs of protesters led by groups such as the Greater Ardoyne Residents Collective surged at police in full riot gear with planks, throwing bricks and bombs. Over 80 police protecting the marchers were injured. One police was struck by a concrete slab dropped onto her head from a rooftop. Cars were burned. Violent rioting

lasted for days. The political-sectarian division that continues to trouble Northern Ireland despite their efforts toward peace was again expressed through violence.

One blogger comments: “The 2010 riots manifested the aggression of thousands of young people who have grown up in a social climate of profound hatred, have played amongst bomb sites and burnt out streets, are maturing into a society that had lost its economic strength long before the global recession” (Mac an Airchinnigh 2010).

There has been other violence too. In March two soldiers and a police were killed, the first murders of security forces since the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998. Whether or not this violence is an indication of a return to the troubles, it is an indication that the country is persistently divided. 83 peace walls stand between Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods in the name of safety. The government mirrors this divide as well with Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson of Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party holding top posts. There is little middle ground and much that divides.

At the same time, though, Northern Ireland has a hugely thriving peace-based civil society. There are numerous efforts underway for the sake of peace and reconciliation—commissions on the past, police reforms, advocates of healing, cross-community projects. Is the persistent division that erupts in the kind of violence seen on the Twelfth simply part of the long road to peace and change—the generational journey described by John Paul Lederach (Lederach, 1998)? Or is there something more to understand? Is there a way to look at the conflict in Northern Ireland that may shed light on how to finally break the system that divides and destroys?

One compelling place to start thinking about the matter is from the premise that social systems, structures, habits and norms are essentially meanings and that meanings

are socially constructed. Most of us are familiar with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's work demonstrating that while the world appears to exist independently of people and society, the symbols and meanings that comprise it are, in fact, constructed by them and are only possible because of them. As they write, "it is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions and is maintained as real by these" (Berger and Luckmann 1976, 33).

Surely it is equally the case that we are not free to make meanings, we are born into them. As Marx famously wrote: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please" (Marx 2005, 1). There are historical meanings and structural constraints that preexist each of us and that powerfully influence the meanings we make. Neither is meaning made in a vacuum but is the result of the interactions between people. It relies heavily on consensus over the most fundamental perceptions, including color, language and matter

Despite the constraints on our individual ability to freely make meaning, meaning is nonetheless generated and sustained by us within our minds. And it is further true that the very psychological structures of our minds set the interpretive boundaries by which we create, understand and act on the meanings we make.

It would be an interesting endeavor to explore the meanings operating in the troubles that continue to echo throughout Northern Ireland. Certainly the division between Irish nationalists and Protestant unionists is rooted in meanings that have built a system of society with structures and powers and dynamics that exist outside any single individual. And yet it is those individuals in society acting together who perpetuate and create the meanings that sustain those structures.

Cognitive psychology and the work that conflict analysts have done using the principles of cognitive psychology have laid an important, empirical groundwork for understanding the mind and its operations. This work has persuasively lit the limits of some otherwise competing theories of conflict and its resolution. Cognitive psychology's excellent descriptions of how the human mind operates, what it perceives, how it orders and processes information is a critical component for understanding how and why minds do perpetuate and create conflicts that hurt people, divide them, tear them apart.

Where the ultimate goal of conflict research is to understand what disengages conflict so that peace and compatible social order can be possible, it is imperative to have a solid grasp on the role of the mind.

In the first part of what follows, I will lay out the key findings of cognitive psychology on the topic of our minds, of meaning and of conflict, paying particular attention to the contribution of the Insight approach to conflict analysis and resolution, that while outside of the world of psychology, locates conflict as a phenomenon of meaning. I will then return to the story of Northern Ireland with these categories in hand to see what looking at the division there from an angle of cognitive operations might mean for moving beyond sectarianism. What we will find is an inextricable link between the micro of the mind and the macro of social conflict, with hope, one that will move our thinking closer toward understanding how conflict can be disengaged.

The Cognitive Operations of our Minds

The ways in which we act to create the worlds in which we live are rooted in the most fundamental operations of thought. As people in the world, we have the common

experience of being aware of the environments that surround us. We perceive a reality that we exist within and use our minds to extract meaning out of the constant barrage of information from the people, objects, and events around us. The fact that we use our minds to extract meaning implies that perception by its very nature is subjective. Not only is our perception subjective, but the way that our minds are structured to order and processes the constant flood of information that we experience entails that the outcomes of those cognitive processes are similarly so.

Due to the massive quantities of information that stimulate our senses, our brains, those extraordinary organs, create strategies and short cuts to categorize and organize information into efficient concepts to conserve mental resources (Klausmeier and Prayer 1970, Stagner 1965, Kool 2008). Brains do this as part of learning. Rather than having to rediscover how to operate a car each time we get into one, we develop concepts that allow us to apply what we have previously learned to new situations. “[K]nowing one critical attribute that objects have in common leads to inference of additional attributes and directs appropriate behavior toward that object” (Klausmeier and Prayer 1970, 39). Therefore, whether I’m driving a Honda or a Subaru, my mind recalls their commonality and what I am supposed to do in order to satisfy my intention to drive by the organizational operation of schema; however, if I am in England I will have to learn to adapt what I know to the new circumstance of driving on the left side of the road. Schemas are the mental frameworks that we create to store and understand information and which we use to interpret the present and decide to act based on the future outcomes that we anticipate.

Our minds operate to maximize efficiency using schemas' interpretive frameworks and cognitive researchers have shown that these frameworks arise automatically without any need to make a prior decision to use the framework (Fiske 2002). The use of our mind's frameworks to understand a particular situation is an automatic, and therefore unconscious, response to the experience of information itself. This has implications for the notion mentioned above that perception is subjective, seeing as how we perceive what we perceive depends on frameworks that we have created from experiences that we have had in the past. This includes more than just the personal experience of driving a car and knowing when to engage the clutch. It includes also the very personal understandings that cause one to merge cautiously into oncoming traffic, and the interactive meanings of the social world in which I am driving—the traffic laws, the social status of driving, the common understanding of driving's impact on the environment. The interpretive frame that operates to engage even the most banal actions comes with all kinds of social and personal meanings that make each person's framework, while shared to a large degree, ultimately subjective. Piaget and Kohlberg discovered in their work with children that “a child does not passively learn moral rules but tends to restructure them in terms of his or her own experiences” (Kool 2008, 79). This observation could be applied to other rules as well. Despite subjectivity, the efficiency and automaticity of our interpretive frameworks give certainty to our actions and give us an understanding that we have knowledge—that we know.

While new information, like driving on the left, gives us the opportunity to learn and to alter or create new schemas, these interpretive frameworks also function to select what information is relevant to learn. Thus we have in cognitive psychology the principle

of “selective perception” (Stagner 1965). Stagner writes that “to survive, man must learn to sift the information coming in, emphasize some items, and ignore others...[in such a way] one learns to disregard confusing cues” (Stagner 1965, 48). We tend to pay attention to information that confirms what our interpretive frameworks tell us that we know, again an operation of efficiency. This selectivity also operates when it comes to the information of memory. We will remember, automatically, evidence from our past that confirms what we know and forget evidence that contradicts it (Stagner 1965, 50). This selectivity reinforces how we understand and what we know. It strings together the narratives that we use to “seek causal relationships between events” (Kool 2008, 71) to give our cognitive operations coherent conceptions of the past, present, and the most likely future. These observations of selection and causality that confirm what we already know lead to the conclusion that knowledge once formed is resistant to change.

The Cognitive Operations of Our Minds in the World

The interpretive thinking and knowing we engage in cognitively happens in the context of the larger social world that we inhabit. For perception to have meaning it must be shared. This is why when we err in our perception—when I mistake my sister’s coat for my own—we can self-correct. We know that we have mistakenly perceived because we share reality with others. However, it is also true that perceptions of reality differ for each person and for observers belonging to different groups.

Differential reality when confronted with the automatic, efficient and selective cognitive operations of the mind can cause trouble. Those operations that discount contradictory information and remember what confirms what we know create meanings

that can stir conflict and pit us against those whose meanings we do not share. In the context of differential social reality, Stagner observes that self-correcting operations of perception do not hold. Indeed “erroneous percepts sometimes ‘create’ the reality they had implied, thus giving rise to the so-called *self-fulfilling prophecy*. A relevant illustration is that of the barroom drunk who accuses others of trying to start a fight with him; by his behavior, he soon elicits the aggression he had imagined” (Stagner 1965, 46).

We also tend to explain what we perceive to be the negative behavior of others in terms of their personal dispositions. We attribute their actions to qualities of themselves because actions are clearly linked to actors, whereas motivations or circumstantial conditions are hidden from view. Most would tend to conceive the barroom drunk as a hostile maniac, despite the fact that the liquor was probably what caused him to behave aggressively.

This leads us to another important connection: that our cognitive operations function to create linear, causal understandings causes us to attribute intention to action in addition to dispositional judgments. So not only is the barroom drunk a hostile maniac, but he meant to start the fight. Cognitive psychology calls this “attribution bias” (Kool 2008, 151; Stein 2005, 294), which in turn can lead to the creation of “enemy images.” Stein writes that “an image refers to a set of beliefs, or the hypotheses and theories that an individual or group is convinced are valid” (Stein 2005, 294). In other words an enemy image is a schema or interpretive framework that embodies the attribution bias we give those we feel are dispositionally and intentionally negative. Stereotypes generally fall into this category and lead us to conclude that negative assumptions about others are true.

The negative assumptions that we generate from our interactions with others and integrate into our interpretive frameworks are often socially shared. Tajfel's work on in-group preference and Social Identity Theory demonstrates that groups tend to organize themselves and others into categories of affiliation and opposition (Tajfel 1981).

Affiliation groups that hold enemy image meanings about opposition groups tend to demonize out-groups and extend negative disposition and intention attributions to both the individuals that make up the group and the group itself while at the same time deepening their own sense of solidarity with their in-group. What this tells us in terms of cognitive operations is that our interpretive frameworks are not only reinforced by the selective information that we perceive to confirm what we know, but also by the social groups we share those interpretive meanings with. Bar-Tal calls shared interpretive meanings "sociopsychological infrastructure" (Bar-Tal 2007 , 1430).

In conflict these negative concepts of others, both shared and personal, are further reinforced through the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy and through the tendencies of our minds to interpret data according to what our interpretive frameworks already tell us to be true.

In sum, our cognitive operations make meaning out of what we perceive in the world. They lead us to create interpretive frameworks that are automatic, selective and consistent and tell us about the present and the future based on experiences of the past. They attribute cause and intent and make dispositional judgments about others. These judgments are exceedingly difficult to change because the interpretive frameworks subsume what we have understood of our perceptions back into the framework as correct

understanding of what we have experienced, particularly when the reality that the frameworks indicate is socially shared.

Cognitive Operations in Conflict

These operations of cognition in the way they pattern our perceptions and the meanings we make have implications for understanding how we engage in conflict and what it may take to disengage it. Janice Gross Stein persuasively demonstrates that attention to cognitive psychology's categories of cognitive operations puts limits on the commonly held understanding that conflict is a matter of rational choice (Stein 2005). Rational choice theory understands individuals (and states) to be rational actors who engage in conflict as a struggle over interests in a way that will objectively provide them with a maximum cost benefit; thus the contributions of game theory and other experiments on choice. This analysis of conflict, however, does not take into account the subjectivity of rationality nor the observation that people "seek to maintain the consistency of their 'belief systems' against discrepant information in ways that lead them to depart from norms of rational inference and choice" (Stein 2005, 293). When statistics like the one cited in *Peace and Conflict 2010* show that 80% of internationally brokered peace agreements experience a recurrence in violence, it suggests that agreements based on negotiated agreements are not sufficient to disengage conflict (Hewitt, Wilkenfeld and Gurr 2010).

Cognitive psychologists have contributed a rich layer to understanding conflict and its resolution though demonstrating empirical principles of cognition. Because of cognitive psychology we have a better understanding of the process by which people

typically think and interpret what they perceive. We know how to classify bias, stereotypical attitudes and enemy images, which are automatic, selective and consistent and contribute to the patterns of decision-making that escalate and perpetuate conflict. Stein suggests that conflict cannot be resolved “unless images change and leaders and publics learn” (Stein 2005, 301). Addressing the psychology integral to conflict maintenance must be a key component to disengaging conflict patterns so that peace can be sustainable.

Building on the principles of cognition, psychologists have offered the field methods for predicting conflict outcomes. Some, like Prospect Theory build on perceptions of risk and aim to reframe perceptions in an effort to alter decisions to continue conflict behaviors (Stein 2005, 296, Kool 2008, 22). Others use psychology to classify types of individuals as either naturally competitive, and therefore conflict prone, or cooperative by nature, and therefore tending to handle conflict well (Kool 2008). And others use psychological findings to attribute one’s ability to resolve conflict to their cognitive skill, suggesting that conflict resolution requires a learned capacity for cooperation (Golec, 2002; Deutch, 2002, 2006).

While all of these observations and their coordinate remedies have the potential to work successfully, one complicating factor is that each required effort is aimed uniquely at individuals. In Prospect Theory’s case, reframing the issue is intended to change the perceptions of leaders so that they will ultimately concede to negotiated peace. The meanings made on the ground among the population, which because of cognitive operations are likely steadfast schemas about the other as a threatening enemy, are unlikely to change coincidentally. To focus on engaging types of individuals who are by

nature more cooperative or nonviolent is a gamble that leaves other types to continue to fight. Focusing on skill development is a worthy endeavor. Most of us would benefit from augmenting our abilities to think critically and act cooperatively. However, knowing that cooperative action results in the best outcomes, and even having the skills to be cooperative, does not necessarily entail that individuals or groups will act cooperatively, particularly with those they perceive to be enemies. The same holds true for recommendations that suggest conflict can be overcome by building transparent and accountable institutions (Stein 2005, 302). Attitude change has to be more than a matter of convincing in order to penetrate the systems that both perpetuate and sustain and are perpetuated and sustained by the interpretive frameworks of competing groups. As Fiske writes, “given subtle biases that are unconscious and indirect, change is a challenge, resisting frontal attack” (Fiske 2002, 127).

How then can the automatic, selective and consistent interpretive frameworks that operate cognitively to design causal narratives of disposition and intent in conflict situations be penetrated so that patterns of behavior change? One thing that that has not been sufficiently explored by psychologists is how and why schemas change (Stein 2005, 295; Deutch 2002). The Insight approach to conflict analysis and resolution may shed some light on this.

Cognition and the Insight Approach to Conflict

In order to change interpretive frameworks so that opportunities to make non-conflict decisions emerge, we must first explore why interpretive frameworks are so resistant to change in the context of conflict. As we saw earlier, in non-conflict contexts,

interpretive frameworks can be adaptive and malleable. I will learn to drive on the left side of the road when in England without much resistance because I am curious, attentive and seek to understand. According to Melchin and Picard, the pioneers of the Insight approach to conflict, which is based on the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan, learning happens as a result of the generation of insights, and learning is the basis for knowing (Melchin and Picard 2008). We come to know something by first experiencing, then by seeking to understand what we experience through the generation of insights, and finally by verifying which of our insights is most likely to be true. This knowledge is framed by interpretations that are grounded in experience and values that are both cultural and personal and make up the narratives of interpretive frameworks. According to the Insight approach, generating insights, which is essentially engaging in a form of learning, is the basis for changing interpretive frameworks.

While cognitive psychologists observe values and beliefs and measure how they operate on attitudes, the Insight approach places values within the cognitive process of knowing itself. The Insight approach tells us that once we have verified that we know something—after we have experienced it, generated insights about what it is, and concluded that we accurately understand what it is based on the content of our interpretive frameworks—we automatically evaluate it. We evaluate what we know based on “cares”—those deeply held values that tell us what matters, what is right, what is wrong, and how the world ought to be. The spectrum of values that a person carries varies from person to person, but all values are narratively dimensioned and are a consequence of the personal experience and social relationships that give meaning to what we perceive (Melchin and Picard 2008).

Feelings are carriers of value. It is exceedingly rare to have no feeling. Even apathy is an emotion. The feelings that we have that accompany what we know indicate to us how we value it—are we attracted or averse, comforted or threatened? Based on these feelings of value, we make decisions to act.

What Melchin and Picard's Insight approach to conflict ascertains is that conflict happens when we judge that something we value, something we deeply care about, is threatened by the decisions of others (Sargent, Picard, Jull 2010: 3). We know that we are threatened because we experience a feeling of fear or disgust or injustice that is informed by past experiences, which have given us the understandings with which we interpret the present and anticipate the future. Bar-Tal observes that "fear is an automatic emotion, grounded in the perceived present and often based on the memorized past" (Bar-Tal 2001, 601). Our interpretive framework tells us that the decision of the other is certainly going to lead to a future where a deep care is compromised. There is very little room to reflect on that stance because danger feels imminent. We are afraid and our operations of knowing— experience, insight, verification, have lead us to evaluate, judge and decide that we are going to defend.

In defensive postures that are accompanied by negative emotions our propensity for self-fulfilling prophecy and selective perception and recall grows. Stagner writes, "anxiety," which is an emotion of fear, "leads to 'tunnel vision' where a person is so focused on one central object, that important neighboring cues may go unnoticed" (Stagner 1965, 56). The automatic selection of information that confirms what we have interpreted leads to certainty, which is how we become hardened in positions.

The Insight approach tells us that when we are hardened in positions, curiosity breaks down and learning stops (Melchin and Picard 2008). We no longer are able to generate insights, because we are completely occupied by defending, and the interpretive framework operating to give us understanding about the situation of conflict that we find ourselves in remains fixed. In fact, it becomes more and more entrenched as it is reinforced by selective perception, which in turn leads to attribution bias, which as the conflict escalates becomes enemy imagery and demonization. By this stage, the people and the problem are one, and budging on positions would throw us into the domain of loss.

The idea that conflict is about threatened values is not new. According to Kool, “it has long been understood that a conflict over deeply held values and beliefs tends to threaten the core self and makes people defensive with hostility as the end result” (Kool 2008, 155). What is new in the Insight approach is three fold.

First, it refines the definition of value from a thing—democracy is a value of mine; I believe in democracy—to an operation that tells me that democracy is good. It is from my initial evaluation that democracy is good that I can conceptualize democracy as a value object.

Second, it locates the operation of value within the processes of cognition, which illuminates that our judgment of value leads us to make the decisions that we make. When I witness election fraud, I feel indignation, which tells me that something is not good, and that I am under threat. This will lead me to make a reactionary, defensive decision to act. Because the feeling is what I experience most immediately, it will take deliberate reflection to know that it is my value of democracy that is threatened.

Third, under threat I am defensive and in my effort to protect, I am certain. This certainty dissolves my capacity for generating insights, which in a non-conflict situation would allow me to discover new information or a new relevance to old information and shift my interpretive framework. Instead, my interpretive framework becomes more entrenched and resistant to change.

Disengaging Defense Through the Insight Approach

The Insight approach tells us that interpretive frameworks are resistant to change because we react defensively to perceptions of threatened values, which diminishes our ability to generate insights. What follows, then, is that if curiosity can be restored, and insights generated, then interpretations of perceptions will change. If interpretations change in such a way that de-link the narrative of threat, then new possibilities for acting in non-conflict patterns emerge, as there is no longer reason to be defended.

This theory has been applied to interpersonal and small group conflict resolution through Picard's practice of Insight Mediation. To unlock the conflict-pattern of communication, Insight mediators, whose strategies build on discoveries of cognitive operation, bring intense curiosity to the parties to help them pay attention to new information so they can generate insights and learn about both their own operating interpretive frameworks and the other's that are leading them to decide to act in particular ways. The result is that certainty about the meaning of the situation and "what to do" becomes uncertain. And from the openness of uncertainty learning happens in such a way that horizons are able to shift and possibilities for new non-threatening decisions open.

While Insight theorists are the first to articulate this understanding, they are not alone. Ross argues that “a psychocultural change strategy requires the introduction of new experiences and/or the introduction of new emotional connections that alter the salience of elements in the narrative of key actors in a conflict and invite new and/or revised linkages among their key elements” (Ross 2001a, 4). The insights that will alter the “salience of elements in the narrative of key actors” must be insights into the certain and defensive meanings that are creating and perpetuating that salience. Once that is revealed and attended to, curiosity about it is generated and new meanings become possible.

The Insight approach to conflict has been effective in leading to the resolution of interpersonal and small group conflict because it has focused on helping parties examine the meaning they are making in those contexts. While we think, know and make meaning within our own minds according to our own interpretive frameworks, the interpretive thinking and knowing we engage in cognitively happens in the context of the larger social world. For perception to have meaning it must be shared.

While cognitive psychology’s methods for conflict resolution tend to focus on individual attitudes, skills and capacities, the Insight approach penetrates that focus to the meanings that build those attitudes, skills and capacities. Because meanings are socially created, shared and reinforced, the Insight approach’s attention to the impact meanings have on the decisions we make can extend the discoveries of cognitive psychology to contexts of social conflict. Questions that explore how meanings are made, the contours of the interpretive frameworks in operation, how those frameworks interpret the decisions and actions of others to be threatening to deeply mattering values, what dire future is

being imagined as a necessary outcome should the decisions and actions a group is fighting against come to pass. When examined how likely are those decisions and actions of the threatening group? What are their motivations? Are the meanings that one group is making of those decisions congruent with the meanings the other group is making about them? When insights about new and newly relevant information are generated around answers to these questions, the certain threat and hardened positions that characterize conflict positions start to shift. Space begins to open up for new possibilities for interpretation.

Because meanings are created and reinforced socially, and particularly because conflict attitudes are so defensive that letting them go is a move laden with threatening consequences, creating this space for insight is a challenge.

What This Could Mean for Northern Ireland

The strife that plays out in the six counties of Northern Ireland is what remains of a strife that flourished between the British and Irish for centuries. Even before the Reformation and the bitterness that emerged between Catholics and Protestants, British colonialists in Ireland developed a conventional wisdom that portrayed the native Irish as barbarous heathens (Liechty and Clegg 2001, 72). The dominance of the Protestant Church of Ireland that emerged after the Reformation merely confirmed the prejudice—the Irish were not only barbarous because they were Irish, but because they were Catholic. The majority of Irish were dominated by a powerful minority of Anglo-Irish colonialists and suffered as an underclass until the late 1800's when the push for independence, or "Home Rule," gained momentum. Protestant unionists were unhappy

and feared that the establishment of Irish self-government would lead to an Irish dominated state and would strip the powerful Protestants of their dominant positions (Hennessey 1997). In response, England granted Home Rule in 1921 to all of Ireland but Ulster, the six rich counties in the North that make up Northern Ireland. England kept those as her own to quell her loyal, island-dwelling subjects. In the North, the Protestants comprised the majority and retained their positions of power, though the reality that they were a minority on the island was never a far thought from their minds. The Irish who lived in the North continued to be treated as second-class citizens until civil rights efforts in the 1960s lead to the most recent troubles, which ravaged the small country for over thirty years.

The dominant interpretive framework of each side is that it has been victim to the domination of the other and so has taken strides to resist. The Catholic nationalists' demand for civil equality in the British state of Northern Ireland was taken by Protestant unionists as a campaign against themselves, who as a minority on the island projected that Catholic equality would certainly end in a Catholic overtaking of their rightful status as presiders over the loyal British land of the north and end in their certain subjugation by a lesser class (Hennessey 1997). The fight that ensued hardened these threats, crystallized sectarianism, and drew impenetrable divisions between communities.

The final 1997 paramilitary cease-fire and the 1998 Belfast Agreement stopped the fighting in Northern Ireland considerably. The last civilian targeted bombing was the Omagh bombing in 1998, which killed 28 civilians. Spats of violence here and there have continued, and the country has tried to protect its communities from one another by physically dividing them with peace walls, some over 40 feet high. The political power-

sharing that the peace delivered took almost a decade to take hold, and when it finally did in 2007, the cooperation at the levels of the elite had yet to reach the community level.

The riots of this year's Twelfth are evidence of that.

Ross calls the parades in Northern Ireland “psychocultural dramas” where “each party’s core narratives and the symbols associated with the parades invoke intense feelings, and each side respectively defends and attacks these symbols” (Ross 2001, 170). The parades are a performance of the entrenched interpretive frameworks that perpetuate the “tunnel vision” of the conflict, preserving enemy imagery and provoking defense against the meanings of that imagery.

And while the Northern Irish may not be free to make their own meanings—it is clear that they have deeply rooted social narratives out of which have grown systems and structures for how to live—they are free to reflect on those meanings. The automaticity that cognitive psychology observes in the operation of the frameworks that give meaning to perceptions can be interrupted by curiosity, as the Insight approach has shown.

Liechty and Clegg’s five-year study of how reconciliation might be possible in Northern Ireland finds that “understanding sectarianism, what it is and how it functions, is a crucial element to any movement beyond it” (Liechty and Clegg 2001, 147). They find that integral to the dynamics of sectarianism are the ways in which every day norms and logics perpetuate division and threaten sustainable peace. Logical reactions and responses to issues of basic security and others maintain the system of sectarianism which has become “reified” in its externalization as a “living and even willful entity” animated by the choices of individuals (Liechty and Clegg 2001, 14). Each person is part of the maintenance of the sectarian system through both action and inaction. And they

argue that any pursuit of locating the essence or fundamental within it would be futile because sectarianism, like an ecosystem, depends on every aspect of those relationships within itself that sustain itself.

Over hundreds of dialogue and focus sessions with singular and mixed groups of Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists on the topic of sectarianism, which created space to be curious about the pervasive sectarian system, Liechty and Clegg were able to distill destructive patterns of relating that maintained it. Among these were a culture of blame; an overwhelming sense that the way things are cannot be changed; a feeling that basic needs are under threat and therefore violence (and other destructive relating) is justified; a negative rather than positive identity—suggesting that identity is sustained by what one is not, rather than by what one is, and therefore creates a need for an enemy in order to maintain a sense of self and community; a singular frame of reference for interpreting the other; and a pattern of belittling, dehumanizing and demonizing. What this tells us is that in addition to a negotiated peace agreement that leads the country on a political level to overcome division, efforts to reflect on and generate curiosity and insight about the interpretive frameworks, schemas, and “sociopsychological infrastructures,” that maintain the dynamics of sectarian division on the ground will be critical to the sustainability of any political peace, because reconciliation is a profound and social wide shift in attitudes and values that have been deeply rooted.

To create the environment where insights into interpretive frameworks can be generated in a social setting and interpretive shifts can be sustained will take ingenuity. It will take asking questions as to how meaning is created, what values motivate meaning, and how meaning is transmitted within a particular culture. Liechty and Clegg’s work

offers some suggestions based in their explorations of meaning within Northern Irish communities, which include promoting empathy and creating space for positive identity. The further relevant question that the Insight approach directs us toward is how to promote empathy and create space for positive identity when our cognitive operations automatically reject those efforts as contradictory to what our minds know — that Catholics are no-good and that my identity is strong over and against another. The answer of the Insight approach is that to create that space requires not just understanding sectarianism, but de-linking the threats that maintain it. Through curious inquiry into the meanings of interpretive frameworks insights are generated about whether what we know to be the way things are and what we are certain is going to happen if we stop defending are necessarily so. In deep-rooted, violent conflict, where threat is pervasive to the point that it takes on an externalized life of its own, inducing insight generation to de-link threat will require multiple platforms. But unpacking, attending to and being curious about the meanings that create the defensive and aggressive interactions of conflict is imperative if we are to successfully disengage conflict so that peace and compatible social order can be possible.

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