



# Collective Memories and Community Interventions: Peace Building in Northern Ireland

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines the role of community interventions in post-conflict settings. The focus is on peacebuilding through the shaping of collective memories, achieved through the transformation of social ties. By addressing community interventions, this paper opens the black box between interventions by formal institutions (such as peace treaties, trials, or truth commissions) and outcomes. It is based on a study of one specific cross-community initiative in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which – in 2012 – employed a Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit. Document analysis is complemented by interviews with participants and organizers to reveal the role of pedagogical practices, mediated by cohort effects, in facilitating cultural transformation through group interactions. This paper suggests how community interventions can change collective memories, cultural trauma, and related identities of the conflict, away from their polarized and polarizing forms, and it explores implications for future peace and social justice.*

**KEYWORDS** collective memory; community groups; violence; peace; Northern Ireland

## Introduction

Martha Minow (1998) stresses that the past century is the first in which humankind has engaged in systematic efforts to develop institutions that seek to prevent, or at least to respond to, mass violence. These efforts have taken many forms including criminal prosecutions, peace treaties, truth commissions, vetting procedures, memorials, apologies, and reparation payments. Some of the new institutions qualify as transitional justice mechanisms as they seek to smooth the transition from repressive regimes to

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ISSN: 1911-4788



democracy or from mass violence to peace (Torpey, 2006). At times, they involve reparations, but systematic redistribution of economic resources is often missing. Today, scholars are studying the effectiveness of such interventions. Some identify improvements of human right records and democracy scores following interventions, such as trials and truth commissions (Sikkink, 2011) and prosecutions by the International Criminal Court (Jo & Simmons, 2016).

The study of outcomes of transitional justice at times falls short on two accounts. First, it focuses on the improvements of civil and political rights, but it pays less attention to the enhancement of social justice, of a fair and equitable division of resources, opportunities and privileges in society (Atuahene, 2016; Miller, 2008; Woolford, 2016). Second, while providing important insights, such scholarship often leaves unopened the black box (the meso- and micro-processes at work) between macro-interventions and outcomes. This omission has motivated researchers to examine, for example, whether trials deter potential future perpetrators given the risk of punishment, or whether trials generate collective memories and representations that delegitimize grave human rights offenses (Savelsberg, 2015; Savelsberg & King, 2011). In this paper, we therefore examine the role of community-based initiatives in shaping collective memories in ways that contribute to peace. They are part of the black box between formal peace treaties that enable and inspire them on the one hand and the outcome of transitional justice interventions, their effects on the memory of violence and peace on the other. In doing so, we respond to John Brewer's (2013) call for research at the intersection of sociology and peace studies, with a focus on civil society.

We conducted research in Northern Ireland in 2017 and 2018, as the country approached the mark of 20 years past the Northern Ireland peace agreement (April 10, 2018). We conducted 21 interviews with participants and leaders of these initiatives, supplemented by archival work at the Northern Ireland Political Collection in Linen Hall Library.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we focus on one of many civil society initiatives, the Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit, a peace-making instrument as deployed in 2012 by Bridge of Hope in collaboration with two prominent women's centers. The Toolkit emerged as a collaboration between Bridge of Hope, a subdivision of Ashton Community Trust, and the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University. It introduced transitional justice concepts to community members and facilitated conversations with community groups over a seven-week program. Organizers were "from various republican and loyalist districts [and] were experienced community activists involved in truth seeking campaigns, women's issues, restorative justice initiatives, community policing and trauma services" (Rooney, 2017, p. 5). An initial pilot in 2011 was followed by a second

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<sup>1</sup> The Linen Hall Library is the oldest library in Belfast, founded in 1788. The Northern Ireland Political Collection contains 350,000 items related to the Troubles and the peace process. The collection has begun to be digitized and available via [dividedsociety.org](http://dividedsociety.org)

initiative in 2012, involving two women's centers, the Falls Women's Center in the Republican and the Shankill Women's Center in the Unionist sections of Belfast. More will be said about these Centers below.

In the following, we first review previous work on the cultural effects of formal interventions and explore how these effects play out in the context of community groups in post-conflict settings. Following an introduction of the Northern Ireland and Belfast setting and the legacy of "The Troubles," we present the core of this contribution: an analysis of the Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit and its cultural consequences, specifically its contributions to a form of collective memory that stabilizes peace.

### **Toward Cultural Consequences of Interventions in Violence**

Extant research on consequences of institutional interventions in situations of mass violence has focused on formal processes such as court trials or truth commissions as opposed to community processes. Several studies identify correlations between transitional justice and positive human rights and democracy outcomes (e.g., Jo & Simmons, 2016; Sikkink, 2011). Explanations typically focus on the notion of deterrence, the assumption that rational actors will refrain from mass violence in fear of retribution. Other work instead examines the cultural effects of transitional justice mechanisms, especially the traces such interventions leave in collective representations and memories of past violence and the resulting delegitimization of repression and mass violence (Osiel, 1997; Pendas, 2006; Savelsberg & King, 2011).

This body of work builds on classic sociological ideas in both Durkheimian and Habermasian traditions, focusing on rituals and communication respectively, and on hopes expressed in the 1940s by politicians and jurists such as President Franklin Roosevelt and Justice Robert Jackson. Judge Samuel Rosenman, Roosevelt's confidant, characterized the president's expectations for a criminal trial against Nazi leaders thus:

He was determined that the question of Hitler's guilt – and the guilt of his gangsters – must not be left open to future debate. The whole nauseating matter should be spread out on a permanent record under oath by witnesses and with all the written documents. (Landsman, 2012, p. 74)

Much recent research has focused on a history writing function of interventions after mass violence, the construction of a collective memory of past evil that, some argue, will reduce the likelihood of future offending (Osiel, 1997; Pendas, 2006; Savelsberg & King, 2011). Following Lewis Coser (1992), we understand collective memory as knowledge about the past that is shared, mutually acknowledged, and reinforced by a collectivity. A specific type of collective memory is a collectivity's cultural trauma, memory of a situation that is "a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and

c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its cultural presuppositions" (Smelser, 2004, p. 44). Jeffrey Alexander adds that "cultural trauma" is anchored in Durkheim's classical idea of religious imagination. Such imagination forms "inchoate experiences, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape" (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 9). In other words, what once was diffuse and chaotic in the minds of those who were exposed to horrific events begins to take shape, to become focused and organized. Only after such transformation are groups able to communicate effectively about terrifying experiences, potentially sharing them with others who were not directly involved.

Importantly in this context, cultural trauma can be shaped by interventions:

The idea that the mediated production of common memory narratives can and should be 'engineered' (orchestrated, managed) in order to become productive of a peaceful and just co-existence, rather than a source of division, remains one of the underlying assumptions of (post-) conflict governance. (Rigney, 2012, p. 252)

Examples of successful transformations of memory in fact abound for the level of macro-interventions. The Nuremberg Trial, for example, enhanced moral outrage over of the Holocaust and further advanced global consensus regarding the dignity of individuals. The process worked through symbolic extension of the Shoah and psychological identification with the victims. Consequently, members of a world audience became traumatized by an experience that they themselves had not shared (Alexander et al., 2004). In these terms, the punishment of leading Nazi perpetrators by the International Military Tribunal (IMT) and by subsequent trials was performative. It provided, consistent with a semiotic model of social life, images, symbols, totems, myths, stories, and it thus contributed to the formation of a collective memory of evil (see also Savelsberg, 2015, Savelsberg & Nyseth-Brehm, 2015; Smith, 2008).

While neglecting the role of community processes, work on formal interventions – such as trials and truth commissions – nevertheless provides inspiration and delivers questions to be asked: What types of suffering are participants in community interventions aware of, and how do they categorize them? How do they conceive of victims and perpetrators? Where do they lay blame? How do they imagine the conditions of the conflict? In short, what collective memories, cultural trauma, and identities emerge, and what are the consequences for future peace?

Our research identified answers to such questions for community interventions that unfolded in the context of a formal institutional response, specifically a peace agreement that involved reduced prison sentences for those who had killed in the context of The Troubles. We thus take seriously "the local turn in peacebuilding" (Bräuchler & Naucke, 2017; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015) and the "micropolitics of reconciliation" (Theidon, 2006, 2012). Theidon, in her research on Peru and Colombia, critiques transitional justice programs that "by reducing DDR [Disarmament,

Demobilization and Reintegration] to ‘dismantling the machinery of war,’... fail to adequately consider how to move beyond demobilizing combatants to facilitating social reconstruction and coexistence” (Theidon, 2007, p. 67). She calls for more attention to community processes that follow the end of violence, specifically among neighbors, coworkers, and fellow citizens. We here heed this call.

Calls like Theidon’s from the transitional justice literature are aligned with general sociological thought and research on interaction within community groups as sites of cultural creation and mediation indeed shows a productive way forward. Sociologist Gary Alan Fine writes, “interaction provides a dynamics for social life but lacks the structure on which action creates stability and self-reference. Groups provide this structure” (Fine, 2012, p. 172). Fine describes the examination of groups as a “meso-level of analysis” between individual and macro approaches which enriches both structural and interactional approaches. Through groups, culture can thus solidify, becoming “sedimented” in the terms of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967; for sedimentation of knowledge about mass violence see Savelsberg, 2021). Relatedly, Pachucki and Breiger (2010) calls for the joint examination of cultural sociology and social network studies, where the former addresses the “dynamic process of meaning making” while the latter explores “how this dynamism influences, and is influenced by, the structure of social ties, either at the egocentric or whole-network level” (p. 206).

In light of these arguments, we set out to examine post-conflict Northern Ireland and community interventions within this context, specifically the Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit program involving the Falls Women’s Center and the Shankill Women’s Center. Some words about the two centers are in order before we speak to our data and methods. The Shankill Women’s Center describes itself and its history, on its website (Shankill Women’s Centre, n.d.), as “formed in 1987 as a locally based group to provide education for women.” Its identity is that of “a key provider for training, health awareness, childcare and young women’s activities in the Greater Shankill and beyond” and as “providing an accessible resource and development support for women in Greater Shankill and beyond.” Similarly, the Fall’s Women’s Center, according to its website,

...was established in 1982 in West Belfast by local women in order to improve the quality of life for women and their families living in areas of extreme deprivation and most affected by the conflict. It is based in West Belfast, a community recognised as one of the poorest in Western Europe... The Falls Women’s Centre is a community development organisation which, through long term experience and expertise, responds quickly and appropriately to community needs... The Falls Women’s Centre/Ionad Mhná na bhFál is involved in the economic development of the community and continues to support women’s development within the area through the provision of training, education, childcare, advice, advocacy, counselling, health and well-being. (Falls Women’s Centre, n.d.)

Both women's centers are thus core transmitters of national peace initiatives to the local level. Importantly, they work in settings that are characterized by poverty and that have experienced excessive levels of violence. Their work is thus oriented toward stabilizing peace and advancing social justice (for details on the socio-ecological setting in which both Centers are nested see further information below).

### **Data and Methods**

We conducted research for this article over three months in 2017 and a supplemental visit at the end of 2018. We examined three cross-group community initiatives suggested by local academics, social leaders, and politicians. This article highlights one of them, the Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit. Our participant observation and informal conversations across a range of initiatives help place this case in a broader context.

Participants in the Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit were recruited from the women's centers, each on one side of the divide. As part of the seven-week program, the participating women individually filled out a series of worksheets, called "Tools" (see Figure 1). In Tool 1, facilitators ask participants to list significant milestones in the past to highlight the extensive knowledge that they bring to the program. While anonymized, information listed about the respective women's center allowed us to identify whether the authors came from the Shankill or Falls centers. The Tool 1 document represents how participants experienced and interpreted the different periods of the conflict and the transition to peace. We analyzed 20 Tool 1 documents completed in 2012 as part of the initiative we are examining. Additionally, we asked our interview participants in 2017 and 2018 to fill out Tool 1 documents as part of the interview. Our analysis thus measures the distinct collective memories of the two groups as recorded in these documents, highlighting the similarities within groups and divergences across them.

We supplemented the analysis of the Tools by conducting eight interviews with participants and organizers of the Grassroots Transitional Justice Toolkit and 13 interviews with participants in related community initiatives. Organizers were social activists with long-term experience in a range of community projects. Our interview guide asked respondents to share their personal trajectory in the social sector, and to describe how the Grassroots Transitional Justice Toolkit fit in this broader context.

To satisfy concerns with human subjects and in the interest of research ethics, we applied for permission with the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota. In line with conditions of the permission, we anonymize interviewees in this text. No actual names or other identifiers are being used, a precaution that is especially important in the conflicted setting in which these women work. Additionally, given the small group of participants in the initiative, we take the further step of presenting quotes independently

rather than associating them with pseudonyms as the combination of quotes could facilitate identification.

Figure 1. Example worksheet or “tool.”

**TOOL 1**  
*Dig Where You Stand*

Complete the grid below to provide a checklist of grassroots group resources, knowledge and experience.

**GRASSROOTS GROUP RESOURCES**

Key conflict events & experiences	PERSONAL / ORGANISATIONAL	POLITICAL	LOCAL	GLOBAL
1960s-70s				
1980s-90s				
2000s-10s				

Analysis of the Tools and interviews were finally supplemented by an analysis of archival documents kept by Linen Hall Library (for broader context), by Bridge of Hope, and the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University (specifically on the Toolkit).

**The Troubles in Northern Ireland**

A summary of historical background and introduction of core actors is warranted. The most recent bout of violence in Northern Ireland known as The Troubles erupted in the 1960’s and persisted for three decades until the 1998 peace accord. While its origins are contested, we can identify three conflicting parties: those seeking independence of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom (Nationalists), those wishing to remain part of the UK (Unionists),

and the British government itself.<sup>2</sup> While the conflict is not religiously motivated, the political groupings strongly overlap with religious affiliation. Catholics tend to be Nationalists, seeking an independent, united Ireland, whereas Protestants tend to be Unionists, seeking to remain part of the UK.

Several armed paramilitary groups developed throughout the conflict, including the Irish Republican Army (IRA) on the Republican (Nationalist) side and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Defense Association (UDA) on the Loyalist (Unionist) side. The estimated number of killings exceeds 3,600. In addition, as many as 50,000 people were “physically maimed or injured, with countless others suffering psychologically..., a legacy that continues to shape the post-1998 period,” the period following the 1998 Peace Accord (BBC, 2018). The numbers are horrific, especially considering the small size of the Northern Irish population (just over 1.5 million).

Throughout the conflict, community groups built ad-hoc structures to protect themselves from violence. Most barriers are located in Belfast and owned by a range of government entities (including the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Office, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive), and a few are in the hands of private entities (Northern Ireland Foundation, 2017; Belfast Interface Project, 2017, p. 9). These barriers include fencing and approximately 21 noncontiguous miles of “peace walls,” some over 15 feet high, separating highly concentrated neighborhoods of Catholics and Protestants.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 1990, even before the peace agreement, Northern Ireland established the Community Relations Council, a government body to promote positive inter-community relations. A central inspiration for this initiative was Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Hughes & Knox, 1997, pp. 331-332). Community initiatives intensified after the peace agreement of 1998, signed by most of Northern Ireland’s political parties, as well as the British and Irish governments. These initiatives were encouraged by politicians who, while often stirring up ethnic conflict, are also in a position to soothe it, as indicated by the following quotation from an interview with a Unionist:

A lot of people listened to the political representatives at that time. I know the Good Friday Agreement was voted for and agreed to, but it wasn’t by big, big margins. And a lot of people within Protestant areas didn’t understand the Good Friday Agreement. They didn’t read it. They voted along the way their politicians wanted them to vote. (Shankill Women’s Center interview, 2017)

In line with Lazarsfeld et al.’s (1944) classic notion of the two-step flow of communication – the idea that mass media do not reach seemingly monadic

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<sup>2</sup> McEvoy et al. (2006) caution against seeing the conflict as two-sided (between Protestant/Unionists and Catholic/Nationalists) as that description obscures the political violence of various State agencies including the British Army and local Police.

<sup>3</sup> Resulting segregation was (and still is) intensified by a system in which schools were based on religious denomination, Catholic or Protestant.

recipients directly, but that media messages are filtered through informal group communication – interviewees from both communities described how they not only received information about the peace agreement as presented in TV programs, but also processed it through conversations with family, friends, and fellow activists.

As we focus on community initiatives, we zoom in on the experiences of women. The experience of The Troubles, like all histories of mass violence, was highly gendered. While men were most often the targets of killings and went to prison for their involvement with paramilitary groups, women often experienced terror in a different way. Some involved in the Toolkit project shared their experiences of suffering. Consider the following quotation from our interviews:

My earliest memories, of being 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, is sort of sitting in the middle of the night with a blanket around you and all these guns in the middle of the living room and these soldiers with their faces blackened going through your house and searching it and wrecking it. And then, when it was done, your mommy closed the door and your mommy put you to bed. So, I grew up with the view that the British Army was the enemy. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

However, women not only suffered, but they also kept their communities and society going, often under substantial hardship, as a quotation from another interview illustrates.

The women in the community had to get their money, make it go through, school lunches, bus fares, look after the kids, go and visit their husbands, get them money for their new jeans and their new Oxford boots. They had to look where their next meal was coming from. The men in prison knew where their next meal was coming from, and they knew they were going to get three meals a day. So, there was a lot of work with women in the community while the men were in prison. Men don't know those stories. (Shankill Women's Center Interview, 2017)

Importantly though, women did not fight this struggle alone. Community ties were crucial, and they intensified through organized initiatives, even before the peace agreement.

### *A Tale of Two Women's Centers*

The 1980's saw the establishment of two women's centers in Belfast, which we described above. We here add some information on the contexts in which they were established. The Shankill Women's Center is located on Shankill Road, in a predominantly Protestant/Unionist area. Falls Women's Center is sited on Falls Road, in a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist section of the city. Both roads start near the center of the city, just a quarter of a mile apart, and diverge as they move west and north. Both pass through relatively poor and

highly segregated neighborhoods in western, northern, and central Belfast, neighborhoods that suffered more fatalities and were disproportionately affected by the conflict compared to the southern and eastern portions of the city (Mesev et al., 2009, p. 901).

A report from Bridge of Hope, the community organization leading the Toolkit program, describes these two neighborhoods as follows:

The estimated population of Shankill ward in 2010 was 3,672. It ranks 4<sup>th</sup> out of 580 in the multiple deprivation measure, 6<sup>th</sup> in the income deprivation table, 11<sup>th</sup> for employment, 5<sup>th</sup> for health deprivation and disability deprivation, and first in education skills and training disability... The estimated population of Falls ward in 2010 was 4,865. It ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in the multiple deprivation measure, 4<sup>th</sup> in the income deprivation table, 3<sup>rd</sup> for employment, top (1) for health deprivation. (Bridge of Hope, 2014, p. 5)

Growing up through The Troubles, many women in the two Centers had experienced interruptions of their education and occupational development. Yet, their passion and commitment led them to push on with their work for the community. The Centers have a mix of staff and volunteers, although these are shifting categories as many staff work on three-month contracts without knowing whether there would be available funding beyond their contract.

The Women's Centers were exceptional in that they maintained cross-community relationships through the height of the conflict, fostering solidarity with each other to advocate for women's issues. The Falls Women's Center and Shankill Women's Center even turned down scarce and precarious funding if it had been denied to the other center. One interviewee discussed how closely the two Centers collaborated and supported each other:

We had good relationships working together for years. We actually campaigned together for funding, if one group wasn't getting it, the other group wasn't taking it. So, the history had been there with the Shankill and Falls for years, for the existence of the Women's Centers. (Shankill Women's Center Interview, 2017)

In part, the two Centers managed to maintain this unique level of communication at the height of the conflict according to one interviewee because many discounted their work as that of "just a bunch of women" (Shankill Women's Center Interview, 2017). This tendency to minimize the role of women allowed them to continue working together under the radar. Similarly, Sara McDowell reports how efforts of Catholic women in Derry who formed a community organization with the name Peace People has been "quintessentially feminised under the rubric of 'female principles' of non-violence and an instinctive maternal response to protect" (McDowell, 2008, p. 339), thus downplaying their political positions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a review of women's activism during The Troubles, see McWilliams (1995).

Despite such long-standing collaboration and solidarity between the two Centers, the Peace Agreement allowed for new initiatives, including the Toolkit project. Some of the participants in the Toolkit indeed experienced interaction with women from the other side of the divide for the first time thanks to this community intervention. One interviewee reported:

I had never crossed the divide and met a Protestant woman and made a Protestant friend. I think I had worked with a girl once, and that was like a short interlude kind of thing, but it never really developed. Not through choice, just dynamics of work. But I had never, ever, sat in a room with Protestant people and shared what had been going on. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

Women who had previously interacted with women from the other Center had already managed to bracket the wider conflict and their political identifications as Nationalists or Unionists. The context of the peace agreement and the Toolkit program now allowed them to address explicitly the conflict for the first time: "whilst the women had worked together since the 1970s on women's center issues such as domestic violence and abuse, and childcare, this was the first time they actually spoke about the conflict together" (Bridge of Hope Staff Interview, 2017). This situation also provided fertile grounds for the development of innovative programs such as The Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit.

### **The Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit**

Nearly 15 years after the 1998 peace accord, a civil society-university collaboration initiated a peacebuilding community project called The Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit. The Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University and Bridge of Hope designed the Toolkit "to empower, equip and encourage people in resource limited, post-conflict settings to consider how the tools of transition work in practice" (Rooney, 2016). Bridge of Hope, a department of Ashton Community Trust, is a community health and well-being service that supports individuals affected by the conflict who are of poor physical and emotional health. Irene Sherry, as Head of Victims & Mental Health Services at Bridge of Hope, describes the extensive behind-the-scenes-work that led up to the Toolkit:

For many years I would have been engaged with colleagues ... who would have been trying to drive peace and community development at the local levels. But for many years it wasn't safe to talk about it... We had been doing so much work in the background, for perhaps ten years at that stage, and it was time to start bringing the work into the open... I don't want to sound simplistic, but there were very difficult conversations that had to take place in rooms. And that has been the backbone to where we felt then that transitional justice could develop peace and reconciliation further in [these] areas. (Irene Sherry, Interview, 2017)

In 2011, Sherry invited Senior Lecturer Eilish Rooney from the Transitional Justice Institute to discuss establishing a community process. Rooney was an ideal partner as she is recognized for her community work, and she served – through her simultaneous academic affiliation and community engagement – as a solid bridge between transitional justice scholarship and working-class communities unfamiliar with the concept of transitional justice, exactly those communities which Bridge of Hope targeted for the initiative. Born out of this experience, the core principles were easily established. The Toolkit takes a bottom-up approach and expands the range of people and topics typically involved in transitional justice. It highlights that “past accountability and social justice affects everyone” (Rooney, 2016), and that “life experiences and skills are often taken for granted and not considered the valuable resources they undoubtedly are” (Rooney 2014). The Toolkit empowers participants to see their personal experiences as relevant for these larger topics. Additionally, “each stage of the Toolkit programme... is imbued with intersectional alertness. In practice, this means paying attention to the significance of gender, class and identity in shaping justice aspirations and everyday experience” (Rooney, 2017, p. 16). Our own analysis builds upon the ways in which these multiple facets of identity can facilitate conversation across one divide.

An internal report describes the Toolkit thus:

It is about locating and listing the significant milestones from the past that relate to a community, to what was happening ‘across the divide’, across the island regionally and globally. The toolkit enables participants to map their individual experiences within a frame that expands from the personal to the political and from the social to the global. In this way we see ‘at a glance’ as it were which experiences are most significant for some people, which were common to all and how these relate to what was going on in the world at the time. (Bridge of Hope, 2014, p. 4)

In practice, participants attend a seven-week program where facilitators use the Toolkit to engage them in discussions on transitional justice at the local level. Eight tools are titled: (1) Dig Where You Stand, (2) The Five Pillars: Global Glimpse, (3) Institutional Reform, (4) Truth, (5) Reparations, (6) Reconciliation, (7) Prosecution and Amnesty, and (8) Map Making – From the personal to the political. The seven-week program began with Tool 1: Dig Where You Stand, to emphasize the value of the participants’ own knowledge and experiences to the program. They were invited to share their personal experiences and recollections of significant historical events to initiate the group’s discussions. The subsequent six tools guided participants through key transitional justice concepts, including the use of case studies from conflicts across the globe. The use of international cases served to illustrate transitional justice concepts and to create a temporary analytical distance. The international cases allowed participants to engage with the ideas one step removed from their lived experience and return to it with fresh eyes. The aim was to demystify and ground the legal jargon of transitional justice to make it accessible and

meaningful for community members. The final tool culminated the program by once more facilitating the making of connections between participants' personal experiences and broader historical events.

### **Conflicting Collective Memories**

The initial development of the Toolkit was challenging for Bridge of Hope and the Transitional Justice Institute. This did not come as a surprise because conflict and segregation had resulted in radically conflicting collective memories among Unionists versus Nationalists. Consider the following quotation from an interview:

When you are coming from different working-class areas from PUL or CNR constituencies,<sup>5</sup> their memories or their experiences are going to be different in terms of what they recall. (Bridge of Hope Staff Interview, 2017)

In preparation for the full program, the Toolkit organizers were aware of such conflicting memories. They invited each of the Women's Centers to participate individually in an abbreviated version called a "residential fast track" to determine whether they would be interested in committing to the entire program. The "residential" was held on an island nearly two hours from Belfast. This location gave the encounter a sense of separation from the daily conflicts of everyday life. Participants took a brief ferry ride, which engendered a liminal state for cultural transformation. Participants "would always highlight the disconnect from the land and how it gives them permission to open up and talk... [and the distance] brings about great transformational change for them. They feel like no one is near them, they have free space to engage and talk" (Bridge of Hope Staff interview, 2017). Both the distance from Belfast and the water separating the island from the land on which their everyday lives unfolded – symbolically separating them from the everyday – played a key role in how women interpreted the situation, the implicit norms guiding their behavior, and by consequence, how they interacted with each other.

Following the residential fast track, both centers agreed to participate jointly in the full Toolkit program. We analyzed documents from the 2012 program to understand what knowledge about the violence women brought into the program, how they conceived the nature of the pain, the victims, and the responsible actors. As a baseline of memories and collective representations we examined the first tool of the seven-week series of the Toolkit, "Dig Where You Stand" (see Figure 1).

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<sup>5</sup> PUL and CNR are abbreviations that stand for the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community and the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community, respectively.

The Tool asks participants individually to list significant events experienced during The Troubles, categorizing them as personal/organizational, political, local, or global. Responses manifested how participants saw the world, specifically the sectarian conflict. By analyzing the similarities within each group and the differences between the two groups, the Tool thus provides a snapshot of each group's distinct collective memory of the conflict, two decades after the peace accord.

One interviewee described how the nature of the conversation in a cross-community setting shaped the statements she made. As she addressed her reactions and motivations to speak, she implied she would likely not have raised certain talking points with an audience differently composed.

You went around the table in *Dig Where You Stand*, and obviously, when someone from the other community was bringing up something, I had to, my mindset was going, tit for tat. She's bringing that up, I'm bringing that up. I'm bringing that up. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

If one side mentions a bomb that caused them suffering, the other would "retaliate" with a story about a different bomb that caused them suffering. In describing her experience, a woman does not recite a fixed recollection of the past. Instead, a range of factors informs her account, including the location and audience. This not only affects the expressed narration to the audience, but it also shapes the speaker's own understanding of the experience, making particular aspects more or less salient in the speaker's memory through the repetition. This tit-for-tat reaction illustrates how these types of cross-group interactions can backfire, reinforcing division rather than permitting a transformation of perspectives.

Differences in responses between members of the two groups are of two kinds. First, members of each group tended to list events that affected their own community rather than the other. For example, while women from both Unionist and Nationalist backgrounds mentioned bombings as significant events, members of each community were more likely to remember a bomb that had targeted their own community rather than one that affected the other. Specifically, women from the Nationalist Falls neighborhood were more likely to mention the Omagh bomb, in County Tyrone, placed by dissident Republicans opposed to the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) cease-fire. Women from the Unionist Shankill Women's Center instead were more likely to mention the Shankill Bombing, an attempt to assassinate the leadership of Loyalist Ulster Defense Association (UDA) paramilitaries, who the assailants thought were meeting in a room above a fish shop.

Second, when listing the same events, members of the two communities tended to categorize the events differently. Consider memories of the Hunger Strikes that protested the treatment of Nationalist prisoners as ordinary criminals rather than as political prisoners. While women from both Shankill and Falls mentioned the Hunger Strikes, women from the Unionist Shankill

neighborhood often listed the strike as either a political or a local event (taking place in their neighborhood), whereas women from the Nationalist Falls neighborhood nearly always categorized them as “personal or organizational” (e.g., Shankill or Falls Women’s Center) events. The latter categorization is easy to explain: in many instances, the Falls women had fathers, brothers, or husbands imprisoned along with the hunger strikers. Instead, for women in the Shankill, the hunger strikes were undoubtedly a meaningful event, but they did not carry the same emotional charge.

We find similar differences between collective memories of the “Holy Cross incident” by Unionist versus Nationalist women. Holy Cross school, a Catholic primary school for girls, was located in a Protestant area. In spring 2001, neighborhood residents began picketing the school, claiming regular attacks by Catholics against their homes. After summer vacation, hundreds of loyalist protesters went further. They tried to stop the schoolchildren and their parents from walking to school through their area. Riot police and British military intervened. In January 2002, a physical altercation between a Protestant and a Catholic outside the school sparked a large-scale riot in the area and attacks on other schools in north Belfast. In the Tool 1 worksheets, women from the Shankill (Unionist/Protestant) Center tended to identify this conflict as a local event, whereas women from the Falls (Nationalist/Catholic) Center were more likely to categorize it as a “personal or organizational” event. For the latter, this event carried affective resonance, whereas for the former it took place in geographic proximity but not with the same emotional charge.

In short, the initial toolkit responses document the divided memories among women from Unionist and Nationalist neighborhoods of Belfast.

### **Transformation of Clashing Memories**

How then do the clashing memories become transformed through community initiatives? In the context of encounters between the two groups, we identified two key features that enabled the transformation of memory. The first is heterogeneity within each group, including inter-generational mix; and the second is the disassociation from one’s own situation through cognitive exposure to cases of violent conflicts in other countries. Playwright Bertolt Brecht would have referred to the latter as a *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), where geographic or temporal distance allows the audience to accept a message before its members recognize that the same message applies to their own situation. This technique reduces the risk of defensive reactions.

In the following, we first speak to encounters of women from the two communities with each other and then to each of the two transformative features of intergroup communication.

### *Encounters with Each Other*

Interviews indicate that encountering the “other” in the context of the Toolkit mediated memories. For instance, one participant said, “for me, coming through what I came through, I had never sat and reviewed, or thought about anything, or thinking about someone else’s heart and pain” (Falls Women’s Center Interview, 2017). The Toolkit created a safe space to present and receive information that women would not otherwise have shared.

This revelatory effect did not just operate across the divide, but even within the same community. In the setting of the Toolkit, participants felt it appropriate to reveal experiences and thoughts that they had not previously shared even with colleagues from their same Women’s Center. These revelations then shaped how participants understood the conflict, especially how the violence had affected others around them. An interviewee from the Falls Women’s Center expresses surprise at how the Toolkit facilitated learning about another colleague from her own Center.

There was a girl who done it with us, whose brothers were blown up, like IRA volunteers, but never once put it on the table. Never once turned around and said, I have a brother here who was blown up... And then you would have a (Unionist) woman stand up and say, well, actually this bar and this bar was blown up. And that was triggering acknowledgements in your head, yeah, they suffered, they got hurt too. (Falls Women’s Center Interview, 2017)

The first epiphany described in the above passage is the result of a story shared by a Nationalist woman, transforming how another Nationalist understood the conflict and its impact on others. The woman re-telling the incident is aware only of her own suffering and pain, but that self-centered memory is transformed when the other participant communicates her brother’s fate. In a diffuse and general sense, each individual surely knows that others have suffered. Yet the representations of colleagues from within the same women’s center had been formed by what they know of each other, what they had shared, but obviously not by what they had omitted. The Toolkit created a space to talk about matters that were not typically discussed within the women’s center. The Toolkit experience not only contributed to shaping how women viewed their colleagues on the other side, but it brought home how the broader conflict and peace process affected those they interacted with daily.

### *Heterogeneity by Cohorts*

Sectarian groups do not constitute homogenous blocs. Importantly, we expect differences in age cohorts within each group to affect perspectives on the conflict. This is in line with Karl Mannheim’s (1952) famous essay on generations and collective memory, in which he highlights how experiences in a person’s formative years shape the intensity of their memory (for more recent

empirical support see Schuman and Scott, 1989). In line with such expectations, age cohorts served as a wedge, working against a tit-for-tat dynamic reported by some participants in the Toolkit. They opened spaces for different perspectives regarding the conflict and the “other” they confronted. While most women participating in the Toolkit program were in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, some younger women also attended, and their perspectives were distinct. One young interviewee bemoaned that some of the older participants “were sort of entrenched in [time] twenty years ago and hadn’t really moved on.” She went on to say,

It was good to be able to put in the perspective, both, a personal perspective of being a young person living through the Troubles, but also someone who works with young people now. (Shankill Women’s Center Interview, 2017)

A recognition of the role played by younger participants in the Toolkit program was echoed in an interview from the Falls Women’s Center when the respondent described the direction of a conversation and the change induced by the intervention of a younger participant:

People brought up the Shankill bombing, and then in the dynamics of the group there were younger girls. And the younger girls were Protestant – Catholic friends, and they brought in their whole perspective and dynamic. And they didn’t even bring what the age group of mine was bringing.... They were opening it up to the bigger world to things, like they were opening it up to 9/11 and, famine, and stuff. They were bringing up different things into the arena, which was actually opening a think tank on it, you know... It was very good... And it was 1, 2, 1, 2, so you were dynamically broken up. So, if I was filling out something, the girl besides me was filling out something. And then the young girls were coming in with something completely different, which was a real sunshine..., which took you away from going the us and them on the trip. I have to say it was very good, it was very good. (Falls Women’s Center Interview, 2017)

These interview segments indicate how the age affinities of younger participants from the two Women’s Centers were able to dislodge the dynamic of a conversation, which may have otherwise been stuck between irreconcilable Nationalism and Unionism poles. While scholarship on collective memory shows variance across age cohorts, less work points at possible transformations because of interactions across cohorts. The above quotes from the perspectives of a younger and of an older participant indicate that, had the discussion just been between the older participants, it likely would have failed to take them out of their polarized roles and perspectives. The younger participants brought novel perspectives, a “youth perspective,” which was neither Nationalist nor Unionist but voiced from members of their respective communities. In other words, their perspectives transcended long-held notions of their respective communities. Our research suggests that there is indeed transformative potential when interactions occur across difference. Preexisting ties across the dividing lines, here within the younger generation,

are best suited to break up the stalemate in the larger divided group, consisting of older women from the two opposing sides. This clearly is a case of intersectionality at work.

*Pedagogical Practices: Encountering Other Violence*

Finally, the design of the Toolkit entailed a pedagogical practice of introducing case studies of transitional justice mechanisms following mass violence in other contexts as diverse as reparations in Argentina and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It thus provided a comparative lens and a mechanism for the participants to reframe their experience. These international case studies were introduced among the various presentations given by staff and guest speakers, and participants were frequently encouraged to connect their local experiences with international cases that they had reviewed together or were otherwise familiar with.

One of the 12 key findings identified in an internal report highlights this strategy: “comparative study of other countries coming out of conflict generated curiosity and provided a ‘real time’ sense of transitional justice in action. It encouraged and informed participants by placing the local process within a global context” (Bridge of Hope 2013, p. 7). Accordingly, The Toolkit User Guide (Rooney, 2014) continually emphasizes the need to provide both local and international examples. A staff member at Bridge of Hope confirmed this assessment in an interview, and she expanded thus:

What I have found is when you bring an international perspective, and you let them see how people have been able to do stuff, it gets people to look at things differently. It affords them the opportunity to hear and engage with each other. It is not about agreeing with one another, which is a personal choice. But it lets them hear different perspectives, and I think that in itself is a very worthwhile process. (Bridge of Hope Staff interview, 2017)

This quotation highlights one important way in which the Toolkit experience orchestrates the experience of participants to permit cultural change through shifts in collective memory that hold potential for advancing peace.

*Outcomes: Changing Memories and Identities*

Interviewees from the two Women’s Centers spoke to major transformations of their collective memories of The Troubles and the peace process because of their participation in the Toolkit. The following quotations are indicative:

I would say that was the first time ever that we had done it [communicated] as groups. Individually we might have had a conversation with different ones, but never as a group. (Shankill Women’s Center Interview, 2017)

It doesn't mean to say that we are all flowers and roses, and we all are going to live together next door. But it allows and facilitates respect. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

Interviewees confirmed that the Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit curated a unique experience of bringing together individuals as a part of groups with distinct collective interpretations of the past, facilitating dialogue with transformative potential.

A participant from the Falls Women's Center indicates how the Toolkit experience changed her perspective, in that it allowed her to recognize the pain of the other side. She said:

I didn't own a veto on 'we were a hurt people'. That hurt belongs to everybody. So, I wasn't the only one that held that kind of, not me as in, me as in representing the Nationalist – we were not the only hurt parties. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

Such shift in the understanding of victimization is a key aspect of converging collective memories. Another quotation from an interview with one of the women participants confirms this interpretation:

[The] Transitional Justice [Grassroots Toolkit] has allowed me, and it has actually, I do believe, I give it the value of actually changing, helping to change my mindset... Because I had come from a completely different mindset, of not thinking. I was straight down the line Republicanism, straight down the line, 32 county. This is what I have been doing, this is what I know they been through. And it put me through a different arena, where I had met friends, and became friends with women of the Protestant community. And listened and shared their experiences, and allowed for it. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

The Toolkit was thus a community intervention that built upon the Peace Agreement. It created a space where participants realized that the other side could also be a victim, without diminishing or negating the status of her own side's suffering. Changes in individual perspectives were the outcome of collective processes of cross-group communication. Memories that members of sectarian communities had confirmed and reinforced for decades within their communities were confronted by different memories, and – thanks to the Toolkit strategies – they were substantially transformed to provide a platform for peaceful co-existence.

Finally, in addition to changes in individual perspectives, participation in the Toolkit led to the Centers developing new programs.

So, from the Toolkit, we have developed our own programs that not only reach Shankill and Falls Women's Centers but is open to any other woman in the community. So, it did give us an idea to start a more hearty delivery of a program for peace and reconciliation. We have always done peace and reconciliation, but

you'll find that we've done peace and reconciliation on our own doorstep with our own people. (Falls Women's Center Interview, 2017)

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit experience suggests that collective memory and even cultural trauma can take new forms to promote peaceful coexistence. In the case of Northern Ireland where individuals had been either physically isolated, or where conversational taboos had kept them from engaging with the other side on topics related to the conflict, the Toolkit opened a space for re-examining the past in new ways, and with new audiences. The conflicting collective memories among sectarian communities of Northern Ireland began to transform through interactions facilitated by a community intervention that was itself made possible by a Peace Agreement at the macro-level.

As we address community-level interventions, we extend an analytical strategy used to examine the impact of formal and macro-level responses on collective memory (Savelsberg, 2015; Savelsberg & King, 2011). In Northern Ireland, where community initiatives preceded the 1998 Peace Agreement, they gained strength and transformed after its signing. This transition from formal to informal interventions made visible interactional traits, which appear conducive for constructive engagement between groups from different sides of post-conflict settings. While literature on formal interventions focuses on the link between individual and institution, our project brought to light the variance and role of social ties between individuals in informal community settings. Two features of the Toolkit program played a central role: the heterogeneity of participants across the sectarian divide and across generations, and the introduction of case studies from other conflicts. They helped to foster interactions, which softened the stark divide between groups. They transformed collective memories as they allowed for recognition of the victimhood of "the other."

The heterogeneity within groups, especially the mixing of cohorts, confirmed the significance of cohort effects postulated in classical literature (Mannheim, 1952) and supported by newer empirical work (Schuman & Scott, 1989). While past cohort literature discussed the role of cohort effects in the development of collective memory, our research explored the constructive effect inter-cohort communication can play in interactional settings for the transitions to peace.

Further, exposure to other episodes of violence from across the globe helped break up defensive reactions. Confronted with situations of sectarianism and suffering, women from the two sides of the divide now saw themselves as an entity in relation to the international case they were exposed to, a phenomenon we call – following Brecht – an alienation effect. Together, inter-cohort mix and alienation effects facilitated the emergence of new memories in the context

of group processes. They opened space for individuals to re-remember the past and to reimagine a brighter future, confirming the central role of social groups in the formation of cultural understanding (Fine, 2012). If indeed collective memory is a notion of the past that is shared, mutually confirmed, and reinforced by a collectivity (Halbwachs, 1992), then the remaking of the collectivity in community settings has the potential of generating new memories, transforming cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004), and generating new, more inclusive communities. This insight opens new directions for further exploring Pachucki and Breiger's (2010) encouragement that we bring together the adjacent fields of cultural sociology and social network studies.

We must concede, of course, that we do not know (yet) the long-term, sustained contributions that initiatives such as those of the two women's centers have on peace building. Recent events surrounding Brexit, especially occasional outbreaks of violence, show that success may be tenuous and is contingent on change in the larger political environment in which local initiatives unfold.

Finally, while the mechanisms under study in our paper are not directly concerned with social justice, we highlight that most of the women served by the Centers are of working-class background. It is not specific to the Northern Ireland experience that women at the lower end of the class structure suffer most from the violence. Thus, the conflict intensified social injustice. Efforts at reconciliation (via memory re-construction), involving them, are thus likely to contribute to increased social justice.

One of the recurring debates in post-conflict studies relating to memory focuses on the amount of memory of a violent past. Does more or less memory better advance transitions to peace. Do memorials need to ensure that past violence never be forgotten to avoid repetition of past atrocities? Or do past atrocities need to be pushed out of the limelight to allow for reconciliation? Our study suggests the flexible and transformative qualities of memory, specifically linked to interaction. The question is not how much memory, but what kind of memory collectivities cultivate. The Toolkit experience illustrates how memory can be transformed to promote peace, through community intervention in support of formal interventions such as trials, truth commissions, memorials, or peace agreements.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research toward this article was supported by a Grand Challenges grant ("Ensuring Just and Equitable Societies: Human Rights Collaborative and Faculty-Student Human Rights Laboratory to Promote Equitable Civil Society by Creating Bridges Between the Academic Community to Public Policy and Non-Governmental Actors"), University of Minnesota. During the research the authors were hosted by the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University in

Belfast. We especially thank our interviewees, brave contributors to the transition toward peace and justice, as well as Áine Magee, Eilish Rooney, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, and Irene Sherry for their support and advice along the way.

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