An Experience of Restorative Justice for the Reintegration of Violent Extremists: the ALTERNATIVE research project in Northern Ireland.

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Prison programme

The Prisoners

Background

* Over 3500 people killed in the conflict 1968 – 1998
* 966 killed by loyalists
* Sentenced Loyalist prisoners in one wing;
* Loyalist violence was a defensive reaction to the threat that the IRA posed to their people and identity.
* Nearly 10,000 loyalists were imprisoned. (12,000 republicans were imprisoned)

Prisoner group

* Serving long sentences for very serious offences;
* Differing release dates;
* 14 participated;
* Three year programme. (2010-2013)

Resistance to rehabilitation

Rehabilitation

* Assumes deficits in responsibility for offending and its consequences and an inability and/or unwillingness to change
* Assumes deficits in values and skills required to reduce the risk of re-offending
* Assumes the need to comply with the authority of the expert to assess, plan, intervene and monitor

Politically motivated offenders

* Have a clear political ideology and strategy to support their actions and its intended harmful consequences
* Victims are defined as the enemy
* Share a collective rather than individual responsibility for their actions which strengthens their commitment, loyalty and solidarity
* Tend to be intelligent and to articulate their views clearly and assertively
* Adopt an antagonistic position in relation to authority

The limitations of a strategic approach

* Rehabilitation is strategic – identify and assess risk factors, risk management and challenge or change risk factors.
* Political extremism is also strategic and the extremists will understand the approach.
* They will either resist it or play it as a game to get what they want.

An alternative?

- Does desistance theory open up space to work on offending without prisoners feeling they are being ‘rehabilitated’?
- Does restorative justice open up space for politically motivated prisoners to think about their impact on victims and to understand non-violent responses to conflict?
- Does a university course open up space for politically motivated prisoners to think about reintegration into their communities?

What is the problem?

- The person? > rehabilitation
- The ideology? > deradicalisation
- The violence? > disengagement from violence

* The person is not the problem: the problem is the problem

The Approach

* Combines ideas from desistance theory and restorative justice particularly the movement from a condemnation script to a redemption script (Maruna) and relationships with family and community.
* Focus on harm rather than the person or ideology
* Refuses to pathologise
* Does not moralise though engages in moral questions
* Is based upon a learning process – lectures, dialogue, reading, the use of DVDs, role play and assignments
* Developed into an accredited University of Ulster certificate in Restorative Practices

“I came into this blind. I didn’t really know what it was going to be about. The truth is, I enjoyed it. It was a real eye opener, it was. I didn’t have any negative experiences. I didn’t think I liked RJ before coming here, but thought I liked it in the end. Even the homework has helped me put things into perspective. You think ‘yeah, that’s what I believe’. It is good to get it down on paper.”

Objectives

- To clarify what loyalism means and what it means to be a loyalist in practice on release
- To consider how best to prepare for release
- To offer an invitation to explore a different relationship between conflict and violence through restorative practices

The Process

* Build relationships so as to get know the individuals (cf Mark Hamm)
* Download the ideology
* Test the validity and effectiveness of the ideology in practice
* Offer alternative narratives
* Test alternative behaviours through restorative justice
* Raise questions of victims

Build relationships

* Explained role and discussed the power implications
* Reviewed possible roles
* Chose learning model – student-teacher through which both parties had something to learn and to teach
* Established our commitment to non-violence
* Established respect – managing our own judgements and a commitment to listen and understand in the face of aggressive testing
* Sought and gained permission to ask difficult questions
* The emergence of rituals or etiquette

* Shaking hands
* Exchanging small talk
* Tea
* Bringing a gift
* You are visiting their ‘homes’

The importance of etiquette

Dialogue

* The dialogues were conducted at micro, meso and macro levels (Schmid 2013) Inquiry commenced at the meso-level, understanding the ideology of loyalism. This was often related to the macro-level of the history, politics and culture within which loyalism was both a product and an agent. As trust and respect developed increasingly some individuals felt free to speak at the micro-level of personal experiences and motivations.

I found I had a voice in the class
…I was allowed to say what I want.
You did not take it in a bad way.

We became more open with each other.
Not only to you but to each other.

* A sense of injustice and shame
* Characterised by deep ambivalence between the positive ‘sacred values’ (Atran) and the negative image of loyalism
* Tended to result in ‘circular’ conversations which did not progress or generate new ideas
* Created a healthy frustration

* Download the ideology

“I’ve been living in a circle and I’m trying to break out of the circle”

“This class – where Loyalism is at, where is it going, how can we make a better environment for everybody. We want that. We all want that for our kids. But we can’t have that when we have the f***** Historical Enquiries Team constantly pulling you back to the past again and again.”

* Truth – the evidence, the facts

Loyalists killed

* 692 Catholic civilians
* 128 Protestant civilians
* 93 Loyalist paramilitary
* 39 Republican paramilitary
* 14 British security

* Critical thinking

Critical thinking and alternative narratives

- Effectiveness – have your community, your family and you benefited more than lost?
- Studying the history of loyalist politics to offer alternative narratives
- Showing DVDs on restorative themes
- Asking prisoners to consider questions about victims and remorse.
- Role plays examining non-violent responses to harm

* “Nobody has ever asked me these questions”

“We know we are stereotyped. Thugs and gangsters. If you look out on that wall, you’ll see that each one of us has a blue dot by our names. That means we’re drug tested every week. Our cells are raided constantly. There’s never once been a drug found on our wing. But that is what people think. Can I ask you something: When you say to your wives that you’re coming in here to talk to Loyalists, what do they say? What do they say when you tell them we’re thinking about the future, trying to make a change? Can that be spread?”

Questions of victims

* Victims (Letshert and Staiger 2010, Walgrave 2015) include not only those that individuals have directly harmed, but the victims' families, the community in general that has witnessed and been affected by their violence and the families of the perpetrators.
* Collective responsibility v personal narratives
* The experience of being desensitised to victims is a staged process from street disorder to murder. Offers strategic intervention possibilities.
* Acceptance of remorse

“I just want to make one point about being in a room with a Catholic [facilitator]. I never done that in my life before this. Leaving this class today, I’ve got more respect for Catholics than I ever had before. There is good in Catholics. I’m willing to learn in the future. This opened my eyes to things, the crime I was in for, and things I done in the past. I can see how there were victims. I never seen it like that before. I was just doing what I was told to do. I do have a heart, I do have feelings and they’re starting to show. If there was another course [like this] I’d take it.”

Test new behaviours

* Foundation skills in restorative practices
* Role play
* Exploring non-violence in a prison and community context

“Personally, I found this well interesting. Eye opening to be honest. Things were brought out that we’d never have thought of on our own. I’d have never given any thought to restorative justice processes for one. It made us think a lot more. In here, you’re in a bubble and you just take each day as it comes. Me personally, I don’t look back and don’t think about what’s to come.”

Preparing for release

- Four prisoners successfully completed a certificate in Restorative Practices
- Five others completed one module
- Two dropped out
- Two transferred to another part of the prison
- Four have been released
- One has been in contact with us on release and is working with a community restorative justice project

Ex-combatants preventing violent extremism

Young Men and Violence project

- 6 ex-combatants (3 IRA and 3 UDA)
- Address groups of young men from militant areas and who engage in sectarian rioting and violence.
- They tell their story and emphasise how much they lost through their involvement in violent extremism.
- They challenge the glamour of violence.
- They emphasise that the conditions that led them to engage in violence have changed and that now political rather than military strategies are appropriate. (Cf Clubb 2016 on framing)

Greater Dunmurry Good Relations Partnership

* Ex-combatants from both republican and loyalist backgrounds formed an alliance to improve relations between the two communities and to prevent sectarian violence and street disorder.
* If there was any intelligence of possible conflict the activists would immediately share it through mobile phones. Local volunteers would then intervene to prevent it. (see also Gordon Clubb 2014)
* At times of tension due to political circumstances, e.g. cultural marches or protests, volunteers would act as marshals to prevent any disorder.

Community Based Restorative Justice

* 70 republican and loyalist activists most of whom are ex-combatants have been engaged in accredited training in restorative practices at Ulster University.
* Ex-combatants having undertaken the training are playing a key role in addressing harm and conflict in their communities.
* Community based restorative justice can prevent conflict in intercultural settings – South Belfast. And resolve race hate crime and conflicts when they occur – East and West Belfast and maintain order at times of political unrest.
* Communities can be activated through community conferences to address serious issues – Derry/Londonderry

* an understanding that extremis ideology can be closed and ‘go round in circles’ without getting anywhere;
* a disillusionment with violence and a recognition of the efficacy of non-violent responses to conflict or aggression yet a reluctance to disavow violence as a legitimate response in specific circumstances (cf Maruna 2000 on desistance narratives and Clubb 2016 on narrative fidelity);
* a realisation that loyalist violence had failed to prevent the rise of republicanism;
* a disillusionment with loyalist and unionist leadership;
* a wish to return to normal family life;
* a realisation that the community does not support paramilitarism;
* a wish to serve their community in different ways.

*Findings

Success factors

* Voluntary participation
* Independent of authorities
* Extensive contact
* Transparency and trust
* Respect
* Skilful facilitation
* Debriefing and support from colleagues
* Focus on behaviour rather than ideology
* Engagement with the other – people and narratives
* Connection with wider networks of support in the community
* Key restorative values: respect, relationship and responsibility

Thank you

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