**Rejection, Shaming, Enclosure, and Moving On: Variant Experiences and Meaning Among Loyalist Former Prisoners**

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**Abstract**

This article unpacks the variant meanings, perceptions, and experiences of violent enactment and stigmatic shaming among loyalists with regard to rejection, harm, and masking. What we locate is a landscape of variable emotions, experiences, neutralization techniques, dependences, and embedded forms of fatalism as well as resilience. Attending to those alternate positions and well-beings is important in considering the capacity of re-integration and the presently uneven nature of it. In adopting an account-driven format we present and analyze how involvement in violent conflict can, on the one hand, provoke persistence and senses of transitional thinking and on the other engender rejection and related fatalistic attitudes.

The calling of the paramilitary cease-fires in 1994 began a process through which armed groups worked toward cessation, de-militarization, and community-centered justice and social capital building. That process has been at times uneven, but the main paramilitary groups have decommissioned and the majority of their memberships have withdrawn from violent engagement. The political representatives of those groups were part-architects of the Belfast Agreement and have at times protected the peace process through challenging emergent wreckers and spoilers. The Belfast Agreement delivered early prisoner release and a commitment to aid re-integration and rehabilitation. The latter has remained jagged as former political prisoners are criminalized via a range of legal impediments that include access to work, adoption, insurance, and travel. More recently legislation has been passed that de-bars former prisoners who have served five years or more from acting as political advisors within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In sustaining peace and conflict transformation former paramilitary groups have remained publicly and stigmatically shamed through felon-setting and discourse-driven narratives of blame casting. Stigmatic shaming refers to acts, narrative construction, and legal impediments that divorce, both symbolically and practically, offenders from victims. Processes of denunciation promote rigid interpretations of conflict, positions blame upon sections of those embroiled in conflict, and in some cases invokes the notion that paramilitary combatants were valueless, pathological, and erroneously compulsive.

Prosecutions remain for offenses committed between 1968 and 1998. The Historical Enquiries Team (HET) formed under provisions of the Belfast Agreement and established by the Police Service of Northern Ireland aims to re-examine all deaths attributed to political conflict in Northern Ireland. This is tied to the needs and expectations of families and to resolve those needs by delivering prosecutions, ensuring deaths were adequately investigated and/or supplying families with information concerning offenses. Although the needs of victims are vital with regard to societal transition they have in certain instances become pawns in wearied discursive battles. Present case reviews and public inquiries that concern state violence/collusion are also insufficient with regard to developing wider truths about conflict assertion and harm. How present approaches to the past develop a concept of societal healing is undetermined. Moreover, dealing with victimhood via punitive measures merely undermines a more transitional justice and reconciliatory approach.

The assertion of the legitimacy of victims is more nuanced than stigmatic shaming would imply. The discord that effected violent enactment is more nuanced than the paramilitary–victim nexus. There were transgressive forms of state violence, human rights abuses, sectarian frameworks, and other societal manipulations that engendered violence. In some instances those who joined paramilitary groups did so because of intense levels of victimhood within their community. As one former loyalist prisoner asserted, “I sat and watched my father being shot. I got angry and picked up the gun. In a matter of months I went from victim to a person blamed for creating victims.”

The stigmatizing frame provides no space that appreciates a more complex gradation of the victim–offender nexus. Retribution aims to apply agency on the “behalf” of victims through a framework of offender exclusion. It out-plays the emotions of loss and the intensity of grief but withdraws that frame when victimhood induced violent reaction. This contracted selection of victims is based on bifurcation, is purposefully discerning and close-ended, and linked to a process in which victims’ voices are “often picked out, appropriated and then re-presented.” This is undertaken irrespective of alternative options and the latent value of conflict transformation that could advance more holistic forms of recovery. If anything the punitive/stigmatic method has done little to either provide an adequate voice to victims or explain the heterogeneity of victims’ voices. In many cases victims either feel re-traumatized by the inactivity of recognition or sense powerlessness regarding the histrionic politicization of their emotions. Stigma casting aims for a culture of control centered on a political and cultural miscellany and a “locus of calculation, contestation and struggle … in a fashion that is blind to some of its consequences and driven by value commitments rather than informed, instrumental calculation.”

The consequences of the past, formulated by discursive division and emotions, generally subvert any desire to aim for collectivized agency, which may instill the sense that coping and dealing with the past is emotive but also a potential site of personal and societal recovery. It entails the silencing of any aspects of conflict and victimhood incongruent to the rigidity of blame-casting and criminalization. The stigmatic shaming of former paramilitary prisoners, paralleled by criminalization, is stylized as societal values but is in fact emblematic of asocial historicism, censure, and the undermining of pluralized emotions and opinions. It subverts the capacity of bringing former paramilitaries into a re-integrative form of shaming and thus inducing cultural immobility. Twenty years on and following the establishment of power-sharing, the Belfast Agreement, and the restoration of devolution it is clear that former combatants remain labeled in a similar fashion as they were at the time of their cease-fires, as reflected in the following type of explanation of former paramilitary prisoners: “… self-pitying narratives of family break-up, parental disapproval and psychological breakdown on a ‘consequence wheel’… .”

Such evaluation fits into the discourse of rejection, which fails to interpret personal feelings and emotions concerning harm caused, of being drawn into conflict but at the same time possessing the capacity to consider the impact of harming and ultimately rejecting the utility of violence. It is also blind to how, what is read as “self- pitying,” was in fact linked to a program of activities aimed at dissuading younger generations from engaging in conflict.

Such evaluations generally omit the significant loss of family members among paramilitaries. For those who stigmatize, victimhood is static and without multiple forms of categorization. In a society in which around 1 percent of the population were killed, during conflict, it is important to note that this violence was largely contained within highly segregated and socially deprived communities. The intensity of those geographic bounds being highlighted within the former prisoner community among whom a third lost a direct family member and some 45 percent a relative. This is not to excuse violent enactment but to remind that within the assertion of stigmatic shaming such loss is silenced or omitted. Emotive and stigmatic language also underplays the high rates of suicide among former combatants including one case when a loyalist former prisoner, stigmatically chastened in local newspapers, after a verbal sectarian altercation, killed himself by immolation.

Stigmatic shaming aims to narrow the space required to adequately understand the plurality of conflict with regard to the diverse membership of paramilitary groups, the fluidity of commitment to parent groups and the desire to transform conflict from violence into representative politics or community leadership. As this article contends we require a more adequate and nuanced understanding of former combatants in order to shift beyond stale and repetitive meta-narratives based on criminalization and labeling. In this case understanding the impact of stigmatic shaming and presenting the heterogeneity of feeling and interpretation of it, among former prisoners, aids a more cautious reading.

We here present a framework of former prisoners that relates to rejection, acceptance, or part-acceptance of harming and the dismissal of having harmed, thus offering space to move beyond stigma and consider the potential for meaningful re-integrative affects.

**Understanding the Post-Imprisonment Environment**

There has been an emergent literature on the long-term impacts of conflict on the well-being, resilience, coping, and impact of aging on combatants, with a general consensus that experiences of conflict for both state/non-state combatants and civilians creates burden and distress linked to emotional and bodily trauma and other stressors. This may be related to post-traumatic disorders or other psychological harms that can manifest through irritability, memory loss, confusion, flashbacks and nightmares, and negative emotions related to isolation, self-loathing, shame, and guilt. The impact of imprisonment is also acknowledged as an aggravating factor in terms of weakening the capacity to adjust to everyday stresses following release with regard to aging, penury, family breakdown, evolving mental health issues, and reflection on past deeds whether related to harm caused, endured, or both. Symptoms of distress and personal disorder can become severe and so persistent that some former combatants resort to self-harm disempowerment and anger.

Mastering emotional well-being among former political prisoners is linked to social class background, closeness to a partner and family, inconstant senses of betrayal or loyalty to the state or community, and the capacity to emotionally re-integrate. Significant work has shown that a prisoner who fantasized positively about a return to family life compared to those who did not emerged from capture/imprisonment in a better emotional state. Other literature has revealed that prisoners whose families rejected them or who stigmatized their actions found re-integration as either difficult or unfeasible. A further support base or barrier to reintegration being the role of family members and their aptitude when coping with a former combatant suffering strain, hopelessness, and shame. The analysis of shame of capture is more common than the near invisible examination of the link between stigmatic and re-integrative shaming among former political prisoners.

Self-help operationalized by former prisoner groups and a perspective of time to be appreciated as opposed to time misplaced due to incarceration are also important variables in achieving well-being. Work conducted by the author and Jamieson and Grounds highlighted a range of problems and issues that affected both republican and loyalist former prisoners. That work indicated that loyalists were six times (republicans four times) more likely than the standard male population to use anti-depressants and tranquilizers. Around half of all respondents stated that they had been refused employment due to their imprisonment with a similar share of loyalists (49.3 percent) and a third of republicans (34.2 percent) stating that that their imprisonment had “caused moderate/severe harm to their families.” In adopting the GHQ-12 method it was found that 41.1 percent of Republicans and 38.0 percent of Loyalists scored above the threshold indicative of mental health symptoms meaning that respondents were twice as likely as the standard male population, in Northern Ireland, to express signs of emotional distress. Nearly 40 percent of loyalists stated that there were times when they had not wanted to “go on living.” Unsurprisingly, evidence of poor mental well-being was closely linked to alcohol dependency.

There has been, in comparison to republicans, a lower scale of politicization and community engagement. For loyalists the peace process was understood as a settlement whereas for republicans it is a project driven by the desire for Irish unification, social justice, and community renewal. In perceiving that the conflict was settled and that loyalists “won” few embedded themselves in a “post-conflict environment” of political action and social justice seeking. This is usually explained in the context of “the war is over” and the necessity of returning to civilian life. This is not an uncommon expression among pro-state groups for whom volunteering is based on the acts and deeds of being a combatant as opposed to anti-state forces who are more likely to operate hybrid forms of interaction that included violence and paralleled political projects. Loyalists who adopted such a hybrid approach tend to cope better than those who focus upon rejection and refutation. The qualitative analysis undertaken herein is based on interviews with 52 respondents.

We consider neutralization and responsibility/restoration linked to senses of community inclusion, self-worth, and well-being allied to self-appraisal and moral emotions. Rejection and responsibility are here viewed as products of internalization and reflective consideration. For those who display significant signs of emotional ill-health we find what Baithwaite understood as unresolved shame and a related form of embarrassment-exposure tied to masking and the non-public presentation of wrong-doing. In general, those who expressed moderate to lower scores spoke more of guilt and experiences of shaming that, although sometimes destabilizing, could affect more positive adjustment. Even though a prisoner has been sentenced, publicly accorded, and socially constructed as being guilty it is evident that guilt, rejection, and the reaction to stigmatic shaming are matters of relative personal judgment. What we find is that publicly or even privately dealing with the emotions of causing harm, what Braithwaite and others would classify as acknowledged shame, through seeking forgiveness and engaging in real or imagined forms of restorative justice is linked to better emotional well-being. As Harris and Maruna argue, understanding shame, in whatever form, should be linked to analyzing the familiarity, exposure, and reaction to it.

Although the work of criminologists tends to use a shaming framework with regard to non-political prisoners the approach undertaken here remains valid even though political prisoners operated within a movement based context. Political prisoners generally reject state and externally funded organizational forms that aim for re-integrative shaming. The use of these services would possibly impute external renditions and forms of guilt and lead to potential state surveillance and information capture. The validity of a re-integrative approach lies in how a shaming framework applies in terms of situating the individual and their response to publicly hostile forms and methods of stigmatic shaming, especially with regard to emotional well-being. After considering Northern Ireland's ad hoc and punitive approach to shaming we chart the impact of stigmatic shaming and posit the capacity/exhibition of re-integrative alternatives.

**Incongruous Approaches to Conflict Transformation and Societal Restoration**

In Northern Ireland there is constant public shaming of former prisoners tied to political contestation and media coverage but insufficient knowledge regarding how former prisoners react to it. Stigmatic shaming will also incur with the private setting of home or family. What is analyzed here is how senses and experiences of responsibility and rejection are practiced and evaluated through judgments that are attributed to an individual's experiences, conscience, reaction to stigma, and other facets of their lives. In terms of rejecting the notion of collective guilt or shame as conceptually problematic, given the heterogeneity of past membership and alternative assessments of events, it is important to highlight the assorted character of former political prisoners whose well-being, self-analysis, and worth is not merely developed along the axiom of collective group membership but instead as noted by Kutz complicity and regret are linked to affect at the individual level;

… a collective cannot respond affectively to these expressions, only its constituent members can. The lack of an affective counter-response is troubling, because the efficacy of responses of accountability partially depends upon affect. The responses of shame, guilt, and regret help to register the significance of the harm.

This is not to deny that collective agency was not based on the nature of bonding, defenderism, mobilized masculinity, and cultural and political obligations. Conflict creates social bonds that promote action, a shared discourse, group loyalty, and, importantly, a sense of voluntary action tied to pledging to the nation, state or community. Of course, stigmatic shaming does not acknowledge that volunteerism, action, internal group contradictions, and tensions are fluid and that the relationship between a combatant and the parent organization is both imagined and contingent.

Combatant groups may engender a meta-narrative of action and shared commitment but the reality of group membership is more varied and less precise than is generally acknowledged. How one emerges into a “post-conflict” situation regarding mental and emotional health is diverse and not simply prescribed by loyalty, devotion, and allegiance. Ideological commitment does not protect an individual from the consequences of acts, imprisonment, and stigmatic shaming although reaction is relative. Therefore, the impact of shaming creates a dualism between re-integrative and stigmatic shaming and variant emotional incomes. The former being couched in how the concentration on deeds and personal responsibility can frame positive outcomes while the latter is tied to a shaming fixation and forms of constant disapproval that undermine emotional recovery and also political progress. As Harris and Maruna note, “Yet, shame is most problematic when it is unacknowledged, unresolved, and hence becomes projected on to others in a scapegoat fashion.”

Despite being political prisoners the grade and effect of stigmatization is centered and expressed by self-identified emotions. There are those who accept and understand accountability for their actions and variant reactions to the external manifestation of shaming. Public and also private shaming produces variant coping mechanisms that need to be understood more carefully with regard to conflict transformation within Northern Ireland. The objectifying of former political prisoners as an abhorrent mass disguises the complexity of conflict-based outcomes and renders individuals as objects as opposed to agents seeking recovery and civic inclusion.

In some instances combatants assert loyalty to each other and their violent actions to such an extent that they become socially distant to family members or friends. In a sense, engaging in conflict-related violence and/or being imprisoned provides a set of habitual regularities that are linked to social attachment styles that are usually atypical with regard to “normal” social relationships and participation in what would be considered as customary every-day conduct. Attachment and coping are linked to strategies that are deployed to deal with various stressors that can both aid or hinder the capacity to manage emotions, sentiments, and reactions. Emotions and senses of rejection and responsibility are also important in framing coping mechanisms. Thus two individuals experiencing the same event or episode may not share the same coping or cognitive reactions. Coping will also be influenced by variables such as family life, alcohol use, economic well-being, and position in society. As noted, former combatants do not operate within a homogenous group or social environment due to innumerable social, cultural and economic influences, reactions and regulatory strategies. Some may reject guilt and relate actions, even if harm was caused to others, via a neutralizing appraisal within which actions were motivated by defined and acceptable “principles.” Whereas others may languish in a negative reading of their actions, reflect upon them as insidious and even in some cases accept their public shaming. Recognition of that diversity may unleash “the potential of restorative peacemaking. …” As contended,

Restorative peacemaking in post-violence societies seeks to transform shame displacement into shame acknowledgement, and narcissistic pride into humbler notions of the position of one's group, and in the process to readdress group power relations. “Truth” recovery projects are starting points for dealing with shame acknowledgement for groups (victim–offender mediation does the equivalent for individuals), while memory work addresses the latter. “Truth” is thus a way of managing shame. Yet in Northern Ireland there are generally no amnesties or shared commitments to truth recovery.

It is generally opined within the literature on restorative justice that there is a framework that defines key structures, values, meeting with victims, and other defined social justice adjudications. Following Wacquant, Sawatsky, Zehr, and others restorative justice is allied to a series of active forms of commitment and involvement in an offender–victim axis centered upon individual responsibility. Outside criminal court procedures that may include a restorative justice approach undertaken within closed or community meetings and facilitated by a structure led by restorative justice practitioners, victims support group or state representatives. Consensual outcomes, with regard to transgressive acts and behaviors, are driven by a consummation and consensus around the acts performed with agreement set against legal constraints. Such facilitated conferencing is tied to notions of respect, amendment, apology and at times alternatives to incarceration or normal legally defined punishment. However, in Northern Ireland the willingness to engage in such practices is limited by the Northern Ireland 1968 Act. In essence, any person who admits to or is knowledgeable of a crime, which would be a condition of restorative justice practice, for which there has been no prosecution, must inform the authorities of that evidence. Space is provided for those who have been prosecuted but the capacity to engage in admission by those who have not is limited by the risk of incarceration.

As indicated below, some former prisoners, with regard to offenses for which they have been prosecuted, have engaged in a stakeholder form of restorative justice. Others have engaged privately through letter writing, private meetings, and other forms of acknowledgment with survivors and relatives of those killed. Some imagine a form of restoration through privately acknowledging senses of harm and wrong-doing. That includes envisioning the feelings and emotions of victims and the consequences of acts. In those cases in which survivors/family members of victims have been contacted it is clear that truth-telling, at the scale of the individual, is potent with regard to personal recovery for the offender and also for those apologized to. However, envisioning and sensing personal restoration is not a justice-centered process as it contains no evident recovery or reparation for victims even though it may posit an acceptance of harm caused and “offender” recovery.

Although that recovery or restoration of well-being is limiting, from a victim's perspective, it seems that envisaging, conceiving, and comprehending apology and regret does at least recognize victims and permits some personal renewal for prisoners and a capacity to deal with socially constructed shame. At a societal level “offender” recovery such as this is generally unrecognized and within a highly politicized and atavistic climate regarding the debate on victims the transition to truth mechanisms and coherent restorative processes remains constricted. In essence, Northern Ireland's prosecution and criminal justice forms reduce the capacity for truth recovery, thus limiting societal healing and reparation along the offender–victim axis. The mechanism for dealing with unresolved offenses, that being HET, fails to provide a process of offender–victim recovery. Ultimately, stigmatic shaming is too often left unchallenged as a discursive and symbolic construction while re-integrative shaming is largely untried, untested, and under-valued as a process that could be correlated with conflict transformation.

**Stigmatic Shaming: Rejection and Its Disabling Impact**

Those disabled emotionally and socially by stigmatic shaming spoke to senses of rejection based on an inability to cope with public and private shaming. In experiencing unresolved shame respondents spoke to their previous actions and focused on the consequences of harm they had caused. Although these respondents did not neutralize their actions or spin legitimacy they did argue that their involvement was still rejected both within the public and private realms. The inability to cope emotionally was linked to how engaging in violent acts had created stigmas, public humiliation, and felon-setting. This was combined with senses of being expressively paralysed by the stigmatic reaction, even if imagined, of others. It was commonly asserted that rejection and stigmatic shaming had placed respondents within a landscape of denunciation, intolerance, and admonition. Within these conversations the principal objective in terms of social engagement was to limit as far as possible contact with others through maintaining a social circle comprised of those viewed experiencing a shared depressive state. The “other,” those beyond that social circle, were generally deemed as hostile and belligerent toward what were self-presented as the rejected individual/group. What we observe is how violent action is explained and linked to the dominance of act that is paralleled by rejection;

Why did I be involved in killing? I knew they (family) was (sic) ashamed of me. … Then I hit the drink and drugs and that's because I sit everyday wondering why am I like this and why am I so full ah shame. It eats away at you. … Why did I let people lead me on? Why did my family and the wife throw me out? They didn't help me when I was needing that help. Why didn't someone stop me doing what I did? Why don't people care? You go through them questions all day wonder will I never feels (sic) not ashamed? My Dad said I brought disgrace on the family. My brother said I should be ashamed. The papers, the media everybody. Everyone has it in for me as themins (sic) just cares about what people in the street thinks about them having a son who was a bad one. None of themins who point fingers ever ask if you do feel ashamed or guilty. Nothing like that. The finger is pointed and you get no chance to reply to that.

The incapacity to form relationships was commonly noted in terms of “who would want the likes of me” tied to a sense that outsiders constantly judge respondents negatively. Such rejection was noted as due to their violent actions but again directed at the fear of being unmasked, exposing distress and poor mental well-being, which it was claimed would be obvious to outsiders during all forms of social engagement. What appears is an attempted “protective” yet harmful form of social bonding linked to keeping confidences, sharing fatalistic attitudes and reproving the good fortune and better coping of others. As noted by a respondent:

You sit in the pub all day, giving off about others. Then the news comes on an’ someone is ranting on about the past and that we are “men of evil”. So you just feelin’ all rejected, to blame for everything. You can't understand how that feels to be spoken of as evil. It makes the stomach churn, never mind how many times you hear it. All that finger-pointing and that, just sets you down, puts you down. So them people who finger-point just want to keep us where we are. Away in the head and not feelin’ that anyhow cares. They only care if they want us to be the scapegoat.

The lack of social interaction with others was also based on private forms of public shaming among family members and acquaintances that have rejected respondent's actions. Others also included fellow combatants who were shunned or disapproved of due to their capacity to gain and sustain employment, their involvement in public life, especially if they had re-integrated relatively seamlessly into civilian life. A common form of such social distancing being articulated as follows; “Look at (name redacted) sitting with the high and mighty. He doesn't know what I know. Then you have these eejits who run about as community workers. Community workers my arse! Who do they think they are looking after themselves? What do they do for me?”

A common claim was that outsiders would automatically read those who felt public shame as flawed and deficient even before any verbal contact. As explained:

You know people can tell you’re not right. Know you’re not the full shilling before you even open your mouth. So if you’re at a do (social gathering) and there are people you don't know you just stay in the back and keep your head down. So when I sees (sic) people I don't know I just go to my head and go ‘they know I’m not the full shilling. They know I’m a murderer. So I find it hard to talk to peoples (sic) I don't know as I know they know I’m not right just by looking at me or maybe they would judge me for what I done. I know what they think of me before I ask them what they think.

Avoidance of others is a futile attempt to undermine the capacity of stigmatic shaming tied to the perception that potential encounters would lead to de-masking, which would be harmful and adversely presumed. Therefore, remaining inaudible and unseen is an effort to remain morally untarnished through control behavior that is an enactment or presentation of self-criminalization. Pre-judging potential shaming is based on fear of recognition and not stretching beyond a limited social circle that obviates against any form of emotional recovery. Goffman distinguished such masking behavior as a method of information being “given” or ordered in an attempt to control public scrutiny. Covering “deviance” or wrong doing is based on hiding away with surety located among the similarly rejected. The role here is to prevent information seepage and the perceived powerlessness to control negative perspectives and insinuations.

Masking is driven by not wishing to appear feeble and maladroit through a process of withdrawal. What Braithwaite would interpret as the rejected interpreting themselves, due to public shaming, not as characters found in normal social discourse but as those anchored to highly damaging and negative deliveries of self that are linked to increasing isolation and near-invisibility. Acts of masking appear as anger-inducing and are located within a frame within which potential stigma/rejection is more excruciating than seeking rehabilitation. The effect of stigmatic shaming and exposure is understood as a mix of social and personal threat tied to blame setting as a form of shame-rejection.

In many of these conversations it is evident that virtually all social relationships are linked to fears of disclosure and public shaming leaving what is an insignificant space within which to seek redress or the agency of self-help. This is a group frustrated and disabled by public shaming who turns to isolation and who thwart promissory personal development. In effect, public shaming is paralleled by self-deprecation that, ultimately, despite attempted masking, becomes an unhealthy form of internalization. This equates closely to the notion that accepting the power of stigmatic shaming imputes continual punishment and a desire to reproduce rejection.

**Neither Shame Nor Guilt: Just Loyalty**

The second group recorded here included those who did not express senses of guilt or shame and who adopted a position of neutralization regarding their deeds. Neutralization, in this case, was linked to a typology of denial of responsibility and the innocence for victims. Conflict being asserted as political, that actions were necessary, that victims were not blameless due to their political and cultural allegiances and that without such actions Northern Ireland would have been “surrendered away by the British state.” The stigma of condemnation from beyond was rejected via the assertion that such persons include those who either privately encouraged or benefited from loyalist actions or those who misjudge loyalist authority and action due to an ideologically flawed position. In some instances violent enactment was proposed as an appeal to higher loyalties and as a social debt given by those with “courage” and “commitment” to defeat what was proposed as “the enemies of my community.” As explained:

I can take you through what I did. But I am not ashamed of that and I’m not like someones (sic) who gets into the guilty Prod (Protestant) thing. There were loads ah (off) reasons why people killed each other. I know why I got into the violence thing, to protect my people. I and others gave our loyalty to the people. We defended the people. If they say we didn't they’re liars. There was an enemy and I fought that enemy as did others. Why would any soldier question his motives when his country was under attack? I don't fall for this bullshit that we is (sic) guilty. There's an enemy, you fight it and you win. You see other loyalists all mealy mouthed about their guilt. That's a betrayal to my way of thinking of the loyalist cause. You asked me if violence was futile, like fuck it is! I think of the past as a debt of honour and not something about saying “I’m awful sorry.”

Within the neutralizing group there was also a bonding with former combatants but a very clear demarcation between the bonded with who similarly rejected shaming and the unbounded “other” who were observed as emotionally “soft” and personally deficient. Those who rejected public shaming presented signs of psychological anaesthetizing and with regard to violence articulated no expression of apprehension or self-critique. Instead, we find senses of self-worth, high levels of self-esteem, and a vociferous rejection of shaming. In conversations about conflict and violence there was a robust display of masculinity. When it was admitted that respondents had emotional problems these were generally explained as being related to unemployment, penury, and family breakdown. There was near constant fascination to not link ill-health to violent actions. As noted: “I may have big problems but that has nothing to do with killing and it's not to do with what others think of me. It's because I have had a shit life. I don't care what people think and say, for what I did was right.”

Within this group the rejection of public shaming and criminalization appears to be paralleled by deeper emotional issues, disguised traumas, and possible forms of masking. What was observed were performance techniques linked to preparing, creating, and performing what is an extremely virile and publicly unwavering persona as a potential behavioral defense. This group produced a form of non-visible stigma regarding violent actions, tied to what appears to be a purposeful rejection of the link between significant emotional turmoil and public shaming. These respondents may well legitimize their violent actions but it is evident that such ideological surety does not remove emotional stress or related and insufficient coping capacities. It may also subvert, due to their rejection of wrong-doing, any capacity to seek transition and re-integrative possibilities.

**Acceptance, Responsibility, and Moving On**

Those who spoke to their guilt or part-guilt are affected by public shaming as a reality of criminalization and public commentary but appeared freer from it in terms of negative emotional well-being. There were two types of respondents regarding the acceptance of responsibility and harm caused. One group that accepted “full guilt” in that they had been involved in wrong-doing and understood that in “stepping outside of the law” that they had received a deserved punishment. While another group accepted personal responsibility of harm-causing through explaining their actions due to the structure of Northern Irish society, a sense that they had been duped by vitriolic unionist leaders who had raised fears of republican and nationalist threat, which was linked to fears and the “requirement” of defense and sectarian reaction. In this case violence was explained as a mix of flawed political, cultural, and social reproduction that clarified the contingency of violence but within which there was an acceptance of personal responsibility of having harmed.

In the following quotes we can position both the similarity and difference between full and part responsibility with the former understood as those whose personal acts cannot be easily detached from subjective accountability. In conversations with this group prison was understood as a site of reflection, contemplation, and in some cases religious faith had been a medium through which to atone. Self was thus seen as sufficient in terms of coping by “moving on.” As explained:

I know at 18 I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but that was then and I am a different me now. It's not an excuse but I didn't know then what I was doing beyond being angry so I am guilty of doing the wrong thing and not having listened to that part of me that said “don't do that its wrong.” I am guilty because I was part of something that killed a lot of people who are innocent. So I look at my life like the Russian Doll. We are all made up of different bits of life. I am the big bit on the outside and the ugly bits that are inside me and I have dealt with them for good. I done (sic) wrong, I accept that but move on. In prison I would hear others being big men and shooting about stiffing him and doing this and that. I would sit and go “what the hell have I got myself into.”

For those who presented personal responsibility as contingent on social and cultural structures, the impact of oppositional violence, societal breakdown, dupery, and community encouragement explained involvement as causality paralleled by a sense of conscientiousness:

This place was a shithole and it was a place that was going to blow up like it did. So why would I be ashamed that I lived in an effed up place. Went out and killed because I saw killing all around me. It doesn't mean my activities were right or wrong. I know they were wrong because innocent people got killed, but society was the cause of that. I’m not a bad person but a person who lived in a bad place. Billy Mitchell used to say “somebody didn't just hand out crazy pills one day and the people here went mad.” It was a warped place and the killing around you warped minds. If you understand that, it's not callous to think that. It's just you did what you thought was right and it was partly right at the time. I know now the killing bit was wrong but I didn't then and I cannot separate the reality of this place and what motivated me. If I had been born twenty years earlier or later I wouldn't have done those things. Yes, I did wrong and I feel that in my heart but I made amends and wrote to my victim and met the family. I told them it was me and I told them why. So yes I admitted to my guilt but also made it clear that I was the product of how this place was back then.

A high level of empathy for victims was evident in the conversations held. This was commonly explored through regret at the personal scale of suffering caused. The low severity of emotional problems observed within this group echoes Harris and Maruna's contention that self-reporting senses of guilt or responsibility is constructive as opposed to non-reporting which can be dysfunctional and reproductive of anger and resentment. As the following quote illustrates, in comparison to those burdened by rejection, the acceptance of refutation and objectifying public shaming and familial exclusion can be an active process in which contextualizing cause and affect means to move beyond negative and repetitive notions of blaming others. As stated:

When I got out my family rejected me so I knew that was because in their eyes I was guilty. So that was that. They had their beliefs and I had mine. So I understood that as their reality sort of thing and I has (sic) to sort of allow that, get on with it. My mate took it the other way when he got out, he blamed them for rejecting him and felt ashamed that they done (sic) that. So he ends up in a mess and ends up blaming them for the way things turned out, and a right mess too. I knew to move on. I had done my whack and been punished and that was that. I did what I did and I can blame others but that is just stupid. Yes, Northern Ireland was a mess but I made the decision which I know was the bad one to make. If you get that into yer (sic) head then you can move on. You did wrong you got prison and you got out. So the getting out bit is what you need to focus on. The job now is to heal all of that. The plan has to be to build truth and give victims recognition. We need to explain that better and make sure we heal each other. It doesn't matter who you were a victim is a victim.

Within this group the deficiencies of age, societal tension, and action have been explored but “corrected” by a range of alternative methods such as re-integrative based emotions. Some found coping easier by aiding conflict transformation work whilst others have distanced themselves from other loyalists since release. Some have undertaken a restorative approach via a coherent framework tied to common “restorative processes and restorative values.” As with the rejected group there was a constant assertion that private conscience was empathetic towards victims. What we observe within the offender–harm nexus, irrespective of contextualized violence, are positive values for and of personal and societal restoration. The general observation being that both personal and offender–victim restoration, even if imagined, achieves individual responsibility and when combined with dealing actively with stigmatic shaming promotes better emotional outcomes. Restoration, whether personal or through a restorative justice frame, is comprehended as frame to challenge and societal ills through alternative forms of social engagement and a narrowing of the space within which stigmatic shaming can undermine positive inter-community engagement and with regard to the past solution-seeking.

**Conclusion**

The findings within this article echo Lewis's understanding that the difference between shame and guilt is the reproduction of guilt as a disabling emotion whereas dealing positively with shame leads to a more positivist reaction tied to constructing a differentiated version of self, based on a temporal frame between a destabilizing past and a reconstructed future. Individuals assign and confirm their position through discourses attached to the meaning and interpretation of others. This is generally reflected here but we find irregular reactions to public shaming. Some participants through accepting the power of public shaming are affected by emotional negativity. Others respond to that rejection in terms of seeking a front of “decency” linked to accepting or part accepting the impact of their acts. What is also observed, when considering well-being, are variant levels of coping and distress that highlight the heterogeneous nature of such groups, which in itself challenges the construction of paramilitaries as homogenous, unapologetic, belligerent, and impertinent.

The impact of engaging in restorative justice or personal restoration with regard to better coping is of note. Either form of restoration is linked to the object of self as agent in terms of dealing with the enactment of violence. For those who professed harm caused but who desired a restorative frame it appears that doubts over their actions presented an opportunity to engage with a sense of personal recovery and in controlling those personal misgivings there was some potential in re-building and re-positioning within a new life or role. This is tied to an ability to accept actions and thus undermine a vicious cycle of negativity and thus not devote near constant social activity based on thoughts and discussions of rejection, loss, and social alienation.

The capacity to create a mutually beneficial link between harm and societal progression is being missed by an insufficient capacity to determine more effective forms of inclusion for former paramilitaries and also for victims. Rejection and shaming and the construction of legalized and symbolic criminalization, in terms of employment and other services, simply re-positions fatalism and neutralization and does little to include victims and survivors and thus transpose a destabilizing past. It is an ultimate failure of a society to get beyond processes of victimhood based on sloppy and discursive-driven labeling and a refusal to engage in more fulsome conflict and justice recovery. As evidenced, former prisoners generally understand and are empathetic to the turmoil experienced by victims. What is of note is that positive adjustment can be framed by acceptance of actions that pinpoints how a restorative frame, even if partial, could be employed more widely to deal with the consequences of violence as opposed to what in Northern Ireland is a political form that is fixated on causes, variant legitimacy casting, re-traumatization via the overtly political nature of the “victims” issue and a subsequent failure to deal with traumas and emotional difficulties. If anything, society, in Northern Ireland, is hiding away from its own acts and consequences of stigmatic shaming and the affect and disabling impact of them.

**Notes**

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24All of the 52 respondents had been imprisoned. Respondents were notified before the interview that they should not speak about any violence they had engaged in and for which they had not been imprisoned. This relates to the onus upon interviewers to report any crimes they are aware of that have not involved prosecution.

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