**Chapter 1**

**Introduction: Victimhood, violence and Northern Ireland**

**I. Introduction**

The victim is a paradoxical, fraught figure in the social world. The pain, suffering, vulnerability and weakness associated with the victim render it a powerful image in shaping public discourses, policy responses and social action, and is often used to justify the victimisation of others. According to Jeffrey and Candea (2006, 289), the victim label claims a non-political space, ‘it clears the ground, it poses itself as the neutral or indisputable starting point from which discussion, debates, and action… can and must proceed’. Victimhood is, however, inherently political. Scholars of criminology and critical victimology have long argued that our knowledge of the victim is constructed within social and political structures which emphasise the wrongfulness of certain harms and obscure forms of victimisation which are less recognisable or more socially contested (Carrabine et al. 2004; Mawby and Walklate 1994; Walklate 2007). Moreover, how we construct and apply the label of ‘victim’ (and conversely, ‘perpetrator’) neglects the ‘grey zones’ of human suffering (Levi 1986) and has a range of social, political, psychological and moral implications.

This book focuses primarily on how social processes of victimhood operate in settings of conflict, where many groups will have been both targeted with violence and responsible for it, creating complex and overlapping conflict roles: ‘It is probably universal that in every serious, harsh and violent intergroup conflict, at least one side – and often both sides – believe that they are the victim in that conflict’ (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 229–30).The public nature of victimhood in conflict elevates its social dimensions (Brewer 2010; Rosland 2009), and collective, even historical, perceptions of victimhood serve as a proxy for narratives of legitimacy and blame which persist even after political settlements are negotiated or oppressive regimes are overthrown.

Over the past several decades, the nature of violent conflict has shifted in ways that exacerbate contest over victimhood and blur the lines between victims and perpetrators. Instead of conflict between states and state actors, violence takes place within states and amongst populations fractured over competing ethno-national claims (Kaldor 2001; Lederach 2008; Oberschall 2007). Conflicts are increasingly related to matters of identity and based on perceptions of zero sum goals between opponents, creating confrontations which are ‘long-lasting, hard to resolve, and threatening to the international community’ (Bar-Tal 2013, 12). Transforming these conflicts cannot rely solely on agreeing to abandon violent campaigns and resolving conflicting political interests, but must seek to build relationships between former enemies and revise social identities which are rooted in historical animosities and negation of the other’s humanity (Kelman 2004; Lederach 2005, 2008; Nadler and Schnabel 2008; Riek et al. 2008). Perceptions of victimisation and guilt are embedded in groups’ narratives of victimhood and responsibility, of their own legitimacy and the ‘degeneracy of the other side’ (Lawther 2014a, 12), and so for societies emerging from protracted violent conflict, this can be a highly problematic process (Knox 2001; Lelourec and O’Keeffe-Vigneron 2012).

The victim is often held up as the *raison d’etre* of normative responses to violent conflict (if not instrumental for their legitimacy), especially in transitional justice systems such as truth commissions and international criminal trials (García-Godos and Sriram 2013; Hayner 2011; McEvoy and McConnachie 2012; Teitel 2000). It is argued that victims require some combination of justice, reparations and psychological healing to make sense of the harms they suffered, restore their human dignity and reconcile society (Boraine 2006; Crocker 2003; van der Merwe 2003). These processes, however, are often ill-equipped to consider the complex and multiple identities of those affected by conflict or the intractable intergroup processes which reflect variable if not contradictory perceptions of violence, victimhood and guilt. They encounter the roles of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ as fixed and mutually exclusive (Borer 2003), forcing actors to fit within a pre-designed narrative and emphasising the dichotomy between the ‘ideal victim’ (Bouris 2007; Christie 1986) and evil perpetrator that fails to reflect the complex realities of human experience (Mani 2002; McAlinden 2014).

Victimhood in conflict is often experienced collectively (Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Noor et al. 2012; Viano 1989), and which populations are the ‘primary’ victims in these confrontations is a source of contention. Particularly once sustained, physical violence abates and societies attempt to consolidate peace: ‘What victimhood is and who gets to define it are… key questions in truth recovery and peace processes’ (Brewer 2006, 22). Groups who have been victimised in conflict are less likely to acknowledge or take responsibility for the harms suffered by adversaries and deploy a range of social and cognitive processes to maintain this denial (Bar-Tal 2013; Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Noor et al. 2012; Oberschall 2007) How, then, should societies undertake to address their violent pasts and the perceptual legacies of violence when there is disagreement over who are the victims and who are the perpetrators? What impact does the ‘messiness’ of these conflict roles have on the potential for mechanisms such as truth commissions, tribunals and reparations to build peace and facilitate reconciliation between former adversaries?

In this introductory chapter I lay out the themes and questions underpinning this study, and contextualise the research in a necessarily judicious overview of the conflict in Northern Ireland and on-going contention over narratives of victimhood and responsibility for violence. I close with a brief explanation of my research design and methodology, and finally an outline of the chapters which follow.

**II. The research**

There is broad consensus that in order for societies to build peace they must address the legacy of past violence and injustice (Hayner 2011; Lederach 2008; Minow 1998; Teitel 2000). Processes of peacebuilding aim to identify and transform the issues which have caused, escalated and emerged from violent conflict to establish a more stable, sustainable peace. Reconciliation is a central component of peacebuilding, and describes processes which, among other things, transform the basis of relationships between former enemies, addressing divisive identities and socioemotional legacies of victimisation and guilt (D. Bloomfield 2006; Lederach 2008; Nadler and Schnabel 2008). These processes may be facilitated by transitional justice mechanisms, which attempt to establish social trust and mutual accountability through truth, justice and reparations (Aiken 2010; Lambourne 2009; McAdams 2011). Starting from this foundational assumption, I am particularly interested in the tensions related to how these processes handle conflicting perceptions of victimhood and responsibility, and in turn how these perceptions inform intergroup relationships and conflict identities that processes of peacebuilding, reconciliation and transitional justice seek to transform.

Victims and victimhood are often at the forefront of attempts to build peace, and have been the subject of studies in in criminology and the sub-discipline of victimology (Carrabine et al. 2004; Mawby and Walklate 1994; Mendelsohn 1956; Quinney 1972; Walklate 2007), but also in psychology (Herman 2001), anthropology (Jeffery and Candea 2006) and philosophy (Butler 2004, 2009; Govier 2015). Drawing conceptually from both victimology and social psychology, this book approaches the concept of victim as socially constructed and set within structural and relational processes which imbue it with a range of meanings that render social, political, anthropological, psychological, criminological and moral implications. Social psychology in particular lends valuable insights into the processes driving intractable violence, victimhood and reconciliation (Bar-Tal 2013; Fisher 2001; Fisher and Kelman 2011; Kelman 2004; Nadler and Schnabel 2008; Riek et al. 2008), and the social identities formed in conflict experiences. This approach enables an understanding not only of what victimhood is, how it is defined and how it is applied, but how our perceptions of victimhood determine our actions. It does not attempt to determine the objective events of violence and conflict, but rather ‘what people think and feel, as this is extremely important for the understanding of why they act in the particular way they do’ (Bar-Tal 2013, 17). Social psychological and subjective processes constitute our identities, our ‘abiding sense of self and of the relationship of the self to the world’ (Northrup 1989, 55), and determine how we relate to members of our own social group(s) as well as those with whom we are in conflict.

The rich, if challenging, case of Northern Ireland provides the backdrop for this research. Despite its exportation as a model for other societies affected by intractable civil conflicts and mass violence, the Northern Ireland peace process remains ‘imperfect’ (Knox 2001) and ‘unfinished’ (Rowan 2015). The region has yet to institute a comprehensive process to address the legacy of conflict, and its everyday politics and embedded social divisions continue to be dominated by narratives of victimhood and blame. These narratives, part of what McGarry and O’Leary (1995) call the ‘meta-conflict’ over the past, present contradictory perceptions of what groups ‘suffered the worst’ (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1999) and who may legitimately stake claim to victimhood (Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2010). Disagreement about who qualifies as a victim, and the policy implications that stem from that qualification, is often embodied in a so-called ‘hierarchy of victims’ which is seen to privilege certain victims’ needs and experiences over others’ for sympathy, services and influence (Brewer and Hayes 2015; Jankowitz 2017, 2018). This notion of hierarchy, and fundamentally conflicting views of victims and perpetrators, can be traced historically throughout the conflict and in present debates regarding how Northern Ireland should ‘deal with the past’.

Scholarship focusing on Northern Ireland has long sought to identify the obstacles facing its attempts to deal with the past, leading to uneasy realisations: ‘debate on how to deal with the past is giving way to the conclusion that the conflict has not ended, that the past is the present, and that attempts to ‘address it’ more comprehensively are premature’ (Bell 2003, 1099). This book probes the role that victimhood, and more precisely *perceptions* of victims, play in Northern Ireland’s lack of a comprehensive process to deal with the past, and the subsequent implications for reconciliation. Two main questions guide this research:

*How do group perceptions of victims and victimhood impact processes of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland?*

*How is Northern Ireland’s ‘hierarchy of victims’ constructed, and what implications does it have for a society working towards reconciliation?*

My analysis generates a core argument that complex, inclusive approaches to victimhood are better suited to advance reconciliation and build peace. Intergroup conflicts, however, reinforce an exclusivist and intractable *victim-perpetrator paradigm* that perpetuates group-serving narratives of violence, placing the in-group and its members as the true victims and deflecting collective responsibility for conflict to enemy groups. One of the ways this victim-perpetrator paradigm manifests in Northern Ireland is through ‘hierarchies of victims’. I identify several types of hierarchies that emerge in Northern Ireland and likely resonate with the construction of victimhood in conflict-affected societies further afield, including moral hierarchies, hierarchies of attention and resources, pragmatic hierarchies and intergroup hierarchies. Hierarchies which attempt to allocate services to those whose need is most severe may be appropriate in certain circumstances. Those hierarchies which resonate with the victim-perpetrator paradigm, however, reinforce societal divisions and exclude sections of society from acknowledgement and accountability, compromising the relationship building and identity negotiation crucial for societal reconciliation.

Narratives that emerged in this study nevertheless warrant a cautious optimism that some in Northern Ireland can and do challenge the victim-perpetrator paradigm and search for the ‘grey’ in issues of victimhood and responsibility for violence. Indeed, the lessons derived from this particular case may have wider resonance with reconciliation and peacebuilding scholarship and prompt more innovative ways to deal with actors’ roles and the legacy of violent intergroup conflict.

**III. The conflict in and about Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland has long been a society characterised by its struggle to build peace, a process which commentators have described as ‘tortuous and as yet unresolved’ (Shirlow, Graham, and McEvoy 2008, 65). Transitional justice mechanisms have come to feature in most regions facing down the legacy of violence over the past several decades, such as South Africa, Guatemala, Peru, Timor-Leste, Rwanda and Cambodia, yet the implementation of a large-scale mechanism like a truth commission or international tribunal is notably absent in this case. The difficulties facing transition in Northern Ireland are numerous, and are punctuated by patterns of intergroup hostility that extend backwards over centuries and into the present ‘meta-conflict’ (McGarry and O’Leary 1995) over the causes and consequences of the period referred to somewhat euphemistically as the Troubles.

Historian Ian McBride (2001, 1–2) writes that, ‘In Ireland… the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict’. Indeed, many present day disputes refer back to episodes of violence between the native Catholic population and Protestant settlers that took place centuries earlier (Dixon 2001). In 1921, following an independence campaign that began in earnest in 1916, a deal was eventually struck between Irish nationalists and the British government which saw the partition of the island; twenty-six counties became the Free State (and later the Republic of Ireland) and six counties of the northern province of Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom. The boundaries of Northern Ireland were set to ensure a Protestant majority, however a Catholic minority remained within its borders (Todd 2009). During this time, the British government at Westminster did not interfere with the work of the Northern Ireland Parliament, allowing discriminatory policies and sporadic violence between communities to go unchecked over the following decades (Gillespie 2010). Today these ‘sides’ are described broadly (though not exhaustively or perhaps adequately) as Protestant, unionist and loyalist (PUL) communities which seek to uphold the union with Great Britain and Catholic, nationalist and republican (CNR) communities who wish to establish a United Ireland.

Violence became more sustained in the 1960s, and the most recent period of conflict began. Though disagreement persists over the conflict’s root causes and official start, its emergence coincided with a civil rights movement to end discrimination against the Catholic minority on issues such as housing, employment and voting rights (Coogan 1997; Dixon 2001; Todd 2009). Violence ensued and the landscape became increasingly segregated along CNR and PUL lines as both Catholic and Protestant families were forced out of their neighbourhoods. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged during this time, purporting both to defend the nationalist community from sectarian attacks and to fight against oppressive British rule (Moloney 2007). Loyalist paramilitaries, including the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), similarly professed to defend Ulster and the unionist and loyalist communities from republican threat (Shirlow 2012).[[1]](#endnote-1) The British Army was brought in to assist with the policing duties of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the overwhelmingly Protestant police force of the day, and its part-time regiment the B-Specials.[[2]](#endnote-2) The B-Specials were eventually disbanded and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) was established as a military force made up of Northern Irish citizens. Whilst paramilitaries and the security forces are considered distinct actors, allegations and evidence of collusion have surfaced that calls into question their independence from one another (Bell 2003; Cadwallader 2014; McGovern 2017).

The Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement was signed 1998 (hereon the 1998 Agreement), signalling political agreement and an end to the high levels of violence experienced during the conflict. Though it initiated a number of crucial institutional reforms, the Agreement relied on a ‘constructive ambiguity’ to avoid issues on which consensus could not be reached (Bell 2003; Dixon 2001). Only for the diligence of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition were victims mentioned, albeit in a limited statement that ‘it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation’ (Northern Ireland Office 1998, para. 12). One major issue which remains unresolved is how to comprehensively address past injustices and the legacy of the conflict on individuals, communities and society as a whole.

Over the three decades of conflict, somewhere in the range of 3,500 to 4,000 people were killed out a population of approximately 1.5 million (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1998; McKittrick et al. 2007). On average, 120 people were killed every year (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1999), and exponentially more physically and/or psychologically injured (M. B. Smyth 2012). Casualties were sustained on all sides during this time and research has found approximately 16 per cent of adults can be considered ‘direct’ victims of the conflict and another 30 per cent can be considered ‘indirect’ victims (Cairns and Mallett 2003). Statistics also show that certain groups and areas ‘suffered disproportionately’ (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 2001, 35). Those killed were overwhelmingly male, below the age of 39 and civilian (Bell 2003; Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1999). In terms of communal background, 43 per cent of those killed were Catholic and 29.6 per cent Protestant (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1998, 23). Again, whilst all major protagonists were responsible for violence to varying degrees, exact figures are contested; most accounts hold republican paramilitaries responsible for the majority of deaths at 57.8 per cent, followed by loyalist paramilitaries at 29.9 per cent and finally security forces at 9.9 per cent (McKittrick et al. 2007, 1561). Bell (2003, 1128) points out, however, that these statistics do not reveal the ‘dark figure’ of killings related to collusion. Perceptions of victimhood and violence are also largely determined by local experiences and attitudes (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1998), and shape narratives of victims, perpetrators and the conflict itself which fundamentally conflict.

It was only once sustained violence ended and the peace process began in the 1990s that assessments of the human impact of the conflict came into focus (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1999; Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2010; Smyth 2006). Immediately following the 1998 Agreement, those studying the human impact of the conflict found that victims were largely disengaged from politics and claims making about responsibility for past violence:

…the bereaved and injured have no basis on which they may influence the political process. They have no political clout, they do not have the capacity to wreck the prospects for peace, nor do they have the power to command the ears of politicians. (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1999, 2)

As the needs of victims and survivors gained attention and discourses regarding victimhood intensified, however, the fields of victim work and victim politics became virtually indistinguishable (Smyth 2003, 129) and victims became a new locus of political intractability.

Contention regarding who could be accepted as a victim proliferated in the years that followed. This was bolstered by intensifying resistance to its terms which included the release of political prisoners and a power sharing arrangement between unionist and nationalist parties (Hayes and McAllister 2001). Unionist victims organisations increased in number and prominence during this time, and coalesced around anti-Agreement sentiment (Bell 2003; Smyth 2003). These organisations, which included Families Acting for Innocent Relatives and Homes United against Recurring Terror, were concentrated in areas with the highest death rates of security forces and received political support from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and, perhaps most vociferous, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). Often employing language like ‘victims of terrorism’, ‘innocent victims’ and ‘victims of republican terror’, these organisations and their associated political spokespeople communicate very narrow perceptions of victimhood and responsibility which ‘exclude others from the category of genuine victimhood’ (Smyth 2003, 128). These victims organisations and the political spokespeople with which they align are often referred to as the ‘innocent victims lobby’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Some of these exclusivist views were reflected in the report published by then Victims Commissioner Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, *We Will Remember Them* (1998). Detailing the road ahead for victims’ issues, Bloomfield (1998, 14) defined victims as ‘the surviving injured and those who care for them, together with those close relatives who mourn their dead’. Despite the inclusivity of this definition, many see Bloomfield’s implicit focus on victims of paramilitary violence and scant references to victims of state violence as imposing what would come to be known a ‘hierarchy of victims’ (Bell 2003). Bloomfield acknowledges for example that many ‘feel strongly that any person engaged in unlawful activity who is killed or injured in pursuit of it is a victim only of his own criminality and deserves no recognition for it’ (S. K. Bloomfield 1998, 14). Evoking moral distinctions between innocent victims and guilty perpetrators in this way instigated debate ‘concerning whether people who have been involved in armed actions can also be regarded as victims’ (Healing Through Remembering 2006, 3). This distinction forms the basis of arguments to prioritise those perceived to be innocent as victims over those who are less innocent or perhaps more guilty.

An official definition of ‘victim’ was introduced 2006, expressly for use by the Victims Commissioner and statutory victims sector to provide financial assistance and services to those who qualified. The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order of 2006 (hereon the 2006 Order) continues to guide the Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVSNI), Victims and Survivors Forum and Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) established in 2012. The 2006 Order defines its terms as follows:

1. In this Order references to ‘victim and survivor’ are references to an individual appearing to the Commissioner to be any of the following –
   1. Someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident;
   2. Someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for an individual mentioned in paragraph (a); or
   3. Someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident.
2. Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), an individual may be psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of –
   1. Witnessing a conflict-related incident or the consequences of such an incident; or
   2. Providing medical or other emergency assistance to an individual in connection with a conflict-related incident.

While many commend the inclusivity of the definition, it is not without its controversy, having been imposed during a period of direct rule from the UK government in Westminster.[[4]](#endnote-4) Republican and nationalist parties support the inclusiveness of the definition (Graham 2014; Lawther 2014b), however prominent unionist political parties and victims groups are vocally opposed, arguing that it ‘effectively equates “perpetrator” and “victim”’ (Ulster Unionist Party 2011, 2; *BBC News* 2009; Democratic Unionist Party 2014). This ‘innocent victims’ lobby has introduced several legislative actions to change the official definition to distinguish ‘innocent victims’, including the unsuccessful Victims and Survivors (Disqualification) Bill (2010) which would exclude from the 2006 Order individuals who were either convicted of a violent conflict-related offence or who were members of a proscribed organisation.

More recently, the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act in 2013 (Northern Ireland Assembly 2013) was passed, prohibiting those who were convicted for serious conflict-related offenses from holding positions as Special Advisers to members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Spearheaded by Jim Allister of the TUV and victims campaigner Ann Travers, whose sister Mary was killed by the IRA, its passage was hailed as a victory for innocent victims. The legislation has also, however, been assessed as ‘a divisive provision that legislates the meta-conflict to the advantage of certain victims and the detriment of others’, designed only to benefit only those who were victims of paramilitaries (Hearty 2016, 335).

In lieu of a comprehensive transitional justice process, Northern Ireland has employed ‘decentralised’ (Aiken 2010) or ‘piecemeal’ (Bell 2003; Healing Through Remembering 2006) systems to acknowledge victims’ experiences, identify responsibility and consider ways to help society collectively recover from decades of violence. Legalistic and policing contributions have included public inquiries, searches by the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains (ICLVR)[[5]](#endnote-5). Grassroots contributions have included community-based truth recovery initiatives such as the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (2002), proposals on truth recovery from loyalist and republican communities (EPIC 2004; Eolas 2003) and an extensive cross-community[[6]](#endnote-6) consultation by Healing Through Remembering (2002).

Recent years have seen multiple efforts to establish an official, comprehensive set of mechanisms to address the legacy of the conflict, which have faltered due to persistent contention over how they would handle questions of victimhood and responsibility. The *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past* was launched in January 2009 following three years of consultation into how Northern Ireland should deal with the legacy of the past. The report contained 31 recommendations, including the establishment of an independent, five-year Legacy Commission and Reconciliation Forum to ‘deal with the legacy of the past by combining processes of reconciliation, justice and information recovery’ (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, 16). The report also called for a £12,000 ‘recognition payment’ to go to the nearest relative of those killed as a result of the conflict, which the authors emphasised was ‘not primarily about money but rather a need for recognition of the loss or injury they endured’ (2009). It was this proposal that received the most attention and backlash, ultimately rendering the entire report untenable due to anger that the payment would go to relatives of individuals who had been involved in paramilitary violence.

In late 2013, the issue of the past was revisited in talks co-chaired by US diplomat Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O’Sullivan which failed to deliver agreement, allegedly because of contention over the suggestion of investigation and analysis into thematic patterns of state and non-state violence (Rowan 2014).[[7]](#endnote-7) The draft agreement acknowledged difficulties in reaching consensus, stating that ‘Our understandings of the word ‘victim’ in this context were closely tied to our different narratives of the conflict, which are not presently reconcilable’ (Northern Ireland Executive 2013, 22). Finally in late 2014, the parties of the Northern Ireland Assembly signed up to the Stormont House Agreement (SHA). It contained a package of institutions which would undertake processes of truth recovery, historical investigations, oral history and reconciliation, respectively (Northern Ireland Executive 2014). Implementation of the SHA has faltered, however, as a result of several issues including concern about national security disclosures from the British government and the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2017.

Whilst waiting for full implementation, attempts have been made to advance other elements of the SHA including legacy inquests and a pension for those severely injured as a result of the conflict. Lord Chief Justice Sir Declan Morgan submitted a proposal in February 2016 to fund a five-year plan for dealing with the backlog of legacy inquests. Then DUP First Minister Arlene Foster vetoed this funding over her concern that the system bore ‘an imbalance in relation to state killings as opposed to paramilitary killings’ (McCurry 2016). This narrative of undue focus on state violence also compelled members of the Conservative Party in Westminster to table a statute of limitations that would prevent members of the British Army from being charged for conflict-related killings.[[8]](#endnote-8) Northern Irish parties across the board objected to such a policy, with legal scholars pointing out that an amnesty for security forces would most likely result in an amnesty for non-state actors (McEvoy 2018). In May 2018, amidst escalating rhetoric on the prosecution of soldiers and no resolution to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly imminent, the Northern Ireland Office introduced a long-promised public consultation on the SHA institutions that would close in September 2018.

**IV. A note on terminology**

Whilst it is standard practice to clarify concepts for the sake of academic rigour, this research presents unique challenges regarding terminology that make this exercise ever more important. In Northern Ireland, the language used to describe the past and its actors reflects conflicting narratives of violence, victimhood and responsibility. One interaction with a gatekeeper for a victims group drove this point home. Prior to interviewing his members, he prepared me that ‘it would be advisable not to use the language ‘Conflict’ ‘Combatant’ ‘State or non-State Actors’ etc.’, noting how this particular group’s membership ‘believe what happened here to be; “campaigns of terrorism”’ (Anonymous 2014). This and a follow-up email provided a poignant insight to the narratives of the group in question and sensitivities around language:

…the safest ground you can stand on irrespective of who you’re interviewing is to describe here as ‘the Troubles’ – it may be a totally obscure phraseology but it tends not to offend or annoy anyone.

‘Conflict’ = Equation to many who are the innocent victims/survivors of terrorism.

In areas like Fermanagh, Castlederg and other border zones, there was no ‘Conflict’ – there were not ‘warring factions’ – rather there was the systematic removal of a particular grouping of people (either through murder or intimidation leading to displacement). Our urban heartlands were of course very different and were typified by tit-for-tat murder. (2014)

The meanings implicit in this language (as well as its’s explicit message) demonstrate a specific belief about the nature of the conflict and legitimacy of its actors, and perhaps unsurprisingly runs counter to language others prefer to use. As such, I maintain the importance of carefully, if briefly, clarifying and justifying the language I use throughout this book. I do recognise, however, that attempting to maintain a ‘neutral’ terminology is impossible, and there will be objections to the language I use regardless of this exercise or my candour on the matter.

This advice on how to refer to what happened in Northern Ireland serves as a window into the meta-conflict over the past. My preferred usage is ‘the conflict in and about Northern Ireland’. For the sake of style and brevity, I abbreviate this to ‘the conflict’, though in doing so continue to refer to the broader meaning of the phrase discussed here. Templer and Radford (2008) defend their use of the term ‘conflict’ rather than ‘war’ or ‘Troubles’ in their own research into public attitudes towards victimhood. They rejected the term ‘war’, citing that the Ministry of Defence does not use this term, which the authors note is a decision that has ‘implications for soldiers and their families which have caused them frustration and anguish over the years, particularly with regard to issues of remembrance and social welfare’ (2008, 34). ‘The Troubles’, they agreed, was too euphemistic a description of a period when nearly 4,000 people were killed. Therefore ‘conflict’ emerges as the most appropriate term to academically describe the three decades of sustained violence. I add to this term, ‘in and about Northern Ireland’, which I borrow from Healing Through Remembering. Referencing how the conflict was ‘about Northern Ireland’ indicates the conflict related to the ‘desired constitutional status of the jurisdiction’, and is a recognition that the violence affected many outside of Northern Ireland, including the Republic of Ireland, Britain and further afield (Healing Through Remembering 2006, 2–3).

I also use the term ‘transitional society’ or ‘transitional context’ in lieu of ‘post-conflict’, ‘post-violence’ or a slew of other options to describe a society attempting to move from violent conflict to something resembling peace. Post-conflict, first of all, implies that the conflict has ended. Not only do some in Northern Ireland reject that the conflict is over (or that it was a conflict in the first place), but in this research I ascribe to core tenet of conflict transformation, that conflict is a normal aspect of human relationships and is often a necessary driver of change (Lederach 2003). Rather than conflict itself, it is the methods by which societies cope with that conflict – violently or democratically, for example – that determine the ‘peacefulness’ of the society in question. Post-violence, on the other hand, takes into account this distinction, however it overlooks the structural and cultural violence which often remains (Galtung 1969). Arguably, this is the case for Northern Ireland, where many of the structural issues that characterised the conflict have not been addressed and paramilitary violence continues, albeit at drastically lower levels. Traditionally, ‘transition’ indicates that a society is changing paradigmatically, for example from a dictatorship to a democracy (Collins 2010; Teitel 2000). However, it also refers more broadly to societies undergoing a ‘shift in political orders’ (Teitel 2000), or generally ‘the transformation from one condition of society to another’ (Dawson 2007, 5). I therefore find the term ‘transitional’ the best way to describe society in Northern Ireland.

Perhaps one glaring absence in this section is a clarification of the term ‘victim’. As described above, the definition of victim in Northern Ireland is the subject of disagreement and controversy not unique to the region, and which are indeed central to this research. In later chapters I engage with processes that construct our understandings and definitions of the ‘victim’, discussing their implications for perceptions of victimhood, responsibility and processes to deal with the past, though I do not attempt to develop my own definition. I use both the terms ‘victim’ and ‘victimhood’, however, where ‘victim’ refers to individuals and groups who have identified as or been labelled as victims within certain discourses and ‘victimhood’ refers to the state or status of being a victim. Victimhood is more realistically where this analysis lies, as it is not to dispute or question people themselves or their experiences of harm, but rather to critically appraise the way the status of being a victim is constructed and instrumentalised in society.

**V. The methodology**

The research design underpinning this study is decidedly qualitative. It reflects sociological and even social anthropological processes of information gathering and analysis, enabling a more holistic perspective on the subject matter than would statistical or questionnaire-based analysis. In the discussion which follows, I outline the key dimensions of my research methodology, including data gathering, necessary decisions regarding the ethics of conducting emotionally and politically sensitive research, navigating persistent socio-political developments and some reflections on how my own identity and relationship with Northern Ireland shaped the research.

My sustained research began in early 2012 and concluded in late 2015, during which time several significant developments created upheaval in relation to victims and the past in Northern Ireland. To give some insight into the scale of change in this short time, a new set of victims agencies was established in 2012, the controversial Special Advisers legislation was passed in 2013, transatlantic court action sought and won access to interviews recorded by former paramilitaries as part of an oral history project based at Boston College, revelations surfaced about letters sent to On The Runs[[9]](#endnote-9) after a high-profile trial collapsed, multiple sets of talks on the legacy of the past took place culminating with the 2014 SHA, and numerous investigations and inquests took place. Indeed, further events have unfolded in the intervening years, including the near collapse of Northern Ireland’s power sharing government in late 2015, the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Irish border following the UK referendum on Brexit in June 2016, the actual collapse of Northern Ireland’s power sharing government in January 2017 and most recently the introduction of a public consultation for the proposals contained in the SHA.

A wide field of qualitative data formed the basis for my analysis, including 26 formal interviews and countless informal engagements, some of which I planned as part of the research and others which were incidental encounters whilst working for the local organisation, Healing Through Remembering. Formal interviews were semi-structured and designed to elicit interviewees’ unabridged perceptions of victimhood, the conflict and efforts to build peace. Approaching interviews flexibly both allowed me the freedom to digress and probe beyond my prepared questions into the diverse perspectives of my interviewees on those aspects of victims and victimhood they felt most important (Burgess 1991). With this method, my analysis could ‘approach the world from the subject’s perspective’ and ‘reflect an awareness that individuals understand the world in varying ways’ (Berg 2007, 95). I was keen to avoid limiting the scope of my interviewees’ contributions, within reason, because my questions and assumptions were necessarily limited by my own experiences and expectations. Whilst my questions changed only slightly as the project evolved, there were several instances when I honoured the advice of the gatekeeper noted earlier to replace the term ‘conflict’ in my questions with ‘the Troubles’ as it better reflected his memberships’ views of the violence that took place. Appendix I contains a full list of prepared questions used in my interviews.

Determining a workable sample of interviewees posed a number of challenges, including my wariness of replicating the very categories and labels this research seeks to challenge, and ethical concerns arising from such sensitive subject matter. To access nuanced perspectives on the issue of victims in Northern Ireland, I employed a purposeful (or focused) sampling method (Berg 2007; Bryman 2012). This method is well established in similar research where diverse social groups comprise sources of data (Rankin and Ganiel 2008; Lawther 2013, 2014b; Mitchell and Ganiel 2011), and requires:

…knowledge of the diverse groups, the nature of diversity including particularly the intricate recursive linkages between ethnic and other co-extant cleavages – religious, racial, regional, class and gender. It also requires knowledge of the historical, political, economic and sociological frameworks within which the conflicts are embedded. (Osaghae 2001, 12)

Early research and informal discussions with other scholars and practitioners were therefore crucial to this process, and helped to highlight the various narratives I would need to achieve a somewhat ‘balanced’ view of the issues at hand. Templer and Radford (2008, 32) for example provide a useful typology of conflict victims which served as a starting point in determining my target sample. Of the four broad narratives the authors identify, my interviewees predominantly fell into three: (1) ‘victims of paramilitary, sectarian and anti-state actions’; (2) ‘Victims of actions taken by the state’; and, (3) ‘People who have been traumatised or suffered as a result of witnessing or otherwise incorporating and embedding violence in their psyche’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Many interviewees related to more than one of these narratives, including a number of civil society stakeholders as well as private individuals.

I found early success in directly approaching victims organisations who helpfully granted me access to some of their members. My contacts began to ‘snowball’ (Bryman 2012, 424–25) as interviewees would often arrange for me to meet with others. I eventually supplemented this process with assistance from colleagues working in the community and victims sectors, however, to ensure I was reaching an adequately diverse sample of interviewees that spanned gender and ethno-national identifications. Though I struck a relative ‘balance’ across ethno-national backgrounds with 13 interviewees from a Catholic, nationalist and/or republican background, 11 from a Protestant, unionist and/or loyalist background and one ‘other’, the gender balance was less successful with only eight women and 17 men. As my research and the political context evolved, I returned to one interviewee a year later with several additional questions. A full list of interviewees with brief descriptions is available in Appendix II.

Identifying interviewees raised some inherent limitations and considerations involved in conducting such sensitive research. Rather than my own ‘selection’, the process is better characterised as a search for those willing to speak about such a sensitive subject, and gaining the trust of gatekeepers to facilitate access to certain individuals (Berg and Lune 2012, 214). Those who agreed to an interview were inherently self-selective: not only did they have to be open to an interview in the first place, but specifically open to interview under the premise of ‘collecting diverse narratives of victims’. Many interviewees had already encountered, mostly in a cross-community environment, the difficult and complex issues related to dealing with the past and were perhaps better equipped to offer considered responses to the questions I raised than others would have been. As a result, their responses are likely not indicative or representative of wider society in Northern Ireland, and certainly not of all victims. They did, nevertheless, offer thought provoking narratives that challenged exclusive notions of victims and perpetrators, which I did not foresee featuring in my analysis. Perhaps due to this self-selection, those who expressed more entrenched or exclusive perspectives were especially valuable to my analysis, though under-represented.

As the Northern Ireland peace process is a live issue, and debate regarding victims and the past is very much contingent on that evolving process, I also found it necessary to supplement my formal and informal data gathering with relevant media, consultative publications and reports to ground my analysis within this shifting context. This facilitates insights into a snapshot in time within which certain developments defined the contours of public debate on victims and the past, however tracing the issue back in time and revisiting my research several years later it appears the underlying themes remain the same. My sustained role with the organisation Healing Through Remembering[[11]](#endnote-11) was helpful in this respect as well, since the organisation itself relies on a network of members closely involved with these issues and is often a site of constant conversation about legacy-related developments and their implications. This work, which I elaborate upon presently, and my attendance at a number of public conferences[[12]](#endnote-12) grounded my research in the practical experiences of those affected by the conflict and afforded me invaluable guidance and reflexive feedback throughout.

*a. Ethical considerations*

The ethical implications of research in conflict-affected societies required constant attention in the design and undertaking of this project, especially given the emotionally and politically sensitive nature of the subject matter.[[13]](#endnote-13) I ascribed to a key ethical principle Lundy and McGovern (2006, 52) highlight, which is that ‘the researcher should avoid negative repercussions both for those who have participated in the research, and, more broadly, anyone affected by it’. Given the extent to which matters of violence and victimhood pervade society in Northern Ireland, this was not a directive I took lightly. In addition to the requisite processes of acquiring informed consent (Berg and Lune 2012, 78), permission to record and use their contributions, I undertook further measures to create a space in which interviewees felt safe sharing their experiences and to establish trust that their contributions would be anonymous and represented accurately in their use. Anonymity was especially important to this endeavour, given the close-knit nature of Northern Ireland and ever-present tensions regarding the past.

Both an ethical necessity and important to the openness of our conversations, I had to carefully consider the best environments in which to conduct interviews. I often offered several options so that interviewees could suggest a setting where they felt most comfortable, something Berg (2007) emphasises as a ‘Commandment’ of interviewing. Most commonly, interviewees invited me to their home or office, though a number of interviews also took place in the Healing Through Remembering office in Belfast and others at the premises of victims organisations. While not necessarily ideal, two formal interviews and many informal meetings took place in cafés.

Though no one shared material sensitive from a legal standpoint, many shared deeply personal and emotional stories. I therefore felt a duty to those participants to treat their contributions with respect, and allow them to retain some degree of control over what would be shared. Committing to the aim I outlined above to ‘approach the world from the subject’s perspective’ (Berg 2007), it was important to me that my interviewees felt they were properly represented even in anonymity. I took several steps to achieve this, which included encouraging interviewees to review their transcripts and change, add or remove anything they felt necessary. I sent full transcripts to those interviewees who provided contact information, and several did edit for style or clarification. During my analysis and initial drafts, I also reached out to several interviewees whose contributions made them potentially identifiable, and asked if they were comfortable with how I referred to them. This provided not only another confirmation that interviewees felt they were appropriately represented, but also ensured the descriptions and identifications I used to refer to interviewees reflected their own self-identifications, and I did not impose my own constructions upon them. One woman who was involved in republican organisations, for example, requested I not use the term ‘paramilitary’ to refer to her as she feels it undermines what she saw as legitimate republican activism. Others might take exception to this terminology, though I felt it necessary to follow through on my obligations first and foremost to my interviewees.

It would be remiss not to additionally address the sensitivities regarding critical research into victims and victimhood. Such research treads upon precarious terrain, because considering the subjectivity and instrumentality of victimhood in everyday social life should not pre-suppose the brutal realities of harm that human beings suffer, nor the legacies of that suffering in the lives of those who survive abuses. Others have reflected upon the pitfalls of studying violence and victimisation, and the trade-offs researchers make to find the least worst ways of representing the experiences of victims and survivors with due sensitivity (see for example Jeffery and Candea 2006). Žižek (2008, 3), for one, describes the dilemma raised by the need to conduct rigorous, dispassionate research and the ‘sense in which a cold analysis of violence somehow reproduces and participates in its horror’. Though it is a feat few have accomplished in a sophisticated or measured way, perhaps with the exception of those like Judith Butler (2004, 2009), I hope that the arguments I elaborate throughout this book will be received as an intervention on the exclusive, narrow uses of victimhood in social and political discourses rather than a critique or minimisation of those who have suffered harm and identify as victims. It is my sincere contention that inclusive, complex approaches to victims and victimhood enable more compassionate and sustainable responses to violence.

*b. On my role as researcher*

Of course, my own personal identity, social background, biases and experiences living in ‘the field’ for the duration of the project affect the content and findings of this research. Burgess (1991a) in fact describes the researcher as the main instrument of data collection, and therefore a key aspect of methodology. As human beings, researchers bring baggage to research; our analysis and interpretations reflect our subjectivities, predispositions and personalities (Saldaña 2009).

Growing up outside of Northern Ireland, in the United States, my natural role in relation to this research is as an ‘outsider’ (Hermann 2001). I found this to be an advantage with some, as the US is seen as having an influential role in the peace process. Many, however, also view the US and in particular Irish-American communities in terms of the significant funds provided to republican organisations. With the developments of the Boston College archive, the motives of American researchers are viewed more cautiously. Regardless of their assumptions of me as a researcher or a person, my outsider status presented an opportunity to ‘keep me right’; many encountered me as an as yet unbiased newcomer onto who they could education according to their own narrative of the conflict. This offered a unique advantage in accessing the peoples’ raw perceptions of victimhood and the conflict.

This outsider identification alone is insufficient, however, as several years of interactions, personal relationships and active participation in Northern Irish society have made it virtually impossible to remain unbiased or dispassionate. It is of course impractical, and perhaps inadvisable, to remain a ‘detached researcher’ (Finlay 2001), and researchers who are ‘insiders’ face their own challenges and advantages based on their positioning in society. Hermann (2001) describes the ‘impermeable identity wall’ facing all researchers in conflict settings. On one hand, doing research as an outsider affords greater access to sources and research subjects who may see the researcher as more neutral, whereas insiders may struggle for such access when they represent a particular community. On the other, the outsider role may limit the impact of research amongst those who feel an outsider could not possibly understand what happened during conflict. My sustained participation in Northern Ireland, and my work for Healing Through Remembering, however, somewhat blurs my positioning between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’.

My work at Healing Through Remembering, I must disclose, was highly influential to me during my research and deserves more than a passing mention. I began volunteering for the organisation in September 2012, and later took on the role of Project Coordinator until December 2016. The organisation was launched in 2001 to consult on the question: ‘How should people remember the events connected with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, and in so doing, individually and collectively contribute to the healing of the wounds of society?’ (Healing Through Remembering 2002, 5). As such, it was well placed to guide and inform this research. This guidance came in the form of critical insight around the workings of civil society, the peace process, personal experiences of staff and members relating to the conflict and practical sensitivities and implications associated with my research. This experience enhanced my abilities as a researcher to undertake an authentic, compassionate and holistic study into victims and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, influencing the shape and scope of my project, the language I employ, my interactions with those I interviewed and my analysis. It should also be noted that although my work has had and continues to have a significant impact on my research and reflections on such matters, this text does not purport to represent the views of the organisation or its members.

**VI. Chapter overview**

This book is structured into seven chapters, including this introduction and a brief conclusion. Chapter 2 locates my research within peacebuilding and transitional justice scholarship, and outlines societal reconciliation as a deep, broad and long-term endeavour which serves as an analytical framework for assessing the impact of victimhood on processes to ‘deal with the past’ in Northern Ireland. Whereas ‘thinner’ reconciliation embodies negative peace and co-existence, ‘thicker’ societal reconciliation builds relationships between former adversaries and transforms divisive group identities. Transitional justice mechanisms are often deployed to vindicate victims and facilitate reconciliation, though a number of tensions arise in practice. The chapter sets out the argument around that thicker reconciliation and long term peace require engagement with the complex perceptions of victimisation and guilt. In this chapter I also begin exploring some of the tensions inherent in matters of victimhood and responsibility in conflict, and some difficulties associated with establishing the ‘truth’ of past atrocities.

Chapter 3 describes the social construction of the ideal victim and the interdependence between discourses of victimhood and responsibility. The archetypal view of victims as innocent, moral and deserving directs societal responses to harm, and is reified in systems of transitional justice. This victim-perpetrator dichotomy is challenged, however, by an emerging body of work which intervenes on reductionist victim constructions to consider the complexities and contradictions of victimisation. Acknowledging the interdependence of beliefs about victimhood and responsibility, the chapter similarly explores complex layers of responsibility relating to bystanders, beneficiaries of violence and discursive responsibility. It also concludes with a crucial discussion of the limitations of complex victimhood, and how it may become overly relativistic or used in the service of cynical claims to obscure responsibility.

Chapter 4 considers the role of intergroup relations in processes of victimhood, positing that adversarial groups employ the binary constructions of the ideal victim and evil perpetrator as a function of intergroup processes in what I call the *victim-perpetrator paradigm*. This paradigm describes how groups that claim victim status create a favourable self-image which is accentuated in contrast to the ‘bad’ out-groups they identify as perpetrators, and how such processes resonate with group-serving explanations of violence. To preserve claims to victim status, groups often deny in-group responsibility for unjust harm and out-group suffering by deploying the notions of ‘legitimate targets’ and ‘bad apples’. These group-serving narratives resonate with the rhetoric of a so-called ‘hierarchy of victims’ in Northern Ireland.

Turning a critical eye on the discourse of a hierarchy of victims in Northern Ireland, Chapter 5 examines how individuals and groups construct multiple, subjective hierarchies of victims that exemplify a variety of attitudes and beliefs about ‘deserving’ victims. I identify four distinct yet overlapping ‘types’ of hierarchies and articulate how their varying characteristics bear on peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. These types include: moral hierarchies, which privilege innocence and abstention from violence, hierarchies of attention which demonstrate how certain experiences of victimhood garner greater attention and access to resources like investigative rigour and public influence, pragmatic hierarchies which attempt to objectively assess and order the severity of individuals’ harm, and finally intergroup hierarchies which exemplify the ethnocentric processes underpinning the victim-perpetrator paradigm. Woven throughout the chapter is the assertion that intergroup hierarchies overlap to a significant degree with other hierarchies, even appropriating the language of morality or severity of need to justify prioritising in-group members as the most deserving victims.

Chapter 6 assesses the impacts these hierarchies may have on peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. Here, it brings full circle the argument that exclusive constructions of victims and perpetrators may compromise thicker reconciliation by demonstrating how hierarchies resonating with the victim-perpetrator paradigm reinforce societal divisions and exclude complex victims from acknowledgement. I also engage with the illustrative example of the campaign to secure a pension for the most severely injured victims of the conflict to postulate that the political appropriation of these hierarchies may exaggerate their impact on victims and wider society.

The book culminates in a conclusion which reiterating the call that more complex constructions of victims are necessary to support thicker processes of societal reconciliation. I connect this assertion with broader implications for societies experiencing intergroup conflicts and grappling with how to acknowledge and address the needs of victims. To conclude, I engage with some of the more reconciliatory narratives that emerged from this research and consider the possible remedies for the intractable processes of the victim-perpetrator paradigm they may provide. These narratives describe how individuals have challenged intergroup attitudes by acknowledging in-group roles in violence, exploring the motivations and narratives of out-group members, and working to discover common experiences and re-humanise the ‘other’.

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1. Other factions of the UVF and UDA included the Red Hand Commandos (RHC), Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) and the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The British Army operation in Northern Ireland, Operation Banner, lasted from 1969 to 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Other organisations associated with this lobby have included Justice for Innocent Victims of Terrorism, Innocent Victims United and South East Fermanagh Families. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Power sharing collapsed several times after the 1998 Agreement, and the victims definition was instituted during the period of direct rule that took place between 2002 and 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The ICLVR was tasked with locating the remains of sixteen individuals who had been ‘disappeared’ by republican paramilitaries. As of 2018 all but three have been found. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cross-community refers to initiatives which include both CNR and PUL communities. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Amongst these themes would reportedly include shoot-to-kill policies by state forces and republican disappearances. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Statistics from the Public Prosecution Service show that out of the 1,188 PSNI Legacy Investigations, only 354 are cases attributed to security forces whereas 530 are attributed to republicans and 271 are attributed to loyalists (Kearney 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A number of republicans who were ‘on the run’ had received letters from the UK government assuring them there was not currently enough evidence for prosecution and they could therefore return to Northern Ireland without fear of arrest. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The fourth strand includes those disappeared or exiled from their communities. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Information about Healing Through Remembering can be found at [www.healingthroughremembering.org](http://www.healingthroughremembering.org) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The most notable included CVSNI/Amnesty conference at Europa (May 2013); CVSNI conference at Stormont Hotel (February 2014); WAVE Storytelling and Dealing with the Past (April 2014); Remedy conference at Queens (October 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Approval for this research was obtained on 26 November 2012 from the Irish School of Ecumenics Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)