

Breaking Barriers: Exploring the Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Integration Between Protestant and Catholic Communities in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

Inspiration for the study: As I have grown up in Northern Ireland, I feel passionate about improving the relationship between the Catholic and Protestant communities and increasing integration. Further, it is important people gain a greater understanding of the perceived barriers and how attitudes towards integration have changed over the years.

The current study conducted eight semi-structured interviews with participants of both Catholic and Protestant identities. Using thematic analysis, I identified three themes of the data: “Desire for Integration”, “Barriers to Change,” and “Perceptions of Socio-economic Status and Moving on From the Past”. According to the current findings, while there has been an increasing desire for integration in Northern Ireland over the years, fears such as rekindling violence, perceived threat to identity, and politicians act as barriers to this transition. Our findings suggest that participants perceive integration as a threat to their identity. Integration may necessitate the dilution of particular community norms, such as flags and marches, causing legitimate concern about people's identity. The findings indicate that individuals value the protection of Northern Ireland's strong identities, as well as the cultural traditions associated with them. Participants also highlighted the intergroup anxiety and mistrust in Northern Ireland, particularly in working-class areas residing Peace Walls, the physical barriers separating Catholic and Protestant communities. Participants suggested that people are scared integration will reignite Northern Ireland's history of violence.

Furthermore, the current findings highlight that politicians act as a hindrance to integration and instead continue to divide communities. Overall, this study importantly gave people in Northern Ireland an opportunity to voice their experiences and perceptions towards more

integration. Participants agreed that most people desire a future with less division, however, indicated that other issues need resolved before it is the right time to do so.

Implications: These findings make a novel contribution to the field because they demonstrate a strong desire for integration and call for more effective intergroup contact in Northern Ireland, especially in working-class to help reduce the ongoing tensions and anxieties between communities.

Overall, the current findings echo the hopeful words of Lyra McKee (1990-2019):

“It won’t always be like this. It’s going to get better”.