Over the past few decades, planned contact between opposing groups in post-conflict situations has been key in attempting to improve social relations and achieving genuine peace. This article assesses the benefits of the Managed Intergroup Contact Theory (MCT) approach, a slightly modified version of Gordon Allport’s original contact theory, in aiding the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. The article explores the implications of such an approach by analysing the grassroots Family and Community Engagement (FACE) project. FACE is the only project in Northern Ireland currently working with the British Services community and its aim is to integrate this ‘hidden community’ (i.e. the Services families) within the larger society. The goal of the article is to shed some light on how the MCT approach can be a beneficial tool in peace-building, by bringing together rival groups in a slow but positive manner, aiding in the building of durable, trusting relationships and eliciting intergroup trust; both of which are needed in the process of reconciliation.

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Introduction

Post-conflict peace-building is a complex process that includes elements of reconciliation, intergroup forgiveness, cooperation and collaboration (See Tam et al 2008: 303-320). Emerging from a period of violence and intergroup tensions, conflicting communities tend to segregate, distrust each other, and often hold on to misinformed opinions that entrench prejudices. This can further lead to marginalisation and inhibits the development of an integrated society. Ultimately, to aid the process of reconciliation and peace-building, individuals and communities must begin to forgive, trust and collaborate (See Hewstone et al 2008: 199-226). As can be observed in Northern Ireland, where the two major communities refuse to work together, groups continue to distrust and dislike one another, hindering cooperation and impeding the development of a shared future (Tam et al 2008: 303-320).

Although unique in some ways, the experience of post-conflict peace-building in Northern Ireland serves as an example of how difficult the process of reconciliation can be and highlights some of the most effective ways to overcome the challenges associated with this process. The situation in post-conflict Northern Irish society is an illustration of the distinct psychological elements of the reconciliation process (see Tam et al 2008: 303-320). It can help to highlight the necessary steps in the process of reconciliation, which requires a change in the often “well-entrenched beliefs and feelings about the out-group, their in-group, and the relationship between the two” (Hewstone et al 2008: 200). One of the most effective ways to challenge those beliefs, break down walls of separation and prejudice, and ultimately begin the process of reconciliation is through planned, managed intergroup contact. Based on Gordon Allport’s original ‘contact theory’, this managed approach builds on the notion that conflicting groups can move beyond the conflict and their troubled past by having the opportunity to meet and get to know one another. This in turn can increase trust, dispel hardened misconceptions, and aid in the development of understanding and cross-community relationship building (Allport 1979: 280).

This article assesses two fundamental elements of reconciliation and peace-building: forgiveness and trust, and further illustrates how managed intergroup contact can help increase the two and thus aid the process of reconciliation. It also argues that grassroots projects should be implemented alongside top-level political institutions, such as, for example, the Commission for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland. The article draws on the lessons learned from Co-operation Ireland’s Family and Community Engagement
(FACE)\textsuperscript{2} project to argue for a Managed Contact Theory (MCT) approach in future post-conflict cross-community work.

**Reconciliation and Peace-building**

Although the processes of reconciliation and peace-building are related they are not interchangeable. In post-conflict societies, reconciliation is key to peace-building efforts, as it allows opposing groups to move beyond hate and distrust whilst encouraging cooperation and collaboration (Hewstone et al 2008: 199-226; see also Hamber 2007). However, reconciliation is only one step towards peace-building, a much broader and more expansive concept that involves a range of approaches implemented over a long period of time; which aims to change the social structures underlying the conflict and the attitudes of the parties involved (Ropers 1995: 35).

Grassroots projects, whilst limited in their resources and thus unable to fundamentally alter post-conflict societies, can play an important role in the process of reconciliation by encouraging development of trust, forgiveness, and cooperation among conflicting groups. By employing a managed approach to intergroup contact, grassroots projects can offer an opportunity for opposing groups to meet, get to know each other, and take the first steps towards reconciliation. In this way, projects aiming to employ the intergroup theory fight one of its most frequent criticisms: that intergroup contact cannot be beneficial where there is no opportunity for it (Crisp and Turner 2009: 232). By integrating the most marginalized and forgotten elements of a society into the peace-building process, grassroots efforts create a durable, long-term infrastructure that breaks down walls and fosters respect, forgiveness, and mutual trust.

**The Role of Forgiveness in Reconciliation**

Lack of societal and intergroup forgiveness is a major issue that can stand in the way of reconciliation. This can be observed in post-conflict societies, such as Northern Ireland, where anger lingers and the memory and proximity of political violence may reduce the

\footnote{Based at Co-operation Ireland, the island’s largest peacebuilding organization, the FACE project is an EU funded, peace and reconciliation project, which aims to integrate the families of British Services families currently residing in the four Army camps remaining in Northern Ireland. These individuals tend to lead separate, segregated lives due to an inherent mistrust of the local population – a residue of the Troubles and the negative image of the British Army. FACE is currently in its second year and works with hundreds of individuals all over the region.}
willingness to forgive (Hamber 2007: 118). This can also be seen in other deeply rooted conflicts, such as those in the former Yugoslavia, where victims’ forgiveness is of crucial importance in developing sustainable psychological and political reconciliation (Cehajic et al 2008: 352). Without forgiveness, communities that were once in conflict will be unable to collaborate, cooperate, and create sustainable peace; for they will continue to hark back to their violent past and blame each other for the hurt and pain sustained during conflict. In some ways, in the post-conflict period, forgiveness is the culmination of the healing process (Mbugua 2011: 21).

While it is possible to have forgiveness without a complete or genuine process of reconciliation, there can rarely be reconciliation without any intergroup forgiveness (Enright 2001: 31). Reconciliation, a voluntary and difficult process, cannot be forced from the outside and must come as a genuine desire on behalf of the groups involved in the conflict. To begin the process of moving forward and integrating, groups must be willing to let go of the past, forgive past wrongdoings and trust each other.

Intergroup forgiveness, the ability of groups to put past atrocities and hurt behind, is rooted in the development of interpersonal understanding and empathy (i.e. the ability of individuals to reach across community borders and develop mutual friendships and empathy towards one another’s pain). Interpersonal forgiveness is, in many ways, much easier to draw out than forgiveness on a group scale, as people are more likely to forgive on a personal level, once they have gotten to know and like one another. Tania Tam argues that intergroup forgiveness is harder to achieve, more difficult to measure or capture, and influenced by individuals’ attitude towards the opposing group as a whole (McLernon et al 2004: 590).

Group level forgiveness is nonetheless even more important in the peace-building process than interpersonal forgiveness. It encourages communities to dispel negative attitudes, promotes healthier overall intergroup relationships, and helps communities work together towards a shared future (Tam et al 2007: 121). Jorge Manzi and Roberto González, who have studied the role of forgiveness and reconciliation in Chile, have shown that intergroup forgiveness is necessary and possible even between individuals that were not directly involved in the conflict, because even people who have no direct relation to the conflict can assume responsibility for or feel guilt for their group’s misdeeds and thus ask for forgiveness on a group level (Manzi and González 2007: 71-9).
A New FACE to Peace

This development can also be observed on a micro scale, within local grassroots projects. Currently, one of the most segregated groups in Northern Ireland remains the British Services community. As a result of controversies and civilian casualties during the Troubles, many individuals and groups from Northern Ireland have not been able to forgive the British Army, and continue to project their distrust and dislike onto individuals representing the community today. Many of these individuals, mostly young wives and children, do not have a direct link to the Troubles or Northern Ireland, and many do not have any links to the community that served in Northern Ireland over a decade ago. They, however, can bear the brunt of resentment and fear that exists among local communities living around the bases in the region. They feel unwelcome, marginalised, and scared, limiting themselves to the confines of the barracks they live in or near (See Sanders 2012 253-256).

Using a carefully designed managed contact approach, the FACE project seeks to break down the walls of separation and elicit forgiveness on a group level, between local Northern Irish communities and the British Services. Within the project, interpersonal relationships, based on empathy and shared interests, were the first to develop. The project utilises the MCT approach, to ensure that all involved reach a certain level of comfort and trust among their own group before being introduced to their counterparts. This consists of a series of ‘single-identity’, pre-contact workshops before the two groups meet. The project has revealed that after the first ‘joint’ workshop, a number of participants noted how friendly and approachable the members of the other group were and found that they had a lot more in common than previously expected (Observation and Video Transcripts, Ballykinlar Contact Workshop 1, 25 May 2013).

The MCT approach seeks to develop this interpersonal relationship first, then build upon the already established connections to change overall community attitudes. The first joint (or contact) workshop is also designed to elicit similarities first between individuals and create links based on shared personal interests. As Frances McLernon and Ed Cairns argue,

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3This community, comprised of Royal Army, Navy, and Air Force, and their immediate families, continues to live marginalised lives on and around the four remaining regional bases. Contributing factors to this segregation include the perpetuating myths that surround the Services community and the lingering resentment from local groups.

4Single-identity workshops consist of only one of the two communities the FACE project engages with: either members of the Services community or the local communities based near the Army camps.
forgiveness emerges more naturally when people get to know and like each other, which is what the FACE workshops aim to do (McLernon et al 2004: 589; Tam et al 2007: 125). By dispelling myths and encouraging a better understanding of each other, the managed contact process helps individuals to focus on commonalities and the benefits of working together for a shared future. These individual relationships can then be extended to inter-group relationships and views.

Ultimately, intergroup forgiveness breaks down group-wide resentment towards a segment of a society. In post-conflict societies like Northern Ireland, opportunities should be provided for people to deal with their grievances and anger, as they hold the potential to derail the peace process and stand in the way of forgiveness and reconciliation (Tam et al 2007: 133). Furthermore, deep engagement - such as the one proposed by the MCT approach employed by the FACE project - can help people see the humanity in each other by addressing prior hurt, pain, and violence and replace negative misconceptions with new, positive relationships.

**The Role of Trust in Reconciliation**

Opposing groups in post-conflict societies will nevertheless find it difficult to begin the process of forgiveness if there is a lack of trust in the sincerity of efforts to move on beyond violence on the part of their counterparts. This can lead to further segregation and a strengthened desire to remain isolated. Groups that lack trust in each other rarely agree to collaborate, cannot let go of their painful past, and are unable to move beyond prejudiced notions. Thus, trust must be developed between opposing communities (Cehajic et al 2008: 353). However, trust is a delicate emotion to elicit and if forced from the outside may cause further antipathy between the groups, which is why it is vital that these groups are brought together in a careful way that allows trust to emerge naturally (Tam et al 2009: 57). The MCT approach model allowed the FACE project to bring together two mutually distrusting groups in a relaxed and mutually beneficial way, working first with groups individually before bringing them together and highlighting commonalities.

Prior to engaging with the FACE project, Services Families felt most comfortable and safest living ‘behind the wire’. During one of the second pre-contact/single identity workshops, several women from the Holywood group\(^5\) raised concerns about travelling to the

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\(^5\) This represents the community of Services personnel stationed at Palace Barracks in Holywood.
surrounding community and meeting with a group from the outside. Participants from ‘inside’ the Services camps did not know the outside community and thus did not yet feel they could trust them (Observation, Holywood Inside, Pre-Contact Workshop 2, 28 February 2013). Intergroup trust is particularly difficult to establish, as hardened distrust is generally based on generic biases and prejudices, which means that the ‘other’ group are automatically perceived as untrustworthy (Hewstone et al 2008: 211). Nevertheless, there are important positive consequences of establishing trust in post-conflict situations. Trust not only encourages the initial process of negotiation, but also allows people to enter into meaningful relationships, to begin to forgive, and to move beyond hate towards a peaceful and shared future (Hewstone et al 2008: 211).

After three pre-contact/single identity workshops, FACE participants from the Services community were much more positive about meeting local groups. One woman remarked that she was starting to look forward to the meeting and had begun to realise that “you have to be quite open-minded and respect others no matter what their background” (Video Transcript, Holywood Inside, Pre-Contact Workshop 3, 20 May 2013). The initial sense of hesitation and defencelessness is derived from the individual’s uncertainty regarding the motives, intentions and actions of others. There is also a slight difference between two groups getting along and liking one another, and the development of genuine trust. This nuance is particularly important and successfully addressed by the MCT approach. Simply bringing individuals and groups together for a short period of time may increase intergroup liking, but trust is much harder to gain and subsequently more meaningful in the process of reconciliation. Trust is developed through continued work and preparation in the pre-contact, single identity workshops, as well as the carefully planned, managed first contact workshop.

Furthermore, MCT is based on the notion that trust involves taking steps into the unknown (Borris and Diehl 1998: 207-222). The coordinators of the FACE project understood that for opposing groups to come together and explore difficult issues would involve putting themselves in an uncomfortable position. Many women from inside the camps, fearful of the unknown and distrusting of the outside continue to ignore the separation that exists and live segregated lives. In order to reach those individuals that are most afraid and who would benefit most from a programme like FACE, the MCT approach proposes several incentives for the participants, such as meals together, away days for the entire family, and training and
personal development courses. Each group is able to choose the activity they would like to participate in, further allowing the individuals to become comfortable with the process and to take ownership over the programme.

The Role of Managed Contact in Reconciliation and Peace-building

Over the last few years great strides have been made in understanding the role of intergroup contact in reconciliation. It seems to be one of the most effective approaches in changing inter-group relations (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). The MCT approach aims to solidify and add to the elements of intergroup contact most conducive to positive engagement, and as evident in the FACE project, it can change and widen perspectives, promote a better understanding of the various communities, and draw forgiveness and trust from various participants. It is thus a valuable tool in promoting reconciliation and aiding peace-building efforts. While only in its infancy, evidence collected from the first set of participants involved in the FACE project suggests that even in difficult situations managed contact can bring about the necessary conditions for the development of forgiveness and trust. Previous studies corroborate these findings: Tam and Hewstone’s research into trust in Northern Ireland demonstrates that both direct and extended intergroup contact can bring about increased intergroup trust and should be utilised in peace-building efforts (Tam et al 2009: 45). Northern Ireland is not the only place that has benefited from the positive effects of inter-group contact. In the Balkans, “frequent and good quality contact with members from the perpetrator group predicted forgiveness (positively) and a desire for social distance (negatively)” (Cehajic et al 2008: 352).

Several other studies in Northern Ireland have produced similar results and have further illustrated that “contact with friends from the outgroup was positively associated with higher trust in that outgroup and with greater willingness to forgive it for any past misdeeds” (Cehajic et al 2008: 354). On a smaller scale, participants in the FACE project have proved that, after taking part in the initial stages of the programme, even before contact had been made, trust had been developed, as the ‘other’ group became more familiar. Overall, the groups exhibited a decreased desire to keep social distance and excitement at the prospect of meeting and engaging with the other group.

Nevertheless, despite its proven benefits, simple contact is insufficient in some cases. Bringing opposing groups together does not ensure that they will get to know one another or
that the individuals will establish meaningful relationships. At the end of the meeting, ignorance may still persist, masked only by a façade of pleasantries. Critics of Gordon Allport’s original contact theory point out the paradox of contact, which states that prejudice can sometimes be the result of the presence of contact between opposing groups (Dixon et al 2005: 698). Allport himself understood the need for a thorough understanding of one’s context before suggesting contact and also agreed that in some cases superficial contact can do more harm than good. He warned that “theoretically every superficial contact we make with an out-group member could by the ‘law of frequency’ strengthen the adverse associations that we have” (Allport 1979: 264). Therefore, in order to break through the veneer of pleasantries and really change perceptions, contact must be meaningful and well planned.

While it is difficult to predict what meaningful contact looks like, it is possible to develop an approach that is carefully crafted and aims to develop elements of trust, forgiveness, and intergroup comfort, in preparation for the formation of meaningful and durable relationships. Through its carefully designed pre-contact and contact programme, the MCT approach allows for in-depth work, the challenging of stereotypes and misunderstandings, and the opportunity to develop renewed, durable, and positive relationships.

It is particularly important for contact to tackle issues of misunderstandings and myths, as a lack of trust can sometimes be a by-product of misconceptions and can further lead to anxiety and hesitation to engage with cross-community groups. FACE participants from the Services background continued to express apprehension at meeting the women from the outside community even during the third pre-contact workshop (Post-it Notes Reflections, Holywood Inside Pre-Contact Workshop 3, 20 May 2013). However, during the first meeting anxieties slowly eased and the women began to share personal stories of their families, background, and hobbies. Soon, the two groups, inside and outside, had merged into one and the conversation moved from ‘us and them’ to just ‘us’ (Observation, Holywood Contact Workshop 1, 8 August 2013).

In post-conflict situations groups generally tend to segregate as a result of mutual distrust and ingrained prejudices. Although not the primary instigator of conflict, segregation can play a significant role in establishing and maintaining conflict between communities and can
sometimes exacerbate conflict by prolonging mutual ignorance (Hewstone et al 2008: 202). It also creates mutual ignorance, suspicion, and distrust by maintaining negative stereotypes (Gallagher 1995: 27-42). Misinterpretations and mutual ignorance can further exacerbate old grievances within the collective memory of a community which can lead to renewed or repeated violence and lack of intergroup trust (Hewstone et al 2008: 207). Positive, sustained contact has the potential to reduce these negative aspects of post-conflict intergroup relations, as it encourages mutual understanding and tolerance. Contact further reduces prejudice by lowering intergroup anxiety, which stems mainly from the anticipation of negative consequences for oneself and for one’s community during intergroup contact (Hewstone et al 2008: 204).

**Conclusion**

Through the FACE project, the MCT approach has been shown to aid in breaking down prejudices between opposing groups; increasing tolerance, encouraging forgiveness, and developing trust among the various group members. These new or renewed relationships and positive encounters lead to cooperation and collaboration, necessary for the development of a shared society. These elements of post-conflict societies are deeply psychological elements that must be understood and engaged with, to allow for a fruitful and genuine process of reconciliation. Until the various communities of post-conflict societies fight for the respect of each other’s rights, not just their own, societies will remain fragmented and segregated, and thus both forgiveness and trust are necessary in the process of reconciliation.
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