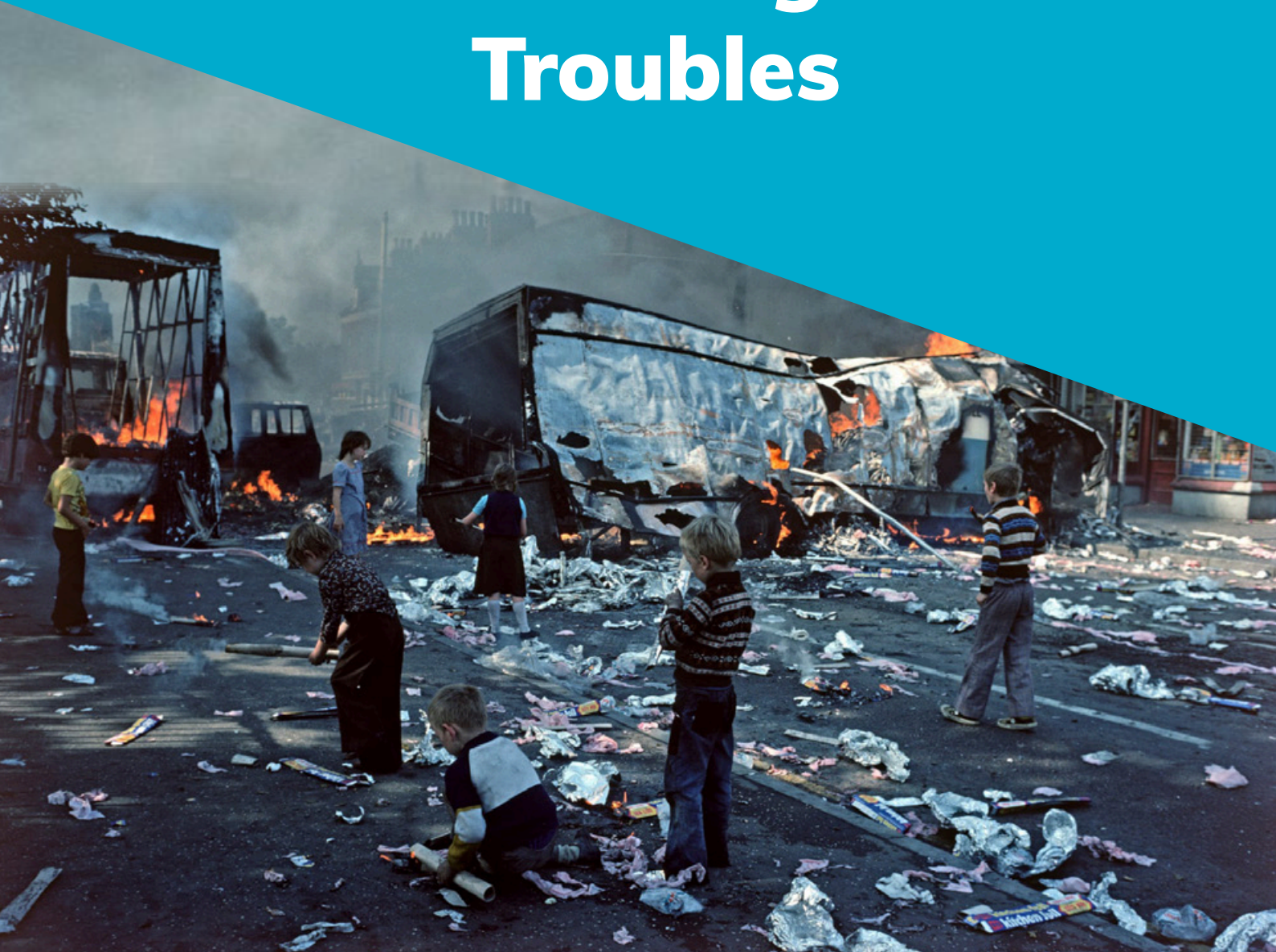


Voices of Social Work Through The Troubles



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FOREWORD

The Troubles in Northern Ireland marked an incredibly difficult and dangerous period for those living in the region. Impacts of the conflict seeped into all areas of life, with few, if any, unaffected by violence.

It was against a daily backdrop of discord and civil unrest that my colleagues in Northern Ireland worked to support their service users, with a common approach characterised by resilience and an unwavering commitment to core social work values. This research details social workers operating in truly exceptional environments. I am struck by the manner in which extreme situations became standard for those involved—practising in such circumstances is, thankfully, far beyond the experience of most social workers in the UK, although is not uncommon in countries across the world.

Twenty years after ratification of the Good Friday Agreement we are only now beginning to understand the consequences of intergenerational trauma rooted in the years of conflict. The research highlights that although many social workers experienced deeply troubling circumstances, employers struggled to effectively respond in these challenging times. It is essential that these individuals are now offered appropriate support to address the impacts of the traumatic events they encountered in decades past and to thrive in the present.

If any good is to come from this strife-torn period in our history, we as a profession must ensure that we learn from the challenges we have faced and share this learning to support colleagues working in societies currently marred by conflict. A major benefit of the research has been the opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and identify the positive difference they made in spite of extremely testing circumstances. Having started the process, it is important it continues to develop via the creation of an oral history archive, to which all social workers in Northern Ireland—including those working in the period following the Good Friday Agreement—are invited to contribute.

On behalf of the British Association of Social Workers I am delighted to have had the opportunity to fund this research and wish to extend my thanks to Dr Duffy, Dr Campbell, and Dr Tosone for their diligent and respectful approach to examining the experiences of social workers throughout *The Troubles*.

Dr Ruth Allen
Chief Executive, British Association of Social Workers

INTRODUCTION

"It is only on reflection that I realise how crazy times were! I found myself in places with people which were totally unsafe. I was immune to things happening around me—no-one flinching when bombs or shooting could be heard, making plans to visit people when the city was gridlocked with bomb scares. The mind-set of delivering the service was ingrained as I was alongside like-minded people. We did take enormous risks with our personal safety but didn't appreciate this at the time."

"I am glad of this work. I am concerned that as a society and profession we want to forget the challenges we faced and the role we played at this time."

This research project, jointly funded by the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), was undertaken in 2017–2018. It explores the vital role social workers played during *The Troubles* in Northern Ireland (1969–1998), a subject previously unexamined in such a focused and rigorous manner.

At the core of this study is the intention to listen to the voices of social workers who continued to provide services to the most vulnerable people in a society torn apart by political conflict and violence. These voices have not been heard before now and this Introduction opens with two examples of such voices.

What is clear from the findings of this report is that social workers faced immense challenges in discharging their professional duties during *The Troubles*, yet they adhered to the values of social work to ensure the needs of their clients always came first. The social work profession in Northern Ireland has much to be proud of in putting 'people first'

during this incredibly difficult period. However, this has come at a cost. Social workers had to endure daily disruption to practice, with road blocks, threats and bomb scares, all common features of working life. Social workers were also on the front line in response to some of Northern Ireland's worst atrocities, working tirelessly with others to help and support people.

To this day, several social workers are living with unexpunged death threats, and the majority of social workers felt at risk in their daily work. As a result, for some social workers, the trauma of what they experienced in *The Troubles* is still something they have to deal with. The job, however, always came first. Some social workers in this research reported risking their own lives to ensure they fulfilled their protective functions to clients. This was occurring against a backdrop of being ill-prepared by social work education and employers who were equally wedded to the 'just get on with it' attitude.

While 'getting on with it', an expression used repeatedly by research participants,

social workers turned primarily to their colleagues for support, with peer support highly valued in helping social workers maintain resilience. However, there was an absence of open and reflective discussion about *The Troubles* related issues they were facing and emotional detachment instead was prevalent in the workplace. On an individual level, there are many examples of managers being very supportive to social workers facing adversities. However, at a structural level, this was not matched by employers' responses. This can largely be explained by the fact employers also faced unusual and trying societal circumstances which presented widespread challenge and, for which, there was inadequate recognition or preparation.

Social workers 'on the ground' had to find their own creative ways of responding. At times this led them into practices involving great personal danger and ethical challenges. But, as a result, innovative community development approaches flourished—an unexpected and welcome outcome of a situation characterised by high-risk and on-going threat.

Resilience is noted by participants as having occurred naturally within a context where individual effort and personal endeavour were essential in making sure clients' needs always came first. Professional growth and stamina were characteristics social workers exhibited in their responses, but heightened vigilance and fear were constant features running alongside these more positive expressions of professional maturation. Social workers were acutely aware about aspects of their

own identity and cultural background, and how these elements of their psychobiography could interface with social work practice. Despite insufficient training and education in this field, social workers had to ensure their own safety while also continuing in their professional role. At a time of ever-present threat, the ability to practice in this way necessitated both courage and skill.

This research report examines social work's role in Northern Ireland at a most difficult period of its recent history, yet ongoing challenges remain. Social work has an important future role in helping to address the adverse impact of legacy issues related to *The Troubles*. Participants welcomed the opportunity to talk about their experiences, but for some social workers there are ongoing issues at personal and professional levels that require recognition and support. As a profession, social work needs its own forum whereby these challenging experiences can be shared and recognised as positive practice achievements given the context of considerable adversity.

Finally, it is important to recognise the importance of social work values as a compass to guide social workers in Northern Ireland through the most challenging of times. Participants demonstrated an unwavering commitment to social work values, always putting the person first, regardless of personal risk. Such a commitment to respond to those in need is something for which social workers in Northern Ireland can feel individually and collectively proud.

REPORT SUMMARY

The first part of this report describes the research approach and processes used to gather and analyse the data that emerged from a survey and individual interviews. The key findings are then presented and discussed, and concluding observations are made for social work policy, practice and education. For ease of reference, the following terms are used interchangeably in this section: *The Troubles*, 'the conflict' and 'political conflict' to refer to Northern Ireland's protracted period of violence.

The report is set out as follows:

- The report begins with a summary of the views of two experts on the importance of the study in helping to understand the role of social work, during this crucial period of the political conflict in Northern Ireland.
- A brief review of the international and local literature on the topic of social work and political conflict is then presented to set the context for, and findings of, the study.
- The next section of the report sets out the aim, research questions and methodology used in the study. This was a mixed methods study that included a survey of social workers ($n=103$) who practiced during the period 1969–1998 and interviews with a convenience sample of social work practitioners ($n=28$).
- The findings of the study are divided in two. In **Part 1** the questions asked through the survey were about experiences of *The Troubles*, and the key findings are presented. As would be expected, the social workers who responded were very experienced, some retired, employed in a range of settings and at different levels in organisations. The sample included practitioners, managers and educators. Three quarters were women
- The Conclusion to **Part 1** brings together key findings from the survey, highlighting ways in which social workers, like others in wider society, sought to make life and practice as normal as possible in this abnormal societal milieu. Working within this context required great skill, innovation, flexibility and nerve; this came at a price, characterised by the fearfulness, threats of intimidation and worry for one's own family and personal safety that came with such difficult and challenging work.
- Within this context, there were some very positive aspects of wider working practices which helped social workers in the discharge of their duties. Creative community-based approaches, negotiation skills, agency supervision and colleagues really caring and supporting each other during difficult times, were all features of practice that were reported in the survey.

- **Part 2** presents the findings from 28 in-depth interviews and summarises responses to eight standard questions and open text opportunities. The findings reveal complex, emotional and value laden views about experiences of working during such intense conflict. The following highlights the findings from these interviews:
 - a) Many respondents explained how, particularly in the early period of *The Troubles*, they were operating in an environment without precedent, and the wider social work profession, social work agencies and educators did not prepare or guide them for the traumatic nature of the conflict.
 - b) Respondents explained the range of responses they became involved in, for example in dealing with the needs of clients who had suffered because of: major bombings, dealing with community gatekeepers who restricted access to geographical areas or individuals, working alongside the security forces, and organising work and schedules around flashpoints.
 - c) Social workers had to respond to personal challenges in terms of personal safety and threats from paramilitaries in the course of their work. It was often the case that respondents did not talk about their experiences with family members as a protective measure, or employers, although peers were more likely to be trusted. While individuals within agencies supported them, there was often a lack of formal or structural support
 - d) It is evident from the interview findings that, despite the professional and personal challenges that social workers faced, they responded with a commitment to core social work values and an attitude of 'just getting on with it'. In all cases, social workers placed themselves and their own concerns as secondary to those of the people they were committed to serve.

A VIEW FROM OUR ADVISORY GROUP – MARIE THERESE O’HAGAN (DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, WAVE TRAUMA CENTRE)

One of the first things that stands out for me is that social workers were working in an environment without precedent. Neither social work educational institutions nor agencies were able to prepare social workers for situations that they would face or provide appropriate support structures to deal with the impact of working in traumatised communities. There was a lack of training around the subject of trauma, symptoms of trauma and long-term impact on individuals and families.

I think the real success of this report is acknowledging the voice of social workers. One of the main coping strategies in living through trauma was silence and I think silence became a coping mechanism for many statutory agencies in Northern Ireland, including social work. Interviewees spoke about how *The Troubles* was a known, yet unspoken reality in their professional lives. This culture of silence ensured that staff in some agencies felt unable to talk about their experiences. Avoidance of openly discussing the personal impact of the risks they faced were shared by many in the report. Neutrality and lack of acknowledgement outweighed the need to provide a space where staff could talk, share and reflect on the risks and challenges which impacted their practice. Many felt it would have been perceived as a weakness to admit being under stress. Social workers were left to navigate a working environment by relying heavily

on their peers and their own resilience. Both the survey and in-depth interviews referred numerous times to how social workers supported each other through very dangerous and difficult times. The lack of formal support from agencies and lack of coordinated response to *The Troubles* within the profession meant that social workers had to respond to events as they were happening.

This reactionary environment took a toll on health and well-being. Many voices throughout the report did acknowledge that individual managers were very supportive in terms of listening to them and to helping find solutions when the personal impact of the work was becoming a burden. Supervision was mentioned many times as a positive experience and provided a space for social workers to reflect and discuss the challenges that they were facing. Although this supervision was very

important in helping to manage risk, it was not viewed as importantly as informal peer support. Social workers relied on each other within their teams. They shared, supported and created a safe space between themselves.

The themes of 'getting on with it' and normalising the abnormal were the key coping mechanisms coming out of this report. Interviewees acknowledged that they had to accept the situation and provide a professional service to ensure the needs of clients were met, even when faced with threats to their own safety. However, for some, the normalising of this abnormal environment came with an emotional cost. The survey and interview data reported that experiences with violence were too numerous to quantify! Some social workers received death threats, while others spoke about fears around religious identity and sectarianism. Many felt social work education remained silent for too long around skilling workers to deal with the personal and professional impact of working during *The Troubles*.

On a positive note, however, the ability to ensure service provision was delivered in a violent and unpredictable sectarian society was largely due to the levels of professional dedication and determination shown by social workers. Social work values were engrained into everyday practice and social workers demonstrated remarkable skill, flexibility and creativity in ensuring that the needs of clients were front and central in their work. The commitment to social work values—being non-judgemental, relationship building, and a commitment

to service—shines through the report. Interviewees discussed the importance of being apolitical, as well as their commitment to showing great concern for practice issues such as child protection under very difficult circumstances. Commitment to the profession and belief that they were making a difference were spoken about with great pride.

Interviewees spoke about how *The Troubles* was a known, yet unspoken reality in their professional lives.



Resilience is a recurrent theme and the ability to work through and cope with risk, threats to safety and fear is highly commendable. Social workers spoke of their professional growth in terms of not being afraid of conflict, being able to plan for their own safety in aggressive situations, being self-reliant, and having the ability to bounce back when faced with adversity. They had to learn these skills on the job but the growth in learning shaped their practices and helped many become more empathetic and sensitive in their work with victims. Delivery of services brought social workers into direct contact with gatekeepers such as paramilitary organisations, community representatives, police and army. This brought risk to both social workers and their clients. Maintaining balance took great skill and again the core values of social work came to the fore in these

situations. This knowledge, reflective learning and skill set is an invaluable resource which needs to be utilised for future generations of social workers.

One of the most powerful sections of this report gives voice to the impact of being a first responder. Social workers spoke about their roles in hospitals in the immediate aftermath of bombings. They put the needs of traumatised families first, spending long hours at work, bearing witness to the trauma, grief and loss and responding to the unrelenting demands of the aftermath. The lengths that many social workers went to, even under great personal risk and danger, is humbling to read. In terms of victims and survivors of *The Troubles*, many felt there was an absence of strategic thinking around supporting people impacted by *The Troubles*. In fact, the topic of victims of *The Troubles* can still remain off limits within certain workplaces. In relation to legacy issues, many voices in this report reflected that social work not only has a role to play in contributing to legacy issues but is actually best placed to do so.

Social workers who practiced throughout *The Troubles* believe they have much to offer current students and those working in a very different Northern Ireland society today. Their learning, wisdom and resilience needs to be shared. The need to have open engagement with *Troubles*-related issues in social work practice is now being addressed. There is no doubt that service provision matured over time as agencies developed greater understanding of what their role should be, and social work education is now actively addressing the impact of *The*

Troubles on practice. There is a strong message of *don't just accept it was or is part of working here!*

This report validates and acknowledges the experience of social workers during *The Troubles* and gives them hopefully the first of many opportunities to pass on their insights and learning to others.

A VIEW FROM OUR INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER – PROFESSOR CAROL TOSONE, SILVER SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

As the only member of the research team not directly impacted by The Troubles or its legacy, I am able to provide an outsider perspective. That is, to the extent that objectivity is possible given that I was both personally and professionally impacted by the events of September 11th, a terrorist-related event. With this viewpoint in mind, there are several observations I made at the time of the interviews that remain.

My first observations pertained to the unique cultural aspects of social work practice in Northern Ireland. “Just get on with it” was a sentiment I heard expressed, in one way or another, from nearly all of the nine participants I interviewed. There was a sense that duty superseded personal concerns for safety in coping with the terrifying and unpredictable events of daily social work practice. Debriefing socially with colleagues, the only people who could fully understand, helped participants face each day, renewed in their collective professional purpose.

Continuing with cultural observations, I was struck by the participants’ awareness of differences between Protestants and Catholics, notably accents, spellings of names, neighbourhoods, parishes where one worshipped, and participation in holidays, all of which would reveal if one were Protestant or Catholic. In the United

States these are minor differences as both are Christian religions, without a history of significant friction or violence between them. In Northern Ireland, acute awareness and navigation of these differences could enhance the quality of their professional services and ultimately be life-saving. How does one advocate and risk one’s life for another who is calling him or her a Taig? How does one partner with paramilitary groups in order to gain access to neighbourhoods hostile to someone from one’s own religion?

My first observations pertained to the unique cultural aspects of social work practice in Northern Ireland.



How does a child protection worker enter the house of a paramilitary member to remove his child under threat of death? Self-disclosure is one of many techniques in our professional armamentarium, yet for these social workers revealing personal information could lead to danger or physical violence. It requires tremendous courage of conviction to enact one's professional values under such circumstances. I remain in awe of the participants' dedication to the profession and their ability to practice as usual in extraordinary and life-threatening circumstances. As a profession we place much value on resiliency as an attribute, both for our clients and ourselves. These participants demonstrated resiliency after every client encounter in that they returned to work each day not knowing what they would encounter, or if they and their families would be safe. Yet they did return every day. They admirably displayed resiliency and other universal social work values. Would a social worker from America be able to practice so well under these circumstances?

My final observation is that legacy of *The Troubles* was relevant as participants discussed their current fields of practice. While there is not open conflict, adversarial sentiments and memories linger, and it is these remarkable social workers who carry these burdens while exemplifying the best aspects of the social work profession.



SOCIAL WORK AND POLITICAL CONFLICT: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this section of the report we will review both international and Northern Irish literature on how political conflict has affected social work, and the profession's response in helping those traumatised by such conflicts.

International perspectives

In the last few decades there has been a growing interest in exploring the way in which political conflicts impact upon social work policy and practice. An early edited text by Ramon (2008) used a wide-ranging approach to capture the nature of social work engagement with conflicts and disasters across a number of continents. More recently, two leading social work journals have focused on these and other related topics (Spalek & McDonald, 2012; Ramon & Zavirsek, 2012). A range of approaches have been used to explain how social workers deal with, and are affected by, political conflict in a range of international contexts.

Some authors have developed explanatory theories on historical and contemporary features of political conflict and explored how these are manifested in organisational, practice and educational contexts. For example, the concepts of religious difference are sometimes used to hypothesise how social workers meet the needs of clients in the Israeli context (Shamai and Boem, 2001; Nutman-Swartz and Dekel, 2009; Moshe-Grodofsky, 2011). A number of

African case studies have been used to explain how radical approaches involving principles of political action (Mmatali, 2008; Kreitzer, 2012; Androff, 2012), and social development (Mupedzswisa, 1996) can enhance the role of social workers. The role of social work in addressing the needs of those seeking refuge and asylum have also been explored (Healy, 2004; Lyons and Stathopolous, 2001; Tasse, 2001; Smith et al, 2003; Briskman and Cemlyn, 2005). Community based interventions have also been used in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon and Africa (Lindsay, 2007; Grodofksy 2011; Doucet and Doucet, 2012; Ochen, 2012). In Israel a number of cross-sectional surveys have revealed variable levels of trauma among social workers and their families following violent incidents (Lev-Wiesel, 2009; Shamai and Ron, 2008). Social workers involved in helping victims of the 9/11 attack in New York also appeared to experience aspects of trauma (McTighe and Tosone, 2015; Tosone, Bauwens, and Glassman, 2014; Tosone, Nuttman-Shwartz, and Stephens, 2012; Tosone, McTighe, Bauwens, and Naturale, 2011; Tosone, 2011; Tosone, Bettmann, Minami, and Jaspersen, 2010; Bauwens and Tosone, 2010).

It is important to also recognise that, where support and protective factors are in place, post-trauma growth is also possible (Tosone, Bauwens, and Glassman, 2014; Baum and Ramon, 2010). Some authors have critiqued the role of social workers using colonial and neo-colonial ideas (Maglajlić and Stubbs, 2017; Harrop and Ioakimidis, 2018). There are a few examples where authors have tentatively carried out comparisons, for example between Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine (Ramon et al, 2006) and Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Herzegovina (Campbell et al, 2018) and in a forthcoming text associated with the research carried out for this report (Duffy et al, 2019).

Northern Irish perspectives

In the last few decades there has been increasing attention to the role of social work during *The Troubles* in Northern Ireland when over 3,700 people were killed and tens of thousands psychologically and physically traumatised (Fay et al 1999; McKittrick et al, 2008). Darby (1978) described how health and care professionals struggled to practice in the midst of violence and the collapse of civil authority. In an early commentary, Smyth and Campbell (1996) discussed the malign impact of sectarianism on social work education and practice. Campbell and Healy (1999) used a narrative approach to explore the impact of the political conflict on personal and professional identities. A number of authors sought to critically analyse the role of social work using ideas drawn from social theory and social justice (Pinkerton and Campbell, 2002;

Houston, 2008). Until recently there have been few attempts to test such ideas in empirical research (Manktelow, 2007; Carlisle, 2016). Campbell and McCrystal (2005) surveyed mental health social workers' experiences of *The Troubles*, indicating, as in the report below, that there were considerable effects of violence on practice and management. A survey of 1064 health and social care staff in Northern Ireland, which included social workers, also found elevated levels of PTSD (Luce et al, 2009). More recently a European Union sponsored social work educational programme partnered by Queens University Belfast and WAVE, a large NGO working with victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland, revealed some important messages for educators, practitioners, service users and agencies (Duffy, 2012; Coulter et al, 2013; Campbell et al, 2013). In this programme, social work students meet to discuss their complex identities and biographies, and work with victims and survivors to create opportunities for new forms of social work practice and social change. It remains to be seen if social work agencies and wider society can match the enthusiasm for change expressed by students and service users in these studies.

Messages from the literature

A number of key messages from the literature are important, in the context of the Report that is described and analysed below. The study of the interfaces between social work policy, practice and education, and situations of political conflict have only recently been the subject of academic interest. It is evident

that these relationships cannot be fully understood without considering a range of social, political, historical and economic factors. The origins of these conflicts are often associated with periods of colonialization and social divisions caused by sectarianism, racism and other forms of social inequalities. Social workers often play mixed roles in these circumstances depending on their positioning between state and civil society. What we find is that social workers often find it difficult to attend to empowering, human rights perspectives in their practice because of identity issues and the prescribed nature of agency expectations. Adherence to neutral, apolitical stances are understandable responses in such unsafe and violent contexts. Yet, as we will see from the findings of the study in the Report below, despite these restrictions, some social workers and their agencies can find spaces to deliver innovative and radical approaches to supporting victims and survivors, and to challenge the existing status quo.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The key objective in this research was to explore how social workers were affected by the political conflict in Northern Ireland during the period 1969–1998. This includes the impact upon professional and family life, support by employers, types of interventions used and whether social workers had received education and training to prepare them for practice.

Research Methods

A mixed methods research design was used, consisting of an on-line survey, followed by semi-structured interviews with a sample of respondents. For the on-line survey, social workers who had worked during the period 1969–1998 were recruited through a diverse range of established social work organisations and networks. The survey ($n=103$) contained a mix of fixed response and open-ended questions to examine particular areas of social workers' experiences of working through *The Troubles*, enabling both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. In addition, the research team purposively sampled respondents ($n=28$) to interview, as a further way of interrogating the important themes that emerged from the analysis of survey data.

Research processes

A Research Advisory Group was established at the commencement of the study comprising representatives from different sectors with relevant experience in the areas under investigation. This group met at important periods

throughout the duration of the project and had a critical role in advising and supporting the research team on important matters, including research population, sample identification and design of research instruments. There was a series of important ethical issues which had to be recognised and managed appropriately in the planning and conduct of this research, *Voices of Social Work through the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, which necessarily took considerable time. Relevant ethical approvals were subsequently sought by Queen's University Belfast and health and social care sector organisations in Northern Ireland, as well as New York University. The research team adopted the following measures to maximise ethical integrity:

1. All respondents were required to provide informed consent using standardised forms for each stage of the research.
2. The study would only focus on social workers' professional experiences of the conflict in Northern Ireland. However, there is a fine line between

professional and personal perspectives and, as such, the recall of professional experiences could potentially cause some respondents to have distressing memories. In such eventuality, the research team members would offer advice and guidance to any such respondent about sources of help, support and advice which could be sought.

3. The issues of confidentiality, data protection and privacy were all carefully addressed and managed by the team in terms of research protocols, instruments, data handling, storage and transcription processes. These processes were all conducted in accordance with both Queen's University Belfast ethics procedures and those of the local Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. The research was also occurring at a time when significant changes to data protection were being introduced through the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) in May 2018. The robust data protection measures we put in place were recognized as entirely consistent with GDPR standards and compliance.

4. The research team members were also aware of the vicarious impact that exposure to this type of research could potentially result in for the researchers themselves. An *ethic of care* (Hugman, 2005) approach was, therefore, adopted by the researchers, involving time for reflection and support following their participation in the research.

PART 1 RESEARCH FINDINGS: SURVEY

Demographics

The number of respondents to the survey totaled $n=103$ and the age distribution of the respondents showed that 49 were in the age group 50–59, representing almost half of the respondents. The second most represented age group are the 60–65 cohort as presented below.

Employment background

82% of the respondents worked in the social work sector as described in the following chart with current service user groups covering nine categories: Children and Families, Healthcare, Mental Health, Probation and Criminal Justice, Learning Disabilities, Older People, Others, All Groups, and Did Not Say.

Chart 1

Age Distribution of Respondents

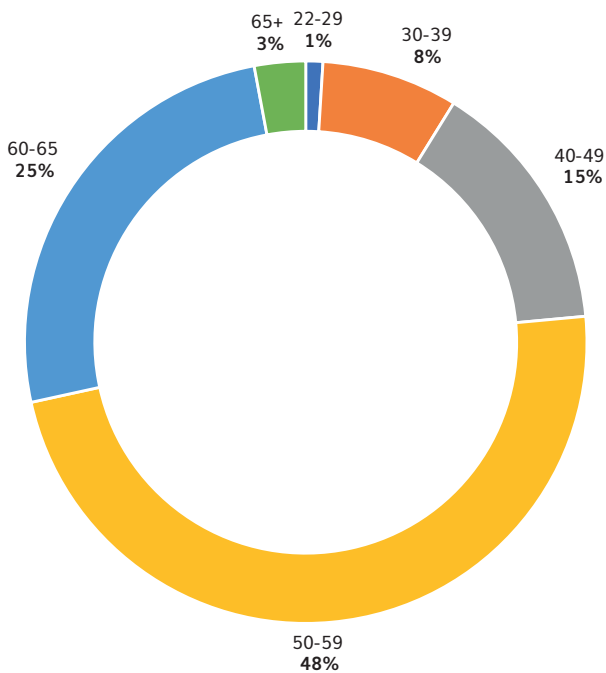
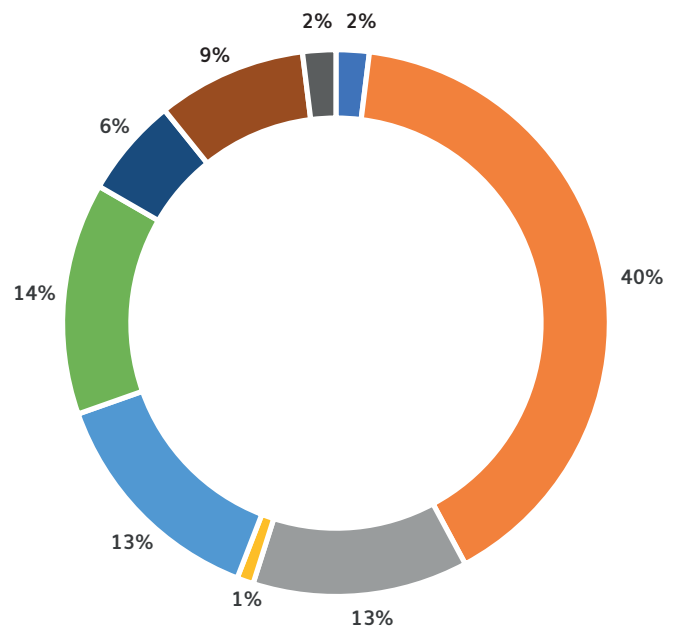


Chart 2

Current Service Group



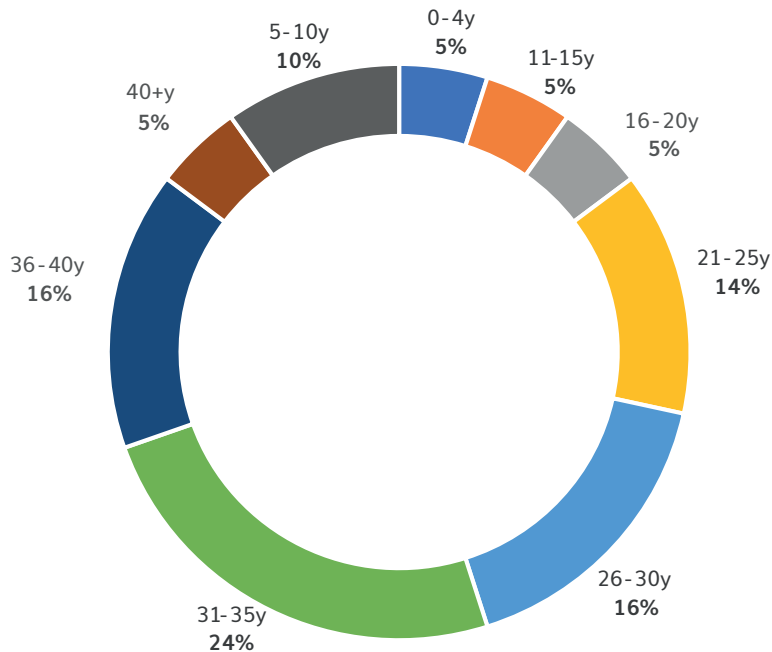
Gender

As in other social work cohorts, women were overrepresented in the respondent numbers. Of the 102 respondents (one participant offered an incomplete return) three quarters were women.

- All Groups
- Healthcare
- Older People
- Children and Families
- Learning Disabilities
- Others
- Did not say
- Mental Health
- Probation and Criminal Justice

The chart below provides a description of the length of service of the respondents with the majority having a service time between 21 to 40 years.

Chart 3



Experiences of *The Troubles*

The survey asked respondents to answer specific questions about their professional experiences as social workers as follows:

1. During your working life, how many times have you experienced the following: Shootings, Bombings, Bomb scares, Road blocks, Sectarian abuse?
2. Did your employer support you following these experiences?
3. Did you receive any education and training in helping service users who were affected by the Northern Irish conflict?
4. What types of intervention did you use to help clients affected by the Northern Irish conflict?
5. Since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998), the government has become increasingly interested in finding ways to meet the needs of victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Have you and/or your agency been involved in any strategies or interventions designed to meet these needs?
6. Do you know of any examples from outside Northern Ireland that can help you as a professional to deal with the needs of victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland?

7. What improvements, if any, can be made to social work and other services to enable social workers to deal with service users who have been affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland?
8. Reflecting back, how do you think working through *The Troubles* has affected you professionally?
9. What were the types of things that helped you cope as a social worker during this time?
10. Were there times as a social worker when you felt at risk because of working during *The Troubles*?
11. How did you cope with these feelings as a social worker?
12. Were there times when you felt your own sense of political, cultural and religious identity were challenged in carrying out your social work professional role?



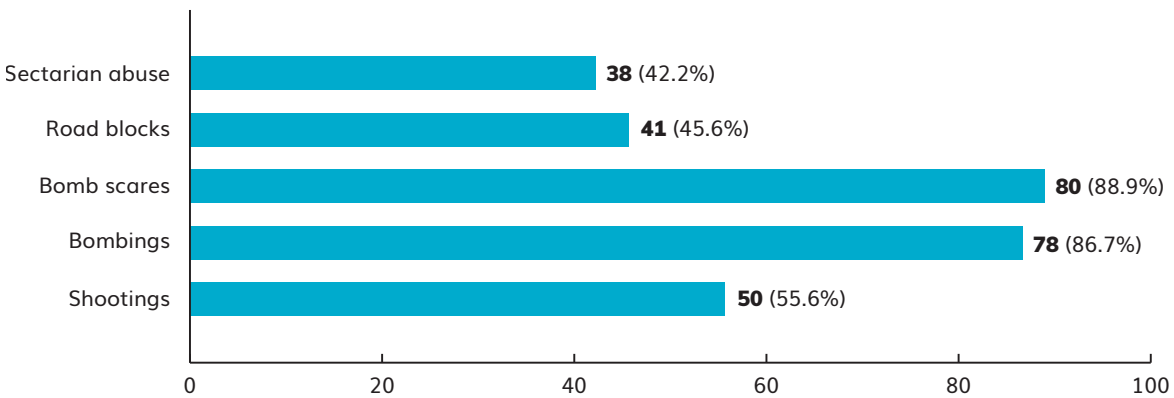
Findings

In presenting the findings, the following section presents responses in both quantitative (tables, charts and statistics) and qualitative (respondents' direct quotes) formats. We now present the findings corresponding to the responses provided for each particular question.

During your working life, how many times have you experienced the following: Shootings, Bombings, Bomb scares, Road blocks, Sectarian abuse?

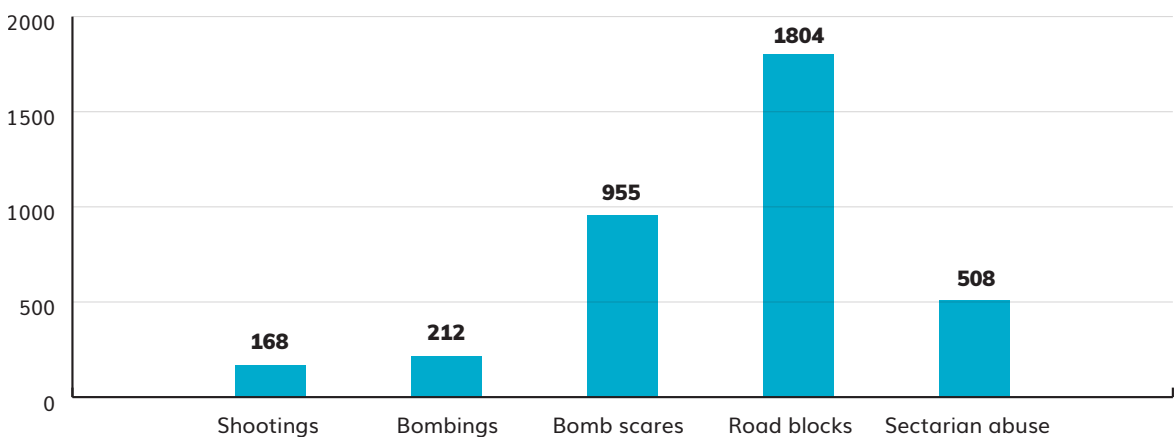
Chart 4 below describes the estimated frequency of these events during the period of Troubles 1969–1998

During your work life, how many times have you experienced the following:
90 responses



Please indicate the number of times per incident. This question asked respondents to approximate the number of times they witnessed the types of violence in the previous question.

Chart 5
Respondents experiences with violence



Several respondents stated that their experiences with violence were too numerous to quantify. In particular, bomb scares and road blocks were said to have occurred numerous times. A number of respondents also referred to the 'Drumcree Standoff'¹ as a significant event. One particular respondent recorded twice receiving death threats during the conflict, an experience also noted by others in both the survey and the interviews returned to later in the report.

Did your employer support you following these experiences?

Just less than half (47%) of the respondents said that they received support from their employer when they experienced violence during the Northern Ireland conflict. In the qualitative responses to this question, some interesting observations are made, reflecting the nature and variety of such support provided.

My employer was supportive, but the main source of support was colleagues who worked alongside me during incidents.

You debriefed with your colleagues when you came back, largely informal peer support.

Some respondents, however, felt unsupported by managers in these circumstances.

After one incident, where I was threatened by a group of masked paramilitaries, my line manager instructed me to return to the same house the following day.

One employer was really supportive and didn't expect you to take risks. However, another did not seem to have a clue and would give advice such as you were entitled to claim travel for out of hours work (I couldn't leave the police station because of rioting)—not how you were, and did you feel safe?

For some staff, however, supervision by managers was viewed as a positive experience:

On one occasion I received a death threat and my employer at the time was very supportive. I was able to move offices and the management debriefing was excellent.

Using 2 staff while on-call at night, two staff to attend an incident during "troubled" times, allowing me to work from home at times, go home early when trouble was brewing or expected or happening.

At particular moments during the conflict, social workers used innovative and supportive strategies to discharge their functions as the following observations show:

I worked on the Trauma Team which was set up after the Omagh Bomb, we had staff support built into our weekly schedule.

¹ Drumcree is an area in Northern Ireland outside the town of Portadown, County Armagh, which was characterised by dispute and 'stand-off' in regard to the wishes of Orange Order marching bands to parade through an area populated mostly by Nationalists. In past years this dispute has sparked tension and violence not only in this area but across Northern Ireland.

There was serious disruption during Loyalist 'strikes' in 1974 and 1979; our employer issued any professional who wished an armband indicating that we were essential services so that we could more easily pass through paramilitary roadblocks.

A critical theme throughout these responses was the level of professional dedication and determination shown by social workers to getting on with their work, despite the threats and violence:

As a team we would talk about incidents we had experienced but simply accepted the situation and got on with it. It was an essential way of coping with a daily potentially life-threatening situation.

Unfortunately, these experiences were the norm and people tended to just get on with work.

Did you receive any education and training in helping service users who were affected by the Northern Irish conflict?

Only just over one fifth (22%) of respondents answered this question in the

positive. For some, their student education was inadequate to deal with the conflict that was occurring in the society:

I did my social work training in [name deleted]. There was a sequence on sectarianism. It wasn't that helpful. We were in the midst of The Troubles and it was all too painful to deal with in a class of people from different backgrounds.

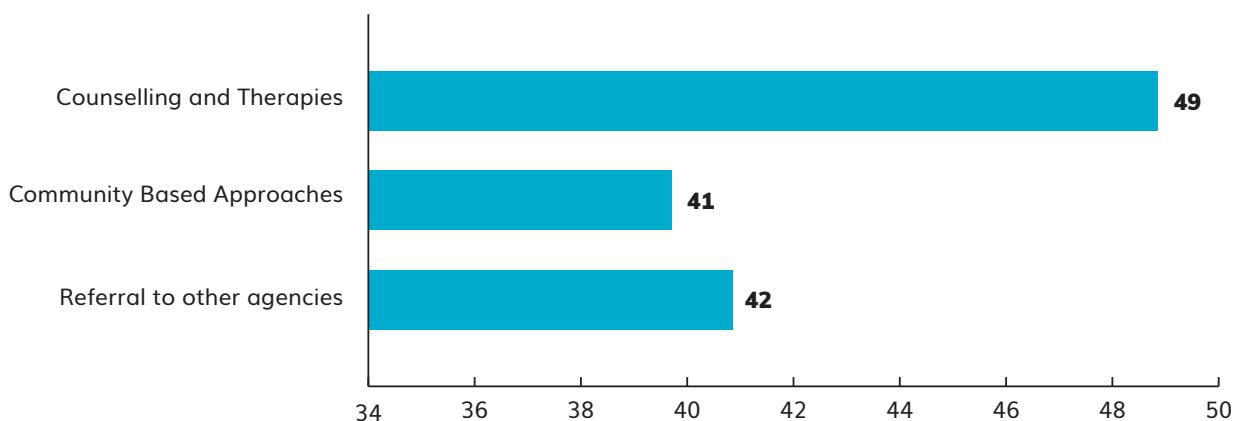
Some agency in-service training was, however, viewed to be helpful:

We received information on accessing emergency supplies when communities were out of their homes and on how to make returns to government on such incidents. During the workers' strikes we also were advised on how to ensure emergency supplies went to communities or vulnerable people.

What types of intervention did you use to help clients affected by the Northern Irish conflict?

Chart 6 below describes the types of interventions used by the respondents.

Frequency of interventions used by respondents



The most common referrals were to GPs, criminal justice agencies, specialist counselling/therapeutic organisations and community groups as described in the following quotations:

Counselling, group work, refer on to other agencies, link with community activists to help young people be safe in their communities.

Counselling, group work, summer schemes, parent groups, weekends away for children and families, through church-based initiatives, referral to community development initiatives, working with community groups to provide safe spaces activities for children and young people.

A recurrent theme was how social workers sought to make the abnormal normal, in the way they dealt with service users' needs:

Generally ... we didn't see the challenges service users faced as conflict related ... The Troubles were just part of life and the impact wasn't really thought about ... I didn't offer any specific help related to their Troubles experiences.

The trauma of living in besieged communities was not spoken about openly in the staff team let alone with the families. It was a known but an unspoken truth with a focus on normalisation.

On the other hand, several respondents linked the impact of *The Troubles* directly to the mental health needs of their clients:

Clients affected by The Troubles often manifested poor mental health/PTSD and they tended to be referred to mainstream mental health services. It has only been in the post conflict period have we

recognised the impact and need and specialist bespoke services to meet need.

Some of the service users with whom I was working would have witnessed events which clearly impacted on their mental health. I would have listened, given them space to talk, but would not have had the expertise to really support them. The other issue was that this was all current, it was what people were living in and with, so it was difficult to address.

In concluding analysis to responses to this question, the following quote powerfully conveys the sense of collectively 'being in it together' in regard to the social work/ service user relationship.

Interestingly enough as I reflect I realise that we all, including clients, had the same "get on with it" approach.

Since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998), the government has become increasingly interested in finding ways to meet the needs of victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Have you and/or your agency been involved in any strategy?

Only one third (33%) of respondents had considered ways of operationalising government strategies for victims and survivors of the conflict. The majority of respondents who indicated an absence of strategic thinking on this issue of supporting people affected by *The Troubles* are reflected in the following responses.

Not clear regarding any higher strategic level thinking around this issue.

I suspect there is strategic thinking at higher levels but I am not aware of it.

For the minority of respondents, a number of approaches seemed possible:

Providing psychological therapies to address trauma related needs arising from The Troubles, research (epidemiological, and clinical studies), developing and delivering training, advocacy, attempting to influence and inform policy.

Working within Community Partnerships is core to my job and so I work alongside many survivors and victims but in many ways it is unspoken and I believe the topic remains off limits within the work place and any interventions are focused on individual need.

It would therefore seem that in the aftermath of the 1998 Peace Agreement, a specific focus on the needs of victims and survivors was recognized as a developing area.

Do you know of any examples from outside Northern Ireland that can help you as a professional to deal with the needs of victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland?

The same proportion of respondents (22%) answered this question positively. Generally, there was a lack of awareness of international examples that might have informed practice in Northern Ireland, but a minority identified a number of potential initiatives such as:

Restorative Justice approaches provided in South Africa.

Through my work in NICTT² I was aware, and they had links with other victims of trauma in New York, Nepal and elsewhere which helped inform our practice.

What improvements, if any, can be made to social work and other services to enable social workers to deal with service users who have been affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland?

Several respondents recognised that social workers needed to actively engage with the transgenerational impact of The Troubles on the current lives of service users. The following are a range of quotations on this particular theme:

Our experience shows that staff need to be informed about trauma related needs and risks, how to work with trauma sufferers and those with chronic grief, with those injured from violence, how to manage and deploy staff to meet these needs, how to work in areas under the influence of paramilitaries, how to work in a context of sectarianism and the importance of understanding and addressing the adverse trans-generational impact of the years of violence. I had little training relating to such areas.

More training on the intergenerational impact of trauma with particular and explicit reference to The Troubles in Northern Ireland. This will help to allow the conversations to begin. In addition to training, social workers will need to be supported to help service users and where they agree, signpost them to services.

² NICTT = Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation.

The need for specialist training on the on-going impact of *The Troubles* was identified as a training need:

Training for social workers on awareness of the impact of Troubles would be helpful. Acknowledgment within SW that the legacy of The Troubles is very much alive and continuing to impact on families.

Post conflict training ... I work with young people in residential care in Belfast. At times, the level of sectarianism in our young people astounds me. I feel we, as social workers, have a role in helping/ attempting to reduce this legacy.

The need for an 'open discussion' on the impact of *The Troubles* and that there should be a space for sharing, reflecting and talking about these experiences was also expressed.

Focus on it, don't just accept that it's part of growing up and working here—it is/ was a unique and dangerous and scary time to work and live in—it might be time to talk about it safely now! Maybe!

There needs to be a public discussion about frontline social work during The Troubles, especially when engaged in child protection where the families had paramilitary connections and having to deal with death threats to self or other staff. They were tough times. It's not even on the agenda so it would help if we even talked about it.

There was also a recognition that employers have a very important role to play in supporting and facilitating staff in the context of a post conflict Northern Ireland. Such support would also require

a reflexive examination of the potentially constraining impact of managerialism on current social work practice. Supervision as a space and place to openly recognise and discuss these on-going conflict related issues was also noted:

Social workers do not have time or capacity to do anything other than statutory requirements or crisis intervention. For me social work increasingly serves the interests of the Trusts rather than the client. It has lost its way, the onslaught of the managerialism business model in social work means the P.R. and paper takes priority.

Increase and maintain front line staff and consciously decrease the need for administrative tasks that directly affect the ability to engage with survivors of The Troubles.

There was also a call for a return to more community-based approaches to social work engagement on *Troubles*-related issues:

Cross community activities and groups have dramatically reduced in recent years. Programmes aimed at educating young people about our shared history and similarities need to be reintroduced in an attempt to reduce what appears to be increasing levels of sectarianism amongst our young people.

A better networking and collaboration with local community-based groups working across interfaces. Better knowledge of the living legacy for victims and survivors, real individualised engagement.

Recognition that this type of social work engagement is inherently political was articulated by several respondents:

There needs to be an overall government strategy for dealing with victims, which is almost totally absent at the moment. Helping would be much easier if there was real leadership from government.

I think the treatment of victims and survivors has been scandalous by government and they are largely ignored or seen as a "problem" that no one really wants to acknowledge. They need to come front and centre as they can teach us a lot about resolving problems, anxiety, PTSD, counselling approaches, resilience and the need for true inclusion within society.

The following quote seems apt in bringing this section to a conclusion in its call for ongoing and open engagement with Troubles related issues in social work practice.

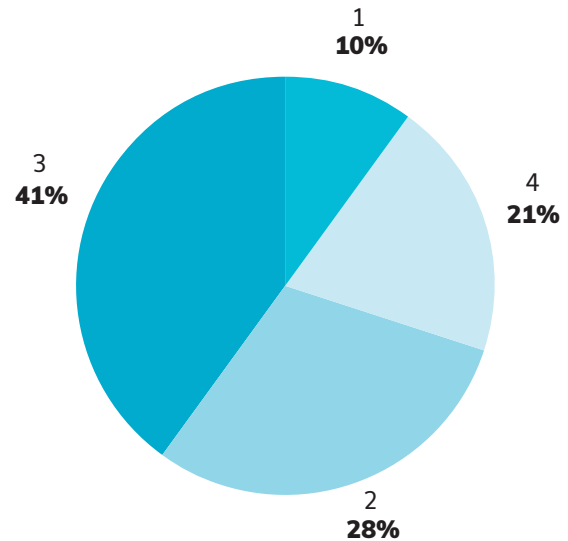
Social work should address these on-going dynamics, at least by naming them in the first instance and then by working collaboratively with other agencies to see how they can be addressed.

Were there times as a social worker when you felt at risk because of working during The Troubles?

The question asked the respondents to rate this feeling of being 'at risk' using a scale from 1 to 4 (1 indicating that they never felt at risk and 4 indicating that they felt at risk a lot of time).

Chart 7

Exposure to Risk during troubles



The respondents gave diverse and detailed answers to this feeling of being 'at risk'. What is clear from the responses is that 62% of social workers felt at risk in going about their work. The list below provides an overview and summary of their responses to how these types of at-risk situations were typified.

- Direct and personal exposure to violence, paramilitary threats, being followed home by paramilitaries, and being victims of paramilitary violence following social work interventions in child protection. Being also directly threatened by paramilitaries because of perceived religious background.
- Being followed by an unmarked car for a full day.
- Being seen to work closely with the police, particularly in Republican areas and needing to manage this.

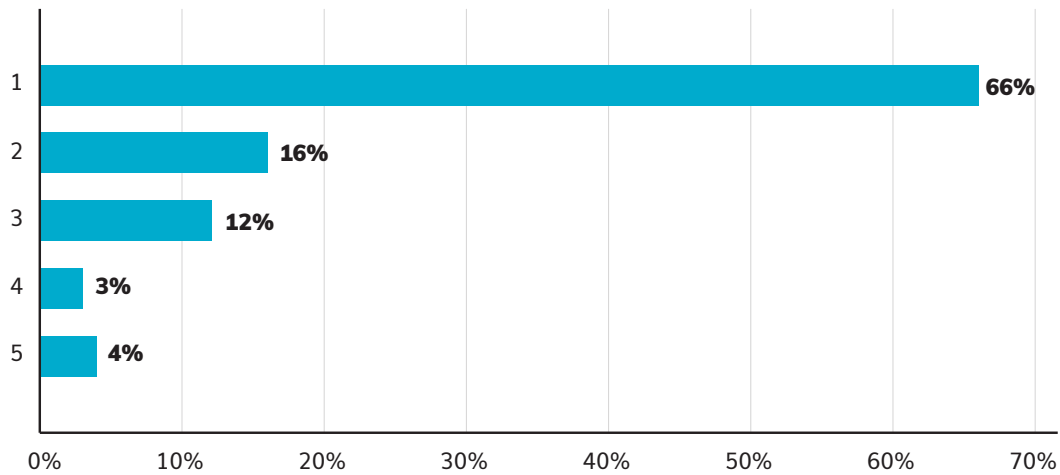
- Doing home visits and strangers asking you who you are and where are you from.
- Child protection social work in paramilitary areas and social work with clients with paramilitary connections. Dealing with paramilitary threats on an on-going basis and following social work interventions.
- Out of hours social work during violent and unsettled times.
- Fear of driving behind army vehicles in West Belfast.
- Having to work under a general death threat to all social workers in one particular part of Belfast.
- Working in areas controlled by paramilitaries coming from a different religious/community background.
- Places visited, people met, bomb scares, road blocks, bombs, sectarian abuse in post.
- Dealing with service users who were armed with firearms.
- Being trapped in an office for a number of hours while a riot took place all around the building.
- Working in certain areas during times of increased tension, e.g. Holy Cross dispute, Drumcree, etc.
- Being caught in crossfire and needing to protect a child from being injured in the middle of this.
- Walking through a suspected booby-trapped front door to discharge child protection duties.
- Directly interfacing with paramilitaries following incidents of domestic violence when paramilitary personnel were also in the home talking to the victim.
- Being trapped and stoned in venues with groups of young people and groups from other sections of the community targeting us, travelling home trying to avoid roadblocks and crowds of people armed with sticks, etc. and being threatened and told to stay away from certain areas.
- Lone working even when there were riots or cars/buses being hijacked.
- Dealing with death threats in discharge of child protection duties.
- Having to undertake out of hours visits accompanied by both police and army.
- Being directly assaulted and threatened because of professional SW role in joint working with the RUC and PSNI.

How did you cope with these feelings as a social worker?

This question asked the survey participants to indicate how they coped with the feeling of being at risk, indicating the importance of various coping mechanisms on a scale of 1-5 with (1 being most important and 5 being least important).

Chart 8

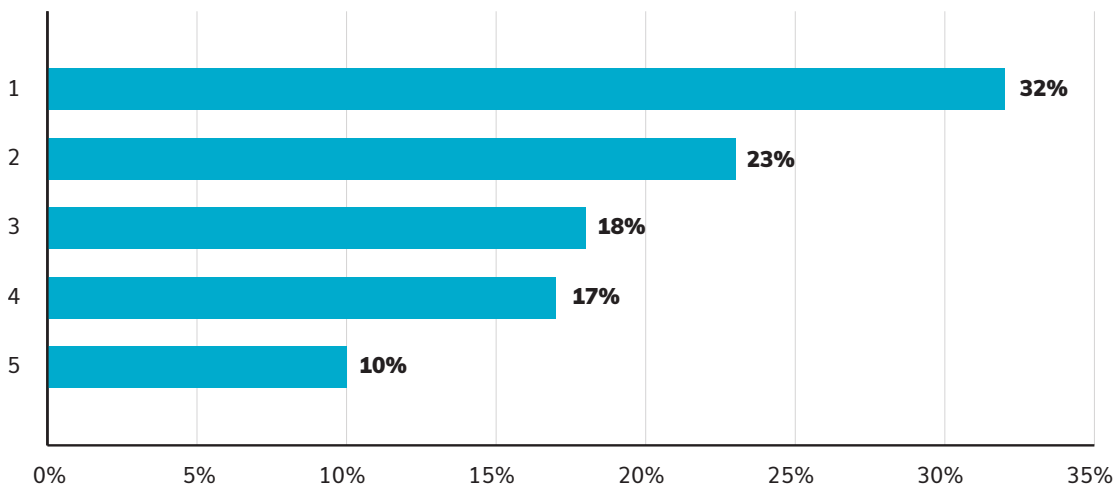
Talking to Colleagues



It is apparent from this theme that respondents (82%) were very dependent on the support of their colleagues in dealing with risk.

Chart 9

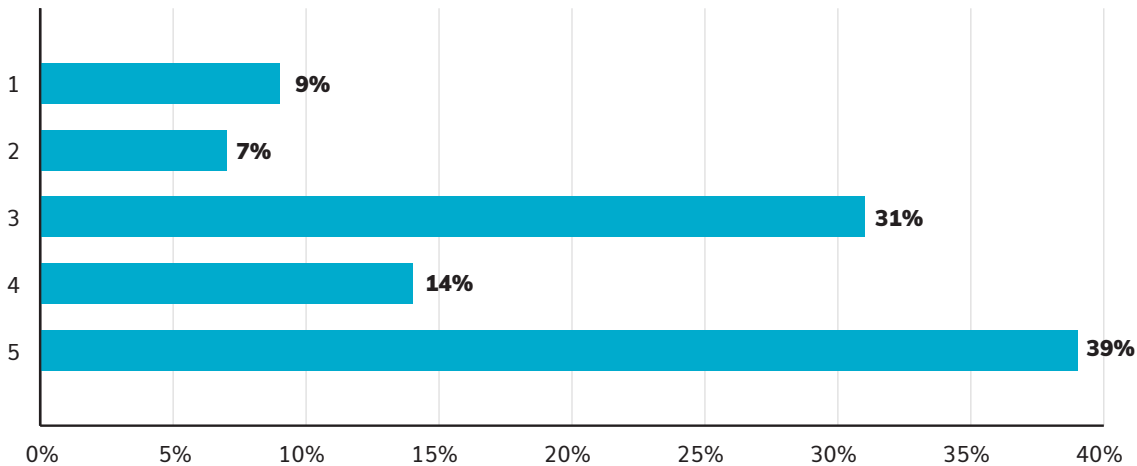
Having Supervision



This theme confirms findings highlighted earlier in the report that supervision is viewed to be important in managing feelings of risk. However, this is not as important as peer support.

Chart 10

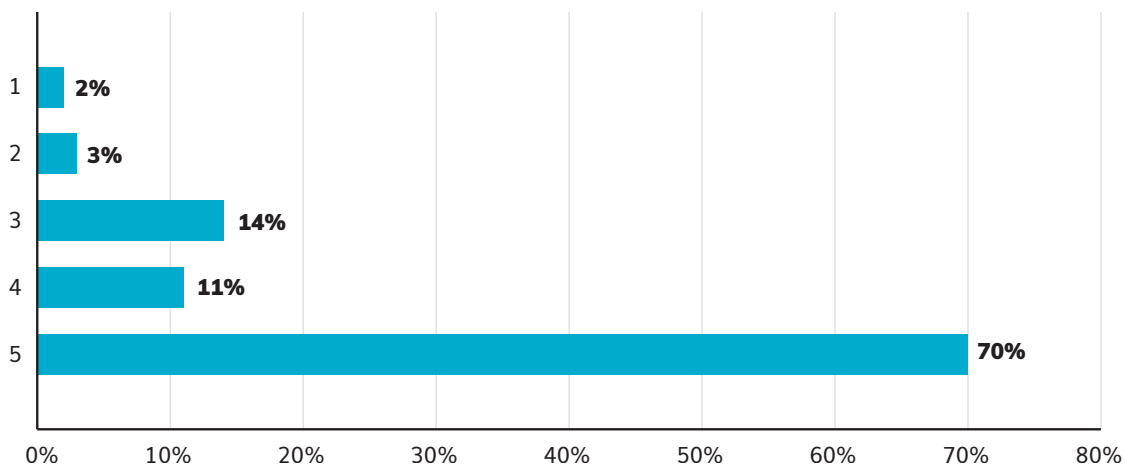
Taking Leave



The chart above suggests that social workers did not highly value the option of taking time away from work to get them through these difficult and risky situations. This could relate to the busyness of their working lives and the need, as referred to already, 'to get on with the job'. It could also, however, be viewed as a negative insofar as social workers did not have time and space for respite and relief from the overt challenges they faced in their daily working lives or may have feared negative reactions from their colleagues about not being able to cope (this point emerges in the interview responses in Part 2).

Chart 11

Not talking to anyone



These findings echo the importance, mentioned earlier, for social workers to be able to share their thoughts, experiences and feelings about working in such conflict and dangerous situations. This clearly was an important coping mechanism.

Reflecting back, how do you think working through The Troubles has affected you professionally?

At the core of this research is the focus on social workers' voices. The following respondent provides a powerful image of how social work in this context had a multi layered impact at a professional and personal level:

I was involved as a practitioner, as a middle and senior manager, as a neighbour and friend of those who were killed and injured. Integrating these dimensions was a challenge but they also informed each other. At times I felt disabled by the nature of the needs which were hard to understand, the fears people had in trusting me, in asking for help, in making the case for action when at times it was hard to get the kind of response that was needed from services and those in authority, by the sectarian undertones. My response was to try to understand needs better and develop evidence-based responses, to train staff so they had skills that were relevant to the needs they were facing ... to comfort and manage staff dealing with very difficult professional and personal experiences. Direct experiences of threat to me were profoundly frightening—as much for the threat they posed to my family and colleagues, as to me. This deeply affected my mood and behaviour at times.

Indeed, resilience is a recurrent theme in many of the participants' responses to this question as can be seen from the following quotes where this is either directly stated as such or implied:

It has made me very resilient, I can manage high levels of stress, I am not afraid of conflict and can mediate well in these situations. I know how important it is to plan for my own safety in situations of aggression.

It made me more self-reliant. This is largely because support from line management for me and colleagues affected by The Troubles was extremely poor and we had to develop our own coping mechanisms.

Some respondents also found positive aspects of their experience, despite the conflict and risks:

Actually, in many respects I believe the working conditions during The Troubles were easier, peer support was always there, and you were out in the communities not in the office, today individuals are brutalized by the workloads, the complexity of cases and levels of risk, audits, stats and 70-page U.N.O.C.I.N.I.s³

At the time I was young and normalised The Troubles as I, like others, didn't know what life was like without them—reflecting back can be difficult as I now appreciate some of the very risky situations that I worked in and would think twice now if faced with the same challenges. I think humour got me and my colleagues through it, not to mention luck. I also quickly learned personal safety techniques and to this day will always hold my keys in my hand and sit next the exit door and never bring my handbag into a house, all to enable a quick exit!

³ UNOCINI = Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland is an assessment framework for children and families in terms of planning for social work intervention and support services.

On reflection, I think I have been affected. I would be less reactive, and I have developed a need to keep situations calm and more controlled. I would be better at risk management and try to ensure that those around me do not escalate situations.

The effect was positive ... It helped me to develop skills in negotiating contested situations. I learned a lot about working out what I wanted to achieve in a given situation and anticipating and dealing with resistance without antagonising people.

There was also an underlying sense that continual exposure to this traumatological environment had quite adverse personal consequences characterised as fear:

It was a very frightening period, which caused me considerable anxiety. As a Catholic who worked in a predominantly Protestant/Loyalist community I had to take a very cautious approach. On a few occasions I can recall checking underneath my car for potential explosive devices.

Lack of confidence in addressing certain issues, fear of sectarianism in workplace, fear of expressing own culture.

Nothing will ever be as difficult or scary.

There were a number of occasions when Ardoyne and the New Lodge were sealed off and locked down whilst the Police and Army 'raided' the area. I had to stay in family homes for a few hours on at least two occasions until the cordon was lifted. This experience was both intimidating and frightening.

There was also an impression that continued exposure to social work in this violent milieu led to a sense of this type of social work context being normalised:

I have often reflected on how the reality of working in North and West Belfast and [name of prison] in the 80's with direct involvement with paramilitaries was the best of times and the worst regarding professional practice. We were forced to focus on our communication skills as saying the wrong thing could lead to significant trouble so this enhanced me as a practitioner, but the normalising of extreme violence, disruptions to the working day etc did numb me emotionally for quite some time. When you are working with people who deliberately terrorise and torture people from a different religion and you witness civil disruption on a daily basis you can become detached. Not a good place to be!

Dealing with The Troubles both personally and professionally impacts how you see normality; as a consequence of the witnessed and experienced violence of that time. Living through The Troubles normalized how we viewed sectarian and dissident activity i.e. bombings, shootings etc. These events were the norm as opposed to the rarity. Therefore, we have become desensitised to abnormal events in the here and now and in my opinion whether rightly or wrongly are more able to deal with them professionally.

The quotes below indicate that social workers, in this 'abnormally normal' context, did not openly engage in reflective practice at an introspective level and additionally did not tend to verbalise these feelings with others; silence

therefore pervaded and prevented any open exchange:

To be honest looking back it is quite shocking how living and working in The Troubles became normalised ... I think that the "whatever you say, say nothing" mentality became normalised and I think that this still affects the way politics is handled in the workplace and with service users.

We tended not to discuss the 'elephant in the room' that was The Troubles, perhaps partly because we mostly came from NI and sought to avoid conflict with each other and partly because there was a certain normalisation of the conflict.

This sense of normalising the abnormal, however, came at an emotional cost for some social workers as the following respondents express:

The trauma I experienced still lives with me and I accept I haven't fully processed it and therefore at some level does have the effect of re-traumatising me when dealing with crisis and risk.

It's become normal to be abused verbally if service users assume I am from one background or the other. At times I have been exposed to the periphery of some traumatic events involving service users with little or no debrief.

I think it stunted professional development as our energies had to go into feeling safe. For instance, some families could only be visited with a police escort.

Scarred me emotionally and physically.

Within this context of fear, having to normalise and adjust to such challenging professional situations, respondents also positively identified aspects of deepened understanding related to areas such as anti-oppressive practice, political skills and trauma perspectives. The following quotes provide relevant examples:

It certainly has made me much more political, in the broadest sense, I think, compared to social workers who are coming out today. I think I'm more aware of issues around justice and seeing social work in a political context and I think that's a good thing.

I am aware of the issues and impact The Troubles have on people's mental health, relationships and their daily functioning. I am currently a hospital social worker and I would be aware of the needs and services available for people with Troubles related trauma.

I feel this professional experience has given me greater insight and understanding of opinions, views and politics than I would have gained otherwise. Therefore, I have benefitted from working as a social worker in this post-conflict society. Apart from fairly regular bomb scares, I feel happy working in this society.

A very strong and recurrent theme was, as also mentioned earlier, a dedication and commitment to doing a professional job and making sure the clients' needs were prioritized. The following quotes underscore this point:

They were challenging times which we

worked through particularly moving across interface areas, and local people monitoring your movements, and having to deal with threats of violence. It was part of everyday work, so we just got on with it. I think as a team we supported each other and de-briefed. Our focus had to be about putting children first, even where threats were made.

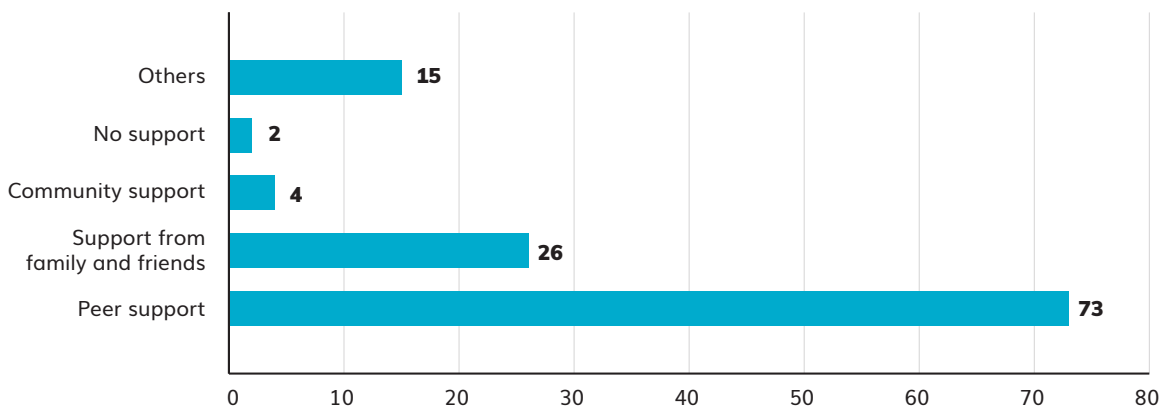
I would say however as workers, we were clear about professional and personal standards and were motivated to deliver a service we were proud of.

In brief, after the initial trauma of experiencing shootings, bombings, numerous hi-jackings and the loss of personal friends both Protestant and Catholic I was numbed. I became more empathetic and sensitive in my work with victims and their families. It taught me the value of understanding the reasons behind conflict (political or other) and to recognise the need for open mindedness and tolerance. It also taught me to be afraid of nothing!

What were the types of things that helped you cope as a social worker during this time?

Chart 12, below, indicates how most forms of support were provided by peers and family members.

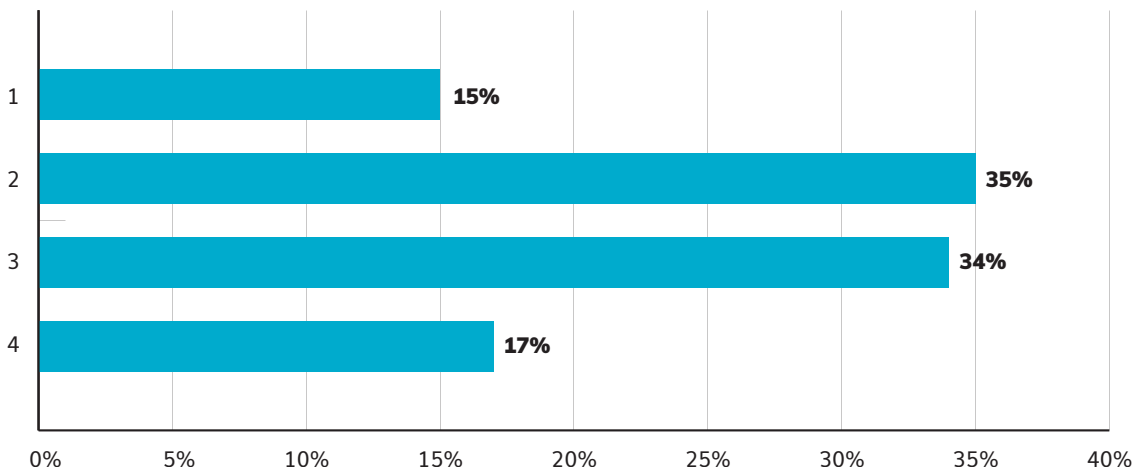
Type of coping mechanism during the Northern Ireland conflict



Were there times when you felt your own sense of political, cultural and religious identity were challenged in carrying out your social work professional role?

The question asked the respondents to indicate their feelings on a scale of 1 to 4 (with 1 being that they never felt any challenge and 4 indicating that their feelings were significantly challenged). The findings are expressed below

Chart 13



Participants were also asked to provide examples where they felt there were challenges to their political, cultural and religious identity. Several respondents noted that clients were often very keen to find out their religious identity and background:

Service users asking questions as my name didn't give much away ... funny at times!

My religious identity was 'assumed' by my service users because I worked in social work.

Families would try to find out your religion. At times threats were made against workers from one religion or the other.

I worked in a variety of communities where my accent enabled people to know where I was from. This inevitably led to people asking where I was from and my answer would have given a strong indication of my religion. This made me feel really vulnerable.

Having made assumptions about a social worker's perceived cultural/religious background led to service users making additional judgements and assumptions as the following respondents noted:

Service users referring to issues because they guessed your background due to your name.

Meeting new service users, experienced people attempting to 'suss out' your own religious background, using tactics to explore your opinions of flags, marches, cultural celebrations etc. This could lead to more menacing threats when decision making for families, for example 'what would you know, you are different background to me?' 'How can you understand my point of view?'

For some respondents the assigning of a particular religious identity could have negative practice effects:

Being identified a Catholic made it difficult to feel confident in situations especially around child protection issues, intimidation was a way of exerting a degree of power and resistance to your intervention.

My own middle-class Protestant upbringing was constantly challenged as either representing an enemy or an ally. It was very difficult to be seen as a professional—was seen as "the Prod".

Always tried to remain professional but aware that I was at times viewed as being from the "other side". Could leave you in a vulnerable position. Sometimes required help of colleague to assist.

These difficulties could also surface in the employment context as the following respondents noted:

Tensions in the mid-nineties were high and this affected co-workers at times, this subsequently created tension in the work place.

When working in communities of different background it could be very challenging at times sometimes within team and client group. Curiosity and fear were issues.

My main experience of sectarianism, challenges to my identity came from a colleague.

The issue of language, symbols, emblems were also sometimes problematic.

Not being able to wear poppy badge.

Need to acknowledge towns by different names totally unfamiliar to me Derry/ Londonderry.

As referred to earlier, social workers were necessarily and routinely engaged in working with paramilitaries, which also raised a number of anxieties:

It was challenging to have to liaise albeit indirectly with paramilitaries. As someone completely opposed to any sort of violence in the context of The Troubles, I felt very conflicted by taking actions which I felt lent power, authority and

legitimacy to paramilitaries in order to protect vulnerable individuals.

I was never comfortable with having to accept that a young person was being forced to leave their area or home because they had fallen foul of paramilitarism. However, this was a reality for some young people.

If you have any further information to offer, please do so below

A range of responses were made to this question that adds to our understanding of how the respondents coped with the political conflict:

I am glad of this work. I am concerned that as a society and profession we want to forget the challenges we faced and the role we played at this time.

It was a difficult time to practice social work/youth work but that was our life then—I have grandchildren now and I am so glad that they will, hopefully, never have to live through times like that, but I have lots of stories to tell them (when they're old enough to understand).

Strong and supportive leadership from management made the difference in my staying in child protection work during The Troubles. I couldn't have done it without my colleagues who were my strength and inspiration.

As a young social worker, I took my cues from others in the team and the Team Manager. They took everything in their stride and their calmness and management of their own stress influenced the culture of the team. I think

there was also a pride in ensuring that services continued to be delivered despite Troubles-related incidents.

I don't believe anyone who worked or lived here escaped the legacy of The Troubles on their psyche, their outlook and their ability to recognize and deal with conflict. We still don't not have any mechanisms to offload this backstory, the bad but also the good parts. Working through and living through this period in our past has made me a much more resilient person. However only a fool would not acknowledge this came at a cost and I'm sure this has repercussions even today so many years later.

While I did not carry around with me any sense of being threatened I was conscious of the armed police and army presence and the helicopters overhead. When I went home for holidays I felt relieved to be away from all of that.

Both professionally and personally as a citizen living in NI I think if we are honest and open with each other we are still living with a huge unresolved legacy as a result of The Troubles which has multiple implications for our present and future social work practitioners.

Conclusions

The findings from the on-line survey indicate that the social work response during *The Troubles* was characterised by many challenges on multiple levels. Despite this, there appeared to be an unwavering commitment to put the needs of service users/clients first at all times; on occasion, social workers risked their own lives in so doing.

These findings suggest an acceptance of making practice somehow normal in an abnormal society. Working within this context required great skill, innovation, flexibility and nerve; this came at a price, characterised by the fearfulness, threats of intimidation and worry for one's own family and personal safety that came with such difficult and challenging work. Yet there were some positive examples of how creative community-based approaches, negotiation skills, agency supervision and peer support were used to enhance service provision. The next section of the report describes and analyses the second part of the study involving in-depth interviews with respondents.

PART 2 RESEARCH FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 28 participants. These participants were recruited by the research team through a variety of channels such as purposive selection (based on their known direct experiences to the research team), snowball sampling (where we were directed to contact people by others involved/interested in the research), HSC Trusts' promotion and publicity of the research, and by responses to the research flyer.

We were, therefore, able to include a diverse range of experienced social workers in this stage of the research as is evident from the demographic information below (based on available data for 26 respondents):

	Number
Gender	
Male	9
Female	17
Age Profile	
40-49	1
50-59	11
60-65	12
65+	2
Relationship Status	
Single	5
In a relationship	21
Community Background	
Catholic	22
Protestant	3
Other	1
Race	
White	26
Disability	
Yes	0
No	26

Most participants worked during their careers in the state sector with a few in voluntary sector organisations, or worked privately. Participants also worked across a range of client groups

Interview Questions

Building on the approach used in the survey questions in the previous section, the research team designed the following interview questions:

1. In what ways do you think social workers responded during the conflict?
2. How do you think social work agencies dealt with conflict related issues?
3. How do you think social work educators dealt with conflict related issues?
4. Can you provide examples of how you as a social worker responded in particular situations during *The Troubles*?
5. What were the types of things that helped you to cope as a social worker during these times? What types of support were there in place for you?
6. What are the types of things that made it difficult, more challenging, in being a social worker during these times? What types of support were there in place for you?
7. How do you think social workers, social work agencies and social work educators should deal with legacy issues associated with the conflict?
8. Are there any other points you would like to make?

Interview Analysis

The approach adopted to analyse the 28 semi-structured interviews was that of template analysis (King, 1998), a thematic analysis technique. In developing template analysis, King (1998) extended and built upon Crabtree and Miller (1999) who discuss the use of a codebook or template as an organisational and analytic tool. This technique, therefore, involves the development of a list of codes or categories which summarise the key themes identified in a data set, arranging them in a meaningful and useful manner - the template (King, 1998, 2004).

With the use of a template, the researcher first assigns segments of text to a theme before proceeding to make connections between themes (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Coding is conducted hierarchically with "similar codes clustered together to produce more general higher order codes" (King, 1998, p. 119). While higher-order codes provide an overview of concepts, the lower-order codes permit a greater level of discrimination of the characteristics within and between the units of analysis.

The data analysis for this phase of the study started with a process of familiarisation which involved reading through a sub-set of the interview transcripts. This process of familiarisation allowed immersion in the data to develop an awareness of the topics and themes discussed in the interviews. Throughout the process of familiarization, notes of key themes that emerged from the transcripts were recorded. An initial thematic template was then created based on

these notes and the broad themes of the interview questions.

Following the development of an initial template, analysis was then conducted on each of the interview transcripts with segments of the interview transcripts being assigned to themes in the template. Throughout the process of analysis, inadequacies in the initial template were addressed and the template revised. The template analysis was therefore conducted in an iterative manner which involved constantly moving back and forth between the data and the template as new themes were discovered in the interview transcripts and new relationships between themes were identified. The need to revise the template diminished significantly following the coding of the eighteenth interview. As noted by King *et al.* (2002), when conducting template analysis, codes are specified not only for themes found in the majority of transcripts, but also for those themes that may occur in a small number of the transcripts but are particularly relevant in order to ensure that a full description of the data is obtained. The 28 semi-structured interviews produced rich and detailed accounts of the participants' experiences of being a social worker during *The Troubles*. The following sections present the key themes identified through the analysis process together with illustrative quotes.

How social workers responded to the conflict

This section presents the key themes regarding the response to the Northern Ireland conflict by the social work

profession and social workers, with a distinction being noted between the responses of social work as a profession and the responses of individual social workers during the analysis of the data.

Lack of organisation

Eight social workers noted a lack of an organised and coordinated response to *The Troubles* with the profession and social workers being forced to respond to events as they happened. Moreover, there was uncertainty on the part of social work professional bodies as to what the response of the profession should be:

But I also don't have any recollection of even the professional ... BASW ... Of any of the professional associations playing any part or acknowledgement or whatever. So I don't think they were particularly good at it. But I don't see it as a criticism. I see it as a ... nobody knew what they were doing and we were making it up as we went along. And responding to what was happening out there as it happened. (Participant 17)

Another participant made the following point:

*I think that as a social work profession, we handled *The Troubles* well. I think as a profession my experience was, and certainly even listening to some of my colleagues who worked in the prison set up at the time, I think we handled *The Troubles* as well as we could without having had a backdrop of a resource on a bookshelf to take it off. I think that you had hugely flexible, innovative practice, scary practice sometimes in terms of*

am I going to be safe here? But we had nothing else to our hand. (Participant 23)

Mental health services

Three participants noted that they were part of a mental health system that too easily labelled service users:

Well I think that some of the criticism has been fair in the past ... It tended to be the community provided a lot of the responses initially and the statutory sector was criticised for being a bit hands off and not really dealing with it or dealing with it in a very clinical manner ... people would have been put on antidepressants and that kind of thing. But I think some of the criticism was fair enough in the early days, the responses. And following some of the reports that were critical of the statutory sector that was then when we decided to set up a trauma centre. So I think I got better. It evolved and it got better. (Participant 4)

In one case the label enabled citizens to access services:

And the fact then that a lot of the response was located within a mental health label ... Whereas what happened, you know, while it affected in a lot of ways people's sense of emotion and mental wellbeing, not everybody ended up in a position of, for want of a better word, mental ill health. And yet you had to be in that position, maybe, to access services. (Participant 11)

Neutrality

Three participants commended this stance of professional neutrality arguing that it was a necessity in order to enable social workers to provide services.

My view is that I think we dealt with it reasonably well. I am conscious that maybe ten years ago there was quite a flavour of discussion in social work that we had ignored it. And that this professional neutrality was not a good response. And that it sort of ... there was a lot of discussion around at the time that in going for that neutrality we were ignoring important issues. And that also we were failing to...that we were failing to address the issues that were both arising for us as social workers but for our service users ... My own view was that that was unjust criticism. I never bought into it, actually. I suppose I didn't see that. I mean I think we maintained a sensitivity to people's personal life stories which were often very traumatic. And that certainly on that individual level, we were very responsive to people's trauma, Troubles related traumas. I think the wider ... and not everybody would necessarily agree, but I think a lot of social work went for the neutrality type approach. I think it was both a necessity, given what was going on, but I also think it allowed us to provide services in very different circumstances. So I have to say I think that lack of overt engagement was necessary and generally helpful. (Participant 9)

Types of responses

In analysing the interviews, types of responses became apparent. Often social workers were first responders to major bombings:

It was nearly like we were one of the emergency services. (Participant 5)

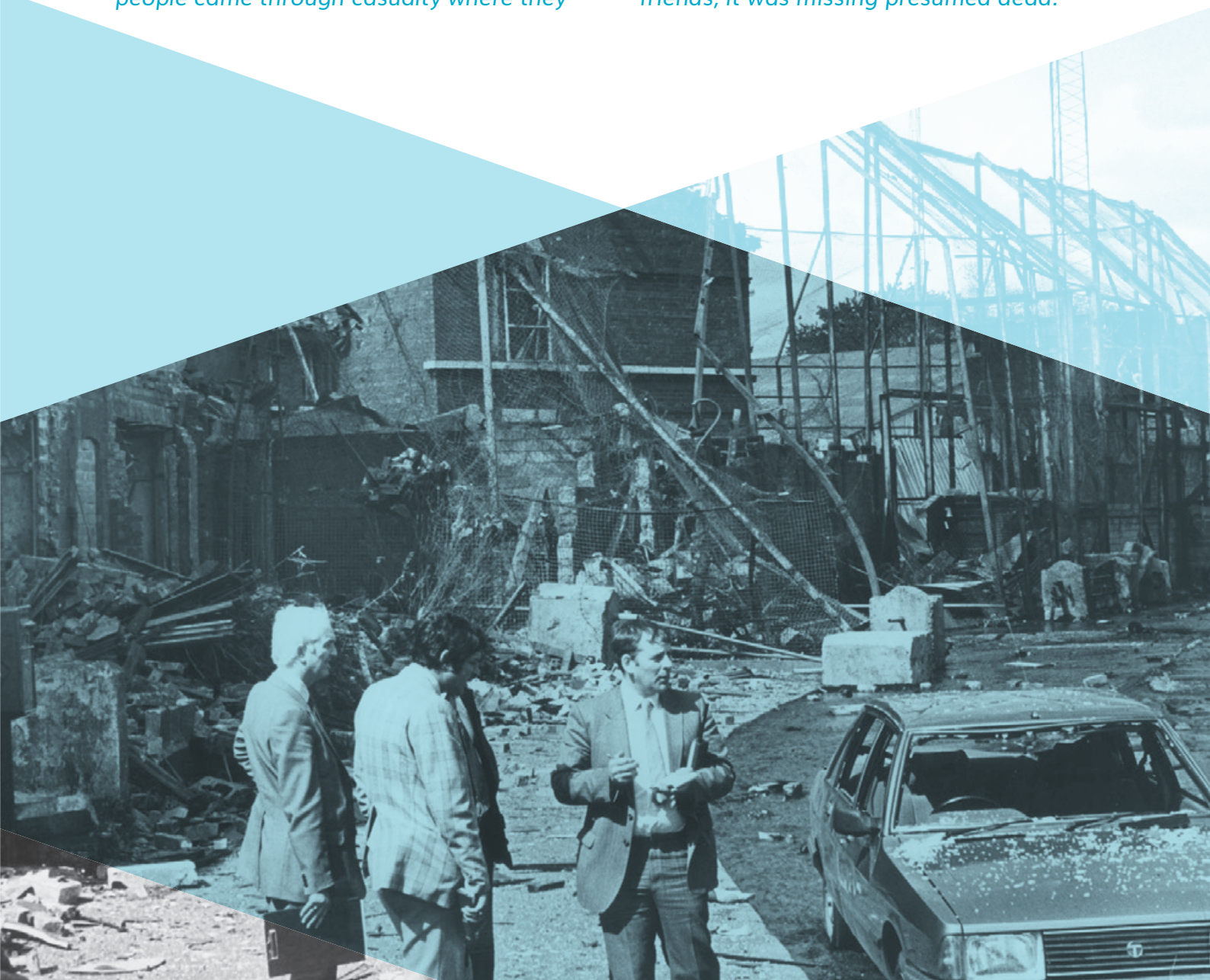
The Teeban bomb for example, I was the social worker on duty and called to that scene. (Participant 14)

What we also would have had back then would have been a trauma response team. So if there was something, if a major incident happened, staff would get the call to come in to work, to be available. And again the day of the Shankill bomb ... staff were phoned saying, can you get into work. Because the hospitals are overwhelmed, people are completely traumatised. So people were there to provide support practically and emotionally ... So they actually had where staff could, if there was a bomb went off and people had to respond, so there was people who had their hard hat and their jacket saying Doctor or Nurse. But there was Welfare. So people were able to go out to respond ... and if people needed to go and get them, they donned their jackets and their hard hats and off they went to bomb sites. Mad. What can a social worker do in the middle of a bomb site? But obviously somebody thought ... (Participant 5)

In addition, social workers were located in hospitals in the immediate aftermath of the bombings, often liaising with police and families and identifying the deceased:

It was the 15th August ... and I was out in the garden cutting the grass. And I heard the bang. I knew right away ... I knew immediately it was a bomb, you know. And managed to make my way out using the back roads, out to the local ... what would have been the county hospital at that stage. And just there were things there you will never ... I remember coming up to casualty and the first thing that met me was just the blood running out the door and down the steps. It was just like total pandemonium. And one of the first jobs I think we got, I got, there was like a post-graduate centre over beside it and what they tried to do was, a cordon as people came through casualty where they

ended up at the hospital, living or dead. They fed the names over to us there. And everybody was gathering over there and they were trying to ... And I remember at one stage the pandemonium. One thing I do remember clearly. I remember having to get up on a table in the middle of the room and just calm people down and try and just say, look we have names and we will try and ... And then we ended up for a while after that, then, they were using the army camp as a morgue. And then eventually we ended up in the local leisure centre where, by that stage basically anybody who came to the leisure centre in terms of family and friends, it was missing presumed dead.



I was actually immediately involved because I was at church that morning. The bomb goes off and I am aware of it very quickly. And I am in the hospital within twenty minutes. And I spend several hours there trying to locate people. Trying to identify the dead and so on. And so there was a very direct experience there of the violence and also some of those who were killed and injured were people I knew very well. And so I was kind of responding at a very personal level as a member of the church, as a member of the community, but also felt that we as a service should have a wider response. (Participant 18)

In responding to atrocities, Participants 11 and 18 discussed the unrelenting demands they faced and the effects this had on their lives:

So I left the house. I always remember I left the house that day at the time of the bomb. It was about three o'clock on the Saturday. And I came home at half two on the Monday morning, without a break. People just worked. (Participant 11)

It is the only time in my life when I didn't get a night's sleep. I do need sleep. But yes, personally I was ... well I had got up at eight o'clock on Saturday morning or seven o'clock or whatever it was. And I didn't get to bed until around six o'clock on Sunday evening. And then had two hours sleep, a bite to eat and then back to Omagh. And I was back in Omagh at ten o'clock or something like that on Sunday night, and then through to the early hours of Monday morning. Back on Monday morning for a meeting at eight o'clock. And I lived 22 miles away from it, so it was a fair bit of going back and forward. (Participant 18)

The accounts of participants in this section implicitly communicate the sentiment of social workers 'just getting on with it' (an expression used consistently in the interviews), and also the lack of concern social workers had for themselves, but rather a focus on providing help where they could and the feeling of a personal need to respond. Although social workers and their agencies were quick to respond to the atrocities as they occurred, as clearly indicated by the accounts of the participants in this section, agencies were less consistent in their ongoing responses, and in some instances had to be persuaded to make a response in the aftermath of atrocities, with social workers leading this response:

It was still very difficult to persuade some parts of our professional structures within the service that there should be a response ... Some people took the view well, we don't need to do anything special here because we already have structures and systems in place. If people feel unwell they can go and see their GP and they will be referred to the appropriate specialist service if they need it. But nothing special required. Now I took a different view on that matter. Very strongly indeed took a different view on that matter. And argued very strongly that we should do otherwise ... (Participant 18).

Commitment to core social work values

Despite these traumatic events, it appeared that the respondents consistently adhered to ethical principles and values:

And of course, I remained apolitical. In other words, I wouldn't have got dragged into any conversations. Because you might have been visiting a family and something would have happened on the Protestant side. Maybe somebody was shot dead. And you would hear it on the news in the background in the house. And you wouldn't have made a comment about that. Definitely not. Because that immediately would trigger for the family, right this person is either sympathetic to one or other side. If you had to say anything you would say, that's a tragedy. God help that mother. God help that father. (Participant 8)

For me the drive was, go out there and be professional social workers. No matter what religion you are or your client is, or what background we come from. (Participant 9)

Social workers also responded in non-judgemental ways to clients/service users, regardless of background:

Because the other thing I was always very conscious of, of denying people service because of a certain religion or a certain background. For example, if somebody has been in prison for a paramilitary murder, they are still entitled to a service. That doesn't cloud your judgement. That can't cloud your judgement. And it may have been, whether you are Protestant or Catholic, that person may have had an attack on your own culture. But that can't

come into it because ... at the time The Troubles were The Troubles, you know. (Participant 8)

But whenever you went into homes ... you had to be impartial and you had to be non-judgemental. And I have to say, I think, if you were ever taught how to be non-judgemental you had to be it at the height of The Troubles here, because you couldn't have done the job otherwise. You needed to maintain that non-judgemental approach. But it was hard because you were struggling with what was going on outside those four walls. (Participant 23)

In their interactions with clients, social workers often ignored issues of personal safety:

I went into a lot of areas that other people would have been horrified at the idea of me going into ... If people were in crisis, they were in crisis. (Participant 10)

But whenever there were difficult and hard decisions to be made about removing children or whether children were going to be put on the register, I don't think I deviated from the task that I had to do. Because at the end of the day my focus was, children may not be safe and it doesn't matter whether you are throwing out bits of language that your husband is in the paramilitaries, or you have connections or whatever. It still was very much my focus that the kids may not be safe. (Participant 13)

'Just get on with it'

A common response on interviews was the expectation that social workers just got on with work, regardless of risk and threat:

So in a way you were just kind of getting on with it. So you focused on the task of what the job was and you weren't really thinking about ... because The Troubles were The Troubles. (Participant 6)

I suppose the primary response is very much about just getting on with it. You know, it could be craziness all round you and all sorts of things erupting left, right and centre, but I think the focus of me and most of the people I was working with was, let's just get the job done. And if that is happening down the street right, fine, how do we work round it? So you kind of just got on with it in that respect. (Participant 9)

Organising schedules around flashpoints

Social workers remarked that, in some instances, they planned their leave and work schedules around certain times of year, for example over the Twelfth of July period, in order to avoid being placed in potentially hazardous situations, or they planned office appointments specifically to avoid conflict between clients/ service users of different community backgrounds:

On other occasions, as I referred to, you didn't go into certain areas at specific times of the year because you knew that people's blood would have been up, more or less, and there would have been a lot

of activity around ... Twelfth of July for example would have been a period; that fortnight would have been a period where there would have been a lot of people off work, a lot of paramilitary activities. There were issues about parades happening or not happening. You just knew to stay out of the areas and you worked your leave around that as much as you could do. (Participant 14)

Well in terms of who was coming to the office, and where they were coming from, and there was the potential for a clash in the office because of the backgrounds that the people came from. So we had to manage our timetable. Who was coming to what office, when, in terms of safety of the clients and the prevention of brawls! (Participant 22)

Political distance in the workplace

Another practical issue that social workers had to address was the tacit understanding of the need to be apolitical in the workplace in order to maintain working relationships with colleagues:

I think at times it was very difficult. Very difficult. And it was a mixture of ... recognising the reality that in a workforce there are people with a spectrum of views on our history and our politics, on the legitimacy or otherwise of various actors within the conflict. And so it could prove very difficult at times. And largely I think we confined ourselves to banalities and to safe forms of words which often didn't have an awful lot of meaning to them. But at least we were able to pass ourselves, more out of politeness than anything else. (Participant 18)

The one exception to this approach to keeping neutral were views about the Omagh bombing which occurred in 1998, just after the signing of the Belfast Agreement:

The one incident I think where that changed was the Omagh bombing. And largely that was because the Omagh bombing came after the Good Friday Agreement. The political settlement of the Good Friday Agreement had created a different context and those responsible for the bombing were seen to be outliers rather than mainstream within the political process. And so it was probably easier to talk about the implications of the bombing. But also because of the nature of the bombing. It was also very necessary to be able to talk these things through very candidly so that we could reach a view as to what an appropriate response or view might be. (Participant 18)

Protecting identity and using aliases

Some social workers with Irish names discussed that they would use the anglicised version of their name, or aliases in order to avoid potentially hostile exchanges:

Just from the name. People would know what I was and that you just ... there was times you just weren't sure you would be safe. I was asked one time, and I felt really frightened, and I changed my name. And I felt so ashamed afterwards. I felt really ashamed. But I just was really frightened at that particular time. I just always wished I had a more neutral name. (Participant 4)

The responses of social work agencies to the conflict

Agencies used a range of approaches in dealing with conflict related issues but there was a perception that agencies were ill-equipped to deal with the conflict:

I don't think they knew how to deal with it, because we were going right back to '77 and then when I trained in 1980 and those employers, they were all senior positions who maybe had practiced social work or managed units of management, because it was an integrated structure as you know, through the sixties and seventies when there were no Troubles. And I don't think they were prepared. And they just expected we all got on with it. So, I don't think they had any ... there was no special training or debriefing or any of the things that we now have in place nowadays. So, they just expected us to meet each problem as it arose. (Participant 16)

Appallingly. I don't mean that in a critical sense. I think it was one of these things. I think it is no different for our profession than it was for anybody else. If you like this was learning on the hoof and people didn't know or understand what was going on. (Participant 17)

Some participants noted however that services improved in a number of areas including the development of trauma services in response to the 'Cost of The Troubles' study, an improved response to high-level incidents, the conduct of needs assessment following bombings to understand what communities needed, and the development of services for the families of paramilitary prisoners:

I think in terms of ... we have got better at understanding trauma. I suppose forty years ago we thought trauma was an injury. And the emotional trauma, people didn't fully grasp that. Whereas I think now we are better at recognising trauma, the very individualised nature of trauma and the very, very personalised response to that trauma. And I think agencies have got better at that right across the services. Across health and social care. And there is very much a trauma-based response to things as well. And trauma is now a word that is used in our everyday speak. Whereas I think probably forty years ago it is a word that didn't feature in our vocabulary. (Participant 5)

Maintaining continuity of services

A number of participants discussed the steps taken by agencies to maintain services during the conflict. This included ensuring availability of services around flashpoints as agencies sought to maintain services despite any incidents of civil unrest that may have been occurring around them:

I suppose on an agency managerial level, to be honest I think the focus during The Troubles was one of coping. Let's provide our service. Let's make sure the hospital doors are open. That our teams go out to anybody regardless. Which was always the case. So, during The Troubles I think it was, keep the services up and running. Get people to them. Do the best that we can do. (Participant 9)

Another step taken to maintain services was that of negotiating with community gatekeepers. Eight participants

explained that agencies had to, at times, negotiate with either paramilitaries, community representatives, community organisations or local politicians who acted as 'community gatekeepers' in order to secure safe access for social workers to certain areas and ensure that services could be provided. A number of participants remarked that such discussions were also occurring at the higher levels of their agencies and reflected agency policy:

We were just talking recently about that nonsense when you think of it and being shocked that Trusts were going along with this. You know, getting permission from paramilitaries to go into certain areas during the strikes that were on, you know. (Participant 10)

And I know, I do know that my line managers, my senior managers at that time had engaged with local community activists to ensure that we would have safety going about. We would have safety going about our work. (Participant 22)

Now thankfully I didn't have to speak directly to these people, my senior social worker would have had to. But if we ever had police involved in cases, well that became a really very risky situation. If we ever had to go into the police station ... well we didn't have joint protocol, but it was a bit like joint protocol work. My senior would have let the local people know where we were. (Participant 24)

Avoidance and neutrality

The response of agencies to the conflict were characterised by what seemed to be an avoidance of dialogue about the situation, a lack of acknowledgement of the impact of *The Troubles* on social workers, and also an attempt to convey to social work staff that these situations were 'normal' in the course of their work. Participants discussed how a culture of silence pervaded organisations in response to attempts by agencies to be neutral and apolitical with issues related to *The Troubles* not being discussed:

We just operated in a wee vacuum there. It was like 'don't mention the war!' I think it was maybe like that. Yeah. It was a strange time. (Participant 10)

They weren't discussed. So that wasn't part of our role. They weren't discussed. It was just ... so I think there was a silence about it. It was just, this is our normality. (Participant 27)

Participants explained how agencies displayed a lack of acknowledgement of impacts on staff or the risks that social work staff may be facing in the conduct of their work:

But I certainly think in those days there was very little effort to recognise some of the issues that were around for people. The safety issues that were around for people. The concerns ... we were by and large living in a war zone in some cases, particularly if you were in the big cities. They were dangerous places to be. And I never, in all of my time, even heard it acknowledged. I never heard anybody say it. I remember going to ... a conference somewhere, and the question was asked of

a senior member of one of the Trusts and it was, how do you support your workers going out in the ... and the word that was used was the killing fields? And this very, very senior member of the Trust crossed the fingers of both hands and said, we hope they come back every evening. That was the entire response to it. I don't think there was any acknowledgement of the stress that it caused. (Participant 17)

Often agencies failed to acknowledge the violence that social workers were facing. For example, following an instance of intimidation, the following participant's manager told him to "get used to it":

So, I went back to the office and explained to ... my team manager, what had happened. And he started laughing. He says ... get used to it. (Participant 1)

*I think the response I got to that ... I said to my line manager who then went to the principal social worker and I think the response, she said put it in writing to her. And I thought, I have just told you I am f***** terrified. Do you want me to write you a memo telling you I am terrified? Do you know? (Participant 27)*

Support for social workers

Some participants did note some level of agency support that they received via induction programmes when starting with the agency, following high-level incidents, or in response to serious threats to personal safety. However, participants were more likely to criticise the lack of formal support structures in place, and that support tended to be the product of individual managers rather than the agencies:

Well now they have things like staff care where, if you go off sick with a work-related illness like stress or anxiety, they will actually get a counsellor from an outside organisation to counsel you, so that it is confidential to what your managers would be hearing. And you mightn't want to open up to your managers, but these are people outside of the organisation. And that is through a system called occupational health where there are a number of nurses and doctors who look after the health of the workforce. That is now. But we didn't have that in 1980. (Participant 2)

All the systems to do with support, they didn't exist way back forty years ago. You qualified, and you were expected to do your job. (Participant 16)

A number of participants discussed how they received support by individual managers, rather than their agencies:

We also had a wonderful Assistant Principal Social Worker. And she was extremely maternal. She sort of sat with ... so if there was something really bad you had to go in and report it back to her. And you would sit down and she would light her Silk Cut King Size and have a cup of tea. I suppose that's what we would now term a debriefing. But it wasn't seen as that. It wasn't even recognised as support in those days. Because those systems just simply did not exist. (Participant 16)

I think ... again I would say it wasn't so much the agencies who helped, but individuals in agencies. (Participant 17)

In terms of my first line management, they would have been fairly acutely aware of it, and supportive, and would have always talked to you about being clear about your own protection and welfare. In the broader scope of the agency, there wasn't an awful lot of open discussion about it, to be frank. (Participant 21)

Nine participants did note the support from agencies and communicated a sense that the response of agencies to social workers needs had developed over time.

That was at a time where there was ... not out of hours back up in terms of someone that I could go and talk to immediately, but very quickly, first thing the next day at nine o'clock I got a phone call to say how are you? You have dealt with a lot. Debriefing sessions. [Person's name mentioned] was contracted in to do some work with me, with her background, from the impact of The Troubles. So the organisation had even moved on a bit further in terms of looking at experts that could help you to work through the personal impact of some of the conflict. So, it had moved significantly. (Participant 14)

Social work educational responses

The overwhelming response to this question was the lack of suitable education with only five participants noting the provision of any training with reference to the Northern Ireland conflict:

But certainly, the training I got was very good, but it was very general. It could have been in any country or any region of the UK. (Participant 2)

I don't remember it being ... you know, it wasn't addressing The Troubles in any shape or form. It was just normal social work training of the time that presumably was happening in any UK city, as it were. (Participant 3)

It wasn't alluded to at all. The only thing we talked about were things like levels of deprivation, levels of unemployment in Northern Ireland. You know that kind of thing. But not in terms of ... it was almost like a taboo subject now when I think back. That's probably why it wasn't talked about. (Participant 24)

Linked to the non-provision of specific conflict-related training, several participants discussed the issue of educators at the time not having sufficient capacity to address the issues resulting from *The Troubles*, and perhaps being afraid of raising the issue of the conflict.

I can't think of any specific courses that you did in relation to The Troubles, because again ... because maybe we were too much in it. We were still living it. It was too much ... and it was too difficult, I think, maybe, to do it then. Because what was the outcome? We hadn't got to the end result. (Participant 12)

There was a bit of a delay in terms of the training centres picking up the issues that social workers needed to have support with. There may have been quiet room conversations. People genuinely did not know how to bring the balance of identifying the issues that social workers were experiencing at that time and how they would have addressed those without

being seen to have been encouraging sectarian comments or bringing sectarian issues into the workplace. Because the agreements across all of the Trusts at that stage, and the Boards, were it wasn't discussed. So that opening kind of cultural acceptance wasn't there to enable the conversations and the reflection to take place. (Participant 14)

Coping mechanisms

Participants discussed a range of coping mechanisms and sources of support and resilience that they were able to draw upon. Key sources of support and coping mechanisms were support within the workplace both formal and informal, a commitment to their vocation and maintenance of the belief that they were making a positive impact, and humour:

Well I am thinking in particular of the team that I worked longest in there. There was a flexibility by the manager. She was truly tuned in, per se. she really was. A woman ahead of her time in many ways, when I look back on it. But she was quite flexible, you know. So, if you were working late at night and were crossing the city... she phoned me at home at times. So, you felt that you were supported, and you felt that you could go in the next day. And some days you went in and some days you didn't. She would have said to you, you know. There was a flexibility around that. (Participant 21)

But the one thing, I think the key for me as well would have been ... I was thankfully the recipient of always having had quality supervision. I was a very lucky person. I always had, from the moment I started in social work, good

line managers who provided quality supervision. It wasn't accountable supervision. It was the proper quality of emotional support, and that really helped as well. (Participant 23)

The predominant informal source of workplace support discussed by participants was the peer support that social workers received from their colleagues, with this peer support and the associated relationships being the most widely reported form of support in the study overall and discussed by 25 of the participants.

The sense of being a part of a really supportive team was crucial ... So I would say a very supportive team. And one thing, and it has gone from social work which was crucial...we had a central, lovely place to come and have coffee. And we would have gathered there at various times throughout the day and just chatted. And that really helped you touch base, I feel ... Because that was a place where people just came and chatted ... Kind of like a neutral area where people just ... like a drop-in room, really. But that was fairly significant. (Participant 21)

Oh the team. The team around you. The team of people around were very, very good because everybody was in exactly the same boat. Everybody knew what you were dealing with and everybody was dealing with the same thing. (Participant 23)

Social workers' belief in, and commitment to their profession, and the feeling that they were doing some good, provided a source of resilience which helped them to cope and continue in their roles.

Well do you know what it probably was? You thought, well at least I am doing something good. At least I am doing something ... I think that did help. And you thought, well at least I am doing something there. (Participant 10)

What helped me cope? Probably a firm belief that I was making a difference. I certainly felt we were doing the right thing. (Participant 22)

Humour, and particularly 'black humour', was discussed by participants as a way that they coped and made sense of situations, and moreover noted that it provided them with a release:

You used humour a lot with colleagues. You used humour a lot to survive. So you would swap stories and you would know some of the cultures. You would be aware of some of the cultures and stuff. And we used humour a lot to try and cope. It was a survival mechanism. (Participant 4)

There is also that very black humour in social work as well. Or maybe just our society. Somehow these mad situations, we could see the funny side of them. (Participant 5)

Participants discussed a range of additional coping mechanisms and sources of resilience and support, although these were not as broadly reported. Three sources of resilience discussed by the participants included their personal experiences of being brought-up and living during *The Troubles*, as well as their training and professional experiences as social workers inoculating them against some of the issues they were facing (n=8). Five participants also

reflected that their youth and naïveté at the time made them resilient and able to cope, while one participant drew resilience from their religious beliefs. Other coping mechanisms discussed included family (n=10) and engaging in sports (n=4). A small number of social workers (n=3) discussed that they coped by avoiding reflecting on and thinking about the issues they were facing, and that they compartmentalized events. Two participants stated that the only way they were able to deal with particular challenges that they faced was to change their job and move to work in another geographical area or work focus. Finally, one participant stated that consuming alcohol was how they coped.

Challenges

This section presents the key themes regarding the challenges that made social work more difficult during *The Troubles*. As noted by Participant 13, the conflict created a “double whammy”, in that social workers were not just dealing with issues that occurred in any society such as neglect, mental health or intellectual disabilities, but also *Troubles*-related issues. The impact of *The Troubles* was, therefore, always in the background, however in some instances it was the key issue for social workers to respond to:

If we were looking at housing or areas that were safe or whatever for people, there was that whole sectarian and Troubles—related backdrop to how we helped people in their lives ... (Participant 9).

Because you were dealing with the neglect, risk, safety issues in terms of

parents not looking after the children because there were whatever adversities that they might have. But you had the double whammy that you didn't know if they were involved in paramilitary things or whether or not they were actually, not through their own choice, having to do that. (Participant 13)

In addition, one mental health social worker explained how the context of *The Troubles* complicated the process of conducting assessments of clients/service users and identifying to what extent a person's paranoia was a symptom of illness or a natural response to *The Troubles* context.

So you sometimes had those situations where you had people who were being assessed as are they psychotic, are they paranoid? ... So I found, as a mental health social worker, assessing people... sometimes you actually had to put it into a context. Are you actually mentally unwell or is your paranoia quite reasonable, given the fact you are living in a border county? And there are helicopters landing in the middle of the night and ... checkpoints would have been happening, the soldiers would have been in the ditches and you wouldn't have seen them until they stepped out. So that paranoia was actually a real paranoia and a real fear. So there was that bizarre thing as a social worker. Trying to do an assessment and thinking, how much of that is real and how much of that has actually been generated by the fear of where they were living? (Participant 23)

Community gatekeepers

As noted previously, a number of participants explained that agencies had to, at times, negotiate with either paramilitaries, community representatives, community organisations or local politicians who acted as 'community gatekeepers' in order to secure access to certain areas to ensure that services could be provided. Nine participants noted the challenges of community gatekeepers which included concerns over who had access to vulnerable people, who determined what was best for the individual, and also the

compromise to services as a result of such gatekeepers:

I think one of the things that I found particularly challenging, and it maybe wasn't just the one experience because we did it quite often, or it was a regular enough feature, was when we had to liaise with paramilitaries to try and keep some of our service users safe. So there were organisations that you went to, community based organisations, and you explained your problem. (Participant 9)

The police weren't prepared to go into that area to remove the service user. So I had to start the negotiations with the



local politicians in [political party] at that stage to try and reason with them about the risks that that individual was at, and get their support to have him removed. So it was even in terms of who was in control or who had access to vulnerable children and adults and how we would work our way through that. (Participant 14)

If you wanted to interview a child, for example, we weren't able to use the local police station or anything like that because of the risk around. So we had to negotiate, sometimes with political groups as well, to be able to even remove children, interview children, and on some occasions political and paramilitary groups would have been in touch with us. (Participant 24)

Security forces

A significant challenge to the conduct of social work during *The Troubles* was the need for social workers to work alongside the police and security forces in particular circumstances. A number of participants commented on the additional risk to social workers and clients/service users that security forces involvement could present:

Police officer came and said to me, we can't take you. And I said why not? He said, we have intelligence that there is a landmine on the road between here and the turnoff for the hospital. And we can't take you because it is targeted at the police car. And the ambulance wouldn't come either because of the same reason. So he said to me there's only one solution. If you drive in front of us very slowly and there's no gap between us, they probably

won't detonate it because it is a civilian car. And I did! ... I did. What else was I going to do? The man was bleeding. He was having a complete psychiatric breakdown ... Thinking back on it, I don't know what else I could have done. I couldn't have left him. The ambulance wasn't going to take the risk. I had no authority to make the police do it. And if I had, and they had been blown up, I would have felt responsible. So I don't even think now, looking back on it, I don't think there's anything else I could have done. (Participant 2)

I remember being called out ... and this was usually a problem at night time or weekends, but at night time when you were providing an out of hours service. There were times when I was called out and I really was quite concerned if the call was a genuine call or was it a setup which was trying to lure perhaps the police into a situation. And I remember being very, very frightened on one occasion when I really did genuinely think that I was being drawn into a situation like that. Because all the circumstances, all my antennae were telling me that this isn't genuine, there's something going on here. In the event it was genuine, but I was being brought down darkened roads in the back of nowhere with two police cars, one in front and one behind, because I needed to have their back up given the particular circumstances. And it really was quite frightening. But I just felt I had to respond. (Participant 18)

Participants discussed occasions when they felt that the difficulty in organising security forces support had a negative impact on their ability to provide social

work services. This included times when the police were unable to safely enter certain areas without support from the Army. Participants felt that this impacted on social work in a number of ways. Firstly, as discussed by Participant 3, the time taken to organise security forces support could delay social work responses and interfere with protection measures being taken. Secondly, and as discussed by Participant 9, security force involvement could have a negative impact on clients/service users and their families by introducing additional trauma:

Normally say if we wanted to take children into care and if it was a family where we believed there was risk, violence and so forth, extreme violence, the police would have assisted us to remove a child. But because that area was such a difficult area, the police couldn't move without the army. And so, on this particular day when we had to remove these children, we had to organise the army, organise the police and then of course by the time that was all organised, when we got into this area this man had disappeared with his children. So again, very far from normal circumstances where you are having to



move with the army and with the police. So that again was another area that you just knew you had to be accommodated in terms of any action that you took (Participant 3)

I vividly remember one particular admission. It was middle of the night. The person was very disturbed. Very, very distressed. Creating quite a commotion and believed to be a significant physical risk to others. I had got the call and the GP had got the call and we needed to set up a safe way of managing this. And that involved calling in the police. Police were highly unwelcome in this particular area and considered themselves under active threat in the area. So, they agreed to come, but they would not come ... they came in force. So, it was not one small police car. It was five police jeeps. And because of the level of threat to the police in that area, they were accompanied by army. So, we also had army jeeps and we had army helicopters hovering just at rooftop level to protect the police ... So, there was no privacy for this person or their family either. Everybody knew that there was a massive scene going on. So myself and the GP went into the house. But in terms of that person's level of distress and the family's distress, it was hugely magnified by the fact that there was a major security operation happening outside. Even if you think about it, the noise of the helicopters, the helicopters flying at rooftop level is hugely noisy. So the whole time we are conducting our interview with this person and the family, you are shouting above helicopter blades. So, I suppose in looking back that hugely added to the trauma for that person. (Participant 9)

Disruption of services

A significant challenge to the conduct of social work discussed by 14 participants was the disruption of services due to incidents or civil unrest and rioting around events such as the hunger strikes, parades, and the Twelfth of July period:

Probably going back to the Belfast experience with the [name of voluntary sector organisation], at that stage, because it was during the hunger strike period, there was a lot of activities, particularly around the Falls and the Divis Flats, where I would have been up trying to see families ... and using mostly public transport, black taxis. But literally about five minutes after you had stepped out of that and made your way towards the door, there were crowds that came from nowhere that you were caught up in the middle of, who were throwing bottles and whatever, bottle bombs or petrol bombs, at soldiers. And no matter how well you tried to prepare your visits, there were occasions where you just got caught up at the wrong place at the wrong time. And I can remember lying outside one of the chapel grounds and there was kind of like a wall that was maybe about three feet high around the outside of the chapel, lying there on my belly for about two hours ... you just had to wear it out. Now you did get up and get yourself shook off when they had moved off, but you shook yourself off physically. But you are thinking, how am I supposed to go into a house that is further on up the road and actually sit down there and start to talk about how you care for your child ... because you were actually still traumatised by the experience. So, there

were situations like that that you just had to ground yourself down and to remain safe until the activities had passed, and then make a decision on whether or not you continued with your monitoring visit or you hoofed your way back to the office. (Participant 14)

Sectarian labels

Participants discussed experiencing and being concerned about labelling due to their name and their perceived community background. This led to suspicion, distrust and the construction of barriers between social workers and clients/service users, but also in some cases between social workers and politicians.

But there are other times I remember being a social worker, going out to do a fostering assessment ... and my name was a very Catholic, nationalist name. And then my married name wasn't. And I always thought would I say I'm just Mrs whatever. My first name is written right across my forehead what I am. But I remember going out there and they opened the door and the people were all very civil. But I was saying, what's your occupation? Civil servant. So they obviously didn't trust me. In the end I found out he was a prison officer. But he wasn't going to tell me he was a prison officer. But that was fine. We worked away on it and I thought we were fine. And then they didn't actually... and it wasn't my place. I just presented the information and then a panel decided whether they were going to be accepted as foster parents or not. But they said to me they weren't surprised because as soon as they got the letter and saw my name they thought they had no chance of ever being a foster parent. (Participant 10)

I remember whenever I was training going to a house in an area in Belfast and the social worker was ending the case with the family. And she was saying, you know, it's OK, Mr whatever his name was, the new social worker ... and I think the new social worker's name was (Catholic sounding name) or something ... and the man had said, I can't work with a Taig. You know like this. And I remember the social worker kind of looking at him and her name was an Irish name as well and she said, but you've been working with me for the last three years and you've been OK. And he kind of was really shocked because she was not the religion that he thought that she was. And it was really... it was surprising. And I was a bit like, oh my goodness. It is really real. (Participant 20)

But there was, in the middle of that [aftermath of a bombing], questions being asked by the political leaders as to what my religious background was. And that was in the middle of the ward where families were sitting with their relatives being brought in, you know, on stretchers and things. And it was almost that they felt that they couldn't communicate freely if there was someone from another part of the community present in the room. And that was a bit difficult, because it was almost like I was being set out from everyone else as being the Catholic in the room along with the families who were all coming from ... not a paramilitary background by any means but from a Protestant background. And I had to be strong enough to say, I am here as a social worker and this is what my role is. (Participant 14)

Social workers also experienced being labelled as 'agents of the state' by clients/ service users from some sections of community which also created suspicion and barriers.

But yet again, you are working for the agency. That is seen that you are working for the British government. (Participant 1)

I think it became harder to sustain that neutrality when you were working within communities where maybe the title of social worker had a political element to it as well. You know, because some of the communities I worked in would have assumed that as a social worker you were part of the state. So, the title could have held you back in those areas. (Participant 19)

Services affected by community background

Participants also noted the challenge of the provision of services being affected by the community background of clients/ service users. For example, it may not have been prudent to house an individual from one community background in an area associated with a different community background. Some social workers, however, felt that in considering such practical matters, they were perpetuating divisions. The engagement in services by clients/services users was also affected by community backgrounds and locations of services:

But also with that client, because people wouldn't go out of their own areas, so you would have say ... you would have a situation where maybe XXXXX Day Centre was set up, and it would have been a great facility for people. But people

wouldn't ... people were afraid, you know, say from the XXXXX or whatever, to come up the XXXXX Road. Because they said no, they wouldn't feel safe. And I remember another young girl, really, from the Falls Road who would not come out of the Falls Road. And her family wouldn't let her come out either. (Participant 10)

And then I suppose in other ways, you see ... I know it is a strong word in Northern Ireland terms, in some ways part of your job, in a way you colluded with it. Because if you were doing something like a housing application, you knew not to put down certain areas, depending on the person who was sitting in front of you. So, you just didn't put them in that area because that was a Protestant area or that was a Catholic area. So, in a way, you felt at times you were sort of ... you were going with the flow at one level, but in another way, you were sort of perpetuating the ... you know. (Participant 11)

One participant also noted that there was a duplication of services due to community divisions and the need to serve both sections of the community.

So, if you think about where I was working, delivering services to children and families living in the Shankill, there was another office about a mile away delivering services to children and families with a big bloody wall down the middle. So, there was duplication of services because you had to keep communities apart. (Participant 27)

Other challenges

In addition to the challenges that The Troubles presented to the delivery of

services, the conflict also presented unique challenges to social workers that made being a social worker at the time more difficult.

Personal safety

Eighteen of the participants discussed that they were cognisant of their personal safety and risks towards them which could make conducting social work more challenging. Indeed, participants discussed a range of risks to their personal safety which varied from intimidation and harassment, to having firearms pointed at them, and explicit death threats.

And this was all about empathising, engaging, skilled interviews, skilled assessment. But when you are under that sort of threat or perceived threat within ... the last thing you are thinking about is a thorough, quality, social work assessment. Because you are thinking, am I going to get through this interview? And it sometimes wasn't another person. It might have been an Alsatian dog that was sitting in the corner. And you were inadvertently told, if this assessment ... if I don't get what I want out of this assessment, Hector here might want to speak to you. (Participant 1)

I remember I took a fairly senior [Paramilitary Organisation named] man's children into care and the [Paramilitary Organisation] phoned the AP in the office to reinforce the threat they had issued to me. My car was stolen from outside the house...To give me the message that they knew where I was. But I remember saying to them that, even if I were shot, the children would remain in care. (Participant 25)

Unable to talk about experiences

Another challenge that participants discussed was that they felt unable to talk about their work and experiences due to issues of client confidentiality, concern over worrying their families, and concern of how they would be perceived in the workplace and their ability to do the job.

As I said to you, after that situation in Derry, OK I had my cry but I was sort of fortified going back into the office. I was afraid it would be assessed as a sign of weakness and not being emotionally up to the work. (Participant 1)

And in those days, quite honestly, it was seen as a weakness to say you were stressed or you couldn't cope. (Participant 2)

I think there was challenge ... and again I would say this in hindsight ... that conspiracy of silence was part the challenge in that it was almost de rigeur that you didn't talk about this. (Participant 17)

The extent to which participants felt unable to talk about their experiences at the time was clearly evidenced throughout the interviews, with participants stating that they were thankful for the opportunity to talk about their experiences that this study provided, something that some of them had not had a chance to do before. This may indicate the need to provide services for those professionals who were working on the frontlines during *The Troubles* and which allow the individuals to discuss their experiences, providing them with the appropriate support:

I really appreciate it. Thank you very much. It has been a bit cathartic for me too. I really appreciate that. (Participant 8)

And I suppose in hindsight, what I would say about that was, that is the bit that has never been addressed. In fact, this interview is probably the first time that anybody has ever actually formally said, how has it been for you being a social worker or an individual or anything else in the middle of all of this? And certainly, the agencies didn't recognise it. Or if they did, they didn't want to talk about it. (Participant 17)

Dealing with personal trauma

A number of participants also discussed the trauma that issues they were having to deal with, and concerns regarding their safety caused, and the impact that it had and continues to have on their lives:

On two separate occasions I would have been subject to personal threat. And they were scary as well. And I would know that on the first of those I really was in a bad place in my own mind over that. And I would make sure that in the morning before we took the kids to school we would search under the car and of course the kids wanted to know why we were doing this. And I would say well, the reason is there are people living in a locality who might be targets and so we are just making sure that everything... that we are safe because we live in this area. And on that particular occasion I myself felt I was the direct target ... and until this day nobody ever came back and said sorry we did that, or that threat was never intended or it has now been revoked. So effectively I am still living with that. But I just ... I have got to the point where I don't really care very much anymore. You get exhausted by it all.

I remember I left my living room one day to leave the house and I was putting my coat on in the hall of my house and my front door had a glass panel in it. And there was an individual walking up to the door. It was the postman walking up to the door. But seeing that individual shape through that sort of frosted glass, I froze. I tensed. And then I looked at my door and in the previous six to eight months I had put additional locks on the inside of my door. And that moment of consciousness of going, this job is impacting on my life in a way that it shouldn't impact on my life. I made the decision then to leave and get another job.

Maintaining a balance

The struggle to maintain balance in their approach and responses to certain situations were discussed by participants. Such situations included when a client/service user was threatened by paramilitaries and having to negotiate with paramilitaries through community organisations:

I have to say I always found that very difficult. My own personal perspective is completely anti-violence. So, I hated the whole connotation of giving legitimacy etc, etc. And yeah, just recognising that these paramilitaries ... you know, that that was the position we were in. On the other hand, I have a twenty-two year old who has been told that he is going to get kneecapped tonight and he is very vulnerable, he has a learning disability, he is on my caseload. Do I not take action to protect him? (Participant 9)

In another instance a social worker had to refrain from reporting a threat made against them to the police in the interests of ensuring the continued safety of both themselves and their colleagues:

Because of the implications that he knew me, he knew where I worked, and the fear was within the organisation, within the ... hospital, that either they would target some of the staff, target me or target the senior social worker for reporting it to the police. And I struggled with that big time and brought it back to the head of social work, and she was of the opinion that the greater risk to myself, to the staff; that would remain ... and that was in 1983 ... remain unreported, because yet again of the implications that there could be a reprisal or we could have been kneecapped. We could have been shot in both knees. And that's what normally would have happened. (Participant 1)

Social workers also had to maintain the balance between the impact that the conflict was having on them, and their need to remain non-judgmental and responsive to clients/service users:

I think, the challenge to maintain our own non-judgemental ... so that regardless of what I thought about what I had heard on the news about a bomb or a shooting, and regardless of my thoughts and feelings about that, I still had to go in the next day and work with the clients as they were then, in a non-judgemental way ... I think I also had to allow and be able to hear their attitudes and beliefs to the bombing and not allow my own ... and I think it really was a real teaching in how do I keep my own personal views and beliefs out of the client assessment? (Participant 23)

Dealing with legacy issues

This theme relates to participants' views on the roles that social work agencies, social work educators, and the social work profession could play in addressing legacy issues.

The role of social work agencies

Only one participant discussed the role agencies could play, suggesting the development of appropriate policy to address legacy issues.

I think ... there is much more awareness of the impact of The Troubles in terms of those that have been bereaved by The Troubles. And there would be a fair bit of research round people who have been injured and are left with physical injuries, disabilities etc as a result of The Troubles, and those numbers are huge ... Just all the range of physical violence have left a large proportion of our society with physical illness and physical disability. And then there is the mental illness on top of that. So, I do think there is a growing awareness of that that policy is trying to address. (Participant 9)

The role of social work educators

Participants felt that social work educators have a role to play with regards to legacy issues in terms of ensuring understanding of *The Troubles* context and legacy, that a new generation of social workers have an understanding of the background and context of *The Troubles* and its effects in terms of intergenerational trauma:

I think it still is an important thing to get social workers to be aware of, because we can hear ... we know that it is a

generational thing. Things get passed down through generations, and if you don't know where people are coming from, I think that's the most difficult place to be. (Participant 10)

I think for me I would probably start with the educators. And I think you need to continue to recognise that it is actually for a person, it is not a legacy. It is now. And it never becomes a legacy. And I think if you understand trauma, you will understand they never really become post-traumatic. They are actually still living within the trauma. And so, for a lot of individuals you are working with, you can't just say to them, well that happened thirty years ago, sure we are post-Troubles. So, I think as educators, helping new social workers understand for some people they meet it will still be in the now. And therefore, we need to respect that. But it is helping them understand. (Participant 23)

Participants also placed the onus on educators to equip social workers to deal with legacy issues:

I don't know enough about how social work education develops in a society like this. But how much of social work training and education at this stage actually even says, this is what you are likely to find out there and this is one of the reasons you'll find it. As opposed to the traditional route of ... you know, if you like, we've always worked on a largely socioeconomic model. And I think there is something about preparing people for the fact that they are going to be going out there to talk to people whose experiences have been different and who have been shaped by this. (Participant 17)

I think we need to train our social workers better at dealing with trauma. And very much trauma informed practice from the start. Because what they are dealing with is maybe two generations now down. But they are still impacted, that family, by how the grandfather coped with maybe a particular incident that might have happened. So I think we still need to ... we need to build on our knowledge base in Northern Ireland of trauma informed practice. And I think educators need to bring that into all areas of practice and teaching and as to how that really affects individuals. (Participant 23)

Educators were also viewed as having a role in challenging biases and prejudices, promoting open dialogue around legacy issues, and ensuring that these issues were acknowledged and openly discussed:

I think it needs to be there. And we need to name it. We need to be very explicit about what it is we are talking about. Because it is that thing where we will have young social workers, or newly qualified social workers coming out and they need to be aware that the legacy issues are still there. The residual trauma is still there. The intergenerational aspect of that is still very much alive and featuring on their caseloads. (Participant 5)

I do believe that what we need to do ... because I don't think the conflict here is anywhere near over ... is that we need to ... and this I think is a large part of social work training ... we need to give people permission to talk about this. And not only permission, but we need to encourage them to talk about it. (Participant 17)

However, a small number of participants highlighted the challenge in ensuring a balanced version of events in the face of conflicting and entrenched perspectives concerning *The Troubles*:

Again, I think it goes back to my point of who writes the book? Because it is like anything. If we were to look at the teaching in our schools about the Second World War for example, it depends are you reading the books from an English perspective or from a German perspective? So, it is very much around ... and I don't know are we far enough away from it yet, to be able to have a balanced ... and it depends who is teaching. Because if you have somebody who is from a very loyalist, unionist traditional background, they will have a very definite version of events. If you are from a very republican background you will have a different version. (Participant 5)

Well you see ... it could end up, and invariably chances are it will be somewhat one sided. Or it will be put through a particular prism. And there will be people who will be availing of that programme who will be coming with their own baggage and their own understanding of what their experiences were growing up, and they would be implacably opposed. (Participant 6)

The role of social work in addressing legacy issues

Participants felt that social work has a role to play in addressing legacy issues, noting that *social work* is well placed to address legacy issues due to

the profession's mix of skills, holistic approach, and non-judgemental stance:

*I think social workers are actually best placed to do this work. Because if you look at what we cover in our training, our basic training and then our post-qualifying training, much of that is around engagement and empowerment and relationship building. It is the ability to communicate and develop trusting relationships so that we can enable and help people to empower themselves. That's the way to resolve the impact of *The Troubles*. (Participant 14)*

In addition, participants felt that social work could take a proactive stance in addressing legacy issues with clients/ service users:

*Probably ask the questions. Because it is a bit like sexual abuse. If you didn't ask the question ... people would say to me, God we worked for years and why are people only being sexually abused now? And that's because we didn't ask the question ... Well I think even saying, have you ever been a victim of domestic violence? Have you ever been impacted on *The Troubles*? What did that feel like? And now it will be a generational thing. (Participant 10)*

Participant 25 gave a contrasting view arguing that specialist voluntary agencies may be better placed to address legacy issues than a social worker with no personal experience of the impact of the conflict:

I think social workers will always help people regardless of what the genesis is of their problems, etc. But I think probably some of the voluntary organisations focusing on victims and probably working with people who have been there, they are maybe better geared than somebody coming with the head knowledge, rather than a practical or heart experience of what it means. (Participant 25)

I think social work has a unique place in creating a voice for the legacy of the generations that are here and have lived through it. (Participant 17)

Another way in which participants felt that social work could help to address legacy issues is by providing space for stories by helping people who were impacted by The Troubles to share their stories:

That's the way to resolve the impact of The Troubles. The Troubles is about listening to people's stories and being active listeners that we are able to reflect and paraphrase and be able to understand what the person is trying to communicate with us. And then to put that into perspective in terms of a systems approach. Not just in terms of the systems that are operational today but transcend that back over the last four decades. What systems were in place and how did they impact on those individuals? And help the individuals and the families to acknowledge the impact. Because sometimes it is by helping them to talk through their life histories and the difficult times that they have experienced that we actually build that trusting relationship. That we are being non-judgemental. We are able to show very strong values of respect and dignity and acceptance. And that is the bread and butter of social work. So, I think that social workers are best placed to do it. (Participant 14)

Conclusion

This part of the report presents the key themes and findings of 28 semi-structured interviews with social workers regarding their professional experiences throughout the Northern Ireland *Troubles*. Overarching or integrative themes that run throughout the data are those of social workers 'just getting on with it', maintaining professionalism, and putting their client's/service user's needs first in spite of the situations and challenges that they faced as professional social workers.

A key source of support and resilience for social workers during these times consisted of peer support from their colleagues, the value of which should not be underestimated. However, a key challenge to social workers and social work educators was the culture of silence and the absence of capacity to discuss

Troubles-related concerns. Linked to this, it was clear from the interviews that participants valued the opportunity to talk about their experiences, and as a result it is the view of the researchers that the provision of services or opportunities for professionals who worked during the conflict, which would provide them with space to tell their stories, should be investigated. Finally, participants clearly articulated that the social work profession and social work educators both have roles to play in addressing legacy issues and intergenerational trauma, with participants arguing that social work is well placed to address legacy issues with clients/service users.



CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

I don't believe anyone who worked or lived here escaped the legacy of The Troubles on their psyche, their outlook and their ability to recognize and deal with conflict. We still don't have any mechanisms to offload this backstory, the bad but also the good parts. Working through and living through this period in our past has made me a much more resilient person. However, only a fool would not acknowledge this came at a cost and I'm sure this has repercussions even today, so many years later.

And I suppose in hindsight, what I would say about that was, that is the bit that has never been addressed. In fact, this interview is probably the first time that anybody has ever actually formally said, how has it been for you being a social worker or an individual or anything else in the middle of all of this? And certainly, the agencies didn't recognise it. Or if they did, they didn't want to talk about it.

In bringing this research report to a conclusion, it is important and appropriate to end as we began, with the 'voices' of social workers as expressed via the survey and interviews. Reading through this report, we are left with enduring admiration of how during *The Troubles* social workers worked unwaveringly to put the needs of their clients first and foremost. It is the ultimate expression of person-centeredness in social work, but this is what formed the solidity framing the approach to professional social work practice in a

very unsettled and dangerous Northern Ireland. There is, however, much learning in all of this. We have already stated how this has come at a cost for social workers, the majority of whom felt in danger going about their work and yet there are admirable examples of impressive community and grass-roots engagements all occurring whilst social workers just 'got on with' the job in such a socially oppressive context.

This report should also encourage us to reflect. A total of 130 social workers took part in this research, and we were left with an overwhelming sense that this focused study was welcomed. This was particularly evident in the interviews, where social workers were very keen to tell their stories and little was held back.

This leads us to conclude that social work in Northern Ireland now needs a space within which social workers can continue to share their experiences. Not only will this have a positive impact on the social workers who take part, but will also help current and future social workers learn about the challenges their colleagues encountered during *The Troubles* while making sure their duties were discharged in a professional and sensitive manner. Social workers can therefore make an important contribution to ensuring the legacy of the conflict they worked through delivers a positive and constructive contribution going forward—this will have a particularly important role in social work education.

There is also much to be admired about how social workers supported each other during these difficult and trying times, how teams worked very well together and how supervision was used in a creative and supportive way by some managers. At a time when social work is increasingly characterised by proceduralism, regulation and managerialism, perhaps we need to pause and reflect on how important it is for social workers to take time for and with each other in fostering the supportive climate that so ably facilitated such responsive social work practice at the most recently challenging period of our lived experience in Northern Ireland.

Reflecting back on the research and our findings, we, as a research team can only express admiration and pride towards the social work profession and how social workers still managed to do their jobs during *The Troubles* in Northern Ireland. We have examples of social workers literally risking their lives, having to deal with death threats, negotiating daily communal disturbance and helping people deal with the duration and aftermath of atrocities, and yet amidst such adversity, coming up with creative and innovative responses.

Social workers with these types of experiences in Northern Ireland, therefore, need to be recognised and we should do everything possible to acknowledge their valiant efforts and sacrifices. We hope that this research report will allow the social work profession time to pause and reflect on how it coped during *The Troubles*, and recognise the importance of shaping the profession around the contours of a post-conflict Northern Ireland. The social workers in Northern Ireland who gave so much during such challenging times deserve nothing less.

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