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'Just Get on with It': A Qualitative of Study of Social Workers' Experiences during the Political Conflict in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article reports on a retrospective study of social workers experiences and perception of practice during the height of the political conflict in Northern Ireland (1969–1988). The article describes the qualitative research methodology used to access the sample, design of interview schedule and data collection. Data were analysed using an iterative process to highlight emergent themes. Interviews were carried out with twenty-eight social workers who were employed in a range of agencies. The findings explore how social workers routinely had to negotiate access to communities in the midst of this violence, sometimes through paramilitary organisations. Respondents identified a range of coping mechanisms that they had used to make the 'abnormal normal'. This included adopting apolitical, neutral stances, yet taking risks in the everyday tasks of meeting the needs of individuals and families. There was, however, limited evidence of employers providing support for practitioners, with peer support most prevalent and purposive forms of education and training during this period. The authors argue for greater attention to the skills and knowledge required for interventions with victims and survivors of the conflict and a more holistic approach to the analysis of social work and political conflict across international contexts.

Keywords: anti-oppressive practice, conflict zones, critical social work, Northern Ireland, social work education

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Introduction: international perspectives on social work and political conflict

In the last few decades, there has been a growing interest in exploring ways in which political conflicts have impacted social work policy, practice and education (Ramon, 2008; Ramon and Zavirsek, 2012; Spalek and McDonald, 2012). Concepts of religious difference and identity are sometimes used to hypothesise how social workers shape practice to meet the needs of clients in the Israeli context (Shamai and Boehm, 2001; Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2008; Grodofsky, 2011). Some studies have revealed variable levels of trauma amongst social workers and their families following violent incidents (Lev-Wiesel, 2009; Shamai and Ron, 2009; Dekel and Baum, 2010). Concepts of post-traumatic growth and shared trauma have been used to explore such experiences (Baum, 2014; Tosone et al, 2012). Lindsay (2007) study is one of the few carried out to explore the impact of political conflict on social work practice in Palestine.

A number of attempts have been made to draw comparisons of social work experiences in different regions, which experience political conflict (Ramon et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2019). Much of this literature refers to conventional, casework approaches, others have explained how community-based interventions have also been implemented in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon and Africa (Lindsay, 2007; Grodofsky, 2011; Doucet and Denov, 2012; Ochen, 2012). The role of social workers and social work organisations has been subject to critiques, for example by using colonial and neo-colonial ideas (Maglajlić and Stubbs, 2018; Harrop and Ioakimidis, 2018). In analysing professional responses to political conflict, however, care should be taken to understand the complexities of, and differences between, types. It is important, for example, to distinguish between the psychological and other sequelae, which characterise longstanding and repetitive traumatic events over decades, for example in Northern Ireland, Israel, Palestine, Bosnia Herzegovina and Cyprus, and the impact of a single incident such as that which occurred in New York on the 11 September 2001 (Bauwens and Tosone, 2010; McTighe and Tosone, 2015).

Social work and political conflict in Northern Ireland

This study presented below focuses on the findings of a qualitative study designed to examine the challenges faced by social workers during the most protracted period of violent political conflict in Northern Ireland (often labelled euphemistically as ‘The Troubles’) that occurred from

1969 to 1998. This two decade period witnessed over 3,000 people dying and tens of thousands physically injured, bereaved and traumatised (Fay et al., 1999; McKittrick et al., 2008).

It is only in recent years that the role of social work during ‘The Troubles’ has been a focus for research. An early commentary (Darby and Williamson 1978) described how health and care professionals struggled to practice at a moment of heightened communal violence and the collapse of civil authority. Then, as now, health and social care services are shaped by geopolitical boundaries and the historical ebb and flow of the conflict. Clients are sometimes less likely to use services that are located in the ‘wrong place’ because of fear and apprehension (Campbell and Healey, 1999). Although it is important not to generalise, it can be assumed that there may have been a relative lack of trust, in particular between Catholics and the security forces. Yet, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that constructive working relationships were developed to ensure that important statutory functions were carried out, for example, in the areas of child protection and adult mental health assessments. Such issues of identity have been explored in the context of social work education (Smyth and Campbell, 1996) and practice (Ewart and Higgins, 2019). Others sought critically to analyse the role of social work using ideas drawn from social theory and social justice (Pinkerton and Campbell, 2002; Houston, 2008). Campbell and McCrystal (2005) surveyed mental health social workers’ experiences of ‘The Troubles’, indicating, as in the study reported below, that there were considerable effects of violence on practice and management. A survey of 1,064 health and social care staff in Northern Ireland, which included social workers, also found elevated levels of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Luce et al., 2002). More recently, a European Union sponsored social work educational programme partnered by a Northern Irish university and WAVE, a large non governmental agency working with victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland, revealed some important messages for educators, practitioners, service users and agencies (Duffy, 2012; Campbell et al., 2013; Coulter 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 whether social work agencies and wider society can match the enthusiasm for change expressed by the students and service users who took part in these studies.

Methodology

Study context and aims

The study was funded by the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, and

associated fieldwork was undertaken in 2017–2018. Both funders were concerned about the relative lack of research about social workers' experiences during 'The Troubles', and its aftermath. The timing of the study was important because of its retrospective nature. It aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of social workers who practiced between 1969 and 1998. The first date is when the current Northern Irish conflict is generally believed to have started and the second when the signing of the Belfast Agreement (NIO, 1998) is considered to be a starting point for the formal beginning of peace building.

A number of research questions were chosen to fulfil the aim of the study:

1. what motivated these social workers to discharge their professional duties during such a violent conflict?
2. what coping mechanisms were employed, both in their professional and personal lives during this period?
3. what strategies and client interventions were used in such circumstances? and
4. what types of support and training were offered by employers and educational institutions?

A research advisory group was established at the commencement of the study comprising representatives from social work and victims and survivor organisations. It 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.

Sample

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-eight participants. These participants were recruited by the research team through a variety of channels, including a range of state, voluntary and community-based social work agencies. [Table 1](#) provides demographic details of twenty-six/twenty-eight respondents (two did not complete this part of the interview schedule).

The respondents participating in the interviews were primarily working in areas of children and family services, although other represented areas included health and mental healthcare, criminal justice, learning disabilities and work with older adults, as described in [Table 2](#).

Study limitations

The study used a non-representative sample; therefore, the findings are not generalisable to the population of social workers who practiced

Table 1 Demographic details

	Number of respondents
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	0
Total	26

Table 2 Employment background

Employment background	Percentage
Children and families	40
Mental health	14
Unspecified	13
Learning disabilities	13
Other	9
Older people	6
Probation/criminal justice	2
All groups	2

during this period of the conflict in Northern Ireland. As a result of the recruitment process, this group was self-selecting and may represent practitioners more willing to talk about their experiences, or who experienced the most severe aspects of the conflict. Despite the lack of accurate figures on the breakdown of religious identities in the social work population, it has been noted that disproportionate numbers of Catholics than Protestants become social workers in Northern Ireland (Smyth and Campbell, 1996; Campbell *et al.*, 2013), and some declare their identify as neither. The researchers, however, were unsuccessful in achieving an approximate balance of representation of religious identity in the sample. It is hoped that this issue will be redressed in a follow-up study of social workers who practice in the subsequent years 1998 to present.

Ethical considerations

Important ethical issues had to be recognised and managed appropriately throughout the design and delivery of the study. Relevant ethical approvals were obtained from university and health and social care sector organisations in Northern Ireland. All respondents were required to provide informed consent using standardised forms for each stage of the research (an online survey and semi-structured interviews). The researchers were conscious that the recall of professional and personal experiences about the conflict could cause some respondents to become distressed. An ethic of care (Hugman, 2005) approach was, therefore, adopted involving time for reflection and support following the interviews with social workers, which ensured that advice and guidance were available. 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.

Data collection and analysis

An interview schedule was designed, based on the key messages from the literature to include: questions about how social workers and their agencies intervened during the conflict; how social work educators prepared students to deal with the conflict; systems of support and supervision; and how might social workers deal with legacy issues. A template analysis approach was used to analyse data (King, 1998), extending and building upon Crabtree and Miller (1999) who discuss the use of a codebook or template as an organisational and analytic tool. This technique 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 (King, 1998, 2004). 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. The need to revise the template diminished significantly following the coding of the eighteenth interview when emergent themes became more stable and evident.

Findings

The following key themes emerged from the process of data analysis: (i) the nature of everyday practice; (ii) coping mechanisms; (iii) support and supervision; (iv) a commitment to social work values and (v) education and legacy issues. These are now presented, using illustrative quotations to further augment the points being expressed.

(i) The nature of everyday practice

In the first theme, social workers described a range of experiences and events which characterised the often risky and abnormal contexts in which they worked. This included difficult engagements with paramilitary group responses when major, traumatic events occurred.

Several respondents described the need to regularly negotiate with community-based paramilitary groups to access clients in need of service as a result of the absence of 'normal' policing and legal structures:

I think one of the things that I found particularly challenging 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).

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).

In addition, the everyday presence of sectarian threats and religious divisions was a daily part of the fabric of social work. In the first narrative, we find concerns by the respondent to hold on to a neutral, professional identity, when their identity was being confronted:

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 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)

The following account explains how one respondent dealt with a less subtle paramilitary threat, yet determined to stay with their professional judgement:

I remember I took a fairly senior [Paramilitary Organisation named] man's children into care and the [Paramilitary Organisation] phoned the AP [a Senior Social Worker] 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).

It was often the case that social workers were enlisted to intervene with other professionals when major incidents, such as bombings,

occurred. These traumatising events regularly involved large numbers of deaths and casualties:

... staff were phoned saying, can you get into work. Because the hospitals are overwhelmed, people are completely traumatised. So people were able to go out to respond... 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).

The potential for vicarious traumatising may have been exacerbated in the social worker knew the injured and deceased:

I spent 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).

Yet, the following retrospective view helps us understand how little practitioners understood about the nature of trauma at the time and how it may have impacted their everyday practice:

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... 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).

(ii) Coping mechanisms

The literature suggests that when people, both practitioners and clients are placed in situations of political and sectarian conflict, a number of coping mechanisms often follow. This appeared to be the case for many respondents. One approach was to assume an apolitical, neutral stance, and generally not acknowledging one's religious identity or sympathies, the goal was to 'just get on with it', a mechanism to ensure safety in work:

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).

When people experience consistent, repetitive traumatic events, then it is often the case that a psychological response to 'make the abnormal normal':

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).

Inevitably the individual's identity mediated or made problematic such encounters. Some social workers with Irish (Catholic) names discussed how they would use the anglicised version of their name, or aliases to avoid potentially hostile exchanges in Protestant areas:

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).

Despite these pressures, there appeared to be a sense of commitment to social change and positive interventions which somehow sustained resilience and coping:

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 (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).

Confirming much of the existing literature on the Northern Irish conflict and social practice, many respondents used silence as a common mechanism cope with the stresses of the role, inverting Heaney's memorable, interpretation of everyday life during *The Troubles*; 'Whatever you say, say nothing' (Campbell and Healey, 1999):

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 rigour that you didn't talk about this (Participant 17).

(iii) Support and supervision

It is crucial that social workers in such contexts have access to formal professional supervision to enable experiences of trauma to be

processed. In many cases, however, they were less likely to be formally supported by their employers:

It was still very difficult to persuade some parts of our management and 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 (Participant 18).

This was partly because of the normative environment of the time, perhaps because of fear of unlocking sectarianism in the workplace or ignorance about what managers could possible do in such trying times:

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... 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).

There were, however, a number of positive examples of where organisations took an active role in protecting their staff:

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 our work (Participant 22).

The following example illustrates a sense of support and protection ('the local people' one assumes were paramilitaries):

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... my senior would have let the local people know where we were (Participant 24).

What was notable in the findings were the levels of support levels of support of, and dependence on, peer advice and care, a sense of the collective at times of stress:

...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... (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).

(iv) A commitment to core social work values

Respondents often referred explicitly or implicitly to ethical principles and social work values in their accounts of practice. This appeared to

have affirmative, beneficial outcomes in terms of self-worth and belief in the delivery of non-sectarian approaches to practice. Despite the fact that nearly all social workers were brought up in Northern Irish society, and regularly experienced sectarianism and divided identities, it was important for respondents to do their best not to let these issues cloud professional judgements:

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 (Participant 23).

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 (Participant 8).

In this case, there was a focus on the rights and needs of the child, despite potential paramilitary threats:

But whenever there were difficult and hard decisions to be made about removing children ... 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).

(v) Social work education and legacy issues

In the early days of the conflict, there was little evidence of universities and employers providing education and training for practitioners to deal with effects of the conflict. This issue was reflected in the following responses:

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).

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).

Participants, however, felt that social work educators should have a role to play, particularly in relation to 'The Troubles' context and legacy, and the importance of ensuring that new generations of social workers would be better placed to deal with the needs of victims and survivors. In the first account, reference is made the important issue of dealing with intergenerational trauma which is often hidden:

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, through generations, 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).

There are also important interventions for those who were directly traumatised during this period and whose needs have been largely neglected:

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...(Participant 23).

The conclusion is that better systems of education and training are required, which acknowledge increasing awareness of trauma and its solutions:

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).

Other respondents were less certain, either because other agencies would be better placed to provide interventions, or a concern that social workers would become overly political:

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).

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).

Discussion

The findings from this study of social workers, who practiced at the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, may have resonance for other situations where political violence occurs. The literature indicates that, as in other such contexts, they were faced with a variety of complex challenges, including threats to their own well-being; yet they appear to have remained committed to delivering interventions that could address the needs of victims and survivors. There is evidence that, in such circumstances, practitioners understandably seek safety in apolitical, neutral positions (Smyth and Campbell, 1996; Shamai, 1999; Shamai and Boehm, 2001; Baum, 2006). Whilst acknowledging that some of the social workers in the study felt that this position was the most viable and rational response, other more nuanced strategies were also evident. Risk taking was taking place, often associated with navigating problematic issue of identity. Throughout the period of The Troubles, practitioners anecdotally have reported how they, like other citizens, used a range of social and language strategies to establish the identity of ‘the other’, what has been described as ‘an absent present within the... social worker/service user relationship’ (Carlisle, 2015, p. 131). The enmeshment of professional and personal identities appeared frequently in respondents’ accounts in the study. The maxim is that it was important not to inquire about the religious identity of one’s client, and not self-disclosing the same in the context of the therapeutic relationship (Campbell and Healey, 1999). The negative association of religion with the long-standing political conflict in Northern Ireland and the polarising of religious identities, it has been argued has stymied attempts to deal with the pervasive nature of sectarianism and the legacy of ‘The Troubles’, thus contributing to the culture of silence (Brewer *et al.*, 2010).

There were many accounts of exposure to physical violence by the respondents in the study, yet clients were often front and centre of interventions. The difficulty that social workers faced, however, was that this sense of commitment was not always matched by the organisations that employed them, although there were some notable exceptions, for example of positive support and supervision by managers. Conversely, peers were most likely to be the first people to seek advice and emotional support often following violent, traumatic incidents. Teamwork and collegial approaches to practice in such a challenging and adverse context were

also pivotal in helping social workers cope. Contemporary social work practice is often characterised by the demands of more managerialist agendas (Trevithick, 2014), which may, however, stymie attempts by social workers and other professionals to challenge the causes of, and find solutions to problems caused by situations of political conflict. Adherence to social work values and principles are critical in these circumstances (Banks, 2006) but it has been asserted that this task cannot be achieved in unthinking, reductionist ways (Levy, 1973). The findings from the study suggest that some social workers were committed to developing a value bases that could navigate the abnormal challenges they and their clients faced. On reflection, over 2 decades since the signing of the Belfast Agreement (1998), it can be argued that these and other social workers should deliver the more politicised, activist and social justice-oriented practice (Campbell *et al.*, 2019) that is at the heart of the current global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014).

The study findings indicated that very few respondents had accessed specialist training during the most violent years of the conflict. It is probably the case that, since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, social work education in Northern Ireland has embraced more positive ways of teaching students directly about the impact of ‘The Troubles’ on individuals, groups and communities. Northern Ireland is unique in having this requirement a mandatory aspect of its social work curriculum (Duffy, 2012; Campbell *et al.*, 2013). These experiences point towards the need for social work students to openly address this difficult type of pedagogy as a core aspect of their educational experiences. There are challenges in teaching about such topics which are discomforting (Coulter *et al.*, 2013) but, nonetheless, there is also evidence in these studies that such approaches can positively impact students in their grasp of key elements of social work knowledge on political conflict and social work.

Conclusions

This first, substantive, study of social workers’ historical experience of the Northern Ireland Troubles revealed a number of overarching or integrative themes. Most respondents created interventions that were characterised by the notion of ‘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. The use of silence and the hiding of religious and political identities can be viewed as important coping mechanism, yet risks were taken to ensure that services could be delivered. 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. It was evident that there were few opportunities for appropriate education and training during these difficult and dangerous times.

Although there is a need to be cautious about drawing comparisons with how social workers in other regions deal with political conflicts, some of the findings of this Northern Irish study may have resonance for the emergent knowledge base in this field. The literature suggests that, in such circumstances, a key challenge to social workers, social work educators and social workers is to manage and deal with cultures of silence and the absence of capacity to discuss how political violence affects the workplace, particularly where ethnic or religious divisions occur in the profession. This silence is often linked to the ambivalence about identifying one's religion and other aspects of identity, which can understandably be understood as a safety mechanism. There is an imperative that, in the process of qualifying of social work education, students and educators need to embrace and debate common and contrasting experiences of the conflict and what this means for their identities. When qualified, social workers should engage in forms of continuous professional development to maintain this learning and insight. Improvements in social work skills, knowledge and values in this field can, as the participants in the study highlighted, ensure that the professional can take a lead role in dealing with the many legacy issues that have to be addressed in Northern Irish and other societies.

An interesting 'by product' of the research process was a sense of catharsis experienced by some participants during interviews. There was value in the opportunity to talk, often for the first time, about their professional and sometimes personal lives during this traumatic period. In Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, it can be argued that further strategies and research approaches should be developed to ensure that such critical voices and stories can be told in safe ways; this is an imperative, not just for social workers, but also clients, to enable healing to begin and continue. Perhaps just as important is the need for the profession to interrogate its role in wider context of problematic histories, social and political structures and reinforce and perpetuate divisions (Maglajlić and Stubbs, 2018). These more critical perspectives can draw upon other international experiences (Campbell *et al.*, 2019) to understand how social work practices are shaped by broader structural determinants (Campbell and Pinkerton, 2020); these often close down opportunities for alliances to be built between the profession and clients who have been victimised by political conflict. Such holistic analyses of social and political systems can help confirm social work's commitment to conflict resolution and peace-building in these and future conflicts.

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