



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Voice, Agency and Blame: Victimhood and the Imagined Community in Northern Ireland

Dr. Cheryl Lawther, Professor Kieran McEvoy
and Dr. Lauren Dempster.

Queen's University Belfast

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Presentation Overview

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Project Introduction



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

- ❑ Title: Voice, Agency and Blame: Victimhood and the Imagined Community in Northern Ireland.
- ❑ Funder: Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).
- ❑ Project team: Dr. Cheryl Lawther, Prof. Kieran McEvoy and Dr. Lauren Dempster.
- ❑ Timeline: April 2016 – September 2018.

- ❑ Project aim: explore intersection between victims and ‘dealing’ with the past in Northern Ireland, focus on themes of voice, agency and blame.

- ❑ Further information: c.lawther@qub.ac.uk / <https://victimsandthepast.org/>



Research Context

1. DEALING WITH THE PAST

- 'Piecemeal' approach to the past
- Healing Through Remembering (2006)
- Consultative Group on the Past (2009)
- Haass-O'Sullivan (2013)
- Stormont House Agreement (2014)
 - Historical Investigations Unit
 - Independent Commission on Information Retrieval
 - Oral History Archive
 - Implementation and Reconciliation Group
- Fresh Start (2015)



Research Context

2. POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD

- ❑ Statutory definition of a victim contained in Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 remains contested.
- ❑ Played out through competition over 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims and creation of hierarchies of victimhood.

- ❑ Impact:
 - ❑ Recognition Payment of £12,000 proposed by Consultative Group on the Past;
 - ❑ Creation of pension for those seriously injured as a result of the conflict;
 - ❑ At times, use of victimhood for political and social gain.



Research Methodology

- ❑ 60 interviews with representatives and members of victims' groups; lawyers; NGO activists; representatives of the statutory sector; and print and broadcast journalists involved in reporting victim issues.
- ❑ 21 interviewees were women.
- ❑ Site visits and participation in walking/memory tours.
- ❑ Involvement of 'critical friend' in Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland (CVSNI) – ensured ethical best practice and assisted with access to interviewees.



Voice

- ❑ Research found three challenges associated with voice and truth recovery/dealing with the past:

- 1. Capturing and abuse of victims' voices:**

'It [victimhood] also makes a good football. It's also good for point scoring within the parties which is shameful, it absolutely is shameful and when you see them kicking it down the road, they kind of kick it forever' (6/3/2017).

Voice

2. Over domination of a small number of voices:

'it's kind of like the loudest voice, the sharpest elbows, the biggest who pushes their way to the top of the queue' (15/11/2016).

For some interviewees, also tied to recognition of importance of encouraging other voices:

'I think sometimes it's those who shout loudest that will be heard. I love whenever I hear other victims of terrorist violence speaking up because you know that you don't want to be, there was a time whenever it was like every morning you were getting a phone call from the radio station or whatever and you just go well no, there are lots of other people besides me out there. But I do think that there are cases within Northern Ireland which have become sexy cases, if you want to put it like that and it's actually hurtful, it's very, very hurtful to other victims because they do think well, what about my own, what about my loved one. We never get anything or nobody listens to us. I've always encouraged victims to speak up and tell their stories, share their stories because I think if you don't share them people will never learn' (15/11/16).



Voice

3. Silencing of 'uncomfortable' voices:

- ❑ 'Uncomfortable' voices may, for example, challenge privileged notions of innocence and blame, or contradict legitimizing narratives and imagined communities of victimhood.
- ❑ Following quote refers to members of the republican community who have been victims of republican violence but the same is also true of victims of state violence in the unionist/loyalist community –

'One group of victims whose voices have never been adequately heard are those people from the nationalist and republican community who are victims of republican paramilitaries and they are to some extent a group of people whose voices are basically silent and silenced in this process'.

Agency

- ❑ Discussions on agency refer to individuals' and groups' ability to effectively respond to and advocate for their own needs and campaigns.
- ❑ However, fieldwork demonstrated concerns about victims groups becoming *'more about the group than about the victim'*.
- ❑ Or existence of groups which have little intrinsic or moral interest in responding to victims' needs: *'But for the man who works 30 or 40 years and then retires on a big pension, is a bit bored and thinks well can we start a wee gentleman's club and jumps on the back of victims because jumping on the back of victims seems to be the trend now here at the minute'* (2/3/2017).
- ❑ Has been argued the size and expansion of 'victims sector' in Northern Ireland constitutes a 'victims industry':
'My own wish would be that as many people as possible should be able to remove the word 'victim' from their foreheads. There are people who were not injured themselves who are almost making a lifelong career of all of this and it would be a great thing if one could wean some people away from that attitude' (Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, 2008).

Agency

- ❑ Other interviewees offered a ready acknowledgment of the sense of ownership and empowerment that comes from engagement and cultivating agency -

'I know that it's bandied about sometimes that you hear celebrity victims, I don't hold any truck with that because if people are using whatever means possible to get their campaign raised to such a level that people know about it then I say more power to them. I'm also cognisant that other campaign groups would be better at how they present themselves and I think it's fantastic, regardless of their background or creed, if they are managing to get heard and if they're managing to have their campaign raised in whatever form, whether it's the media or Stormont or whatever; I think it's fantastic' (3/5/2017).

- Balance needs to be struck between representing and advocating for victims and survivors and denying individuals of their agency.



Blame

- ❑ Northern Ireland and 'playing the blame game':

'I can blame you and you can blame me and that's what's happening on both sides. Once somebody brings a subject up, ah but, what about...and then the blame jumps from that table to this table and back again and then the blame game. They made a comedy programme out of that, The Blame Game, and so that sums up Northern Ireland. There is your understanding of blame, they turned it into a comic show' (2/8/2017).

- ❑ **Risk that truth processes become forum for institutionalisation of 'whataboutery' .**



- ❑ Trading of 'my' truth v. 'your' truth and creation of hierarchies of truth.

- ❑ Truth used to fight 'war' by other means.

- ❑ Truth recovery becomes individualised, failing to offer full examination of context, causes and consequences of the past.

- ❑ Curtails space for political generosity and may lead to reification and stagnation of victimhood.

Conclusion

- ❑ Identified need on part of victims and survivors for measures to deal with the past.
- ❑ Such measures could offer e.g., truth, justice, acknowledgement and support towards meeting physical and mental health needs.

- ❑ Offset by long and protracted debate on dealing with the past and politics of victimhood.

- ❑ Project has identified three themes of significance regarding consultation on SHA and establishment of legacy bodies:
 - ❑ Victim voice
 - ❑ Exercise of agency
 - ❑ Calibrations of blame

- Will require sensitivity, imagination and generosity going forward.





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