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## Participation, Truth and Partiality: Participatory Action Research, Community-based Truth-telling and Post-conflict Transition in Northern Ireland

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### ABSTRACT

The article assesses some methodological and ethical issues raised by a Participatory Action Research (PAR) 'truth-telling' project conducted in Northern Ireland. The authors reflect on their role in the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP), a community-based study that recorded and published relatives' testimonies of victims of the Northern Ireland conflict. The article addresses two major areas of concern. First, it explores the potential value for post-conflict transition in carrying out PAR-informed, single-identity, community-based research work in a violently divided society. The authors argue that such 'insider' research can make an important contribution to developing strategies of conflict resolution, although significant limits need also to be recognized. Second, the article critically assesses the validity of claims to telling the 'truth' that such a project involves. The end of legitimating popular knowledge is key to a PAR-based approach and this can have important consequences for post-conflict transition. However, in a divided society such a goal also raises significant questions concerning the issue of partiality and the limits this sets for the nature of the 'truth' that may be told.

### KEYWORDS

conflict / Northern Ireland / oral history / participatory action research / research methodologies

## Introduction: PAR, Truth-telling and Post-conflict Transition

The aim of this article is to critically assess the value and limits of adopting a community-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to 'truth-telling' processes in violently divided societies. It is therefore concerned with certain wider methodological and ethical issues raised by employing participatory research strategies to sensitive research subjects. It is specifically designed to examine two main areas of concern: first, the contribution (and limits) that adopting a PAR-based 'single identity' approach can make to conflict resolution in a violently divided society; and, second, the tension between the PAR aim to legitimate popular knowledge and the validity of truth claims that such work may make. A case study of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP), a community-based 'truth-telling' project in Northern Ireland, is used to analyse these theoretical questions.

The ACP was a four-year-long project designed to record and publish the testimonies of the relatives and friends of the 99 people from the Ardoyne area of North Belfast who died as a result of the conflict. The article draws upon the authors' first-hand experience as active participants in the ACP (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002). It is also informed by assessment research that the authors carried out in the project's aftermath (Lundy and McGovern, 2004). For this, around 50 interviews were conducted with ACP members and participants (30) and community representatives of both local nationalist and unionist communities (20) on the experience, impact and reactions to the work.

A PAR-based emphasis upon participation was central to the work of the ACP. However, rather than providing a full-blown critique of PAR, the article is designed to explore the insights the work of the ACP offers on the role and value of participation as a means to achieve the ends of post-conflict truth-telling. The nature, extent and limitations of such participation are also therefore critically analysed. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of a project that was primarily based on the experiences of one community are discussed. This focuses on the role of 'insiders' versus 'outsiders' in conducting sensitive research in violently divided societies. The authors argue that there are significant benefits for conflict resolution if truth-telling mechanisms pursue community participation and public ownership of the process as key goals. However, the ACP's adoption of an 'insider' research approach and working with a primarily single identity focus also call into question the validity of the 'untold truths' it was able to tell. In a project directed toward the public retrieval of difficult and often highly contentious memories, the problem of potential 'partiality' was a real and complex question. The article therefore concludes by discussing such issues within a wider theoretical context.

## Participatory Action Research and 'History-making'

The Ardoyne Commemoration Project can be characterized as an example of Participatory Action Research. There are a number of distinct 'schools' within

the broad field of PAR that differ in their methodology, focus, political orientation and even terminology (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Stoecker, 1999). At its most straightforward, PAR is defined by two key interconnected elements; it is 'action research that is participatory and participatory research that unites with action' (Rahman, 1993: 75). For Orlando Fals-Borda (1991), PAR has four defining characteristics. It involves 'collective research' and attempts a 'critical recovery of history'. It will also seek to enhance the valuing and application of 'folk culture' and aims at the 'production and diffusion of [such] knowledge'. Taken together such an approach is designed for the 'legitimization of popular knowledge'. Anisur Rahman (1993: 83) contends that PAR is a political practice designed specifically to challenge the 'means of knowledge production [including] the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge'. For Budd Hall (2001: 176), this struggle for 'knowledge-making' means that PAR is essentially concerned with 'history-making'.

PAR tends, therefore, to be conceived as distinctive in both the way it is carried out and the goals it seeks to achieve. In the case of the former, the key imperative is to conduct the research in an 'egalitarian manner', while the outcomes are understood to be directed toward creating opportunities for democratically meaningful action (Lincoln, 2001). These two dimensions are closely interlinked. The manner in which the research is initiated, designed, conducted and disseminated is itself intended to form part of a wider emancipatory project by challenging the way in which knowledge is constituted and validated. Democratizing the research process is tied umbilically to the legitimation of the knowledge produced (or publicly aired) by it. The democratization of the research process undoubtedly requires a paradigm shift in the way in which the traditional researcher–subject relationship is understood. The researcher is envisaged as becoming more of a 'facilitator' adopting a 'catalytic and supportive role' (Rahman, 1993: 82). Real participation has to involve what has been termed 'co-generative dialogue' (Fear and Edwards, 1995). Community members should not only advise on the shape and direction of the research but must have the opportunity to at least collaboratively 'control the decision-making process' (Stoecker, 1999: 842). Indeed, the distinction between the academic and the community is itself problematized by PAR theory, particularly when the supposedly contradictory subject positions of researcher and community member are simultaneously occupied by the same individual(s) (Park and Pellow, 1996). However, as a number of commentators have noted, participation and action are not ends that are necessarily complimentary (Rahman, 1991). Randy Stoecker (1999: 850) has suggested that key 'decisional moments' should be established in the research process to ensure that the desire for 'co-generative dialogue' and 'decision-making control' is balanced against the need for 'efficiency concerns'.

PAR is designed to validate and disseminate popular, community-based knowledge in order to challenge social marginalization and structures of oppression. Nowhere is this aim more relevant than in societies that have been riven by armed conflict and which are embarking upon a process of post-conflict

transition. This has been exemplified by truth-telling initiatives undertaken in many parts of the world, most notably perhaps in Latin America (Gugelberger, 1996; Hayner, 2001; Lykes, 1997, 2001; REHMI, 1999). However, PAR practitioners tend to present the validation of popular knowledge as a largely unproblematic goal. Yet, this is a far from uncontentious issue in deeply divided societies, particularly those emerging from conflict. Very specific issues are raised in adopting a PAR perspective for a community-based truth-telling process in a divided post-conflict situation such as Northern Ireland. If PAR is concerned with the 'legitimation of memory' such a context raises profound questions about whose memories (and about what) are to be legitimated (Lundy and McGovern, 2001).

### **Case-Study: The Ardoyne Commemoration Project**

Before discussing some of the ethical and methodological issues raised by the work of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project, it is first necessary to give a brief description of Ardoyne, the context within which the Project was formed and certain key aspects of its working process. Ardoyne is a nationalist working class community in North Belfast of approximately 7500 people (AYPE, 1998; Burton, 1978). Between 1969 and 1998, 99 people from Ardoyne were killed as a result of the conflict. Of these, 50 were the victims of various loyalist paramilitary groups (primarily the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters), 26 were killed by members of the State security forces (British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary) and 13 by various Irish republican organizations (the majority, nine, by the Irish Republican Army). A further six fatalities were members of the IRA killed inadvertently on active service, one died accidentally and in three cases it is unclear who was responsible (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002: 7). A range of the issues are the same for victims' relatives no matter which agent was responsible for the death. However, there are others that are more specific and which emphasize the great sensitivity in conducting research in such areas. For example, that no member of the British security forces responsible for 28 percent of these deaths (many of which clearly involved unarmed civilians) was ever arrested, interrogated or served time in prison has left a legacy of alienation and a distrust of the authorities and outsiders among many people in Ardoyne. Similarly, loyalist organizations have been increasingly subject to allegations of systematic collusion with the state as part of the latter's counter-insurgency campaigns extending over several decades (Ní Aoláin, 2000; Relatives for Justice, 1994). As recently as April 2003, a state-sponsored commission of inquiry into collusion found that such claims were well founded (Stevens, 2003). This has raised many difficult and complex questions for relatives. On the other hand, dealing with those cases where the local IRA were responsible for deaths (particularly where the victim was killed as an alleged informer) proved among the most challenging and sensitive for the

ACP. They emphasized, as we shall see, that the tensions and silences that exist within particular communities on the legacies of the past need to be addressed as part of post-conflict transition quite as much as the antagonisms that exist between communities.

The Ardoyne Commemoration Project was established in July 1998. It was created as an entirely local initiative within the context of wider political developments, the most significant of which were the IRA and loyalist ceasefires of 1994 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in April 1998. This peace process created the space for people in Ardoyne and elsewhere to reflect upon and discuss, often for the first time, what had been endured over the past 30 years of political violence. Coping with the ongoing realities of the conflict had previously precluded time for reflection. With peace came the possibility of contemplation. However, the 'victims agenda' was brought to the fore by anti-Agreement unionists opposed to the release of conflict-related prisoners as part of the peace process. What has been termed a 'hierarchy of victimhood' was promoted by differentiating between supposedly deserving and undeserving victims (Lundy and McGovern, 2001). Certain British government actions suggested that the 'hierarchy of victimhood' was emerging as a matter of state policy (Bloomfield, 1998). At the bottom of this 'hierarchy', it inevitably seemed to many nationalists, were victims of state violence.

It was against this backdrop that around 30 people including victims' relatives, concerned individuals and representatives from community groups called a meeting in Ardoyne to discuss the 'victims agenda' and to explore ways in which the community could commemorate their own victims of the conflict, in their own way. After a number of subsequent ad hoc meetings, much discussion and debate, the idea of a commemoration book emerged. The ACP was the result. From the outset the ACP was therefore construed as a community-based initiative. It was formed around an elected committee of eight (later reduced to five) and a wider 'membership' of people who joined in at various stages and assisted with specific tasks (interviews, database, transcribing, returning edited interviews etc.). Community participation was seen as a defining feature of the ACP, designed to guide and shape its development. The explicit purpose of the project was to collate and publish the oral testimonies of the relatives, friends and eyewitnesses of the area's 99 conflict victims. During a four-year period over 300 interviews were carried out. A book (*Ardoyne: The Untold Truth*) was finally published in 2002. It was launched at a meeting held in Ardoyne, attended by several hundred relatives and community members on the 33rd anniversary of the deaths of Ardoyne's first victims. The book contains the 99 victims' case studies, each made up of 2–3 oral testimonies, and a series of historical chapters (based in the main on oral history material) designed to contextualize the individual deaths.

During all stages of the project, the ACP attempted to seek the views, opinions and the participation of the wider community. This was intended to meet the goal of creating community 'ownership' and control of the design, research process, editing, return phase and production of the book. The 'return phase'

was seen as particularly important in this regard. An initial edited version of the interview transcript was handed back to the interviewee who could then alter their testimony in any way they saw fit. The transcript was then re-worked in line with these wishes. Family interviewees were also allowed pre-publication access to the complete case study including interviews with other family members, friends and eyewitnesses. While participants could only make changes to their own testimony they could raise any inaccuracies or issues of concern in other testimonies with the ACP. This 'handing back' phase added years to the duration of the project because of the sheer amount of work it generated. However, taking its lead from PAR approaches, this 'handing-back' phase was seen as a pivotal 'decisional moment' where collaborative participation was an objective overriding all other concerns. The intent was to enhance a sense of participant control, create dialogue and help resolve a number of unresolved issues. From the outset it was therefore also an integral aspect of the ACP's thinking that the integrity of the project depended upon its being carried out by members of the community, as opposed to someone from 'outside'. This does, however, raise a number of issues that need to be considered within the context of researching in violently divided societies.

### **PAR and 'Insider' Research in Violently Divided Societies: 'Access', 'Familiarity' and 'Single Identity' Work**

The PAR approach of the ACP was the basis upon which 'community-based truth-telling' was founded. It was also conceived as the means of circumventing some of the methodological problems that are part and parcel of carrying out research in violently divided societies in general, and Northern Ireland in particular. In order to assess the work of the ACP as an example of PAR, it is therefore necessary to outline some of the ethical and methodological issues identified by previous writers on this subject. Given its importance, one of these, the question of bias and subjectivity, is discussed by itself in the next section. Here, the focus falls upon the three interrelated areas: 'access'; 'interviewer presentation'; and the value and limits of 'single-identity research'. In this context PAR is understood as a particular form of 'insider' research. The way in which PAR approaches impacted on the ACP research in each of these areas is then detailed and critically assessed in relation to the ends of research for post-conflict transition.

A number of authors have discussed the difficulties and dangers facing social researchers working on sensitive topics in Northern Ireland (Brewer, 1993; Feenan, 2002; Feldman, 1991; Jenkins, 1984; Knox, 2001; Pickering, 2001; Sluka, 1995; and Smyth and Robinson, 2001). One widely discussed issue is that of interviewee suspicions over the identity of the researcher and the purpose of the research. John Brewer (1993: 127–8) has argued that the 'social, political and economic environment' in which his research on policing was undertaken presented issues for the physical safety of the researcher, which

impacted on the technical, methodological and ethical aspects of the project. Drawing on his anthropological work in nationalist west Belfast, Alan Feldman (1991: 12) has gone so far as to suggest that 'in a culture of political surveillance, participant observation is at best an absurdity and at least a form of complicity with those outsiders who surveil'. The result of conflict-generated suspicion was (Feldman argued) that undertaking ethnographic research in both communities was rendered all but impossible. This conclusion has in part been disputed by Colin Knox. Although carrying out highly sensitive work on paramilitary violence Knox (2001: 220) suggests that research 'across the community divide' is possible but that researchers have to tread a fine line between 'concealment' and 'transparency'. In similar vein other analysts have either written positively of the value of cross-community research, or carried such work out with significant success (Gillespie et al., 1992; McNamee and Lovett, 1992; Smyth and Darby, 2001).

Such issues are particularly relevant to the respective roles of 'insider' and 'outsider' researchers of violently divided societies (Smyth and Robinson, 2001). However, as Tamar Hermann (2001: 79) argues, few researchers on conflict are 'pure outsiders', most being either 'involved outsiders' or 'insiders'. Being an 'insider', Hermann suggests, brings both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, closeness to the subject group allows the researcher access and a familiarity with their experiences denied to others. They literally and metaphorically 'speak the same language'. Negatively they carry with them 'emotional baggage' that is likely to impact on their analysis. Similarly, their lack of a 'certificate of honesty' can prevent access and familiarity when dealing with members of the 'other community'. Truly joint research initiatives may be the means out of this dilemma but, as Hermann (2001: 90) notes from her own experience in Israel–Palestine, that is often desirable but unachievable.

While differing in some of their conclusions, these various authors therefore pinpoint the importance of the issues of access, interviewer presentation and the merits and possibilities for single identity or cross-community research in violently divided societies. Certainly these were concerns that came very much to the fore during the work of the ACP. The ACP can be characterized as an example of PAR 'insider research'. In terms of its personnel, working methods and outlook the ACP was, in many ways, almost indistinguishable from the community under investigation. The authors' worked as members of the ACP in collaboration with a number of victims' relatives, community activists and other locally based interested groups and individuals. They joined the project after attending a public event organized by the ACP (The Forgotten Victims, August 1998). They could both, in this sense, be considered as 'insider' researchers. In addition, one of the authors is from Ardoyne, and, as 'one of them' was generally readily accepted. Shortly after joining the ACP she became a committee member. The other author is from Derry (77 miles from Belfast). He was the only member of the project not from Ardoyne. By virtue of his identity (religion, nationality, political stance) he could be described as 'an insider' to the conflict. However, because he was not from Ardoyne his relationship



with some members of the ACP and participants was at times not entirely straightforward. Two things are significant here. First, is the importance of precisely who it is that carries out such sensitive research. For example, when asked why it was important that it was people from Ardoyne who did the research a founding member of the ACP argued that:

The project couldn't have happened if it hadn't been done by people who were from the area and who had a certain amount of respect within the area ... if it had been a group of people from outside Ardoyne or another country then doors would have been shut and people would have just put the phone down. That's the magic of the project, that it is a local project and it is local people that people can identify with.

However, equally relevant is developing a more complex understanding of what criteria constitute the status of 'insider'. Much of the literature on conflict-related research maintains a relatively straightforward binary opposition of 'insider' and 'outsider'. Claims to the former are made by researchers who come from a certain background but who can often lack the full complement of credentials and/or life experiences (local background, family and friendship links, specific political history, etc.) to make them a 'real insider'. There may be a need to imagine the 'insider'/'outsider' paradigm less as a singular divide than a series of concentric circles, entry into each of which is dependent upon possession of various 'certificates of honesty', bringing the possibility of greater 'familiarity' and 'access'. Recognizing such distinctions can improve the design of conflict-related PAR projects and the allocation of tasks. For example, while lacking the trust that familiarity engenders can be a problem for gathering data, the 'outsider-insider' can bring an insightful distance to its assessment.

That said, probably the single greatest advantage a PAR approach offers to conflict-related research is that of access. The 'insider' nature of the ACP was perhaps most apparent in this regard. One illustration can be seen in the compilation of the full list of victims and potential interviewees. Prior to the creation of the ACP, no definitive list of Ardoyne's victims existed. This was built up over time in part through information given by local people. Dozens contributed to the work of the project in this way, often volunteering themselves as potential interviewees at the same time. Direct and indirect long-term contacts through local kinship and social networks, unavailable to the outsider researcher, were key to building up the necessary trust to arrange and conduct interviews in this way.

There are numerous barriers that can prevent access to the 'outsider' in a place like Ardoyne. Long-term experience of a conflict that revolved around an information war, state surveillance and, in particular, the use of informers can have a very real impact. It results in what might be termed a 'culture of secrecy' and a deep-seated distrust of 'outsiders'. As one respondent put it:

A sort of sub-culture developed over the past thirty years in areas like Ardoyne and the people will only say certain things to certain people and only feel comfortable in the presence of certain people.

There are many steps that the 'outsider' researcher can do to alleviate such concerns. However, there is also a need to recognize that the fact of who they are (and what they are doing) can still act as a major delimiting factor on their ability to access important aspects of the views, opinions and experiences of community members. PAR is specifically designed to try to allow people to feel as if the work is theirs. If people do not feel that, and by definition believe the work belongs to someone else, it invariably affects the findings.

The 'insider' character of the project was also critical to the conduct of the interviews themselves and the issue of interviewer presentation. Most of the interviewers had little or no previous experience and this presented a number of logistical and other problems. For example, it was felt necessary to draw up a set of ethical guidelines and these were then disseminated and widely discussed with all the members of the project. Indeed, collective discussion of ethical questions was a feature of the work throughout, involving a fusion of academic learning and the community-sensitive insights of project members. However, and from the outset, advantages of other kinds of experience were an essential ingredient of this work. The development of an empathetic understanding between interviewer and interviewee was often the result of a shared knowledge and first-hand experience of traumatic, conflict-related events, as this respondent suggests:

I didn't know Mary [ACP interviewer] particularly well [but] I knew she was somebody from my own community. I knew right away there were things I wouldn't have to explain that she would understand some of the things I was saying, so I felt more comfortable. Especially if she was going to take extracts ... she would understand. I wouldn't have to explain to her what the issues were.

Talking to someone who 'spoke their language' could enable participants to speak more freely with the understanding that 'one of their own' would be unlikely to use the information to their detriment (Lundy and McGovern, 2004). The importance of this cannot be underestimated and is perhaps best illustrated by an example of where such empathy was absent. A local woman was interviewed about events that occurred over 30 years ago by the 'outsider-insider' researcher. At one point the interviewee was asked about a printing press, used for a local republican group, that she had briefly kept hidden in her attic in 1970. At first she was extremely reluctant to discuss this at all, until assured by another member of the project who was present (and who was well known to the interviewee) that this information, from three decades before, would not be used by the authorities.

The nature of the ACP allowed it access to groups, voices and knowledge that would otherwise have been entirely inaccessible. The project included community activists with links to local political and other organizations. A key aim of the project was to open up a dialogue within a community in which often deep felt and acrimonious divisions (internal as well as those with other communities) were the result of long-term conflict. For example, as noted before, 13 local people had been killed by various republican organizations. In a number

of these cases outstanding issues remained and relatives sought clarification of the events and circumstances surrounding these deaths. In certain instances the ACP was able to provide a conduit of contact and information between relatives and those with some of the knowledge they sought. In one case, the ACP established that responsibility for a death previously blamed on a loyalist group had, in fact, been carried out by local republicans. The victim's widowed spouse had wanted to know for many years the specific reason for the death of his loved one. Because of the access that the PAR character of the project afforded, the ACP was able, at least, to elicit an explanation (a case of mistaken identity).

However, it would be naïve not to recognize that these very advantages of access could also impact in a negative way on the interview process. For example, it may be wise not to take at face value the earlier contention that an interviewee 'wouldn't have to explain' certain experiences or views to the interviewer. It is also necessary to recognize that pre-constituted collective and community narratives of the past can impact significantly not only on the social memory of those being interviewed, but on their willingness to challenge these when talking to someone from the same place (Misztal, 2003). In this vein, there were a number of instances where people within the community may have seen the orientation of the project as problematic. This was most noticeable where the local IRA had killed the victim as an alleged informer. These were amongst the most difficult cases that the project had to deal with and passions continued to run high when such issues were discussed. That some of the members of the project would have been identified as republican-minded may have played a role here. In one such instance a victim's family refused to give an interview prior to the publication of the book, although they later indicated that they regretted this decision.

This clearly raises some issues over managing perceptions of the nature and purpose of such work. However, it should also alert the practitioner of PAR to the problem of conceptualizing the 'community' as homogenous and underestimating the tense realities of intra-community division. 'Community' is itself a construct, as is the idea of a 'single identity'. In the wake of violent conflict, the need for relieving trauma and healing divisions within a 'community' (as well as between them) is one of the key functions of supposedly 'single identity' research. Researchers need to be aware that (as one participant put it) 'people are always screening what they say', and whatever advantages arise from insider access need also to be seen in this light (Lundy and McGovern, 2004).

Perhaps the most significant limitation of the ACP's work was the difficulties of conducting such sensitive research 'across the divide'. Being embedded in a particular community may have been a prerequisite for conducting the work of the project but it also defined its extent. In a small number of cases the very nature of the ACP made access difficult. This was particularly so where the victim involved was from a unionist background. Despite great efforts, the lack of community-based conduits of contact proved to be an insurmountable obstacle in at least one case. Similarly, the compilation of the list of victims and interviewees was circumscribed by the structural limits of communal division. The

remit of the project was to include all victims who had been born (or lived for a significant period of their lives) in the area. However, a substantial number of unionist residents of Ardoyne left (or were forced out) during the mass population movements in Belfast in the tumultuous years of the early 1970s. It is unknown if any of these unionist former residents became conflict victims. Perhaps even more significantly this did not even come to light as an issue until after the project had finished, during the authors follow-up research work (Lundy and McGovern, 2004). While the intent of the project was to be inclusive (and certainly all victims who were known were included, regardless of their status or the agency responsible), the reality of communal division impacted on the efficacy and extent of that inclusivity.

There is more than an echo here of Tamar Hermann's (2001) argument that the advantage of 'first hand familiarity' for the researcher working within 'one's own' is paralleled by a lack of access and understanding when attempting work with the 'other community'. Clearly the path of joint research work, recommended by Smyth and Robinson (2001) is one response to this dilemma. But the suspicion of such 'joint work' (as Hermann found) cannot be underestimated and will, again, potentially have a profound impact on the willingness of participants to reveal their feelings and experiences in as full a way as possible. Perhaps opening up a public space *between* specific projects rather than *within* them is the key to unlocking this particular problem. The continuing prevalence of communal division in parts of Northern Ireland where the conflict had its most devastating impact is a reality that field researchers in this area need to recognize. A research project that sets out to 'cross the divide' may find great problems in engendering the necessary level of trust to produce meaningful testimonies.

## **PAR and the Meaning of Truth in Community-based Truth-telling**

Of all the criticisms that might be levelled against adopting an emancipatory PAR approach to 'truth-telling' in a violently divided society, the most problematic and far reaching in its ramifications is the question of the potential bias of what some have termed 'partisan research' (Hammersley, 2000). In turn this calls into question the status of the testimonies' claim to 'truth'. For Martyn Hammersley, for example, such emancipatory research strategies will invariably lead to 'systematic errors' that fundamentally undermine the validity claims of sociological knowledge. If constituted within a postmodernist paradigm, such strategies also reduce 'truth' to a mere relativist proposition that 'what is true becomes that which is taken to be true within some community whose members share a particular perspective' (Hammersley, 2000: 157). In what sense, then, should the 'truth' of the work produced by a community-based, 'insider' PAR-based project such as the ACP be understood, and what issues does this raise for post-conflict transition?

Proponents of radical PAR perspectives certainly argue that they are involved in an explicitly emancipatory political project in which the traditional processes of knowledge production and hierarchies of validity are being challenged. Many tend also to adopt a postmodernist paradigm in framing their understanding of the meaning and status of knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1991; Rahman, 1993; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In this sense they offer a particular perspective on a widespread debate within the social sciences and related disciplines (Alvesson, 2002; Haack, 1995; Hammersley, 2000; Stanley, 1992). A key focus here is a challenge to the long-established contention that the proper end of social research is the production of objective knowledge (Lyotard, 1988; Popper, 1959; Rorty, 1989). Such questions have also been raised amongst historians where a parallel debate has been taking place, largely in response to postmodern critiques of the discipline (Appleby et al., 1994; Evans, 1997; Jenkins, 2003). Practitioners of oral history have been particularly concerned to revise the claims of earlier generations to be able to access and record the 'real' experiences of subaltern groups. Indeed, something of a consensus has emerged around a more complex, nuanced understanding of the relationship between method, memory, culture and testimony (Perks and Thomson, 1998; Portelli, 1997; Thomson et al., 1994). A far weaker truth claim, which recognizes the social construction of memory and therefore the absence of a universal historical truth, tends to lie at the heart of such positions. On the other hand, a radical relativist position that views all 'truths' as self-validating is countered with a reliance on the historian's craft of evaluation. An echo of this postmodernist mood has also been evident in the emerging field of 'transitional justice' (Gugelberger, 1996; Jelin, 2003; Teitel, 2001). For example, Elizabeth Jelin has argued that in the post-conflict 'struggle for memory' the 'testimonial' should be understood as 'a construction of memories [that] implies a multiplicity of voices and the circulation of multiple "truths"' (Jelin, 2003: 73).

There was much debate within the ACP itself about the status of truth. This crystalized around whether the term untold 'truth' or 'story' should appear in the book's title. The methods employed for the book formed the focus for this discussion. Given that the aim of the project was to allow the participants, as far as possible, to say what they wanted to say then there was a limited sense in which external tests of validity, or data analysis were applied to their narratives. That said, the editors did examine the interview transcripts in the context both of other testimonies and archival and historical materials. This informed the discussions that took place with the participant as part of the 'handing back' phase. In addition, the work of the project also involved the identification and analysis of patterns of experience within the whole body of the testimonies. These were presented as research findings in the book's conclusion. However, the ACP itself also recognized that it was not writing a 'definitive history of the district or of the conflict', but only that it sought to show 'through the words of those most directly affected, how the conflict impacted on the district' (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002: 14). There is also a need to be aware of a wide range of factors that might influence the character, content and thus

the 'truthfulness' of the testimonies. These include, for example, the narration of the self, the role of genre and narrative convention, the cultural meanings of the past, present-mindedness and the previously noted importance of collective histories and the subsequent constraints on being able to tell 'stories that do not fit' (Thomson, 2003).

Yet, despite this, when it came to naming what it was they had done, there was a strong sense amongst the project members that they wanted to hold onto the word and concept of 'truth' rather than relinquish it for what was seen as the less evocative and powerful 'story'. The sense seemed to be that, while the truth presented might be partial (in both the sense that it is incomplete and reflects a particular perspective), the word mattered because it had a resonance that other terms lacked.

This tension between 'truth' and 'partiality' was also a theme in many of the interviews carried out as part of the follow-up evaluation of the ACP. The response of this Ardoyne victim's relative typifies the relativist understanding of 'truth' that predominated:

If you are going to have any deep healing you have to get some expression of truth even if it is only my truth. It doesn't have to be your truth. It doesn't have to be a shared truth. But before I can actually be healed I have to feel that somebody's heard my story and if they haven't heard my story then I'm not open to letting it go.

While far more critical of the outcome of the work of the ACP, unionist respondents viewed 'truth' in a similar light and also argued that 'partiality' was the point of 'truth-telling'. As the following unionist community activist argued:

There is a need for recognition that truth is a multi-faceted thing, highly subjective and needs to be recognized and accepted as such. Indeed the hope that a community may benefit from telling its story is based on the very fact that they got to tell it from their perspective.

However, what was also clear was the general desire of participants, as with members of the project, to use the term 'truth' when describing their testimonies. This appeared to be very much bound up with a sense of bearing witness and of challenging dominant readings of the past. For many respondents the term 'story-telling' seemed to imply that their testimony could be viewed in the same vein as a form of fiction, an uncomfortable level of hyper-relativism (Evans, 1997). Far from legitimating their experience of the past, the term 'story-telling' seemed to offer a new means of diminishing the validity of that experience. Truth, on the other hand, represented the basis upon which a claim for historical justice might be made, a recognition that such testimonies were an 'essential source of information', a means to open up previously silenced spaces of understanding and reassert a sense of agency (Jelin, 2003; Teitel, 2001). It is in this limited but instrumentally significant sense that the concept of truth takes on meaning in PAR community-based truth-telling processes.

## Conclusion: PAR, Participation and Partiality

The PAR approach adopted by the ACP was key to resolving a number of the methodological, ethical and political dilemmas that researchers encounter in researching violently divided societies. The article illustrated that insiders can gain access to key individuals, groups and sensitive information that is often off limits to 'outside' researchers. Because they are trusted, 'insiders' may be able to penetrate some of the most impregnable and impenetrable silences. The value of this type of work when researching violently divided societies lies in its ability to provide a potential avenue of articulation for often excluded and alienated voices; an important task for post-conflict transformation. However, the position of the 'insider' is also often more complex than is generally assumed and the nuances of interaction and access need to be understood in all their multi-layered manifestations. Such access and insight also comes at a cost and numerous caveats must be placed upon any claims to getting inside the 'truth' by such means. Indeed, the concept of truth itself has to be seen in a particular light. The value of maintaining its use lies largely in the way it validates popular knowledge. This is not only a key goal of PAR but can also be a psychologically and socially desirable end of research in a society emerging from conflict. Testimonial truth claims are also an important recognition that marginalized historical experiences, particularly in sites of conflict, often leave few other evidential traces than a witness's words. What emerged in the testimonies gathered by the ACP, and the interviews carried out in the follow-up research, was that many victims' relatives and others reflected a sensitive and nuanced understanding of the meaning of truth, and the purpose of saying it. While often understood as positional and multi-dimensional there also appeared to be a strong sense that speaking 'truth' mattered because it was a refutation of certain things that had definitely not happened, and an assertion of things that definitely had.

The model of research design and conduct offered by PAR practitioners raises important issues for the way in which sensitive research and truth-telling initiatives are undertaken in societies experiencing post-conflict transition. Perhaps most significant of all is the desire to place the 'subject' of the research at the centre of the decision-making process. In the same way, a victim-centred truth-telling mechanism should aim to place the bearer of testimony at its heart, not only as the narrator of past experiences, but as an active participant in the conduct of truth-telling itself. It may be in the reassertion of such agency, by making participation a key principle, that many of the ends of truth-telling might be met.

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