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Numbers to narratives: A journey through the epistemological landscape

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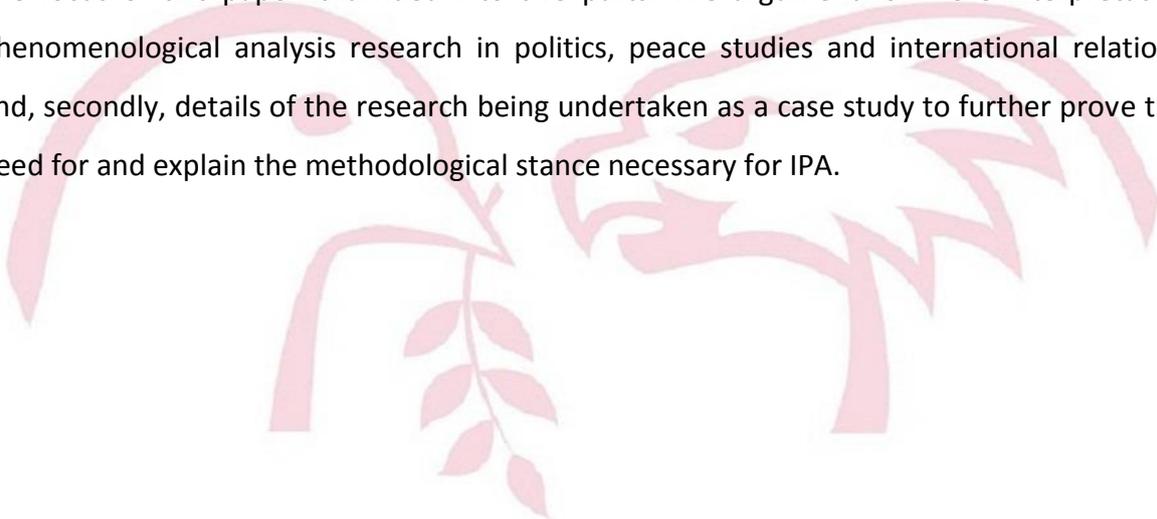
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Abstract

Conflicts ignite due to complex and contested motives; statistics tell us of the breadth of casualties and scope of cleavages, but they don't tell us why peace agreements breakdown. Statistics tell us a "how many story", which leaves out hidden answers and elaborate agendas. Qualitative analysis is in its ascendancy but which method suits the topic? Can bias really be bracketed; are researchers able to bracket off their own feelings and opinions?

This paper is an insight into the epistemological shift necessary to take when engaging in Interpretative phenomenological analysis, from now on described as IPA. It is also an acknowledgement of the flexible nature of statistics and how they can be used as a subjective tool in mixed method analysis.

The focus of this paper is divided into two parts: The argument for more interpretative phenomenological analysis research in politics, peace studies and international relations and, secondly, details of the research being undertaken as a case study to further prove the need for and explain the methodological stance necessary for IPA.



Introduction the numbers

Data collection and number crunching

According to sources there are as many as 396 on-going conflicts in the world today, including 18 wars and 25 limited wars. In addition to these wars there are over 40 highly violent conflicts and 165 crises involving violence: a bleak outlook for the globe to say the least. These figures suggest there are currently over 200 violent conflicts (Ellerbrock, et al, 2013). The United Nations defines "major wars" as military conflicts inflicting 1,000 battlefield deaths per year. the U.N are engaged in 15 peace keeping operations at present; not including major conflict areas such as Syria, where no unified military intervention has been agreed as yet (UN, Cartographic Section, 2012) Meanwhile The Uppsala conflict data base reports there are 32 armed conflict currently in the world, a reduction since last year, although battle deaths have augmented radically since 2011, primarily due to the Syrian crisis (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2013).

Some conflicts are considered to be continuous, with as few as 25 battle related deaths; (Kalyvas, 2010). For example Afghanistan is an existing military operation for the UK, although there have been less than 10 deaths this year (this is still a tragedy of course for the friends and families of these soldiers). (Ministry of Defence, 2013). The point is, a soldier killed in "the line of duty" is counted in official statistics. However, an attack killing 98 people can be excluded from conflict data bases if the state is involved in a peace agreement and the conflict is deemed formally over (Lederach & Lederach , 2010). There are also conflicts which cannot be accurately statically referenced, because perpetrators do not claim their victims, so the deaths are not included in any conflict data base but violence is tearing the countries apart; for example in Mexico and Columbia it is estimated there have been over 100,00 deaths in the 'drug wars'.

We may feel we are discerning regarding human tragedy but there is little consensus on the quantifiable aspects. This makes something very apparent, war/conflict/crisis, whatever you choose to call it, is present, but how present is debatable and this is before you take the feminist perspective into account i.e. what is peace? (But that is another topic). It can be suggested, if you cannot quantify conflict how can you begin to explain it?

Of the 32 conflicts cited in the Uppsala data base , only one these is interstate the rest are intrastate or civil wars; of the 136 civil wars fought since 1940, 74 aimed at gaining control of the state and 62 aimed at separation from the state (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2013 (a)).

It is suggested that many of these contemporary conflicts are identity conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2011) that is the hostilities are not predominantly about control of territory, (although territorial control is a factor). They are locked into a constant 'them' and 'us' state of affairs with little room for change. As out-group vs. in-group prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, stereotyping and intergroup conflict takes hold, it almost certainly leads to intractable conflict and violence (White, 2001; Bar-Tal, 2011).

Moving from global conflicts to a study of one

Calculating deaths and casualties is a worthwhile pursuit it, brings evidence of the amount of violence being perpetrated around the globe, it draws attention to problems and it allows us to make decisions on where and what to research. Though, again, we cannot be sure that these figures are completely accurate. They, like all estimates, are based on information left out and brought in, a human has interpreted the figures and chosen the data set. Being killed in a conflict on the wrong side of a cut-off point or turned into a 50% reduction boast excludes the veracity of conflict and alienates us from the reality, but that is the point; quantitative analysis cannot do justice to the study of conflict.

However, we may look at individual conflicts and see if there are transferable aspects within the individual interpretations of the conflict (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Explore meaning behind actions and bring some insight into the 'why', the 'who' and, ultimately, the 'what' of conflict.

A study of Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland a brief introduction:

History

The first English involvement in Ireland is reported to have begun as early as 1170 and struggles for control have wreaked bloody battles over the last 800 years, ultimately

culminating in a division into two separate entities: the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (Mulholland, 2002). This long history of conflict has created two separate national identities within Northern Ireland and has birthed a state with citizens embroiled in an identity conflict; (White, 2001; Bar-Tal, 2011).

The troubles

The troubles, 1968(9)-1998, were a 30 year period of intense political violence; over 40,000 people were injured and more than 3,600 people died, including 987 Catholic civilians and 538 Protestant civilians (Edwards A & McGrattan, 2012). There were terrible violations of human rights by all sides, usually with impunity: as you can imagine this had a devastating impact for all who live in Northern Ireland.

On the British mainland there were 125 deaths and casualties were chiefly civilian, comprised of young children and ordinary citizens as well as high ranking politicians, and members of the British royal family (Fay, et al, 1998).

The victims and their status are fluid and dependant on who is telling the story. It is suggested that everyone in Northern Ireland personally knows someone who died. Statistics can show a bloody and desperate picture, for example, Dillenburg et al (2006) discuss the tragedy of 7000 parents losing a child, ramping this up to 115,000 losing a close relative. Another oft quoted figure is the impact on society; two percent of the population of Northern Ireland died during the troubles, a figure that matches in percentages the number of deaths in the Vietnam War on the American side i.e. 100,000 deaths. These figures are used to explain the enormity of the effect this conflict had on the Northern Irish population but they don't explain why there are still sectarian flare ups (O'Leary & McGarry, 1996).

Official Peace

This conflict officially came to an end with an Irish Republican Army ceasefire in 1994 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998; 15 years ago. Since then there have been concerted efforts to bring about peace, with millions of pounds invested in community programs and government initiatives (OFMDFM, 2013).

However, in Belfast alone, there are still 1500 sectarian incidents per year: There are 99 'peace walls' in Northern Ireland dividing communities along sectarian lines, these are curving 40ft-high barriers dividing roads, communities and even public parks (Jarman, 2005). The need for reconciliation between the communities in Northern Ireland is obvious but what lies beneath the obvious violent flare ups and sectarian division?

Figures do tell us how much society was impacted, we can even quantify the cost (the EU do it all the time) but that doesn't really explain the true human cost or how to bring about lasting peace, how to avoid conflict resurgence.

Looking at readiness for reconciliation in Northern Ireland

Why reconciliation?

79% of conflicts that became active in the last 10 years were conflict relapses - occurrences of resurgent, armed violence in societies where conflict had been settled for at least a year (Sandole, 2013). It is suggested the major cause of this resurgence is that the conflicts were not truly settled, that there was no reconciliation. The need to discuss reconciliation has been on the political agenda for some time, the word reconciliation appearing in *A Shared Future* (2005) 15 times; *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (2009) four times and, most recently, published in May 2013; *Together: Building a United Community*, Reconciliation is mentioned 27 times (OFMDFM, 2005; 2009; 2013). So are the communities ready reconcile and what is reconciliation?

Troubled Narratives

Given that the conflict in Northern Ireland is complex it is unsurprising that there are many versions or narratives of events. For example the length of the conflict is highly contested; some claiming it began in 1969 others with the plantation of Ulster in the 17th century, whilst others cite the Norman invasion of 1170. Additionally, there is not even agreement between the opposing parties on who the 'other' actually is (White, 2001, Jarman, 2005).

It is argued that, for Protestants, the 'them' are Irish Catholics. They identify an Irish Protestant versus Irish Catholic problem and see this as a struggle within the auspices of a United Kingdom. However, for Republicans the conflict is about both social identity and role

identity; for them the other is the British state and its agents. For Republicans the social identity dimension of the conflict is not Irish Catholics versus Irish Protestants but Irish nationalists versus the British government and its agents in mainland UK and (Northern) Ireland (Mulholland, 2002; Edwards, & McCrattan, 2012).

As in other identity conflicts, both parties have deeply rooted narratives based on “victim and victimizer”. Each side feels the other has usurped their legitimate rights to express their national identity, therefore continued peace between the parties involved remains elusive. Bound up in these feelings and narratives is the inability of either side to successfully engage in reconciliation (Auerbach, 2009). It is, therefore, these narratives this research seeks to examine with a view to understanding the potential for reconciliation.

Qualitative research in political psychology

A post positive approach has been gaining ground since the 1950s and has become more prevalent in the in the 1990s; this asserts that the social world cannot be considered objectively due to its fluid and changing nature (Lawrence Neuman , 2005); and that realities are constructed through social interaction and thus need to be studied in the same manner. Qualitative data collection using semi structure interviews will enable us to explore and understand better the accepted wisdom and thinking behind attitudes in Northern Ireland. This echoes the opinions of Morrow, Robinson, & Dowds (2013) whom state this clearly when they assert:

“...monitoring statistics have provided much needed indicators on how the Northern Ireland public as a whole has perceived the situation on a year by year basis there has been limited analysis of the depth and richness of this dataset...” (Morrow, et al; 2013 p5).

Referring to The Life and Times Survey (NILT) and its predecessor the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) survey they go on to explain that the trends observed from the complex longitudinal data set, with an enviable continuous sequence of twenty years of polling and analysis, is still in need of further analysis. It is suggested that the data is exploited by further study, looking for richness and depth. Qualitative data produces rich data and linked to statistical information such as the above it is evident mixed methods studies have their place in monitoring peace.

IPA a very brief introduction

Interpretative

Husserl an early supporter of qualitative research but an advocate of thematic analysis, confessed scientists exist in their ivory towers, having abstract theories as opposed to the concrete lived experience; he suggested that a researcher can adopt a 'natural attitude'. He proposed that you may bracket and, in essence, can transcend the individual experience and biases of your own experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Conversely Heidegger said bracketing is impossible; we cannot step outside ourselves into an objective realm, Heidegger's method is existential. Heidegger stresses we are always getting a story one step removed (even in numerical data collection as explained above); IPA though is honest about this and takes each account as a unique idiographic description that has been interpreted by the story teller. Our data is this unique interpretation. It is a participant's interpretation of events and phenomenon.

Idiographic

IPA is idiographic; it focuses on the uniqueness of the context, the time and place. Instead of measuring behaviours or events, we listen to participant's accounts, treating the participants as experts. Therefore; this research is looking at the participant's expert knowledge on what reconciliation means to them within their community. We ask about their own experience; for example, "what is your experience of people's feelings about reconciliation?"

Phenomenon

This is the P then, the concrete phenomenon. This research seeks to unpick a confused and disputed concept: reconciliation and particularly what this means in Northern Ireland. Thus, the phenomenon being studied is something necessitates further exploration in order to find meaning in it, so that we can make sense of what it is.

Analysis:

First analysing each account entirely separately looking for themes that arise within each account, when, you move onto the next again you look at it entirely separately, (as far as

this is possible). It is not until you have analysed all accounts separately that you then look across accounts looking for transference, but with IPA nothing is left out- one theme within one individual account is important; it could be that vital missing link. IPA provides us with data that can often be left out with other forms of analysis; its social constructivist ideology allows research to be truly participant led and can thus get into hard to reach areas producing novel ideas.

Reconciliation

We all have psychological baggage or foreknowledge; this is called resistance in IPA. We all have resistance until we have worked through our understanding. In IPA this understanding is called fore-understanding, this understanding comes from "narrative frameworks" i.e. to understand what something is we need to know where something has come from, we need to know the back story to understand events and this ties neatly into reconciliation and the reconciliation pyramid.

As I have mentioned, Reconciliation (somewhat ironically) is a contested and difficult concept, there are academic, personal and religious meanings to what reconciliation is, it holds facets of strength and facets of weakness; it is this woolly and blurred concept that this research seeks to explore. Hamber(2009) suggests reconciliation is a process, which involves building relationships and finding ways to come to terms with the past, by acknowledging, remembering and agreeing on the truth of that past, with a view to a shared future (Hamber, 2009). This connects with the latest strategy on community relations in NI.

It can be argued that reconciliation may be over ambitious where there are no past positive relationships, as in Northern Ireland, particularly when many numbers of years have passed and responsibility has been outsourced to previous generations (Lederach & Lederach, 2010). However, to begin to reconcile; Lederach suggests that the current generation needs to be able to give voice to their ancestral grievances, to address the transgenerational traumatic residue and that the truths in all their versions needs to be acknowledged. This story telling requires an approach of acceptance and trust which is a long and arduous process. Groups will need to go through 'cold' steps of narrative acquaintance and

acknowledgement, before reaching the 'warm' steps at the apex: Empathy, apology and, ultimately, narrative incorporation (Auerbach, 2009). Is this what is really needed in Northern Ireland? This research seeks to ask at least a small population of opinion formers what they think to investigate whether what they say correlates with what academics suggest. Auerbach's reconciliation pyramid will be used as means to guide the questions and see if it is a useful tool in measuring readiness for reconciliation; where are the opinion formers located? Or where do they think their communities are located?

Narrative acquaintance;

Narrative acknowledgement;

Expressing empathy;

Readiness for restitution

Assumption of responsibility;

Asking for and granting forgiveness

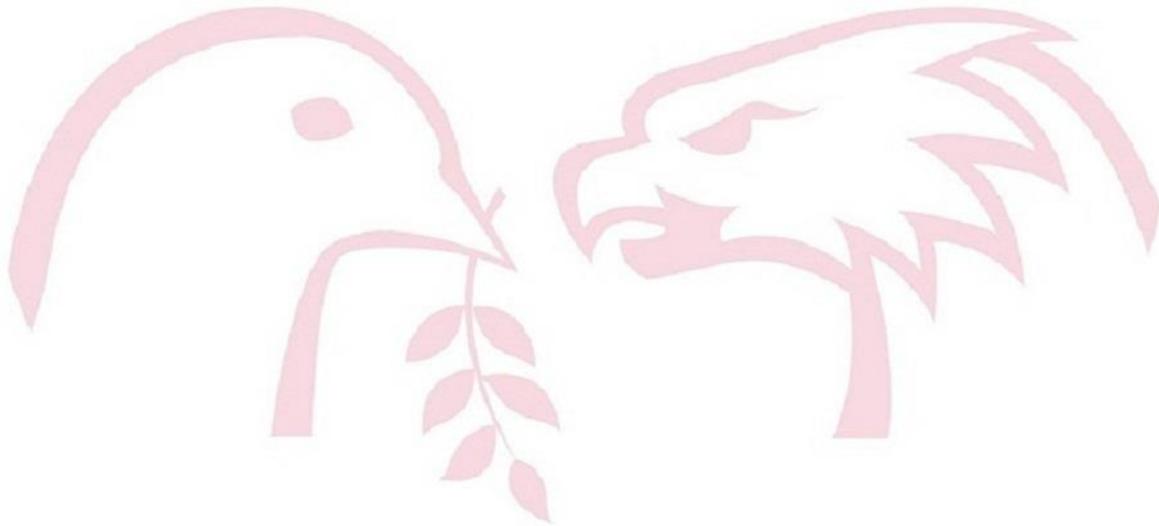
Narrative incorporation

Or if there is no readiness, does the OFMDFM need to go back to the drawing board?

Conclusion

In closing, it is essential to understand that the researcher places great value on statically investigated research and that this enquiry seeks to build upon numerical studies completed in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, this paper advocates for a duality between the participants rationale of reconciliation; based on intersubjective experience and previous studies on the phenomenon of reconciliation. It is asserted that a phenomenological methodology is the most suitable approach to addressing this research question, for example, interpretivism which, according to Crotty (1998), includes the consideration of historically situated responses to social world problems: this research is grounded in contested histories. This approach will enable the participants to explain how much they know of and how they feel about the other side's narrative. This participant led approach is

imperative in determining where the communities may lie on the reconciliation pyramid and can give us a clear idea of the societies' readiness for reconciliation, or at least obstacles to it. Also, as a phenomenological approach is concerned with the lived experiences of participants, and allows the research to tell the story from the participants' view; the participants will determine the terms of the research and guide the researcher through the stages, leading to a greater understanding of what reconciliation is. A larger scale study, of at least 200 participants, using logistic regression will enable us to identify how much of this new knowledge is transferable to the wider population. Mixing our methods in this dovetailed manner will ensure we have both strength numbers and richness of data. This method of inquiry will enable us, as researchers in War and Peace to transfer knowledge from conflict to conflict, to peace and, ultimately, reconciliation.



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