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"It's a Very Emotional Kind of Thought". An Appraisal of Five Community Workers' Accounts of their Involvement during the Troubles in Northern Ireland

By Joana Etchart

Abstract: The conflict in Northern Ireland started in the 1960s and rapidly deteriorated between 1968 and 1971. As violence escalated, various forms of community activism developed at grassroots level with the overall aim of improving living conditions locally. The role of nonviolent community workers in fulfilling a range of key purposes was crucial. Given that they experienced a truly "close encounter" with conflict and its local ramifications, this paper will analyse how they refer to their "involvement" in personal accounts and, particularly, which links the interviewees establish between the events – "what was taking place" – and their decision to "do something". Based on the assumption that emotions serve as a means to establish a connection between oneself and the historical event, the paper will analyse how this link is construed by focusing on the feeling of fear (Bourke, *Fear and Anxiety*). Eventually, on the basis of Bede Scott's contribution on affective disorders (Scott, *Affective Disorders*), the paper will seek to identify what emotional patterns may be drawn from the sample interviews. Overall, by relying on theoretical contributions made by specialists in the history of emotions and oral history, this article will also seek to identify means by which subjective accounts of contested events may be used a source of historical knowledge.

Keywords: *Northern Ireland*, *conflict*, *community workers*, *history of emotions*, *oral history*

As in most conflict situations, the Northern Ireland conflict is composed of events that took place, as well as various – often contested – accounts of what took place. Numerous interpretations have been given on the nature, origins and causes of the conflict from the outset (Boyd, *Holy War in Belfast*; De Paor, *Divided Ulster*; Cameron, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*; Scarman, *The Scarman Report*; and Trevor-Roper, *Why Ulster Fights?*). During the conflict, two major trends of explanation were identified, one internal, and the other external (McGarry & O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*). The internal interpretation focused on the religious, cultural and political divisions between nationalists and unionists whereas the external one considered that the factors which contributed to the aggravation of the conflict were either economic, or related to international events and movements, or concerned with decisions made by national governments.

Since the transition to a post-conflict situation from 1998 onwards, there have been various attempts at finding mechanisms to "deal with the past". The 2014 Stormont House Agreement constituted a breakthrough, yet the need for

effective investigations into the deaths of the Troubles has not been properly addressed and various key aspects still remain pending (Bryson, *Victims, violence, and voice*; Bryson and others, *Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past*; Hamber & Kelly, *Practice, Power and Inertia*; and McEvoy, *The Legacy of the Troubles and the Law*). Accordingly, accounts of past episodes are given in that context of fundamental disagreement as to how to interpret the Troubles.

Arguably, such a context creates a specific type of reserve – shall we say a suspicion – in regard to what is sometimes perceived by historians as partial accounting. Yet, specialists in oral history have long proven that so-called subjective accounts and recollections constitute an important resource for the historian, provided that a scientific framework is elaborated that permits to use them as archival sources (Portelli, *The Peculiarities of Oral History*). In Northern Ireland, Anna Bryson conducted an oral history project on the memories of 1945-1969 in the town of Maghera in which she developed an interesting reflection on the subjectivity of the people interviewed. For example, she acknowledges that there are "shadings, contradictions, and tensions within each testimony" (Bryson, "*Whatever You Say, Say Nothing"*: 45). In line with this, this article posits that personal accounts may be taken into consideration in the historical analysis even when they are subjective or, shall we say, because they are so. The focus will be on feelings, emotions and affective experiences – the various labels will be used interchangeable– in line with recent works on the history of emotions (Boddice, *The History of Emotions*; Boddice, *A History of Feelings*).

As a starting-point, following Joanna Bourke's consideration that fear stands as "one of the most influential emotions in history" (Bourke, *Fear and Anxiety*: 111), the article aims to examine whether and how fear is displayed, particularly the fear of dying, and what other affective experiences are recalled by the interviewees when confronted with a situation of extreme danger. Besides, it also looks at the emotions which remain unidentified, even though they are perceptible during the interview, for example when the pace or the voice are altered.

But, before proceeding any further, the scientific approach must be clarified: the author does not seek to act as an analyst of the emotions of each interviewee. She does not intend to provide an explanation of the participant's emotional state. What this article seeks to do is to adopt a wider perspective. In order to do so, it relies on the ground-breaking work of oral historian Alessandro Portelli who studied the recollections of the event of the Fosse Ardeatine in Italy in 1944. Portelli contended that the historical event he studied had a double entry point as "both an event that actually happened and one that

is intensely remembered and conflictually narrated" (Portelli, *The Order has been Carried out:* 15). The Italian example applies to Northern Ireland, where the conflict is a ground of intense remembrance, but also of intense contestation of remembrance. Thus, the person who gives an account is also intervening in the contextual debate on the interpretation of the past.[1]

Moreover, when seeking to appraise emotions in history, Jan Plamper developed the notion of a "temporal difference between the experience of an emotion and its memory" (Plamper, *The History of Emotions*: 290). In other words, the emotional recollection may be posited both as historical – how one felt when the events took place – and contemporary – how one feels when telling about it. This ambivalence constitutes the basis of the analytical approach adopted in this article. Firstly, we wish to identify the events that affected the interviewees and that mattered in their decision to become involved in various forms of community work. But, in addition, the article seeks to establish whether the affective experience that is recalled is part of a wider pattern. The framework for this interpretative grid – which is largely under construction – is influenced notably by the work of Bede Scott on affective disorders in colonial and post-colonial literary texts (Scott, *Affective Disorders*). He explained:

> Rather than understanding emotion as necessarily subjective or individualized, then, I shall regard it here as a relational practice that may be socially or even politically determined. Or to put it another way, I will argue that literary representations of emotion need not be interpreted solely at the level of character, individual psychology, or the contingencies of plotting, but could also be related to wider historical processes. This shift in emphasis acknowledges the intersubjective quality of such emotional responses and, in so doing, challenges some of the boundaries that have traditionally insulated the individual from the collective, the psychological from the social. (7)

The "shift in emphasis" developed by Scott provides a sketchy yet promising framework to analyse interviews, by promising to study how the personal is "related to wider historical processes". The leading question concerns the affective signs that are perceptible in the testimonies under scrutiny: are they part of an "intersubjective" pattern? If so, the feeling might mean that the person is being infiltrated by more global historical events, by political decisions, or by social developments. When that occurs, Scott identifies that there is an "affective disorder" (10-16) of historical importance, which must be fully identified and then integrated into the historical account. This opens a very promising field of research into the various affective disjunctures of a historical nature that are perceptible in the oral testimonies of the Troubles in

Northern Ireland. The scope of the research being extremely ambitious, as a starting point, this article offers to look into the experiences of five key community workers who were involved in nonviolent initiatives locally during the three decades of the Troubles from the 1970s to the 1990s.

The emotional encounters with conflict

This article analyses accounts of community workers who practised nonviolent forms of activism such as community development and community relations during the Troubles in Northern Ireland (Etchart, *Community Development*), when such activities were thriving. For example in 1974, there were approximately a hundred local community groups in Belfast alone (Fortnight Magazine, *Belfast Community Groups*: 1), and about 500 in Northern Ireland in 1975. This means that there was on average one community group for 3000 people (Griffiths, *Paramilitary Groups*: 194). But why focus on nonviolent community workers?

When one looks into the history of public policies supporting community groups and voluntary work during the Troubles, several key figures stand out for a variety of common features: firstly, they got involved locally in various forms of nonviolent community activism such as trade unions, women's groups, tenants' groups and facilitation, and, secondly, they did so incessantly throughout the Troubles. The role of community workers in fulfilling a range of key purposes during extremely difficult times has been documented by authors such as McCready, who shed light on the value of community development (*Empowering People*).

Moreover, in the 2000s, Michael Hall published the transcripts of interviews with community leaders in a series of booklets where he sought to define who these people were: "A list comprising not only those individuals who had never deviated from the peaceful pursuit of bridge-building between our estranged communities, but also former combatants who subsequently became involved in community work when the self-defeating nature of violence became ever more apparent to them" (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*: 1). This article is rooted in the definition provided by Hall in order to contend that these people constitute a coherent group of nonviolent community leaders. What brings them together is their activism in a variety of local development initiatives during the Troubles and, consequently, their experience of activism during the conflict. In that regard, they represent an interesting, original entry point into the history of the Troubles.

Besides, as explained by Hall, some figures of nonviolent community activism were former combatants who had experienced paramilitarism themselves, and had concluded that this approach failed to improve local living conditions. Overall, community activism was practised within communities where coercive and violent actions were also promoted by local paramilitary leaders and activists.[2] The two served antagonistic aims, yet they were concomitant and community workers sometimes acted as liaising agents. For example, some of the fieldworkers employed by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission (NICRC, 1969-1975), the Community Development Officers (CDOs), had contacts with local paramilitary leaders as part of their liaising task and of the overall inclusive policy adopted by the leaders of the said Commission (Griffiths, *Paramilitary Groups*), even though they disagreed with paramilitary agendas (Etchart, *Les premières politiques de réconciliation*). This constituted one "encounter" with conflict, among many others.

In order to analyse how nonviolent community workers refer to their involvement and to their experience of the conflict, this article is concerned with the empirical analysis of five testimonies given by May Blood, "Joe" Joseph Camplisson, "Kate" Kathleen Kelly, Father Des Wilson and Joanna McMinn, who all have in common a commitment to improving local conditions during the three decades of the Troubles from the 1970s to the 1990s.[3] May Blood was a trade union activist in the local mill where she was employed (Blackstaff Linen Mill). She also contributed to setting up a residents' association in her neighbourhood in the 1970s (Springmartin, Belfast). She then worked for the Greater Shankill Partnership and became involved in the Women's Coalition.[4]

Joe Camplisson worked as a CDO for the NICRC and, as such, guided local people in various community initiatives. He also acted as a facilitator in liaising with local paramilitary leaders. He continued in the Community Development Centre (CDC) up until the late 1970s.[5] Kate Kelly also worked as a CDO and she helped set up various community initiatives, especially with women. In the 1980s her activity became her full-time job through the funding available under the Belfast Action Team scheme. She later worked for the Department of Health and Social Services as an expert in community development. Father Des Wilson was a priest in the Ballymurphy area of Belfast. He helped people set up community projects of various sorts, including community centres such as the Springhill Community House. He also helped establish the Conway Mill Education Project. Joanna McMinn worked in the field of adult education with the Workers' Education Association and then the Open University. She helped

set up various women's projects to improve women's education, health and welfare rights.

Traces of their work may be found in the reports of some community groups, in books and pamphlets (Blood, *Watch my Lips*; Wilson, *An End to Silence*; Wilson, *We didn't Take "No" for an Answer*; and Wilson & Sheehy, *A Diary of Thirty Days)*. But the main source of information is the interview. Joe Camplisson was interviewed by the author on a variety of occasions between 2005 and 2010. His testimony was also published by Michael Hall, so was May Blood's (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*). This article also relies on interviews conducted by the local community media centre Northern Visions TV (NVTV) as part of the "Our Generation Archive project". The interviews were conducted and broadcast between 2009 and 2011.

Interestingly, in the introduction to the series of pamphlets, Michael Hall acknowledged that the community workers he interviewed were hesitant to speak at first. He identified two sorts of "anxieties":

> All the interviewees were initially reluctant to reminisce about their experiences, concerned that such personal accounts might read as self-promotion. I endeavoured to assure them of the wider benefit in sharing their successes and their failures. Some reminded me that personal accounts were inevitably highly subjective, and that others might have different recollections of the same periods in our history. Nevertheless, despite such anxieties, they all agreed to be interviewed. (Hall, *Introduction)*

Generally speaking, community workers tend to adopt a modest position, and they avoid talking about the personal. But some of them might also be reluctant to share an account that they consider "highly subjective". This reserve indicates that they are aware of the context of fundamental disagreement as to how to interpret the past. Precisely, this might represent a major scientific challenge: how may such subjective accounts become an integral part of the history of the events they describe?

Examining the meanings of fear

Several historical episodes resurface in conjunction with a personal – or an emotional – reference to the notion of fear. Yet, the following examples show that the meaning of fear is variable. As a case in point, in the NVTV interview conducted in 2009, May Blood recalls an episode during the Troubles where fear predominated in the neighbourhood where she used to live with her family (near Rodent Street in West Belfast). May Blood is a Protestant and she used to

live in a mixed neighbourhood. She describes the moment when they were forced to move out of their family home in 1971. This is how the events unfolded:

> We were actually burnt out of our home by Protestants. They came one night to put the neighbours next door out. My dad came out and said to them "catch yourselves on, this woman's not doing any harm." There was a great fear in the community at that time because people were disappearing. You went to bed and when you got up the next morning there was another two neighbours gone, nobody ever knew where they went. And the fear was, that they were taking all of the Catholics and then they were going to come and shoot all the Protestants. […] Luckily my mum and dad were on holiday in Newcastle. They lit the bonfire right up against our house and all the ceilings came down and every window in the house was broken. It was a definite message. We decided we had to move. (Blood, *NVTV Interview*: 21:20-25:00)

Roden Street used to be a mixed neighbourhood with Protestants and Catholics living next door to each other. This episode describes intense intimidation by people coming at night and highlights the fact that the two communities were at risk, that it was the mixed nature of the place that was being targeted. Such forced movements of population occurred sporadically in various parts of the city of Belfast during some of the extremely violent episodes that took place between 1968 and 1971 (Cameron, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*; Prince & Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt*; and Walsh, *From Hope to Hatred*). Rodent Street is mentioned especially in the context of the "Flight", which was a brief yet intense episode of population movement that took place in August 1971, in the aftermath of the introduction of internment on August 9th. Internment without trial was a special measure, introduced by the regional unionist government in Stormont with the approval of the British government, allowing the police force – the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) – and the British Army to arrest people suspected of belonging to paramilitary groups and to detain them in internment camps. This targeted essentially suspected republican paramilitaries of the PIRA (Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles*; McCleery, *Operation Demetrius*).

Police officers and British Army soldiers raided houses and made arrests *en masse*, which contributed to increasing tensions locally and, combined with various other factors, triggered population movements. According to a report issued soon after by the NICRC Research Unit (*Flight*), hundreds of Catholic and Protestant families were forced to leave their homes in chaotic conditions. This led to extreme poverty as people generally left with little to no belongings to seek shelter elsewhere. It affected both Protestants and Catholics, as

indicated in the report: "of the total number of movements 40% were Protestant while 60% were Catholic" (*Flight*). May Blood's account sheds light on extreme levels of destitution. She explains that they "ended up squatting in Springmartin – that was the only way we could get rehoused" (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*: 5). In the interview conducted in 2010 by the NVTV, Kate Kelly also refers to an episode, in which she got involved in an ad hoc relief committee to try and help the people who had been forced out of their homes and were now homeless (Kelly, *NVTV Interview*: 17:26).

Interestingly, the fear of dying as described by Blood in her account is experienced at the level of the community ("great fear in the community at that time"). There is a double entry into the risk of dying: the personal risk of being shot or of dying in a fire in your house, and the global danger of vanishing as a community of mixed identities. This shows the importance for her of having grown up in a mixed neighbourhood in the 1950s, and of having experienced the destruction of such a community.

This also surfaces in the testimony provided by Father Des Wilson who grew up in Ormeau Road in Belfast, where Catholics and Protestants were "good neighbours" (Wilson, *NVTV Interview*: 01:30):

> I was very fortunate, I grew up on the south side of Belfast in the Ormeau Road area. And it was a very mixed area. We had a man living near us who was a tremendous preacher, he was one of the old Huguenot stock, Professor [Douglas] Savory and he was working at Queens, he was a Professor of French. He used to go out every weekend or so, preaching against the Catholic Church [laughter] which is an interesting kind of neighbour to have. But the district was very, very mixed indeed. Because two doors from him there was another family, one of whose members was put in prison for six months for wearing an Easter Lily for the republicans. So how much more mixed can you get? [laughter] So I was very fortunate in that way. (01:15 – 02:23)

Des Wilson insists on the "very, very" mixed nature of the area as regards religious identities and political aspirations – the Easter Lily is a symbol that is worn to commemorate the republican/nationalist struggle in Ireland during the revolutionary period and the War of Independence (1912-1922). Incidentally, although that aspect is not made explicit by the interviewee, the families also belonged to different social classes, one neighbour being a University Professor and Des Wilson's own family being of modest origins (01:10). He describes the extreme differences between them with a touch of irony, which indicates that no sense of danger emanated from living in close proximity to each other. He even feels "very fortunate", which shows that he appreciated the diversity.

This is quite typical of people who grew up in the 1950s.[6] May Blood also says that the situation deteriorated notably during the intense rioting of the late 1960s (Cameron, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*; Scarman, *The Scarman Report*) and during the episode of the Flight, which, according to her, put a "strain in relationships with Catholics". But there was an "underlying feeling that we were friends", especially in the local mill where she worked and where she got involved as a trade unionist (Blood, *A History of Feelings*: 18:00 – 20:00). Interestingly, the strain is presented as circumstantial, but the feeling of friendship is perceived as deeper. This analysis is quite common among community workers belonging to the generation who had grown up in mixed neighbourhoods. This came to an end in the early years of the Troubles as a result of "fear in the community", as described by May Blood. In her case, this was induced by members of the Protestant community – which she also regards as her community Farset Community Think Tanks Project, *Grassroots Leadership (1), Recollections by May Blood and Joe Camplisson*. She was not afraid of what people from the other community might do to her, but of what members of her own community were capable of doing. Her recollections also indicate that what used to be safe – the family home, the street, one's community – suddenly became dangerous.

Sensing danger: **when violence and fear penetrate into homely sets**

When Father Des Wilson became a priest in the late 1960s, he was appointed to the area of Ballymurphy in West Belfast. He describes the destitution and extreme levels of poverty in the area. In his account, the streets became a very dangerous place: "In the early 1970s when terrible things were happening, people simply couldn't be sure when they left their house in the morning that they'd come back in the evening." (Wilson, *NVTV Interview*: 13:05). He refers to "shootings", as people were "being shot" in the streets (13:30).

Highly intense episodes took place in the early 1970s and, as mentioned previously, in the days that followed the introduction of internment and the intrusion of police and army officers in homes. In the neighbourhood of Ballymurphy specifically, a dramatic episode took place between August 9th and 11th. As explained by investigative journalist Ian Cobain (*Ballymurphy Shootings*), who looked into the "Ballymurphy Shootings", soldiers from the British Army took over a local community centre and used it as a base. The next 36 hours were chaotic: the soldiers raided the homes of suspected members of the IRA and shot people on the streets. The events left ten people dead, one of whom was a priest, Father Hugh Mullan. Fifty years later, in May 2021, the Lord Chief Justice's Office in the Royal Courts of Justice in Belfast stated that

the ten victims were innocent, that the use of force against them was not justified, and that no measures were taken to protect civilians (Judicial Communications Office, *Summary of Findings*). That it took fifty years to properly investigate the shootings and publish the findings testifies to the immense difficulty of "dealing with the past". Although an initial investigation into the deaths was conducted in 1972, it was deemed unsatisfactory and the account of the events became intensely contested during and after the Troubles until 2018, when the new investigation into the shootings began. The soldiers argued that some people were armed and that they belonged to the PIRA (Cobain, *Ballymurphy Shootings*). But the relatives of the ten victims incessantly claimed that they were innocent civilians. The political and historical stakes of such disagreements are obviously high, and this episode constitutes one example of the numerous unresolved cases of the past in Northern Ireland, which accordingly remain "highly subjective", and constitute historical "anxieties" per se (Bourke, *Remembering War*).

Des Wilson's account testifies to the tense atmosphere that prevailed in the streets of Ballymurphy and also to the fact that civilians were targeted. At one moment, he recalls a traumatic episode when, after providing assistance to a local family whose son had been shot by military fire, he left to go home: "As I was going out of the house, I suddenly became conscious of the fact that there was a number of women who had formed themselves around me, and they never said a word! When I think about it today… it's [pause] it's a very emotional kind of thought you know." He then goes on: "We moved out to the main road. You could hear people shouting away." And he remembers thinking: "My God, they'd have done that for any cleric, any person" (Wilson, *NVTV Interview*: 13:00 – 15:30). The tension is palpable in his account when he remembers people shouting – that is a very precise sound which testifies to a high sense of alertness. The precision of some aspects of the moment represents the tension generated by the possibility of dying, given that he felt he had become a target too. Is this why the recollection is such "an emotional thought", as he puts it? He is also possibly impressed with the spontaneous, brave attitude of women who shielded him from bullets. But, arguably, the "very emotional kind of thought" might also be a contemporary emotion generated *during* the interview, as he remembers not only the events, but also his own position in it. This stands as a case in point of the dual meaning of a feeling as both a past experience and a contemporary comment.

The account given by Wilson of the transformation of a safe place into a dangerous one also concerned rural settings, as shown by Joanna McMinn's oral testimony given in 2011. McMinn was born in England and moved to

Northern Ireland in 1974. She lived in the Glens of Antrim, which was considered "a safer place to be, to be out of Belfast" (McMinn, *NVTV Interview*: 07:20).

> Even there you were very aware of the things happening, you know, just the patrols […] one of things I remember is the presence of the UDR [Ulster Defence Regiment 1970-1992] and how our Catholic neighbours would tell us that they could be stopped by somebody who knew them, but asked them who they were and where they were going from [sic] and where they were coming from […]. I was so conscious of the actual hurt of it to people, to be treated like that by people who knew you. (07:20 – 08:00)

This account describes the intrusive nature of Army patrols "even there", that is to say in the countryside, and the very special feature of the UDR as a locally recruited regiment of the British Army, who employed local people (mainly Protestants). She describes her awareness of the "hurt" to "people", who in this case were Catholics. She did not experience the hurt personally, as she was not a Catholic, but she nonetheless knew that this represented a humiliating experience. This hints at the intersubjective quality of the feeling of humiliation that possibly circulated from one person to another, in this case from those who experienced it to those, like McMinn, who knew about it.

When asked by the interviewer if she was frightened, she says she felt safe given that she was considered an "outsider". However, she recalls one episode when she did feel frightened. It concerns the death of John Turnly, who was from a traditionally unionist family. Yet, in the 1970s, he joined the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and then set out to create the new Irish Independence Party (Connla, *John Turnly Remembered*). McMinn recalls:

> At one time my husband had been involved supporting somebody who was standing for election, John Turnly [founder of nationalist Irish Independence Party, shot dead in 1980 by loyalist paramilitaries]. And then he was murdered, he was shot dead by the UVF, I think,[7] in Carnlough and his wife had been driving him somewhere and wasn't aware that somebody, you know, was following them and so on. And after that I was frightened. My husband had had a close association with him. Now people who knew said, you know, you actually have nothing to fear. We'd lived for seven years without a lock on our door, and, we got a lock on the door, and a dog and, you know. (McMinn, *NVTV Interview*: 08:10 – 09:25)

McMinn suggests that Turnly was assassinated because he was a Protestant nationalist, and was thus perceived as a traitor by members of the

Protestant/unionist community. That loyalist paramilitary leaders locally perceived Turnly's nationalist activism as deviant represents one facet of the intimidation exerted on the community in general, pressing people to conform to what was seen as one's community's accepted identity. The fear of being deemed disloyal was also conducive to keeping one's head down, as described by May Blood: "For many people it eventually became a matter of: just go to work, come home, keep your head down and don't go creating any problems for yourself out there" (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*: 5).

Besides, McMinn's account of Turnly's assassination shows that the conflict came close to her at that moment as she now believed that her husband had become exposed as a target too. A close examination of the oral performance indicates that her pace and phrasing become extremely allusive – there are a series of suspended endings and recurrent use of "you know". When violence, and murder, become a possibility, a specific type of fear – a sense of alertness – is induced, as when McMinn refers to Turnly's wife not being "aware that somebody, you know, was following them and so on", and when she says that they eventually "got a lock on the door, and a dog and, you know". The pace and the allusive tone show that McMinn and her husband were aware of possible security threats to their lives on an everyday basis, and in their own homes. This is an interesting example of the phenomenon of infiltration of a historical, political and social transformation – that their lives are now at risk – into the personal account. The kind of fear that invades the homely sphere constitutes an important affective disorder. Further analyses would be required to fully grasp the extent of the phenomenon – how intersubjective is it? – and to identify the various meanings of that specific kind of fear.

In addition, the allusive tone that surfaces through the oral quality of the document indicates that many things are left unsaid, notably about "people who knew", that is to say, people who knew of paramilitary activities and agendas. This reveals an interesting facet of the experience of the conflict, that of encounters with paramilitarism. Indeed, on some occasions, community activists such as Joe Camplisson acted as local facilitators. This began as part of the community relations programme devised by the NICRC and was later pursued by a number of local community groups (Etchart, *Community Development*; Etchart, *Path Dependency*). Joe Camplisson began to work with paramilitary leaders such as Andy Tyrie (UDA) from 1970 onwards. He explains: "We [Andy and I] had an understanding that I could only work with people who were not dealing with weapons, but those who were doing something on the social front. I felt that this trust being placed in me, coming from a Catholic background, was amazing" (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*: 23).

The relationship-building experience felt, as he says, "amazing", which is indicative of the importance given to this type of work. This also consisted in trying to develop an analytical discourse among paramilitary leaders. Ideally, this would lead them to acknowledge the failure of paramilitarism (23-26). Of course, the objectives of the community worker and the paramilitary leader were antagonistic: the former aimed to develop peaceful forms of activism, the latter to gain community support for violent actions through their involvement in the "social front". Despite the difficulties inherent to such unconventional work, it nonetheless developed in the 1970s (Etchart, *Les premières politiques de réconciliation*).[8] More generally, though, Camplisson's account of his encounter with Andy Tyrie also suggests that the experience of fear was extremely paradoxical for the nonviolent community workers.

The links between fear and agency

Although in her analysis of the affective experience of fear Bourke explains that this may reinforce subordination, she also insists that it may adversely "unravel" subordination and lead a person to act against it (Bourke, *Fear and Anxiety*: 125). This is extremely relevant in the case of the testimonies under scrutiny. For example, the terrible episode of the flight of May Blood's family gives way to a description of how she "almost" instantly got involved in a community project, the Springmartin Residents Association, in order to improve the living conditions in the neighbourhood:

> Almost immediately on moving into Springmartin, I got involved in voluntary community work. I got a group of women together plus one man who was included because he was good at writing letters. We began to say, this is what we want in our estate. We pay the same rent as everybody else and therefore we are entitled to the same things. (Blood, *NVTV Interview*, 22:00)

The street, we are told, was "a dump" as a result of the events of the previous days. Blood explains that the group was mainly made up of women, even though the social environment locally was rather hostile to women being active in the group. In her account, there are allusive references to local paramilitaries who intimidated them and even led them to disband the group. Blood adds that "women were taking risks": "all the men were drinking in the local pubs and the women were fighting – in the Association – it was not easy" (22:00 – 27:00). This describes the conservative expectation of "all the men" that their wives' role was in the private place of the home, not as an activist in an association.

Blood also refers to a form of "hesitancy to get involved by Protestant women who were married to paramilitaries" (28:30), which shows the extent to which paramilitarism had infiltrated the home and the personal.[9] The experience of fear and of activism are associated in Blood's account when she refers to the fact that she was free ("I was free", 29:00) despite the hostile environment as regards women's activism. Besides, the various episodes and developments of the 1968-1971 period, notably her family's flight in 1971, created in her a "desire" as she says, to become actively involved locally: "And I suppose from all this involvement the desire grew in me to help people" (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*: 4).

This, we argue, may take place when fear becomes "experiential", in line with what former member of the South African African National Congress and former Justice Albie Sachs described as "experiential truth". According to him, among other types of truths, experiential truth means "deriving from lived experience certain conclusions about life, about existence" (Sachs, *The South African Truth Commission*: 35). Regarding May Blood, the knowledge gathered from her experience of the conflict and from "all this involvement" led her to construct this notion of "desire" to help people. Somehow, fearful episodes reinforced her sense of capacity. Drawing from her experience as a trade unionist in the local mill, she knew that she could contribute to improving people's lives. Father Des Wilson also refers to this when he concludes that after many tragic moments he "learned tragically" (Wilson, *NVTV Interview*: 16:35).

This experiential truth also surfaces as the experience of a contradiction. For example, interviewees often describe a moment when they felt disconnected from their environment. May Blood says:

> When the whole Civil Rights thing fell apart and we went down the road of the Troubles, for a long time I felt confused, I felt lost, I didn't fit into this world around me. Even in later years that's the way I have often felt: that somehow or other I don't fit into all this. Not that I'm not British, not that I'm not a Protestant, for I'm a very loyal Protestant and my faith is very important to me, but all that was happening around me seemed to have little to do with my Britishness or my Protestantism. All of a sudden we were supposed to wave a flag to prove we were loyal? I don't believe you have to put a flag outside your window to prove you're loyal, I just don't believe that. (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership 1*: 6).

She describes that she felt a disjuncture between what she feels, her beliefs and the "world" around her. Interestingly, in the accounts, the experience of a contradiction often contributes to getting involved in community action and, more specifically, in *networking*. The testimonies are invariably interspersed

with accounts of getting in touch with someone, of ringing someone, of getting phone calls, and so on. There are many little signs indicating an intense networking activity. For example, Kate Kelly explains how she – and three other community workers – became involved with Women's Information Groups in the early 1980s:

> We all had contact in different ways and then gradually our discussion focused on – in those days women, first of all, they hadn't the good conditions, the good living conditions they have now, I mean they were beginning to have it, […] but women were emerging to provide support for children, mostly that was it, it was mothers and toddlers' groups, that is where that began. So we became aware of all of that, and each of us had different information, and similar information as well, about what was going on. So we gradually came to a point where we thought we should ask, without any kind of [pause] what's the word, like a kind of direction, well, the direction was to bring the people we knew, the women we knew, together. (Kelly, *NVTV Interview*: 32:00-33:30)

This extract sheds light on a series of very elaborate social skills such as being aware of the needs emerging on the ground, having detailed information on "what was going on", and having "contact in different ways". The approach is also fundamentally collective and consists in bringing people together, be they community workers or local people. Women's Information Groups were set up in the 1980s to help women make informed decisions on key issues such as health, family and finance. The rationale, as described by Donahoe in her book on women's contribution to community development (*Peacebuilding through Women's Community Development*), was to create links between women from various areas and to encourage them to share information on the issues that mattered to them.

Kelly describes the difficult context of the Hunger Strikes in the early 1980s, when tensions escalated. Kelly and the groups she worked with were organising an event in London and had to pick up women from their homes in various neighbourhoods. This was potentially hazardous. Yet, Kelly identifies that moment as important, as it "indicated very clearly how [pause] people want to go on, want to relate, they get value out of that and that's why it's so important to continue to examine how the relationships can be developed. I mean, people are dying to be in touch with each other really [laughter]!" (Kelly, *NVTV Interview*: 42:00 – 43:00).

This is an interesting comment that runs counter to the dichotomy that is often drawn between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. Kelly, instead, describes a yearning for contacts. This echoes Joe Camplisson's description of how his contacts with loyalist paramilitaries felt "amazing". Both

examples show that the type of community work that they practised during the Troubles relied heavily on networking skills, and that it felt like a passion for most interviewees.

In that sense, the sample of interviews shows that taking action may also be construed as an emotional pattern. On that level, Joe Camplisson's account is quite telling:

> One important incident occurred when I was working in the Greencastle area. I was driving along the bottom of Serpentine Road when I heard a bomb go off somewhere in the vicinity. Immediately I did a quick turnaround and came flying back up, shaking. The bomb had been in a pub across from where I held some of my meetings; indeed I had been on my way to one of these. And I was halfway up the Serpentine Road when I stopped and said to myself: "What am I doing", I wasn't afraid of danger, I was more terrified of what I would see ; I didn't know whether I would handle it. But I went back down again, and that fact of turning around and going in the direction of the danger took me through a fear barrier and was also a turning point in my work. (Farset, *Grassroots Leadership*: 23)

This extract is eloquent in many ways. On the one hand, the *historical* emotion of fear is complex. The interviewee is "shaking" first, he then describes a series of consequent affective experiences: the fear of dying, and the apprehension of having to cope with an atrocious scene. Eventually Camplisson transcends the "fear barrier". This is an elaborate reflection on his emotional experience during a bomb attack. The affective description also shows how the dreadful atmosphere of the moment infiltrates the personal account. On the other hand, though, Camplisson also makes a *contemporary* comment upon the necessity of getting involved in the sort of perilous and sensitive work that he undertook as a facilitator. He explains his more general commitment to working "in the direction of the danger", that is to say by adopting unconventional and sometimes risky approaches such as liaising work and the facilitated analysis of needs.

Concluding remarks

From a historical perspective, several aspects of the Troubles have surfaced among the interviewees. For example, some of them referred to the changing nature of community relations between 1968 and 1998 and the importance of specific events locally such as the impact of internment. The levels of strife and division changed during the Troubles, and were impacted by internal and

external power relations. The accounts also reveal complex patterns of subordination and domination in the communities.

Besides, through the analysis of the emotional experience, an additional layer of meaning was added and key affective disorders were identified. For example, interviewees described various situations of extreme danger during the conflict – such as shootings against civilians in 1971, and intimidation against attitudes seen as deviant in the community in the 1970s and 1980s. On such occasions, the fact that a personal or an affective recollection surfaces sheds light on the penetration of contextual developments into homely settings. A series of signs have been identified such as the reference to an emotional experience – fear for instance – but also less obvious signs pertaining to the oral nature of the sources – such as allusive pace and phrasing. These, we argue, are key indicators of various phenomena of infiltration and of affective disorders of historical significance, such as the destruction of one's – mixed – community in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the deep sense of loss attached. A major emotional disjuncture also concerned the transformation of a safe place, such as the home or the street, into a dangerous one, as in during the Ballymurphy Shootings, but also as a result of the paramilitary presence, coercion and violence.

As a case in point, the article also found that the emotional experience of interviewees contributed to their involvement in community work. They were risk-takers, and they often worked in dangerous situations. Yet, the fear translates into a "desire" to act, and as a passion for human interaction and collaboration. We also observed that fear and the experience of a *contradiction* were interrelated. In Kate Kelly's interview, when referring to the people whom she worked with in the 1980s, she states that they were "dying to get in touch with each other" (Kelly, *NVTV Interview*: 42:12). The use of the expression "dying to" inadvertently reveals the importance of contradictory experiences during the conflict, how people fathomed them and felt about them. This raises interesting questions as to the intersubjective meaning of such an experience: what emotions are associated with it? Further research is deemed necessary to better apprehend this and also the variety of meanings attached to the experience of fear. Eventually, this article has identified analytical tools that permit to take into account the sort of historical material that might be perceived as imperfect – such as personal recollections and oral sources – in the hope that people's experiences and affective disorders such as the ones of nonviolent community workers might eventually form an integral part of the history of the Troubles.

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1 This approach questions the traditional dichotomy between memory and history and draws from the work of such specialists as Joanna Bourke on these questions (*Remembering War*).

2 Paramilitary actions were exercised during the Troubles in Northern Ireland by various groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in nationalist areas, and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) in loyalist ones.

3 They all continued to be actively involved after 1998, but the remit of this article is limited to the years of the Troubles.

4 May Blood was later awarded an MBE and became the first woman from Northern Ireland to be given a life peerage in the British House of Lords. For more information, see *May Blood (1938-)*.

5 Sadly, Joe Camplisson passed away in July 2021 while this article was under completion. Academics who had had the opportunity to work with him hailed his unique character and his exceptional experience as a practitioner and "problem solver" locally. See George Mitchell's *Appreciation* published online (*Joe Camplisson*).

6 See also Marianne Elliott's work (*Hearthlands*) on the housing estate where she grew up in the 1950s, the White City housing estate in north Belfast.

7 The later conviction of the murderers seems to indicate that it was another loyalist group, the UDA, who committed the murder. See Connla (*John Turnley Remembered*).

8 It was also promoted later in the 1980s and early 1990s by people involved in the newly established community relations bodies such as the Community Relations Council (Fitzduff, *Beyond Violence*: 88-117), albeit much more discreetly.

9 On loyalist women and paramilitarism, see Alison (*The Experience Of Women In The IRA And UVF*).