

Ed Cairns

Identity, Memories, Trust, Guilt, Forgiveness, Denial, and Victimhood in the Reconciliation of Intergroup Conflict: Evidence from Northern Ireland

As the conflict in Northern Ireland stutters to end after 30 (or 300) years of suffering, one thing has become apparent, which may be of help to other societies facing similar problems. Traditional politics alone can only lead so far down the road to reconciliation. Politics can deal with the concrete issues involved in intergroup conflict, in particular issues of power, demography, and economics.

However, beneath the surface of many intergroup conflicts lie many more symbolic or psychological problems that remain untouched by traditional politics. Many of these involve issues of identity that in turn are bound up with memories of the past and lead to a mistrust between the two groups. Further, part of that mistrust may be because one or both of the groups may invoke denial to protect their present identity. This in turn raises questions about collective guilt and indeed about intergroup forgiveness. Fortunately attempts to understand these phenomena, both individually and in their relationships with each other, are underway in Northern Ireland, and will be reviewed in this paper.

Ed Cairns is a distinguished professor of psychology at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland. His academic career also led him to collaborate with the University of Melbourne (1995), the University of Cape Town (1994), the University of Florida (1980) and the University of Alberta (1976) as a visiting scholar. Professor Cairns has been closely involved in the work of Division 48 (Division of Peace Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, a division he has been presided since 2001. Professor Cairns has contributed to the publication of a substantial number of studies focusing on the understanding of conflict and political violence by children and young persons, as well as on the psychological impact of conflict and political violence on social identity in Northern Ireland. He has also researched extensively on collective memory and the passing of enemy images to the next generation.