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Using psychology and the power of collective identities to combat adversity

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Using psychology and the power of collective identities to combat adversity

Summary of the impact:

Psychology has traditionally focused on biological, genetic or personality factors to explain why some people cope better or worse than others in adverse situations. However such a focus can lead to a therapeutic dead-end as it is very difficult to change a person's temperament or genetic predispositions. Researchers at the Centre for Social Issues Research at University of Limerick have addressed this problem by conducting highly regarded research on the benefits and burdens of so-called 'collective identities', such as nationality, socio-economic groups, and ethnicity. This work has shown how the collective or shared understandings of a person's identity can profoundly shape their adaption to stressful, traumatic or adverse circumstances.

The centre members have worked with policy-makers, government departments and public service organisations to apply these research findings to national policy, public

services, and training programmes for social and health care professionals. At local levels, the centre has worked closely with NGOs and voluntary groups. This engagement has translated the research findings into practical benefits for communities and statutory agencies living and working at the coalface of adversity.

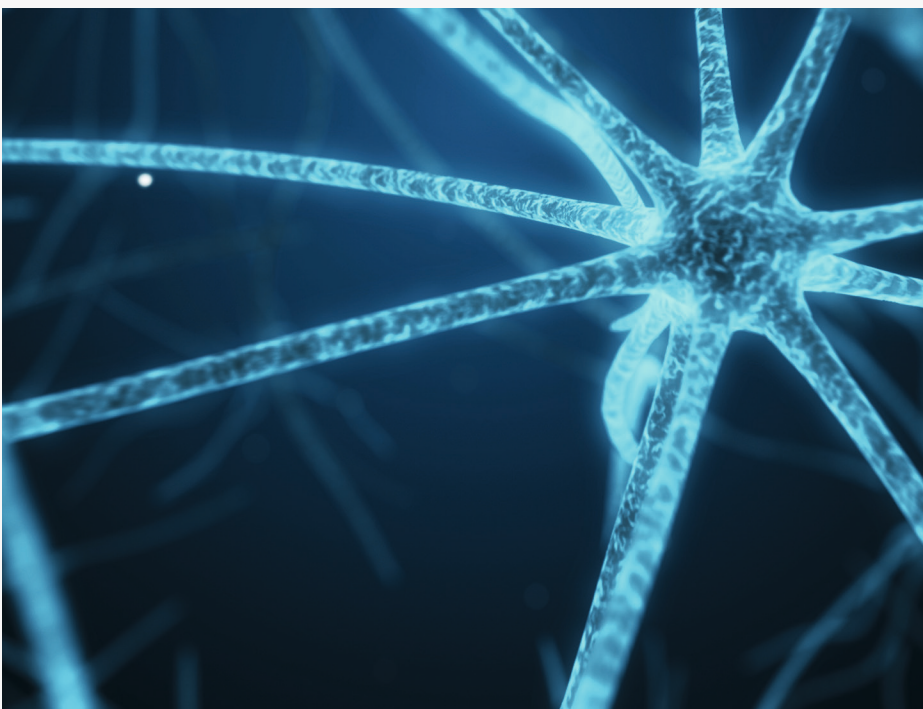
Underpinning research:

Collective identities

Sometimes individuals behave in particular ways not because of their individual idiosyncrasies but because of key attributes associated with highly valued group memberships. For example, parents - a collective identity shared by many adults - don't necessarily drive more safely when they have young children in the car. In fact, if motivated to quiet a crying baby parents can make very risky driving decisions. So it is not disposition or temperament that is determining cautious or risky behaviour in this example, rather it is the expectations

people place on themselves and others as a consequence of their identity as a parent. In everyday life, group membership or collective identity is used to guide one's own behaviour and interpret the behaviour of others. These attributes, though shared, become central parts of who people are and how they see themselves and others. In the language of psychologists, group memberships define how we think of ourselves and how others interact with us. These shared or collective identities are how cultural and social forces get under our skin.

Through linked projects over the past nine years, researchers at the centre have undertaken empirical studies on how social and cultural forces drive responses to stress, trauma and adversity through a sense of collective identity. Collective identities can be a benefit or a burden. For those dealing with trauma or adverse situations they can be important resources to buffer stress, however they can also heighten our risk of stress. This work has been carried out with partners based



Our research findings on the benefits and burdens of collective identities have been translated into practical benefits for communities and statutory agencies living and working at the coalface of adversity."

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in other institutions in Ireland and Europe. Research led by Muldoon (Refs 1, 15, 16, 17) and Schmid and Muldoon (Ref 5) has studied collective identities in the context of political violence in Northern Ireland. This work has shown that people's shared understanding of groups within a society, rooted in nationality, ethnicity, gender, social class, results in differences in lived experiences that affect health. This research included the first study to demonstrate in a representative sample of people in Northern Ireland and the border counties, that there was significant post-traumatic stress as a consequence of the political violence over the preceding decades. Regardless, even those most affected by political violence, rarely considered themselves 'victims' (Ref 1).

Funding from EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (EUSPPR), Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (ESRC) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) further enabled researchers from the centre to examine collective identities across Ireland. Research by Lowe and Muldoon in Northern Ireland (Ref 6), by Stevenson and Muldoon on adolescents (Ref 7), by O'Donnell et al on St. Patrick's Day Parades (Ref 8) highlights the changing and dynamic nature of identity in contemporary Ireland. Findings indicate that Irish people don't often think that they are behaving in particularly 'Irish' ways. Rather, 'Irishness' can be seen as a backdrop to everyday life; as an identity it is rarely foregrounded yet communicated in everyday ways through shared cultural understandings. Those of minority ethnic or national groups, who may not have access to this same cultural knowledge, report very many everyday ways in which they feel they are not Irish and are outside of the national community (O'Donnell et al Ref 8 and Pehrson et al Ref 14). Additionally Joyce et al's research showed that how Irish Travellers on the one hand and students on the other typically saw themselves (Ref 9), how this impacted on how they treated others, and what they view as acceptable and normative in terms of their own behaviour.

This approach has also informed research undertaken by Gallagher et al which has shown that social attributes affect physical health in situations of acute stress (Ref 2) and in unemployment (Ref 3). Research by Stevenson et al (Ref 4) and McNamara et al (Ref 10) has shown the health cost that negative stereotypes have on disadvantaged

communities. For example children from low income backgrounds show decrements in self-esteem associated with being overweight and obese that are not apparent in middle class children with similar weight issues (Ref 11). However, because of these burdens, marginalised communities show strong social bonds and collective empowerment that can be seen as important resources to negotiate adversity (Ref 10, 18). In a similar vein, research by Naughton et al on domestic violence shows how preconceived attitudes and identities impact on judicial handling of custody cases where domestic violence is a factor (Ref 12). However, collective identities can buffer the impact that direct exposure to domestic violence has on children and young people's mental health (Ref 13).

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Research Grants Awarded

1. "The Legacy of the Troubles II: Trauma identity and remembrance" Muldoon & Trew, EU Special support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, 2007-2012, €220,000
2. "Embodying the imagined community, National identity and collective commemoration" Muldoon, Stevenson, Bryan, Reicher, Irish Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council, 2008-2012, €281,000 & £200,000
3. "Revitalising communities: a Framework for Assessing Social Change in Limerick Regeneration areas" Stevenson & Muldoon, Irish Research Council, 2009-2012, €97,000
4. "Classed Identities in adolescence" Jay & Muldoon, Irish Research Council, 2011-2014, €72,000
5. "National identity, commemoration and social cohesion" Muldoon, O'Donnell & Minescu, Irish Research Council (2012-2013) €6,000
6. "Biobehavioural correlates of unemployment" Gallagher, Irish Research Council, 2014-2016, €100,000

Details of the impact

The collective identity approach focuses on the subjective nature of human experience and can reveal hidden group-level processes at work. Through concentrating on collective identities, the centre is naturally positioned to look at the real world application of the research undertaken by the team. Working

in partnership with organisations outside academia has created a pathway for the centre to contribute to the solution of real world health and social problems.

Impacts on policy

Research from the centre has contributed very significantly to policy-makers' understanding of the effect of decades of political violence in Northern Ireland. It has had direct impact on public policy and services for treating the residual mental health trauma of the conflict. Informed by the research which demonstrated that people were very reluctant to identify themselves as 'victims', the Victims Commissioner at the Northern Ireland Office changed its policy to channel EU, Irish and British resources through existing services rather than through officially-termed 'victims services'. This was a sea-change in thinking around support for people who were traumatised psychologically by the Troubles and allowed better use of available mental health supports for those affected by political violence (Source 1).

The centre's research has also had impacts on national policy in Ireland on domestic violence. The centre made a written submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, on proposals for children and survivors of Domestic Violence (Source 2). Following this, the centre members were invited by the Committee to present their findings verbally at an official discussion on Domestic and Sexual Violence held at the Oireachtas (Source 3). This participation subsequently led to a centre member being invited to be part of an expert group charged with informing Garda responses to domestic violence. This research emphasises the role of family and community supports that contribute to child resilience and has also been presented to a number of NGOs including ADAPT services and Safe Ireland thus contributing to professional standards and practices in this sector.

Impacts on public understanding

Research from the centre has informed pivotal societal impacts on public understanding of the complex issue of prejudice. These impacts first arose when BBC Northern Ireland produced a two-part television documentary entitled "States of Mind" on social attitudes ten years after the

Good Friday Agreement. Muldoon was one of two experts for the documentary and created an online assessment to measure individual prejudice and the overall extent of social polarisation. Between 2007 and 2009 more than 50,000 people in Northern Ireland took part in this major BBC Northern Ireland initiative. The results stimulated public debate and popular discourse for many months after the programme was broadcast (Source 4).

Further societal impacts occurred through improving public debate when researchers from the centre were invited to speak about their research on the changing nature of national identity at the ARK seminar series in Belfast. ARK's goal is to make social science information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience and their users include policymakers, journalists, community groups and schoolchildren.

Impacts on public services

Researchers from the centre were invited by numerous organisations to give workshops on the changing nature of national identity and its role in commemoration, parades and national events. Over a number of years, centre members delivered workshops to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Community Relations Council (NI), Parades Commission (NI), the Department of Defence and the St Patricks Day Festival Committee (Source 5). These workshops focused on how to maintain harmony and inclusion at potentially divisive national celebrations or commemorations using the centre's research on how minorities' experienced commemorative events. A researcher at the centre was subsequently invited to speak to the organising committee of the 1916 Centenary Commemoration and to chair a PSNI Advisory Group on parades. In this way, the centre's research directly shaped guidelines for the improved quality and management of public cultural events across the island of Ireland.

Impacts on community groups, service providers and health practitioners

Researchers at the centre carried out projects on the psychological effects of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage with the support of the Limerick Regeneration agency. The contacts made with local community organisations and



NGOs facilitated the translation of research findings into public awareness via a feature in the e-newsletter of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, which was sent to approx. 5,000 subscribers (Source 6). Additionally the research findings were covered in local media (Source 7) thus raising awareness of health risks associated with unemployment amongst the communities most.

Research on the inadvertent stigmatisation of residents of regeneration communities was the basis of an invited workshop at the University of Limerick summer school on civic engagement. This workshop was carried out in partnership with Limerick Civic Trust to inform councillors, service providers and statutory agencies of their need to work against inadvertent stereotyping (Source 8). Centre members also ran a well-attended public lecture series in UL and the city centre. Both the summer school and the public lecture series events aimed to increase knowledge of the stigma poor communities might need to work against. These public events also highlighted research findings which showed the value of community solidarity in overcoming such negative stereotyping.

The centre's research has also had manifold impacts on practitioners and services in mental health. For the last 4 years the centre has run public events related to the centre's research findings in conjunction with the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) (Source 9), and contributed to research conferences with the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland that have been certified as Continuous Professional Development for practitioners (Source 10). A more recent public event 'MED-FEST' in conjunction with the Irish College of Psychiatrists (Source 11) focused on the impact of conflict on physical and mental health and community relations in Northern Ireland (Source 12). Thus, through different pathways, the centre's research has had impacts on practitioners, professional standards, and ongoing training of those working in the mental health area.

Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Northern Ireland office website with analysis of the information relating to peoples' understanding of the impact of the Troubles and the need to orient help

without using the term 'victim' available at <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/victims-and-survivors>

2. Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality Submissions received in relation to Domestic and Sexual Violence ref 31/JDAE/012. Report available as pdf
3. Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality Debate – Domestic and Sexual Violence Discussion (19th February 2014) <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/Debates%20Authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/committeetakes/JUJ2014021900007>
4. An archive of the website of the BBC States of mind TV show together with the research evidence to back up the work and the expert team is published at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/stateofminds/>
5. A detailed description of these impacts is available on the Economic and Social Research Council's website at <http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/grants/RES-062-23-1140/outputs/read/b13a4662-a263-4c83-9bf7-3d33644c944c>
6. INOU E-Bulletin Issue 21 February 2016 <http://www.inou.ie/newsandupdates/newsletter/2016/02/18/the-health-risks-from-unemployment/>. Reach of e-newsletter verified by INOU headquarters
7. Limerick research shows that unemployment gets inside the body <http://www.limerickpost.ie/2016/04/22/limerick-research-shows-unemployment-gets-inside-body/>
8. University of Limerick in partnership with Limerick City Development Board – Advance Summer School notice <https://www2.ul.ie/pdf/847101251.pdf>
9. Public announcement on Psychological Society of Ireland's website of free lecture series including link to download presentations of the Centre's research <http://www.psihq.ie/page/art/145/0>
10. Announcement on College of Psychiatrists Ireland website about CPD research conference with link to programme <http://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/Home/Upcomingeventsandcourses.aspx?id=f2bd0f08-30cc-4de1-a01e-b4234906f8ab>
11. Promotional messages about MEDFEST

shared by College of Psychiatrists http://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/Libraries/Press_Releases/Medfest_press_Statement_2016_180216.sflb.ashx and <https://www.facebook.com/events/1691756397733806/>

12. Public Announcement of keynote talk at ESRC Festival of Social Science, Belfast event <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/public-engagement/festival-of-social-science/>, <http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/event/social-science-community-relations-ni/>

Find out more: Listen to the podcast and read other impact case studies www.ul.ie/researchimpact



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