

## The uses of suffering<sup>1</sup>: victims as moral beacons or icons of grievance.

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### **Abstract**

*This chapter considers the suffering caused by war as a distinct phenomenon from victim identity, and considers the social, political and emotional labour involved in managing suffering in a social context. It describes the relationship between suffering and victimhood and how sufferers become, or fail to become, victims and examines how victims themselves, or others, relying on the suffering of victims, use the moral authority of their status in the political arena in calls for continued war, reparations, justice or retribution. Victim identity is a co-production of the individual and their social and political environment, the attribution of the status of victim depends on the sufferer having a 'grievable life' (Butler). The production and maintenance of a victim identity depends on the ability to sustain a victim narrative. In the context of conflict, where the suffering 'other' is dehumanised and their life is not considered grievable, then a politics of compassion is precluded and the politics of victimhood becomes configured into continuing conflict and calls for a return to war.*

### **Suffering and the sufferer**

This chapter is concerned with the political uses to which suffering is put, so Alice Nocher, whose experiences offer a benchmark of suffering, is introduced to the reader.

### **The sufferer**

Alice Nocher was in her 40s when we interviewed her in Belfast in the late 1990s for the Cost of the Troubles Study<sup>2</sup>, and later in 1999 this author interviewed her on camera for the film for which her interview provided the title, *And Then There Was Silence...*<sup>3</sup>.

Alice Nocher lived in Bawnmore, a tight-knit community in North Belfast living in a public housing estate characterized by high unemployment and multiple deprivation. Bawnmore is in North Belfast, the area of Northern Ireland that saw the worst of the killing in the conflict, with 25% of deaths occurring within an area of a few square miles. Bawnmore is a Catholic enclave, surrounded on all sides by Protestant areas some of which provided the bases for several loyalist paramilitary groups. Some Bawnmore residents were members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Official

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the people, some still alive and some, like Alice who have died, who, over the years, have educated her about their suffering and losses with patience and generosity.

<sup>2</sup> Smyth and Kelly (1999) Final report available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?lang=en&id=26033>

<sup>3</sup> Northern Visions/Cost of the Troubles Study 2000. And Then There Was Silence... Available at <https://vimeo.com/60470297>

Republican IRA. Likewise, the Ulster Defence Association has been active in the surrounding Protestant area since the 1970s and their Ulster Freedom Fighters specialized in the assassination of Catholics. The Ulster Volunteer Force, sometimes operating under the name the Protestant Action Force, also assassinated Catholics during the conflict. Bawnmore provided a convenient target and over the decades of the conflict, the community suffered multiple deaths. In a small community of a few streets, the effect over the years was devastating.

Alice was sixteen years old when on 7 April 1972 her 17-year-old brother Sammie was killed in a bomb explosion which he was in the process of moving. Unknown to the family, Sammie had joined the IRA and his mother, emotionally devastated by his death, was unable to cope. Alice, as the oldest girl, became her carer.

On 11 February 1974, Alice, her friend Margaret and three young male fellow workers were travelling to work in a two door car. They were stopped on the road and attacked by an armed loyalist paramilitary group who opened fire on the car. Two of the young men fled on foot, but the third was shot dead. Alice and Margaret were unable to get out of the back seat. Alice was shot eight times. Margaret lived for a week, then died in hospital.

In the aftermath, Alice described how she not only had to deal with her physical injuries, her hair fell out, she also could not sleep, she lost weight, she had nightmares, shook uncontrollably and was terrified to leave the house. There was no support, her doctor told her to 'pull herself together' and she described how her teenage years 'just wasted away'.

In Northern Ireland at that time, armed groups often claimed bombings and shootings operations as theirs. The Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) claimed responsibility for the shooting in retaliation for an IRA attack on a bus load of soldiers and their wives in England the previous week. Alice had to face the men accused of the shooting in court when she was called to give evidence, and she felt strong for being able to do so, with Margaret's father also in the court-room.

Eventually, Alice married, had three children and fell pregnant with her fourth child. Her husband worked part-time in a butcher's shop in the community. On 29 October 1983, he left for work. Shortly afterwards, Alice's sister-in-law arrived at Alice's door with the news that he had been shot whilst cleaning the window of the butcher's shop. Initially, Alice presumed he was still alive, but he had been shot dead.

Alice described her reaction to this latest tragedy:

I just felt devastated that it could happen to me again. Didn't think it was fair. And I kept saying, 'Why me?' I think that was the first time I really ever questioned God. 'Why me, what have I done?' ... And I just didn't think it was fair that I should go through this again... Well the police told me it was definitely the loyalists that done it, but no one ever claimed it ... I feel, auch, there were stages there I hated them and times I even felt sorry for them - did they not know what they are doing. Like they have to go to meet the Lord their maker with that on their conscience. I've had so many different feelings over the years. Now I just don't feel nothing for them. ... (Interview with Alice Nocher, 1997.)

Alice summarized all the years of bereavement, loss and heartbreak and poverty, rearing her children on her own.

It was very, very hard. Financially as well as emotionally it was, you know, am I going to have enough for tomorrow night's dinner, someone needs shoes ... His father buried him ... he told me to put in - a claim for compensation ... I hadn't the money to bring them to court. ... But I think, it's hard enough to go through it all, but I think if you had financial help it would make it that much easier. It would take half the burden. Because for to get one of them [children] a pair of shoes, you've to save up for weeks ... A constant battle. And with myself it was hand me downs from family and friends ... Only for my family I think I would have died a long time ago. For they always pulled me out if I was stuck ... Many's a night I sat freezing because I had no coal ... I'd just put the kids to bed early ... I've seen me burning rags in the fire. Bags of rags just to keep the kids warm. ... (Interview with Alice Nocher, 1997.)

Alice reflected on her life at that point and the impact of political violence on it:

I've often [said to] myself, 'If that hadn't happened or that hadn't happened, where I would be now?' But then I say, 'Well it did happen. And this is where you are and this is where you are staying!' But it has taken over my whole life. It has been my whole life ... well I think time is a great healer. You don't forget anything, it just helps. I am a lot calmer today than I was then... I think I have to be strong, I wouldn't have survived it if I hadn't been. Because there has been many's a time I've sat with a bottle of pills in my hand. 'Take these pills.' But

a strong person goes on. If I had been a weak person, I would have fell by the wayside and that would have been that. But I'm a lot calmer today and a lot stronger for all that experience. Although I could have been doing without it... (Interview with Alice Nocher, 1997.)

Alice was interviewed at the beginning of the peace process in Northern Ireland. She died of brain cancer in her 50s.

### **Iconic events**

Alice's brother was killed, she was shot and her husband was killed during a period when such violence was commonplace, especially in the small Catholic enclave in which she and her family lived. All were 'small scale' incidents, unlike some of the other incidents involving multiple casualties or well-known public figures. Had her brother been one of the fourteen people killed in the Bogside on Bloody Sunday, for example, her experience and that of her family, might have been very different. Those fourteen killings took on an iconic significance, not only for the Bogside community, but for the Nationalist population of Northern Ireland and their supporters in the Irish diaspora. Violent events become iconic<sup>4</sup> when they come to represent not only the suffering and loss of those injured or bereaved but the privations of an entire identity group or community. Other examples are the Sharpeville and Soweto Massacres in South Africa or the attacks on the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Had Alice's suffering been caused in a large scale event that attracted public attention, the collective identification with her suffering could have lessened or removed her control over the manner in which her suffering is deployed. This would have positioned her within a social and political network focused on victimhood and may also have lessened her isolation.

Those suffering as a result of the violence of such an iconic event have reported that the event itself can become incorporated into their identity. One man reported that his 'name changed on Bloody Sunday.' After Bloody Sunday, he reported that he became 'Tony-Doherty-whose-father-was-killed-on-Bloody-Sunday'<sup>5</sup> (Smyth, Hayes and Hayes, 1994; Doherty, 2016). Others in this and similar situations manage to distance themselves from the event by the use of a fictional cover-story, or not discussing it, sometimes not even within the family (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth and Wong, 1999).

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<sup>4</sup> Volkan (1998) refers to these as 'chosen traumas'.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Doherty's memoir was published in 2016

## **Suffering**

Whatever the scale of our personal universe of suffering, it is the subjective benchmark through which we encounter the suffering of others and according to which we try to make sense of it. For some, initially at least, their own suffering overwhelms them, giving way to a kind of frozen panic of the emotions. Their capacity for empathy and ability to focus on others may be very limited. Ideally, this stage eventually gives way to another stage, where although the suffering continues, it does not paralyse the sufferer.

Normatively, it is considered 'better' not to be frozen and overwhelmed by suffering; it is considered a failure if one cannot find the path from the abyss and 'move on'. Yet these dispositions cannot be a matter of moral superiority, but rather of resources available within the self: in the personal history; relationships; and environment. Age; life experience; gender; emotional literacy and intelligence and health; the quality of personal and community relationships; caring responsibilities; economic circumstances; religious or spiritual beliefs and networks; all intervene to condition the individual's access to that path.

In the broader social, political and cultural environment, other influences affect the sufferer's response to suffering: the cause of the suffering; how the cause is understood; whether human agency has caused it wilfully or by accident; whether the sufferer is alone or part of a group of sufferers to whom the same harm was caused, simultaneously or not; whether the harm is publicly condoned or condemned; whether it is seen as deserved or undeserved; the availability of a sympathetic community; whether the harm was done in retaliation for previous acts done by or in the name of the sufferer or their identity group; whether is it part of a pattern of harm done to people like the sufferer.

How suffering is seen by the sufferer is also significant: as an inevitable part of the human condition, as an undeserved victimization, an imposition, as evidence of the evil nature of the malefactor who inflicted the suffering, or a just punishment for past misdeeds – karma, or payback time. The identity of the sufferer is also a key factor in how the suffering is regarded in the public domain, determining the availability of public sympathy and recognition. Is the sufferer part of a dominant or subordinate group? Are they part of a 'suspect community' (Breen-Smyth, 2014).

Many, like Alice, or the uncounted casualties of many wars, suffer in comparative isolation. Only when suffering is witnessed (by the community or society) does it acquire broader social or political

meaning. When the suffering is interpreted by the social and political network surrounding the sufferer the sufferer becomes - or fails to become - admitted to victim identity. It is in the social, economic and political context are victims created; suffering in itself is not sufficient.

In this socio-political, economic and moral landscape death, illness, injury and other forms of harm are given meaning within a political and moral economy and disciplinary regimes of politics, warfare, insurgency, medicine and psychiatry. The attribution of legitimate victimhood and identification of a sufferer as a victim is a co-production, in which the sufferer's individual orientation and character interacts with their political and social environment to produce either a victim, a survivor or a person who has suffered but makes no claim to victimhood nor is seen as such.

### **The uses of suffering**

There would be no victim politics if there were no suffering, yet much of the scholarship and debate focuses, not on those who have suffered, but on the uses to which their suffering is put. Suffering can be incorporated into the identity of the sufferer as Alice did, without any special allowances being made for it. Suffering can be taken for granted, seen as inevitable, minimized, repressed and normalised and the effects medicated or attributed to some other (often endogenous) cause. Scholarship on 'victimhood', 'victim culture' 'victimism' and 'victimists' (Cole, 2007), in which scholars observe, analyse and opine about victim culture is growing. Yet the specific individual and family suffering is frequently at best taken for granted and at worst ignored. In many armed conflicts, civilian casualties are not even counted: they literally don't count<sup>6</sup>.

When accounts of those who have suffered exist (Smyth, 1998; Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, 1999; Fay and Smyth, 2000; Morrissey and Smyth, 2001) they suggest some distinctions and clarifications in relation to suffering, victimhood and the status or label of 'victim'.

1. Suffering is a key element in the construction of victimhood, but not a sufficient or necessary qualification for it;
2. The experience of hurt, harm or fear can be experienced directly by the person themselves or indirectly by association with suffering individuals and with whom one *closely* identifies as part of a family, community or identity group.
3. When victimhood is self-defined, it is a state of consciousness on the part of a person or group related to their experience of suffering, either directly or vicariously, of loss, harm or hurt inflicted wilfully by another party.

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<sup>6</sup> See Seybolt, T. B., Aronson, J.D. and Fischhoff, B. (2013)

4. Victimhood can also be socially or politically defined and recognised, a status attributed to a suffering individual or a group by a third party, a society or some other agent, irrespective of that individual or group's consciousness of themselves as victims.
5. Victimhood is distinct from the suffering of hurt, harm, loss or fear, in that not all of those who directly or indirectly experience these things would identify themselves as victims or manifest a victim consciousness. For example, Primo Levi wrote: "It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944." (Levi, 1947)
6. He goes on: "[O]nto my brief and tragic experience as a deportee has been overlaid the much longer and complex experience of a writer-witness, and the sum total is clearly positive: in its totality, this past has made me richer, surer..." (Levi, 1947)
7. Not all sufferers are eligible to become victims. Some forms of suffering or some sufferers fail to qualify.
8. Not all who claim victimhood have direct experience of suffering. We will return to this point when we discuss collective victimhood.

### **Being a victim**

Victim identity is often characterised by a focus on the pain, loss or fear to the extent the victim has limited or no ability to see any positive in the victim situation. Identifying oneself as a victim can lead to a heightened sense of the sufferer's own vulnerability and hyper-vigilance. The victim may be preoccupied with their own situation and needs to the extent that it compromises their ability to take account of the impact of their actions on others.

Victimization can also lead the sufferer to expect or demand certain dues from society, their community, from the perpetrator or those representing the perpetrator. These dues can include acknowledgement of their suffering, justice and the punishment of the perpetrator, compensation for the damage done, apology, in some cases revenge, services and support for the needs that have arisen as a result of their victimization and restitution of losses.

### **Identity management**

Alice, like other sufferers, faced the challenge of identity management. She feared that her children will be caught up in cycles of revenge and retaliation. In common with other sufferers, her determination to avoid her family members seeking revenge, coupled with her concern for her children required her to manage her suffering and her identity in particular ways. Alice engaged in

the emotional labour in order to manage her emotions and responses so as to pre-empt the possibility that her suffering would be used in justification of revenge.

### **Emotional labour**

The concept of 'emotional labour' was developed by Hochschild (1983) to describe how workers are required to manage their feelings according to the demands of their workplace (see, for example, Virkki, 2008). Hochschild focused on the commodified nature of emotion and the harmful effects of such emotional labour, whilst later studies have explored the gendered nature of emotional labour including the ability of females to reduce violent behaviour through the use of it (Baines, 2004). When the sufferer manages their emotional responses, withholding the expression of certain emotions in order to regulate the effects on others, including members of their own family, they engage in a form of 'emotional labour'.

### **Victim identity**

Many of those who have endured such experiences are wary of, or resistant to, acquiring a victim identity, especially when they see the political and military purposes to which victimhood is deployed and their suffering appropriated politically. For those who do attain a victim identity, the maintenance of that identity, will depend on the ability of the individual to *keep a victim narrative going*<sup>7</sup>.

"A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor — important though this is — in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self." (Giddens: 54)

As Butler (2016) would assert, victimhood is performative.

The environment is a determining factor in the development and maintenance of victim identity, either in the individual or the group. A study of people suffering from cancer (Park, Zlateva and Blank, 2009) found that identification as a 'survivor', a 'victim', or 'a person who has had cancer' was associated with cancer-related activities such as talking about prevention, or campaigning for cancer awareness. Victim identity was also associated with poorer psychological wellbeing, less post traumatic growth than the other identifications. The existence, therefore, of campaigns or organizations raising awareness of the situation of sufferers are likely to be critical in influencing the

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<sup>7</sup> After Anthony Giddens, (1991: 54) on identity.



development or otherwise of victim identity. Conversely, in the absence of support organizations many sufferers describe having to 'get on with it.' Alice Nocher described how the lack of support and the tendency towards victim-blaming influenced her after she was shot:

It got to the stage over there when someone asked me what happened to me I just said I fell and broke my arm. I wouldn't even tell them the truth because it seemed to me that they were saying there is no smoke without fire. You must have been doing something to deserve it. Which was total nonsense. So I thought it was easier to tell them I'd just fell over and broke my arm or something. Or was in an accident because I had a bad limp at the time ... it was just day by day and just every day got that wee bit easier but it took time. It wasn't like going home one day and getting on with, it was just, after about a year I started pulling myself together because I did go through that sort of a breakdown and that was an awful hard time. And, but once I got over that, then I started getting on with my life. (Interview with Alice Nocher, Cost of the Troubles Study, Belfast, 1997);

Research evidence suggests that those with strong 'other focus' are less likely to adopt a victim identity. Three factors appear to influence the degree to which victims will focus on a quest for justice: material self-interest; self-esteem; and moral values. Other-orientation – concern for others - is also an important motivational force in the behaviour and identification of sufferers (Korsgaard, Meglino and Call: 2015) For example, Alice described her aims in managing her own and her family's experience of violence:

'...My main concern for the children was when they grew up, I was afraid of them being bitter and joining some organisation and finding themselves in prison for a long time or worse, dead. So I always tried to be honest but play it down if you like. So that they wouldn't be bitter. Like I would say to them, there are good Protestant people, just the way there is good Catholic people. And there are bad Catholic people and there are bad Protestants. Tried to see it from both sides that there is good and bad in every one.' (Interview with Alice Nocher, Cost of the Troubles Study, Belfast, 1997)

Korsgaard et al (2015) argue that other-oriented people are better equipped to tolerate personal discomfort. Alice's religious belief was also a factor in her orientation to her suffering. Religion may also play a role in self-regulation (McCullough and Willoughby, 2007).

### **Collective victimhood**

The label 'victim' is used both as a label applicable to those, like Alice, who have suffered, and as a characteristic of a national, ethnic or religious group. Examples include, *inter alia*, Nationalists in Northern Ireland as victims of the Northern Ireland state before 1972 or of the British state; Unionists in Northern Ireland as victims of IRA 'terrorism'; Palestinians as victims of the Israeli occupation; Israelis as victims of Arab terrorism; Jews as victims of anti-Semitism; and so on. This victim grouping can be much broader: the West as victim of Islamist 'terrorism' or identity specific, such as African Americans as victims of police shootings and racism in general. This ascription of victim identity spreads the concept of victimhood across an identity group so that the actual sufferers of gun violence or anti-Semitism and so on are affectively joined with non-sufferers who are assigned roles as vulnerable potential sufferers by virtue of their common identity, thus they suffer the fear and denigration that this vulnerability entails and therefore can claim co-victimhood.

There is a clear distinction between the suffering or articulation of grief, pain and loss on the part of the sufferer and the claims on behalf of a political cause, party or faction built upon such suffering and articulations. The suffering of the bereaved and injured is quite distinct from the shared identity of groups, communities, religions, nationalities of a sense of victimhood, where a shared narrative about their own victimization, as distinct from the direct experience of suffering, forms part of the group identity. This shared victim identity may entail a one dimensional moral landscape which precludes any acknowledgement of the group's ability to cause or responsibility for causing harm to others

Identity groups with a sense of their own victimhood rely on historic or contemporary suffering of other members of that group. These types of 'victim groups' will include comparatively small numbers of direct 'sufferers' and larger numbers of those who fear future victimisation and other vicarious sufferers. Such victim groups, comprised of large populations or identity groups are economic, social and political actors. Their existence and their victim consciousness can shape social and political life. For example, candidates in the 2016 Presidential race in the US vie to compete for the African American or Latino vote, by condemning police shootings and expressing support for undocumented immigrants, both issues that cause suffering to individuals and families in these identity groups.

Part of the socialisation into and the acquisition of a collective victim identity is learning what it is to be an African American or a Jew. This is learned from both those who share the identity, fellow

insiders, and from those who do not, narratives about how Jews or African Americans are perceived and treated, articulated by both insiders and outsiders. The performance of the identity of Jew or African American and interactions with others who both share and don't share it, informs and shapes the emergent identity holder into an insider in the identity group, the boundaries of which are marked by acts of 'othering', including hostility and violence.

In representing the interests of the group, the political expression of their identity will inevitably seek to ameliorate the group's position and protect its wellbeing and prevent harm to its members. Thus the suffering of some of the identity group members can take on an iconic significance. Volkan (1998) discusses past 'chosen traumas' of a group which come to symbolise not only the vulnerability and past suffering of the group but offers material evidence in support of present and future vulnerability, thus justifying and calling for prophylactic measures to anticipate and prevent future suffering of members of the group. To be a stereotypical good victim group member is to recognise the suffering of some group members, the vulnerability of all including the self, and to support all protections and counter-measures against those who actually or potentially can attack the group. To point to the harm such counter-measures cause to outsiders or to ascribe any responsibility to one's identity group for provoking attack on it, or for harming outsiders is to risk accusations of disloyalty or of being a self-hating Jew, or an Uncle Tom.

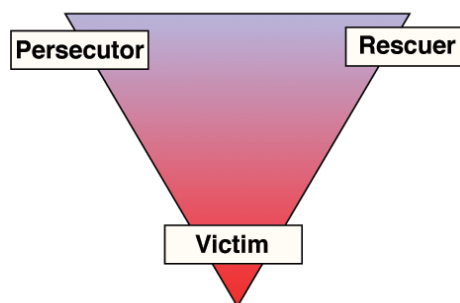
At the collective and societal level, as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both Loyalist and Republican politics in Northern Ireland have relied on their various senses of victimisation to justify their recourse to armed conflict. Competing claims to victim-hood can be used to support and legitimize violence.

Vollhardt (2009) has argued that a common sense of victimhood can be the basis for recognition of common interests, whereas Ben-Meir (2013) argues that where both sides of a conflict have strong victim identities, such as in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the conflict can become intractable. Strong group identification as victims can create impermeable boundaries around a group, inhibiting or preventing trusting relationships with outsiders and compromising communication. The fear generated by such 'siege mentality' can lead to false mutuality in communication, disingenuously telling outsiders what they want to hear, compromising communication. In armed groups, including the armed state organisations, the bonds within the group may preclude engagement with outsiders, yet group members may 'go through the motions' when required to do so. When the

stakes in the past have been as high as the possibility of losing one's life, even when the threat has ostensibly disappeared contact with the other is distrusted.

### **Dynamics of victimhood: Karpman's triangle**

Karpman (1968) describes a triangular relationship between the roles of victim, perpetrator and rescuer and how they each reinforce the fixed position of each other and themselves, by acting in each of the three roles - Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim - in what he refers to as the 'Drama Triangle'. Karpman's Victim is a stereotypical or 'ideal victim' (Breen-Smyth, 2010), helpless, hopeless, powerless, ashamed, unable to make decisions, solve problems, take pleasure in life, or achieve insight. Karpman's stereotypical Persecutor is controlling, blaming, critical, oppressive, angry, authoritative, rigid, and superior and self-righteous. Karpman sees the role of the persecutor as maintaining denial, keeping the victim stuck in the past: rectitude, further hurting the victim and justifying their losses; powerfulness, reproducing the power dynamic of victimisation; reactivity, reproducing the volatile dynamic of conflict; or justification, asserting that the victim's suffering was what they deserved. Karpman's stereotypical rescuer feels guilty so is compelled to rescue, yet their intervention keeps the victim dependent and gives the victim permission to fail whilst keeping the rescuer focused on someone else's problems, rather than their own.



The dynamic between these stylized positions relies on the polarization of the roles that tend to become increasingly polarized, as each party acts out of their given role, the Rescuer rescues, the Perpetrator harms the Victim and the Victim remains helpless. The increases in polarization causes the roles of the victim, rescuer, persecutor to shift as the victim, for example, may retaliate and punish the persecutor who then becomes a victim. The victim may attack the rescuer for doing too much or too little for the victim or for doing too much to the persecutor, thus the rescuer becomes the victim. These new 'victims' may seek out their own rescuer outside the triangle, involving fourth and fifth parties and new drama triangles, thus conflict escalates, in a linked network of triangles. The resolution for Karpman is for each of the roles to act out of character, the victim to become empowered, the rescuer to stop rescuing and the perpetrator to move to a more central position

and develop insight and take responsibility for their own behavior and for all participants to change the characteristics of their interactions with the other roles, or to do nothing.

Although Karpman's model is used in therapeutic contexts and emphasizes the psychological or personality predispositions, it offers useful insight into the dynamics of conflict, particularly in 'victim politics'. Combatants trained to kill can move into victim roles and intervention aimed at supporting victims can be 'triangulated' into conflict. For example when a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital (a Rescuer) was bombed by the United States (Persecutor), (MSF, 2016) leading to the Rescuer becoming a Victim. In 2015, a further 75 (MSF) hospitals were bombed, leading to MSF withdrawing from the World Humanitarian Forum (potential Rescuer) in a gesture of no confidence. In other cases, we can see Victims attacking their Persecutor and moving into the Persecutor role or being construed as the Persecutor. These same debates are evident in contests about legitimate victim status.

### **Who defines victims?**

For Butler (2016), lives are framed as either grievable or ungrivable from the perspective of those who wage war. Recognition of a sufferer as a legitimate 'victim' entails an acceptance that their suffering is 'grievable'. The powerful – the media, the authorities, the dominant elite - decide who to grieve and who not to grieve. A hierarchy of victimisation is created within the news media (Greer 2007) which identifies 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims. Herman and Chomsky's (2008) propaganda model of news points to how 'worthy' victims accounts are dramatically featured, detailed, and include expressive descriptions. Their stories are presented uncritically and the victims themselves are humanised, ensuring that the reader is emotionally invested. By way of contrast, the 'unworthy' victims accounts contain little detail and little attention is paid to them. (Herman, 2000). The implicit politicization of victimhood by the media processes described by Chomsky and Herman sits alongside the explicit politicization of victims by other actors - politicians, armed groups and victims themselves.

For political, administrative or social purposes, external agencies such as governments and the media develop implicit and explicit definitions of victimhood. These shift over time, with the political environment: the 'terrorists' imprisoned for the Birmingham bombings in the 1975 became the 'victims' of a gross miscarriage of justice by 1991; the several hundred men executed as 'cowards' and deserters during World War I become the 'victims' of inhumane ignorance of the mental health consequences of war (Johnson, 2015).

This narrowing of definition and clarification of who belongs to the category 'victim' becomes a necessity during the post-conflict period. The social and political institutions and divisions of a society have been shaped by political violence and in that sense all citizens of a society can universally be regarded as "victims". This is particularly so in societies with long standing conflicts, where the attritional effects of decades of violence have become entrenched and institutionalized.

However, such universal definitions of victims mask the distribution of the death and destruction caused by political violence which is invariably concentrated in certain geographical areas, communities and groups. Such inclusiveness does not serve the interests of dispensing reparations or justice to those who have directly suffered. Universal definitions are also resisted for political reasons, since certain groups claim exclusive rights to the label of victim whilst others resist it for political reasons.

### **A hierarchy of victims?**

Should a hierarchy of victims exist, or does it exist? In Northern Ireland, higher levels of compensation were paid to members of the police and their families damaged by the conflict than was given to members of the army; levels of compensation to civilians were lower still. In effect, a hierarchy is operated by the authorities. Furthermore, some civilians are denied compensation if they had a criminal conviction of any kind, where other bereaved families were given paltry amounts or no compensation since it was calculated on lost earnings. The Northern Ireland system was revised and a tariff system based on the extent and nature of injury was introduced, but was not applied retrospectively. The exclusion of those with criminal records, including driving offences, still pertains.

In the cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa, official mechanisms were established whereby victims were officially defined and recognized for the purposes of acknowledgement and reparations. In South Africa, this was a function of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where a taxonomy of victims and perpetrators was drawn up to assist the Commission, as follows:

## **A Taxonomy of Victims and Perpetrators**

**Victims**

**Perpetrators**

**versus**

Direct perpetrators  
Indirect perpetrators  
Institutional perpetrators (a.k.a. Active Group Perpetrators)  
Sectoral perpetrators (a.k.a. Passive Group Perpetrators)  
Perpetrators by default  
Beneficiaries  
Bystanders  
Passive or complicit perpetrators  
Direct victims  
Perpetrators by commission vs. perpetrators by omission  
Bystander complicity  
Victims once removed  
Victims by proxy  
Secondary victims

Source: Borer<sup>8</sup>, (2003: 1116)

In post-conflict Northern Ireland, the definition of victims was formalized in the Commission for Victims and Survivors Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 which defines the terms “victim and survivor” as “someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident” and also “someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis” for someone who has been injured. The definition includes “someone who has been bereaved” and “an individual may be psychologically injured” as a result of “witnessing a conflict-related incident” or “providing medical or other emergency assistance” in a conflict-related incident. Psychological injury is defined in the Act as the result of “Witnessing a conflict-related incident” or “Providing medical or other emergency assistance to an individual” in a conflict related incident. (Commission for Victims and Survivors Act (Northern Ireland) 2008).

### **Contest over victim status**

In the early stages of the peace process in Northern Ireland, the government’s Victims Liaison Unit came under pressure to include prisoners in their remit for victims. Objections from the newly formed victim advocacy groups in the unionist community, some of which contained former soldiers and police officers prevented the inclusion of prisoners.

According to this view, legitimate victim status cannot be granted to those in any way associated with non-state armed groups or ‘terrorism’, based on unilateral claims to the moral high ground, a statist position and rigid distinctions between innocence and the guilt.

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<sup>8</sup> Borer’s (2003) analysis of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission illustrates the complexity of definitional categories of victim and perpetrator, the indistinct boundaries and overlaps between them, and points out some individuals are both victims and perpetrators.

Groups such as 'Innocent Victims United' in Northern Ireland have campaigned to change the legal definition of victims and survivors to exclude all except those they describe as "innocent" victims of the Troubles.<sup>9</sup> Brewer (2010: 165ff) points out that these distinctions are aimed at making a claim to the primacy of the suffering of one's own group, thus seeking to de-legitimise others' claims to victimhood, emanating almost exclusively from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities (Breen Smyth, 2010). Northern Ireland's largest political party, The Democratic Unionist Party have argued that:

The current definition of victim, brought in under Direct Rule, is wrong. Terrorists must be excluded from the definition of victim. The DUP have already ... introduced a bill to the Assembly to exclude terrorists from the definition of victim. ... The DUP supports the immediate change in the definition of victim to exclude terrorists ...' (Democratic Unionist Party, n.d.)

Radford and Templer (2008: cited in Graham, n.d.) argue that this definition of 'innocent victims' distinguishes between those who did and did not bear arms in the conflict. But this is not quite the effect of the distinction<sup>10</sup>. 'Terrorism'- not the bearing of arms - is the issue, those to be excluded are those regarded as 'terrorists'<sup>11</sup>, whereas others who bore arms in the conflict may, in fact, be included. As we shall see below, veterans who bore arms may be regarded as victims by some, or the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association and were responsible for around 430 deaths in the conflict, mainly Catholic civilians<sup>12</sup> was not proscribed as a 'terrorist' organisation until 1992<sup>13</sup>, just before the peace process began. During the time of their most intense killing of Catholic civilians, the UDA was not regarded by the state as a 'terrorist' organisation, so their members could be considered victims, according to the DUP's argument.

### **Victims-as-perpetrators-as-victims**

Definitions of victim-hood and inclusion and exclusion are played out in an ongoing battle to establish 'perpetrator' and 'victim' as mutually exclusive categories in spite of evidence to the contrary (Smyth, 2003). The way in which perpetrators have been involved in violent action may

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<sup>9</sup> See Graham, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> See below, the discussion of the role of combatants as victims

<sup>11</sup> Some campaigners have argued for a much broader exclusion of sympathisers as well.

<sup>12</sup> When the UDA finally decommissioned its weapons, UDA representative Frankie Gallagher expressed regret to the organisation's victims:

"To all those in the community who have lost loved ones, we understand and we share in your sense of loss, but we are determined and are willing to play our full part in ensuring that the tragedy of the last 40 years will never happen again." (McDonald, 2010)

<sup>13</sup> The UFF were proscribed in 1973.



render the boundary between victim and perpetrator inextricably complicated (see Bouris, 2007. For example, Dominic Ongwen was charged with a war crime of which he is also a victim – the abduction of child soldiers (International Criminal Court, 2005). Ongwen was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army on his way from school aged 10. However, some years later, Ongwen was one of the five LRA commanders the International Criminal Court (ICC) deemed to be responsible for war crimes in northern Uganda. (Gordon, 2011)

State armies and returning injured veterans may be regarded as victims of a government's foreign policy, cannon-fodder damaged by a government's militarism on the one hand, whilst on the other, they may be seen as perpetrators of war crimes or victimizers of civilian populations (Coy, Woehrle and Maney, 2008).

Armed actors who shift roles by pointing to their own credentials as sufferers may avoid the uncomfortable consequences of being seen as a Persecutor. According to Karpman, the Rescuer may sets out to solve the problem and be a good humanitarian, they are often meeting their own needs for power, recognition as a 'good person' or enjoy having people dependent on them. The rescuer can act to keep people in their fixed roles and escalate the conflict or shift roles. Conflict resolution and post-conflict work is often correctly focused on armed actors so that violence to cease and long term security obtained. These armed actors must be engaged and 'humanized' in order to support their transition to peace-time roles. Yet this engagement and humanization can be – or appear to be - at the expense of justice. Judith Herman, in her 1992 classic work points out that:

In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.' (Herman, 2015: 7-8 citing Eitinger, 1980)

Some of the political mobilization of those who claim victim status focuses on who qualifies as a

legitimate victim. The complications facing the attribution of victim identity, legitimate 'victim' identity is not available to civilians from certain communities or groups. During the 2014 Israeli ground invasion of Gaza, retired Israeli General Giora Eiland opined that there was no such thing as innocent civilians in Gaza, saying that people in Gaza were to blame for this situation, just as Germany's residents were to blame for electing Hitler as their leader and thus 'rightfully...paid a heavy price for that...' (Daily Sabah, August 6, 2014). On the other side of the conflict, some Palestinian commentators have previously opined that 'there is no such thing as an Israeli civilian' (Human Rights Watch 2010: 32) some on the basis that because of Israeli conscription<sup>14</sup>, all Israelis were combatants.

### **Political activism and victim politics**

In Northern Ireland, Perhaps the most prominent person in the field of victim politics is William Frederick Frazer, known locally as Willie Frazer. He lives and works in South Armagh; after North and West Belfast, Armagh saw the highest death rates during the conflict<sup>15</sup> and according to "The True Story of South Armagh"<sup>16</sup>, Willie 'suffered greatly at the hands of Republican terrorists losing five members of his family including his father Robert in 1975. They had their home wrecked with bombs on numerous occasions.<sup>17</sup>'

On his website, he describes himself as representing a "non-sectarian, non-political organization to work in the interests of the innocent victims of terrorism in South Armagh."<sup>18</sup> His Wikipedia page describes him as "an Ulster loyalist activist and advocate for victims of Irish republican violence in Northern Ireland. He was the founder and leader of the pressure group Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR), an organization purporting to represent 'innocent victims', a leader of the 'Love Ulster' campaign and, more recently, the Belfast City Hall flag protests."<sup>19</sup> FAIR had its European funding withdrawn due its failure to adhere to the terms of funding, to be non-political and non-sectarian. Frazer has opposed the peace settlement, believes that the fight against 'terrorism' should continue.

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<sup>14</sup> Conscription in Israel is not universal, however, and certain categories of persons, such as Ultra Orthodox Haredi Jews have been exempt in spite of attempts to conscript them (Zeweloff, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> The death rate for residents of Belfast was 4.13 deaths per thousand and for Armagh the rate was 2.48 per thousand as compared with an equivalent rate for Fermanagh was 1.6, for Newry and Mourne 1.58 and North Down 0.44. Source: Fay, Morrissey and Smyth (1999) Table 5:3. Available at <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/cts/fay99.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Reasons for the foundation of FAIR available at [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/fair/fair\\_story.pdf](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/fair/fair_story.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> William Frazer's website available at [http://victims.org.uk/frazer2/?page\\_id=2](http://victims.org.uk/frazer2/?page_id=2)

<sup>19</sup> Wikipedia page 'Willie Frazer' available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie\\_Frazer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Frazer)

Willie Frazer's campaign encompasses members of the local<sup>20</sup> armed forces, the UDR and the RUC, whose role according to Frazer's rhetoric was that of armed combatants aiming to fight the IRA to the death. Even before the peace process began, allegations about their past deeds had emerged. As the peace process unfolds, the absence of a mechanism to deal with past human rights violations, instances of where members of these organizations went beyond the legal limits of their role has meant that they are seen as perpetrators, - Karpman's Persecutor role - by some. Frazer's campaign, however, represents their role as that of 'victim'.

In 2007, then deputy leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and later First Minister, Peter Robinson, told Frazer in a letter that he "might find it much easier to get co-operation with political representatives if you were genuinely involved in Victim Support rather than opposition politics). A survey of some of the language<sup>21</sup> emanating from William Frazer and his cohort in Northern Ireland indicates that they regard those involved in anti-state violence as not only disqualified from legitimate victim status, but as sub-human<sup>22</sup>. Certain lives are not grievable. His sense of being under continued threat and danger requires securitised and militarised solutions rather than peace-making or dialogue, according to him. For Frazer and others of similar disposition, their sense of victimhood and victimisation means that the war must continue, so that the perpetrators may be defeated. For them, the war continues. Frazer's articulation of a continued threat from 'terrorism' fuels his anger at the injustice of 'terrorists' getting away with murder whilst sitting in government. This preference for military solutions positions Frazer in many eyes as less a victims' advocate and more as a political activist, and as Robinson pointed out, in opposition to the peace process

Contests about legitimacy are also driven by competition for scarce resources. This is no different to other such competitions in civil society with one notable exception: the emerging discourse of 'veterans as victims.'

### **Veterans as victims**

The 'veterans as victims' trope sits within a broader trend in discourse about veterans that came to prominence during the Bush and Blair administration. It emerged as mediating narrative which focussed on the suffering and sacrifice of 'our troops' in the context of critiques of US and Allied

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<sup>20</sup> The Northern Ireland Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Ulster Constabulary rather than regular members of the British Army from outside Northern Ireland.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example <http://www.victims.org.uk/04.05.07.htm>; <https://www.facebook.com/william.frazer.58>; and <https://www.facebook.com/williamfrazerni/>.

<sup>22</sup> See, <https://www.facebook.com/william.frazer.58> for repeated descriptions of Republicans and IRA members as 'republican dirt', 'vermin' 'scum', 'trash' and so on.

foreign policy and deployments<sup>23</sup>. Widespread debates about the war in Iraq led to the formation of several organisations amongst veterans and members of the armed forces: in the US, Iraq Veterans Against the War (2004), and UK Veterans for Peace (2012), which were primarily peace rather than victims' organisations.

By 2007, the failures and toll of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan became clearer. As support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan waned, support for the troops, based on concern for bereaved families and disabled veterans did not (Hines et al, 2014). The English town of Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire began to hold repatriation ceremonies for the bodies of service personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and flown into the nearby RAF Lyneham. Mayor, Steve Bucknell, said: "We've been careful throughout this process not to get involved in the politics of the war. These repatriations are simply about the soldiers and their families and the support we give to the armed forces" (BBC, 2011).

In the interests of fiscal probity, Governments strive to define qualified veterans more tightly, whilst rates of veteran homelessness, mental illness and incarceration render the needs of veterans increasingly visible. Campaigners on behalf of veterans can use the 'military covenant' or what Dandeker et al (2006) call veterans' "unique contract of unlimited liability with the state"<sup>24</sup> to leverage resources from the government. In this regard, veterans-as-victims are in a unique bargaining position, possessing a political asset unavailable to most other categories of sufferers, a strong sense that governments have failed to honour their obligations to veterans prevails. Organisations such as Help for Heroes (founded in 2007) sprang up, describing themselves as: "strictly non-political. Wars can happen under any government. The Charity seeks to support those people wounded in war, not to comment on the reasons behind such conflicts"<sup>25</sup>.

Improved battle-field medicine has increased survival rates of soldiers deployed in hot wars, consequently seriously wounded soldiers who previously would have died now survive, but must live with often extensive and severe physical and psychological disabilities. Evidence continues to emerge that perpetrators of acts of violence in war also appear to suffer psychologically as a result

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<sup>23</sup> Non-state combatants, even those severely injured and disabled in combat, often resist being categorized as victims, emphasizing their choice to take up arms and the consequent acceptance of the risk entailed (Fay, Morrissey, Smyth and Wong, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> The military covenant was formalised in UK law in The Armed Forces Act (2011) which does not apply in Northern Ireland.

<sup>25</sup> Available at <http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/how-we-help/about-us/faqs/>

of their experience (see for example Upton Barr, Sullivan, Kintzle and Castro, 2016), even when that experience does not immediately seem to place them in harm's way. A recent study of drone operators, for example, reported that they exhibited PTSD symptoms after flying combat missions from outside the war zone (Pinchevski, 2015).

The victim discourse has been vehemently opposed by some within the military, who see it as a self-fulfilling prophecy. James Mattis, a retired four-star US Marine general, said: "There is no room for military people, including our veterans, to see themselves as victims even if so many of our countrymen are prone to relish that role." (Michaels, 2014). The portrayal of the veteran-as-victim undermines the 'war hero' narrative and has led to concern about the consequences for military morale and ultimately on military recruitment (Stann, 2016; Michaels, 2014). Nonetheless, the veteran-as-victim as a relative 'niche' newcomer to the victim field seems set to remain.

### **Sufferers, Victims and justice**

Approached from an individual psychological perspective, research in organisational psychology suggests three main factors that account for individual orientation to matters of justice: material self-interest; self-esteem; and deontological (moral) values. Although the research focuses on less severe cases than victims of armed conflict, Korsgaard, Meglino, and Call (2015) found that concern for the welfare of others affects individuals' decisions in relation to matters of justice. Moon, Kamdar, Mayer and Takeuchi (2008) confirm that concern for others is a powerful motivating force in individual decision-making about matters of justice. Blau (1964) suggests that the pursuit of justice must be seen in the context of social exchange relationships and the research as a whole suggests that persons higher in 'other orientation', less motivated by self-interest, tend to behave both unselfishly and unjustly, so that they can abandon the pursuit of formal justice. Alice's prioritisation of the socialisation of her children over any of her own feelings of anger or injustice, her desire to avoid involving her children in the dynamics of enmity, illustrates this finding.

### **Political mobilisation of victims**

When conflict ends or abates and the political environment shifts towards peace, a focus on victims and victim politics can emerge. This shift makes it possible to consider the damage that has been done, to reassess lines of division and re-visit the history of the conflict and one's own role in it. Governments can move beyond a war footing and allocate resources, including those attracted by a newly found peace, to repairing the economic, social and political damage of the past. In South Africa, Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, international donors and humanitarian

agencies have supported government and civil society to re-visit the past and to build new cross-sectional alliances and collaborations. Typically, these programmes reach only certain sections of society, two groups are often comparatively untouched: those associated with the middle and lower ranks of the old regime; and the poorest and most marginalised sections of society.

Elsewhere, those who have suffered as a result of political violence have mobilised politically on issues self-advocacy, self-help, healthcare, pensions or reparations or demands for justice. A wide range of self-help groups both delivering physical and mental health-care and advocating for such services for victims can be found in Northern Ireland<sup>26</sup>, South Africa, Israel and other conflicted and post conflict societies.

Some groups, such as the Bloody Sunday Trust<sup>27</sup>, Justice for the Forgotten (Dublin-Monaghan bombs) in the Republic of Ireland<sup>28</sup> and Justice for the 21<sup>29</sup> (Birmingham bomb) are associated with a single incident and campaign for justice, seeking inquiries and acknowledgement of responsibility, prosecutions or the truth about a particular incident. Others such as Relatives for Justice <http://relativesforjustice.com/about-2/> in Northern Ireland work with a wide range of incidents and have a focus on seeking justice and truth, whilst also providing social support. Other groups advocate for services such as pensions for a specific group, such as The Injured Campaign<sup>30</sup> which represents a cross-sectional group of people who were injured in the conflict in Northern Ireland. Large umbrella organisations have sprung up in South Africa (Khulumani Support Group<sup>31</sup>) Wave Trauma Centre in Northern Ireland<sup>32</sup> which offer a range of services country-wide. In the case of Khulumani, they also instituted an ill-fated legal action<sup>33</sup> against beneficiaries of Apartheid, notably *Khulumani v. Barclay National Bank Ltd.* And other US corporations, notably General Motors. Yet other organisations provide support and advocate for sufferers drawn from a specific identity group or political population, such as the Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Torture and War<sup>34</sup> or the Spanish Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo (Spanish Association of Victims of Terrorism) (AVT) which offers services to victims of by ETA, GRAPO, the Provisional Irish Republican Army and Al Qaeda but not to victims of extreme right wing groups such as GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación) or Warriors of Christ the King.

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example a list of groups at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/groups/victimgroups.html>

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.bloodysundaytrust.org/index-02.html>

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.dublinmonaghanbombings.org/home/>

<sup>29</sup> See <http://justice4the21.co.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/campaigns/the-injured-campaign-recognition-for-all>

<sup>31</sup> See <http://www.khulumani.net/>

<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/home>

<sup>33</sup> See <http://www.khulumani.net/khulumani/in-the-news/item/828-us-corporations-can-t-be-sued-for-apartheid-court-rules.html>

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.natal.org.il/English/>

Some have organised across societal divisions and enmities, to advocate jointly for their humanitarian and health care needs. In other cases, sufferers remain in their political silos, limiting their scope of concern to those in their own community and defining themselves according to who victimized them or according to the incident that caused their loss. In some of these latter cases, political activity and advocacy is focused obtaining services or justice and recognition for their suffering, in others antagonism to those who victimized them. Efforts towards reconciliation and reducing antagonism may have some success, but where societies are deeply segregated, or where political grievances remain unaddressed, victims politics tend to reflect and express antagonisms and enmities.

Others, such as Willie Frazer, who position themselves as victims' advocates, are more clearly political in their stance. Willie Frazer has contested at least six elections at both local and national level, but has failed to reach the quota and usually loses his deposit. He has been active politically on a range of issues, all associated with loyalist politics. There have been repeated allegations, which he denies, that Willie has been close links with loyalist paramilitary groups. In 2009, the police denied him a gun license<sup>35</sup> on the grounds that he associated with loyalist paramilitaries<sup>36</sup>. Willie Frazer publicizes his activities on social media, has had a series of websites, two Facebook pages and a Twitter account through which he attracts followers. He often appears alone in front of the camera, publicizing his views and activities and occasionally he uses these media to mobilise protests.

In Northern Ireland, where government funding for victims groups is conditional on recipients adopting anti-sectarian stances and avoiding overt political activism, some groups such as William Frazer's FAIR have been unable to adhere to these conditions and had funding withdrawn. Anger and antipathies run too deep to be quashed by funding policy or other regulations. For some sufferers, a hierarchy of victims is essential to their sense of rectitude, relying on clear divisions between right and wrong, where others have arrived at a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of conflict and been able to move past the divisions of war.

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<sup>35</sup> Belfast Telegraph 29/08/2009 'Willie Frazer: Police won't let me have a gun' Available at <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/willie-frazer-police-wont-let-me-have-a-gun-28492890.html>

<sup>36</sup> BBC News Wednesday, 27 October, 2004 'Protection move after court plea' Available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/3958149.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/3958149.stm)

## **Victims as public figures and political actors**

Some victims, associated with chosen traumas or those with messages that are coherent with media news values become regular participants in media discussions about victims, and over time some to be seen as the archetypal victim, suffering, usually magnanimous, and able to perform in front of a camera or microphone. They become by default spokespersons for the views of all who have suffered, even though there can be no one spokesperson for such a diverse and divided population. Their availability for interview and comment conveniently avoids the need for the media to delve deeper into the complexities of suffering as a result of violence. Searching for a 'human angle' on the latest violent incident has been instrumental in creating what might be cynically referred to as 'professional victims' who become proxies, shorthand, meeting the media need for coverage whilst avoiding extensive media research on victimization or engagement with a range of victims.

### ***Conclusion: the joint enterprise of war***

A persistent politics of victimhood, like war itself, divides people into moral categories with differential values attached to each category. The value of truth recovery and management of violent pasts is that they offer the possibility of recovering not only some of the truth, but of recovering the understanding that, in a society plunged into violent conflict, perpetrators behaved in ways that many of us in similar circumstances might behave. Systematically re-visiting the totality, not merely the iconic losses and tragedies, but all the institutional, cultural, behavioural and other seemingly innocent ways in which those tragedies were made possible, generates an understanding of the joint enterprise that war is. That understanding can offer the possibility of a new community with a common purpose, blurring the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

Some will resist this communion, because war is familiar. War tells us who we are and reaffirms our rectitude with a certainty that peace and common purpose deny. Those who cannot move out of the war footing will rely on the politics of victimhood to reinstate old divisions and re-visit old battle grounds in the hope of winning a war that is no longer fought by the methods they have used to fight it. After peace agreements are reached, rivalries and grievances ,may persist, but they are acted out peacefully, according to agreed principles of democracy. This can be enraging to those proficient in the old methods, who need outright victory and to punish or kill those they regard as sub-human.



Victim politics is one of several ways in which these old battles can be fought. The extent to which a society manages to understand and embrace those who cannot adjust to the new status quo, who are unwilling to relinquish the desire for victory is a measure of the robustness of the new institutions and the political will for peace.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the lack of a comprehensive truth recovery process has left many resentful of the few whose grievances have been investigated and this has created a new sense of injustice. In the wake of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry in particular, the sense that some lives are more valuable than others, some acts of violence are more problematic than others, has further fuelled a contested politics of victimhood. It is clear that the British government has no intention of instituting a comprehensive truth recovery process. In the absence of comprehensive mechanisms, responsibility for working with these tensions falls to civil society, whose sustained and creative efforts in peace-building established the conditions for the peace agreement in the first instance. For many understand the totality, the institutional, cultural, behavioural and other ways that undermine the joint enterprise that war is. And if all else fails, compassion for those who are condemned to fight the battles of the past is the best that can be achieved, for they, too, are victims of the past.

The relevant matters in the discussion about victims are to do with their suffering, the conditions of their life, the losses they have sustained and how these losses might be mitigated. In matters of human security, justice and future risks, here too, sufferers must sit at the centre of considerations. But sufferers' role in determining the direction of policy or law or punishment is determined, not by the status of the sufferer, but by their status as a human being with rights and responsibilities, and by their role in society and their position in civil life.

When sufferers organize themselves into self-advocacy groups focused on their own material, social and political needs, where they develop a well-articulated stance and where they operate alongside those in similar circumstances, irrespective of who caused them harm, they can provide a powerful political resource to a society. There is some evidence that sufferers who engage in this form of collective self-advocacy become happier healthier and more productive. The growing awareness of post-traumatic growth (see, for example, Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2014) where the experience of trauma can be positively re-configured and used from a strengths perspective are useful and hopeful concepts for working with suffering either in oneself or in others.

Sufferers/ victims are not devoid of responsibilities. As we have seen with Alice, she saw that

responsibility, as far as possible, to contain the suffering she endured. The sufferer has a central role in disallowing their suffering from being used to justify doing harm to others. As we saw with Alice and with Norman Finkelstein's parents who taught their son that their suffering in Nazi concentration camps must not be used to justify the oppression of Palestinians, magnanimity on the part of the sufferer may be their most valuable contribution, not only to building a peaceful society but to the rebuilding of their own lives, the resumption of their own role as an agentic citizen and as a person of moral worth and value. In the end, this might be the most powerful form of resistance to the actions of those who harmed them.

10,571 words

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