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# **Volunteer participation and learning through peace building in Northern Ireland.**

**Michael Anthony Bartle**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this study is with the experiences of volunteers engaged in peace building activities in the contested society of Northern Ireland. It takes a qualitative approach utilising semi-structured in-depth interviews to consider their participation and learning.

Fourteen volunteers were individually interviewed. As such, the approach adopted in this thesis is one in which the volunteer is placed at the centre of the analysis utilising grounded theory methods which stress discovery and emerging theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Narratives about volunteering arise largely from the accounts filed by researchers, practitioners and journalists. They depict a rosy tinted picture of volunteering. This study contends that a fuller account needs the voices of volunteers to be front of stage. Volunteer accounts provide a rich repository of knowledge, experience and understanding concerning areas such as peace building, volunteer participation and learning. These three areas are seen as emblematic to the study.

In order to illustrate participation a framework is promoted to explore the complexities of contextual or relational influence and modes of participation. Collectively they point to different experiences and outcomes that stress belonging, radical learning and collectivity. Unlike formal learning about peace building which is framed systematically volunteering highlights a more informal and organic curriculum. A significant absence is due to the dominant discourse that volunteer learning is a by-product.

Emerging themes, volunteer descriptions and current research are synthesised to define the importance of informal learning, a greater understanding of peace building and clearer modes of participation.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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Michael A. Bartle

## **Introducing Volunteering and Peace Building**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis is specifically about volunteer participation and learning through involvement in peace building experiences in Northern Ireland. Although considerable volunteer research exists generally and in relation to social, communal and economic development, for example, current research examines volunteering as a cultural construct, as a counter to depletion of social services, and it being formalised and professionalized (Davis Smith, 2000), less apparent are the experiences of volunteers: their views, their involvement and their learning especially within the area of peace building. This is not surprising. There is something profoundly difficult in researching in proximity to the suffering of others (Bar-on, 1996). There is also the difficulty of understanding such situations constructively without clarity of the nature and characteristics of conflict and contested contexts (Lederach, 1997; McCartney, 2006). Furthermore, there are challenges concerning understanding participation and learning.

What then are the issues and challenges that need to be sensitively considered? Griffiths (1998) suggests that there are methodological, epistemological and practical issues when researching in contexts where injustice, violence and inequalities prevail. The thesis, therefore, aims to explore such apparent deficiencies, contextual nuances and methodological challenges. To do so the thesis will, first, consider how volunteering is currently described and discussed in relation to peace building within the Northern Ireland context. The second task is to explore and clarify what is understood as volunteers as learners. What is learnt and how is such learning understood by volunteers. Finally and associated to these tasks is, whether volunteers who learn about and engage in peace building inform a larger



picture of volunteer participation. To achieve this, it is argued, requires a focus on volunteers' own experiences and perspectives.

## 1.2 The Context

The last forty years have seen unprecedented levels of social and political upheaval within Northern Ireland. A lack of consensus about governability, national identity, structure and domestic legitimacy together with personal and communal experiences of violence, mistrust and segregation has resulted in much fear, confusion and fatigue (Fitzduff, 1995). Northern Ireland is not, however, a society without hope or determination. During this same time the Province has experienced a buoyant and vigorous rise in the voluntary and community sector although participation rates in formal volunteering still lag behind the UK and Ireland (Brudney & Williamson, 2000). Such a rise has been accompanied by, "a significant growth in the number of voluntary and community groups" (Kearney & Osborne, 2003: 41), responding to 'the troubles' and specifically in the fields of peace and reconciliation (McCartney, 1999).

In general terms, 'the troubles' is a colloquial term used to describe roughly a 30 year period of civil unrest since the late 1960s<sup>1</sup>. It is also used as a frame of reference to explain organisational, political, historical and social rhetoric. This includes explanations concerning acts of violence, conflict and intimidation (English, 2003). Furthermore, as an explanatory term it is used to explain how two communities can survive conjointly with contradictory myths, histories and aspirations. Whilst acknowledging these broad definitions, there is also a need to understand the evolving relationship of an individual's movement through 'the troubles' (Whyte, 1994). For some their experiences of 'the troubles' is of the emerging peace agreements of the 1980's and 1990's when violence continued at a level, if more selectively than in the 1970s. For others, it is the development and legacy of established segregation, territorial symbols and polarised structures without engaging

directly with any sectarian conflict. Finally, there are some in Northern Ireland who manage to avoid 'the troubles' directly, either through choice, luck or circumstance. As one volunteer notes:

*R7 My experience of the troubles, well it's mostly being like an outsider looking in. Although I've grown up in Northern Ireland I have not really had any direct experience. My only real experience of sectarianism was at school.*

Here we are introduced to the complexities of such construction where conflict and the language of conflict hold different values in relation to life experiences. We are also introduced to an element of the troubles - Sectarianism - which in its crudest analysis is a negative judgement which involves religion. More than that, it expresses a destructive pattern of relating to others and the systems that sustain and distort difference. Overall then, 'the troubles' is an overarching construct that gives meaning to individuals, communities and society in the language they use, the places they visit, the friends they make and the way they live.

One response to 'the troubles' is the development of Community Relations<sup>2</sup> (CR) work. This may simply involve different communities working on issues of common concern. It may take the form of historical or cultural exploration. It may also involve focus upon controversial issues such as parades, intimidation or bereavement as a result of the troubles. In doing CR work there is an accord with democratic principles and human relations approaches. There is also a need to understand the lack of relationship and interaction between polarised communities especially those identified as republication/nationalist, catholic/protestant communities. Until recently, Community Relations was the umbrella term most often used to describe different kinds of contact and development work within and between such communities. Although 'good relations' has superseded this to embrace an increasingly more diverse population and to 'move Northern Ireland beyond

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<sup>1</sup> See Fraser (2000) for an historical and chronological summary of this period.

<sup>2</sup> The term cross-community initiative seems to have been coined to describe focused work that exists between the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community and the Catholic/nationalist/republican community.

the troubles', Community Relations is still used at grass roots level. Types of CR work include single identity work - activities which do not cross traditional boundaries; cultural diversity - promotion and celebration of differences; and, cross-community work - the bringing together of people to raise awareness, develop understanding and engage in sustainable and interdependent activities<sup>3</sup>. Research emerging from CR work has added considerable understanding to the political, social, organisational and personal impact of conflict (Kelly, 2006) allowing important democratic principles to emerge such as Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (EDI). Acheson, Cairns, Stringer, & Williamson (2006) and Morrow (2000) note, among others, a burgeoning voluntary and community sector replete with experience and expertise.

Throughout Northern Ireland community organisations act as a key mechanism by which CR work is undertaken and delivered. There are many such examples. Some work within specific geographical boundaries such as the Sandy Row Community Development Agency which promotes peace and reconciliation by providing opportunities and voluntary support for those most disadvantaged by the conflict in an area of Belfast. Others have a specific target group and work across several counties such as Cumann Na Meirleach Ard Mhaca Theas - a dedicated programme for political ex-prisoners. Others work at a national and international level, for example, the Corrymeela Community ([www.corrymeela.org](http://www.corrymeela.org)) and Trocaire ([www.trocaire.org](http://www.trocaire.org)). In all cases voluntary involvement is promoted, although how volunteers are involved and managed differs considerably.

### **1.3 Volunteering in Northern Ireland**

Despite this growth there exists a relative lack of scholarly attention to volunteers in Northern Ireland. Any attention there has been has, until recently, focused mostly upon traditional or voluntary organisations,

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<sup>3</sup> For further information, see: [www.community-relations.org.uk](http://www.community-relations.org.uk)

initiatives and movements<sup>4</sup>. Research has established the number of volunteers, trends and avenues of participation (Davis Smith, Ellis, Howlett & O'Brien, 2005; Volunteer Development Agency 2005). Furthermore, information exists on retention, management and motivation to volunteer (Kearney & Williamson, 2001; Mac Neela, 2003; Williamson, 1995). Analysis of strategic partnerships, neighbourhood regeneration schemes and community initiatives suggests further understanding is needed to effectively integrate volunteers at an organisational level (Williamson, Scott & Halfpenny, 2000). More than a third are involved with religious organisations and many volunteer with sports organisations as well as those involving young people and children (Williamson, 1995). Bacon (1998, 2003) has, for example, utilised surveys and case studies to consider the impact of faith-based volunteering and Bamford & Williamson (1999) examined volunteer commitment extending beyond the Province to include responses to international crises, events and organisations. Limited attention has also focused upon voluntary organisations and strategies involved in the very heart of 'the troubles' (Kearney & Osborne, 2003).

At a governmental level volunteering currently occupies a dynamic relationship within the UK and Ireland (Davis Smith, 2000; Lewis, 2005). This relationship includes promoting active citizenship, lifelong learning, fostering caring communities and economic assessment as well as the relationship and expectation of professionals working alongside volunteers (Birrell & Williamson, 2001; Milligan & Fyfe, 2004; Volunteer Development Agency, 2005). As Putnam (2000: 128) suggests, "volunteering is part of the syndrome of good citizenship and political involvement"<sup>5</sup>. Valuing volunteering from a different perspective, Gratton, Nichols, Shibli & Taylor (1997) note how sports volunteers contribute an estimated value of £1.5 billion per annum to the UK and others, including Davis Smith, Ellis,

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bacon's (2003), survey of faith-based organisations in Northern Ireland and Crawford's (2003) study on volunteer involvement in the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

<sup>5</sup> See also, Garland, W (2004) Civil Renewal Report, for relationship between individual involvement and active citizenship. Community Service Volunteer (CSV)

Howlett & O'Brien (2005) and Mac Neela (2003), note the role of the voluntary sector to counter the reduction of health and social welfare related provision.

What is less frequently explored is the actual experience of volunteering. There are exceptions. In the UK, Hatch (1983) and Brooks (2002) and in NI, O'Hagan<sup>6</sup> (2001) and Bacon (1998; 2003) utilise volunteer experiences in their accounts. Other voluntary organisations do integrate volunteer accounts often as exemplars of particular practices, innovations or to demonstrate 'the human touch'. See, for example, the Corrymeela Community ([www.corrymeela.org](http://www.corrymeela.org)). Although there is enormous interest in volunteers helping, encouraging and enabling people to learn relatively few studies consider volunteer accounts and their own learning engaged in peace building. This thesis is concerned with this relative lack of attention to volunteer learning.

For this study all volunteers had in various forms volunteered with the Corrymeela Community. This community has, as an open Christian community based in Northern Ireland for nearly four decades, sought to work in the general area of community relations and reconciliation. Many early ideas around the concept of reconciliation were pioneered in and through Corrymeela either through its residential centre in the rural coastal town of Ballycastle or its office in Belfast. Those involved with Corrymeela would describe themselves as supporters, enablers and catalysts, so that others may take reconciliation and community relations issues further. Corrymeela's work is concerned with the multiplying potential arising out of enabling and empowering individuals (staff, members, volunteers and programme participants), groups and organisations to 'own' their own concerns, agenda and issues ([www.corrymeela.org](http://www.corrymeela.org)).

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<sup>6</sup> Tragically, the author became another victim of 'the troubles', the day after completing the last chapter of this book.

Volunteers engage with the Corrymeela Community in a number of ways. For some, as full-time volunteers on 6 or 12 month programmes at its residential centre. For others, their contribution may be defined as part-time, assisting at weekends, seasonal events or episodic encounters. Alternatively, people assist in various community-based events or groups. Finally, there are those that simply 'lend-a-hand' when they have a spare afternoon. The main aim of this thesis is, therefore, to investigate the experience of people engaged in peace building as volunteers from such various inputs.

The study will use a phenomenological design, as elaborated in Chapter 3, by talking and listening to volunteers in order to ascertain meaning engendered by such experiences. The discussion presented, however, has wider implications for volunteering and conflict in general. As Sixsmith & Boneham (2003) and Putnam (2000) note, volunteering and voluntary action have clear implications within the areas of social, political and personal change. The accounts presented, arguments forwarded and literature discussed aim to explore the experiences, thoughts and reflections of such volunteers. What do they do, how do such experiences contribute within the field of peace and reconciliation and what impact does it have on volunteers themselves?

That there is relatively little attention to this specific area of volunteering is perhaps not surprising since volunteering crosses many academic boundaries, including; social capital (Putnam, 2000), informal learning (Field and Spence, 1998; McGivney, 2001), career planning (Brooks, 2002), leisure and work (Graham & Foley, 2001), health and welfare (Milligan & Conradson, 2006) and civil society (Garland, 2004; Dekker, 2002). Volunteering is also located in discourses of geographical position, motivation, rates of involvement and social policy (Cockram, 2002; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Additionally, and as will be discussed later, peace building and volunteering are both contested and contextual terms not easily researched or defined (Knight, 1991; Lukka & Ellis, 2001).

Furthermore, given the considerable attention to volunteers engaged in violent and radical activity compared with those who act as mediators, voluntary counsellors and community helpers (Kearney, 2003), it may be possible to surmise that such volunteering is often overshadowed by the visibility of violence. Conversely, does volunteering within the area of peace building need to be hidden to be effective? Put simply, it is not easily researched or understood, as Cochrane & Dunn (2002: 151) note:

Much of the most useful activity in this field is conducted invisibly and is not tied to particular events; it is not often appreciable when it is carried out, its value only becoming apparent in combination with other events and actions when viewed over time.

A final reason connected to the above point reflects upon the degree of sensitivity researching certain aspects of volunteering (Kelly, 2004). The extent to which such research encroaches, for example, upon people's lives or the challenges of ensuring data quality when such topics limit approaches and issues of disclosing sensitive experiences introduce research contingencies less commonly found in other studies (Lee, 1993). The unusual, the sensitive, making public private experiences all promote challenges to research at every stage and level, ethically, methodologically and professionally. Peace building volunteers are no exception. Care is needed, for example, to avoid vicarious traumatic re-enactment, when asking volunteers to reflect upon personal experiences of disclosure or those that uncover highly politicised contexts (Apfel & Simon, 1996; Bloom, 2003).

#### **1.4 Volunteers and Learning**

The relationship between volunteering and learning is complex and does not have an easily prescribed framework. There is, however, a growing awareness of the significance and scale of learning that takes place in informal settings, and the potential of volunteer settings and experiences to

provide learning opportunities (Darvill, Perkins, & Unell, 1988; Daniels, 2003). Cloonan & Crossan (*op cit.*) suggest benefits of broadening social horizons and positive intergenerational relations. Other researchers suggest greater personal focus on service learning to reflect the motivation to serve (Shea & Mattson, 1998) or local knowledge and skill development (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). Bringing these facets together, Foley (1999) suggests a close link between incidental learning and social action. An important aspect of this thesis is, therefore, to explore and clarify what is understood as volunteers as learners. This is not as complex as it might seem. Many familiar volunteering questions, looked at slightly differently, are indicators of a picture where learning and volunteering interact. As Davis Smith (2000) notes, volunteering in its many guises sustains civic engagement, promotes individual participation and reflects conditions of learning.

Volunteers involved in peace building activities are constantly engaging with issues and interests that people bring with them, fostering learning as it occurs often without appreciating the nuances of such meaning. That they must learn to 'think on their feet', sharing concerns and expressing qualities, is not new and reflects a long tradition of voluntary and informal education (Jeffs & Smith, *ibid*). Here then are some of the challenges of understanding volunteer learning: it is tacit, organic, based on opportunity for dialogue and contribution. Furthermore, such experiences straddles informal, non-formal and service-based learning raising the question, therefore, how such learning may be conceptualised. Through peace building activity such experiences raises the potential for confronting controversial and sensitive issues. Volunteers may be nervous or apprehensive, lacking in expertise or facilitator /mediation skills. They may fear offending oppressed groups or dealing with intransigent beliefs. Being open to such variety of experiences is the challenge facing such volunteers. Understanding past events, struggling against power, developing human capacities and working to transform the future is the risk and the context of volunteers as informal educators (Minow, 1998).



### 1.5 Positioning the Thesis

In considering the individual experiences of volunteers engaged in and learning about peace building this thesis is firmly located within the tradition of qualitative research as advocated by McNeill & Chapman (2005). That is, volunteers are active, aware of much that is going on in a social situation and capable of making choices about how to interact and act. They are a social phenomenon but may be unaware of some of the social. As such, this thesis acknowledges that the research process is organic, "inextricably linked with the development of analytical ideas and the collection of data" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 51). In adopting a qualitative approach it aims to explore the individual experiences of volunteers engaged in peace building activities, within the contested society of Northern Ireland. This is not to suggest that individual voluntary experiences are necessarily disparate, isolated or disconnected, there simply to be plucked and tied conveniently together. Nor is it to ignore chance encounters, personal or professional experience. This thesis aims to interrogate such experiences to view those elements which may be interrelated, distinctive and conjoined or emerge as themes. As such, the approach adopted in this thesis is one in which the volunteer is placed at the centre of the analysis utilising grounded theory methods which stress discovery and emerging theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). There is a need, therefore, to compare, contrast and reflect how volunteers mention, talk, posit and understand their volunteering experiences.

This research is also instigated as a result of ten years working with volunteers in Northern Ireland. Thus, there is a need to identify the position of myself, as researcher; within the research process and text (see Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of issues relating to this). This suggests at the outset that the research has user-relevance. As such 'users' include volunteers, other staff working within voluntary-based organisations and volunteering. Agreeing with Clough (2002), the positioning of this thesis is about taking

nothing for granted, worrying endlessly and accepting the overwhelming nature of researching others as a process of care, discovery and learning.

### **1.6 Aims and objectives**

Despite these definitional complexities, methodological challenges and the cultural context, what should be clear is that the main aim of this research is to examine the experiences of volunteers engaged in peace building activities within a contested society. To assist the study's focus three specific objectives emerge from this aim:

- To explore the existing knowledge and understanding of volunteers engaged in peace building activities and initiatives.
- To establish the meaning and significance of such participation within a contested society such as Northern Ireland.
- To identify the impact of such volunteering experiences upon themselves, thereby considering what is understood as 'volunteers-as-learners, learning about peace'.

To achieve this aim and objectives, the study starts by considering the structure needed as described below.

### **1.7 Thesis Structure**

The thesis is divided into five chapters. This chapter, the first, has laid the foundations for the thesis. The aim has also generated key objectives in relation to the concept of volunteering in general and peace building volunteers specifically. These objectives receive greater attention in later chapters. The contribution and justifications for this research have been introduced and initial definitions presented.

The second chapter reviews current and recent literature surrounding volunteering to provide further clarification of the boundaries and direction of this study. Namely, how are volunteers in contested societies, engaged in

peace building activities, currently understood? From this contextual literature review many of the issues introduced above will be developed. Here, I refer to the differing perspectives on volunteering noted by Putnam (2000) and Bacon (2003), among others. The areas of peace building and volunteers as learners are introduced, remembering that much of the research is contextual. Indeed, it could be argued that every author is remarking on practices which are particular to location. The work of Spinner-Halev (2003), for example, highlights the educational context of a contested society when he argues for segregated education in Israel/Palestine. This is in direct contrast to Northern Ireland's Education for Mutual Understanding initiative (Smith & Dunn, 1990; Smith & Robinson, 1992, 1996). This contrast in no way detracts from the important issues which other authors raise in relation to volunteering. They do, however, highlight the importance of context and historical backdrop.

Chapter three discusses the methodology. In doing so three main research efforts are identified. Initially, the study reflects upon informal and unfocused exchanges between volunteers and myself whilst I was working at a community-based peace and reconciliation centre - the Corrymeela Community. These exchanges provided the impetus and background understanding for this study. They can be summarised as chance encounters and professional contact.

Second, an attempt is made to draw upon the existing body of knowledge and literature concerning volunteering in Northern Ireland, the U.K and Ireland. To a large extent such literature has been produced either within the voluntary and community sector itself - in the form, for instance, of Volunteer Development Agency (VDA) and Community Relations Council (CRC<sup>7</sup>) documents and reports - or has been generated through the establishment of volunteer research centres (Centre for Voluntary Action

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<sup>7</sup> See CRC (1998) *Dealing with Difference*, directory of peace building related organisations and groups.

Studies, University of Ulster, Coleraine). There are, however, a number of other related organisations, independent and international journals that add to the sector generally and focus upon Northern Ireland specifically. Gaskin (2004) provides an overview of research on volunteering within the UK and notes current knowledge gaps such as; civic engagement, exclusion and non-traditional volunteering.

Third, and that which is developed in this thesis, is the design and implementation of data collection in order to focus upon the aim and objectives as set out above. In this study data was collected from fourteen volunteers all of whom had in varying capacities volunteered in what may be broadly termed 'peace building' at 'the Corrymeela Community'. Although each person had volunteered in other settings and organisations, access to the above organisation permitted this study to emerge. The discussion set out in the following chapters' reports the findings of such data collection from the above volunteers (see page 154 for volunteer profiles). The main data collection method is interviewing starting with pilot interviews and subsequently refined in-depth semi-structured interviews. Analysis is drawn from such findings to explore further some of the emerging findings and, in particular, to draw out some of the issues and challenges surrounding the experiences of volunteers in the area of peace building.

Chapter four discusses the interaction between volunteer accounts and thematic understanding. It is an attempt to hear responses and narratives about their lives through voluntary experiences. Chapter five brings the study to an obvious conclusion. In doing so, there is a convergence of my experience, that of the volunteers interviewed and other researchers' comments. Many studies offer recommendations, and this one is no different although there is no attempt to extrapolate to other contested contexts.

## Chapter 2

### Volunteering in the Northern Ireland Context

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will, first, explore the prevailing research in volunteering within the contested society of Northern Ireland. Such examination will build upon the contextualisation introduced in the previous chapter, as well as explore some of the assumptions which underpin current volunteer research. Being a contested society, research has emerged to reflect the differences and pose unique challenges for researchers<sup>8</sup>. This will culminate in developing a working definition of volunteering. The second aim of this chapter will be to examine the literature surrounding volunteers-as-learners. As raised in chapter 1, this is not as complex as it might seem. Pictures of volunteering often provide an intersection between experience and learning. The final aim is to consider volunteer participation. In doing so the chapter will use available volunteer research to refine the focus of this thesis. I will close by identifying the extent to which research currently enlightens understanding of volunteer participation and learning within the area of peace and reconciliation.

#### 2.2 An Initial View of Volunteering in Northern Ireland

The concept of volunteering has long association with expectations of things that are considered desirable, beneficial and approved of. As Lukka and Ellis (2001: 90), note, “volunteering implies a service delivery model of ‘doing good.’” An initial picture of volunteering, therefore, is a very positive one - of middle-class, middle-aged charity shop workers, marathon-running fundraisers or gap-year students engaged in purposeful and expressive activity (Davis Smith, Ellis, Howlett & O’Brien, 2005). It is one of do-gooders doing

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Jenkins, D. (1988) *Chocolate Cream Soldiers: Sponsorship, Ethnography and Sectarianism*, in R. Murphy & H. Torrance (Ed.) *Evaluating Education: Issues and Methods*. P.C.P. Ltd.: London.

good, people wishing to give back to society, keeping busy, personal development or life-changing turning points. In Northern Ireland there is an added dimension of promoting better relations within and between communities (Acheson, Cairns, Stringer & Williamson, 2006). Terms frequently used to describe this positive volunteering picture include, commitment, participation, vibrancy, a dynamic force, empowering people and communities (VDA, 2005). This 'well-off' and positive picture needs to be challenged, I would suggest, for several reasons.

First, the tendency to romanticise voluntary input and the failure to recognise the dynamics from political interference, business involvement and even incivility in volunteering which, in turn, raises considerable ambiguities and contradictions<sup>9</sup>. Kaldor (2006: 86) notes that, "an active civil society tends to counterbalance the distrust of politicians, the alienation from political institutions, the sense of apathy and futility that provides a potential basis for populist tendencies."

Second, in Northern Ireland some voluntary development and associated funding has resulted directly from the political and administrative vacuum in service and policy provision. Voluntary and community activity acted in the absence of local governance and subsequent structural, social or welfare depletion (see, for example, Williamson, Scott & Halfpenny, 2000; McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). Interestingly, this has led to a vibrant community and voluntary sector replete with character and understanding for shaping the voluntary sector that differs from other *home countries* (Brudney & Williamson, 2000; Billis, 2001).

Third, personal trauma, revenge, 'moral coercion' and challenging societal obligation have resulted in the recruitment and participation of people into a variety of voluntary activities and groups. These include, for example,

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the Volunteer Development Agency (VDA), Northern Ireland (2005) sees voluntary and community participation incorporating the business community and government.

community and voluntary organisations such as the Belfast Interface Project (BIP). A local organisation established in 1995 with a remit to identify the major issues of concern to interface communities in Belfast. Interface areas are areas where different communities interact, usually through acts of aggression or violence. In some interface areas boundaries (peace walls) have been built to reduce the potential for violence. There are also organisations that work throughout Northern Ireland and beyond such as Mediation Northern Ireland, The Corrymeela Community and The Peace People (see, for example CRC [1998], directory of such organisations). There are also international organisations such as The Red Cross<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, there are paramilitary organisations which openly promote their voluntary origins. Crawford (2003: 57) describes, “the UDA needed volunteers and that the volunteers would be armed and trained in combat. He guaranteed that every volunteer would receive training and a gun”. As Ian Paisley, in a speech in 1986, to rally and motivate people states: “My men are ready to be recruited under the crown to destroy the vermin of the IRA. But if they [security forces] refuse to recruit them, then we will.... to destroy the IRA ourselves” (Hall, 1997). Accounts of such voluntary movements raises the question, is volunteering in conflictual and post-conflictual societies open to a wider cultural interpretation or repertoire?

Fourth, issues of professionalism, the management of volunteering and inclusion promotion suggest a growing practitioner and policy literature that sometimes assumes volunteering as a generic and passive recipient of external principles. It develops out of organisational need or societal concerns rather than individual, voluntary understanding or experiences (Locke, Ellis & Davis Smith, 2003; Kearney, 2003; Davis Smith, Ellis, Howlett & O'Brien, 2005). Putnam (2000: 128), for example, suggests how changing demographics and communal resistance to change result in a younger

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<sup>10</sup> See also Franberg (2002), “The social construction of femininity: the initial phase of education of Red Cross nurses in Sweden” for a review of the origins of the Red Cross which demonstrate trans-national appeals for voluntary participation that also highlight societal and contextual issues.

population 'less disposed to civic engagement'. People today, he concludes, are two to three times more likely to engage in "personal rather than community service". Although this assertion has more recently been challenged, is there a pragmatic and political development in volunteering without fully appreciating the context or impact (Milligan & Fyfe, 2004)? One volunteer, for example, interviewed raised these issues and question Putnam's assertion when reflecting upon the role of volunteering within a political and organisational context:

R12 *...the volunteering that I am trying to help develop is a real form of active citizenship actually giving young people space to attack social injustices that exist not from being an expert on the issue simply from helping support young people do something about it.*

This is not to ignore the valuable contribution made by volunteers engaging in life changing personal development, local enterprise, altruistic endeavour, or in the care of relatives and friends (Ellis, 1996). It is, however, to recognise that a fuller picture of volunteering needs to include those who do not traditionally appear since their contribution is not easily measured or understood (Constenius & Saxton, 2000).

### **2.3 Volunteering for Peace Building**

As suggested above, the Northern Ireland context adds particular ambiguities. Here, for example, a person's sense of giving is shaped by the centuries of violence, the perceptions and experiences of oppression and highlighted social inequalities. Focusing upon volunteering in situations of conflict and ongoing tension, therefore, needs to be understood in relation to each historical context, according to Bruce (1992) and Williamson, Scott & Halfpenny (2000). The 17<sup>th</sup> World Volunteer Conference, 2002 was different from many other volunteer conferences in that, rather than reflect upon or develop an understanding of volunteering generally, it opened up discussion around volunteering as a peace building tool reflecting upon a number of conflictual contexts. Bruce's (*op cit.*) study on Loyalist paramilitary violence highlights how, at different historical moments, volunteering can reflect



particular perspectives. Consider, for example, the words 'activist', 'freedom fighter' and 'terrorist'. Each of these terms locates the person described within a particular moral framework, timescale and social/political context. Furthermore, each term, strongly associated with volunteering, might describe particular identities and, in different contexts, the same person! Groups, organisations or governments may also interpret such words as a source to tackle a particular social, political or economic issue<sup>11</sup>.

McCartney (1999) suggests that increased community activity, has, in recent decades rejected polarised politics and supported paralysed communities to work for social change. This, he suggests, has broadened the middle ground to support the political peace process. This does not, however, ignore the difficulties in challenging oppression and cultural sectarianism. An initial view of voluntary action within NI suggests that 'the troubles' has stifled voluntary involvement or growth (Brudney & Williamson, 2000). This is echoed within other elements of civil engagement, such as adult learning, where the troubles have impacted upon people's predisposition to get involved (Field & Spence, 1998).

There is no doubting that place is both a frame of voluntary analysis and an interaction between social experience and community understanding (Delanty, 2003). Although Milligan & Conradson's (2006) offers a geographical perspective on voluntarism, their position allows two other issues to emerge. First, how do particular localities that incorporate interface areas, territorial symbols and segregated lifestyles impact upon voluntary activity generally? Second, what does this mean to the volunteer 'on the ground'? In short, opportunities to reach out, recruit and support volunteers are geographically influenced.

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<sup>11</sup> Cloonan and Crossan (2002), for example, explore the role of the voluntary and community sectors for widening access and tackling social exclusion.

There is also the issue of awareness of communal and societal frontiers. Liechty and Clegg (2001), for example, suggest that ignorance, complicity and collusion still exist to sustain perceptions, distance and boundaries. Benign sectarianism or complicity allows sectarianism to continue unhindered and even develop. This includes voluntary membership or employment as a result of such violence and/or association with organisations that fail to act against such oppression or division. Bacon (1998; 2003) adds that some faith-based voluntary organisations sustain a communal and 'comfortable apartheid' in how they reach out (or fail to) for social need. More recently, McVeigh & Rolston (2007) suggest that sectarianism's development includes other bigoted reactions such as racism. Furthermore, Laqueur (2001) notes the impact of violence on voluntary recruitment to paramilitary organisations as well as the impact upon those already engaged in violent activity.

To what extent radical activity can be counted or understood as a form of volunteering, however, is debateable. Para-militarism, for example, does represent a strong sense of giving to a particular community or cause and is perceived by some as benefiting others. Davis Smith (2000), for example, notes how areas of mutual aid, service to others, active participation and campaigning help define the activities of volunteering. This notion of participation ignores why such violence or oppression cannot be seen as volunteering since the exercise of power through such activity seeks to dominate and coerce rather than disperse or support. Thus, in post-conflictual societies, the definition of volunteering requires an understanding of both activity and context rather than suggest an inclusion of violent activity as a term of reference.

This contextual complexity is not unique to Northern Ireland. Yazawa's (2003) focus upon volunteer exchange programmes between Japan and Korea as well as Gnecco de Ruiz's (2003) examination of the role of volunteers helping displaced families in Columbia, highlight the difficulties

of understanding volunteering in a traditional sense. They suggest, collectively, that each story needs to be understood within the context, whether that is 'the troubles', the Japanese occupation of Korea or rural Guerrilla warfare in Columbia<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, Coy and Woehrle (2000) suggest that relatively little has been done to explore the impact or contribution of peace building volunteering. Porter's (2003) seminal text, *The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, for example, fails to make any mention of the contribution of volunteering, either positive or negative. Porter takes a political position to suggest that if reconciliation mattered enough to enough people in Northern Ireland it would be obtained. He ignores, however, the contribution of community engagement or reconciliation work that is an important facet of Northern Ireland voluntary community (Kearney, 2003).

What is emerging, however, is a growing body of research surrounding the impact upon those subjected to such violence (Bruce, 1992; Laqueur, 2001) and the various responses (Apfel and Simon, 1996; <http://www.torturecare.org.uk>). This also reflects an increased interest on those who volunteer to challenge, mitigate or console those who are victims, bystanders and perpetrators within such societies. The research that exists, however, is of an uneven distribution, focusing in greater detail on certain situations or groups than on others. What is clear within N.I., however, is that volunteering is not just about service and giving but also includes contextual challenges, radicalism and activism (Lederach, 1997; <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/northern-ireland/uncharted-waters.php>).

Birrell and Williamson (2001), Fitzduff (1988), Jarman & O'Halloran (2000), Morrow (2000), and Morrow & Wilson (1995), offer some insight into the

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<sup>12</sup> Laqueur (2001), for example, notes the similarities between the role of the IRA in Northern Ireland and ETA in Northern Spain.

issues related to volunteers and peace building in Northern Ireland. Their studies indicate that volunteers engaged in peace building have yet to have their experiences fully explored. They also intimate that it is unclear what has been learned from such volunteer experiences and stories. Bacon (1998: 57-59) surveyed faith-based organisations to understand the role of organised voluntary activity and the relationship between state and citizens. His survey was supplemented by case studies which revealed, for such volunteers, that voluntary activity is a practical expression of faith. Their comments, include: "people are passively sectarian here"; "cross-community activity is not really talked about"; "there is a great desire to be involved in cross-community activity" and, "we are determined to move into the future without the baggage of the past". Although Bacon does not explore these individual stories nor is his focus on peace building (his focus is upon reciprocity, moral obligation, duty and involvement as an indicator of the health of Northern Ireland's civil society), what is clear, is that these stories start to detail the complexities of volunteers engaging in peace and reconciliation related issues. Kearney (2003) adds vignettes to the process of peace building through voluntary experiences. Such examples, however, demonstrate conflict and experiences of violence as the motivation to change rather than the experience of voluntary involvement in peace building or individual learning.

Williamson, *et al* (2000: 52), take an initially broad perspective when considering the community and voluntary sectors contribution to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland through the role of district partnerships. This initiative seeks to empower people at 'grassroots' level concentrating on local issues through cooperative dialogue and action. The authors social and economic analysis considers the difficulty in evaluating initiatives within such a context where individuals "fear identification" and "may tend to mute critical comments... or are genuinely anxious to support anything that seems likely to promote alternatives to violence or conflict". Ogonor's (2003) research into the impact of non-formal conflict resolution training for rural

Nigerian women echoes the suggestion that initiatives should take into account the often challenging social and communal relationships when trying to understand local governance and peace/reconciliation<sup>13</sup>.

Throughout 'the troubles' an increasing number of voluntary and community groups worked at developing peace initiatives (CRC 1998). The Peace People, for example in the mid seventies, organised rallies and demonstrations to promote peace. Although they lost some public momentum they did what other peace groups did - worked quietly in the background raising issues, providing respite and supporting cross-community work (McCartney, 1999; Morrow, 2000). Historical accounts of other organisations echo such development, activities and issues. See, for example, Davey (1986) for an account of the Corrymeela Community, and Williams & Williams (1994) on the work of the Quaker Service in Ireland. Collectively, they discuss initiatives within and beyond NI, working with local neighbourhoods, those excluded, victims and perpetrators, political and religious groups. "There is a corporate responsibility for areas like business, the churches, the trades unions and the voluntary sector to question whether they are doing enough... examining their own role in creating a new society here" (Ringland, 2008: 18). As might be expected, such organisations working behind the scenes that are embedded in local issues, seek to deal constructively at both community and personal level with sectarian conflict and the effects of societal division. There continue, however, difficulties in gauging the impact of such contribution as organisations tend not to champion this work, and there is also, perhaps, ambivalence towards anecdotal volunteer accounts. This has resulted in limited analytical accounts of volunteers' peace building experiences.

Acheson *et al* (2006) provide an assessment of the strategic role of volunteering as perceived by government together with the challenges at an

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<sup>13</sup> Zinsstag (2005) notes particular issues including community reaction when dealing with female sexual violence in the aftermath of armed conflict.

organisational level. Their focus upon cross community mixing suggests that the voluntary sector has mitigated some of the worst aspects of community conflict. In conclusion, however, they suggest that still relatively little is known in relation to voluntary and community contribution to peace building.

Collectively, and at a general policy level, Barnett Donaghy (2004) suggests that four important factors distinguish voluntary and community research in Northern Ireland from elsewhere. First, previous research has focused too broadly at a UK or Ireland level thus negating the important and distinctive social circumstances of Northern Ireland. Second, there is an advanced public discourse around social inclusion and discrimination in Northern Ireland - particularly through section 75<sup>14</sup>. Connected to this point is the important political role of the voluntary sector, especially during the years of civil unrest, in filling the democratic and policy void that existed (Williamson et al., 2000). As Kaldor (2006: 86) notes, "an active civil society tends to counterbalance the distrust of politicians, the alienation from political institutions, and the sense of apathy and futility." Third, there is a willingness of government(s) to support initiatives to counter the obvious void, and fourth, there exists an expertise, freedom, access and mobilisation readily apparent in voluntary and community groups. This highlighting of such expertise in Northern Ireland receives further analysis by Morrow & Wilson (1995), and Jarman & O'Hallaran (2000).

The former suggest that the voluntary sector needs to develop greater coherence and responsibility to help Northern Ireland move 'beyond violence'. Although supportive of an organic and vibrant voluntary sector, they suggest that the sector needs to be more honest "about the full diversity of views and conditions they do, and do not, represent" (*op cit*: 70). Others such as Williamson et al (2000), suggest that the voluntary and community

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<sup>14</sup> For an outline of the main features of section 75 of the Good Friday agreement, also known as the Belfast agreement, 1998, see the archive at [www.cain.ulst.ac.uk](http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk).

sector are 'coming of age' and this is reflected by the success of community partnerships and the increasing number of community relations groups (CRC, 2003). Jarman & O'Halloran's (*op cit.*) report on the role of community and voluntary networks in areas of interface violence note how demands placed on individuals and groups suggest three types of response. First, some people attempt to volunteer whilst simultaneously remaining silent to (or free from) community or sectarian issues. Others engage within a particular 'truth' position; one that reflects particular values, behaviours and activities - that is volunteering within a particular 'comfort zone' or perspective. This correlates with Coys & Woehrle's (2000) notion that volunteers are most likely to be recruited from friendship circles, where shared identities have already produced a degree of interpersonal trust. A third group see volunteering as having important social and communal potential to challenge the impact and stigmatisation of division. Wheeler (2000) argues for such moral risks and humanitarian action to be taken, suggesting that such voluntary involvement is not simply reactive activity. There are greater philosophical and psychological issues suggested by the author that transcend the perceiving and interaction with the environment.

Cochrane & Dunn's (2002) study of the evolution and impact of ten peace/conflict resolution voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland suggest that relatively little is known about the contribution of such non-government organisations (NGO's) to the social and political fabric of this contested society<sup>15</sup>. Although focused at an organisational level, and as such only one chapter considers individual volunteer motivation and involvement, they recognise that much voluntary activity within this field is often indiscernible. Other researchers, such as Mojab & Dobson (2008), are sceptical of NGO's seeking to promote participation without addressing social and cultural inequalities. Acheson *et al* (2006), consider the role of non-specialist voluntary and community

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<sup>15</sup> See also McVeigh, R. & Rolston, B. (2007) for a discussion on the relationship between sectarianism and racism in Northern Ireland.

organisations in community relations. In doing so, they explore the direct and indirect contribution of voluntary action to the community divisions in NI and the policy and social context.

Taken together, these studies suggest that much of the voluntary activity and policy in Northern Ireland, “is premised on the belief that many people wish to make a difference to daily community life”, despite real experiences of violence which restrict the choice on how, where, and when people volunteer (Morrow & Wilson, 1995: 77). The difficulty is knowing whether to welcome such effort or involvement - with the assumption that such contribution is good or whether such engagement is offered by “irrelevant or interfering groups of well-meaning muddled-headed peaceniks” (Cochrane & Dunn, 2002: *ix*).

Assuming volunteering as a positive phenomenon, Kearney and Osborne (2003) note that an increase in volunteers actively engaged in peace building through cross-community initiatives (13% in 2001 up 6% from 1995) provides real hope in Northern Ireland. Their position mirrors general suggestions of volunteers challenging social exclusion and unjust social order and highlight the importance of supporting volunteers with adequate training opportunities to help understand important social dimensions<sup>16</sup>. Although introductory in nature, their focus upon the notion of reconciliation utilizes two cases to highlight the contribution of volunteering in contested societies. O’Hagan’s (2001) collection of volunteer experiences uses one of these vignettes, in greater detail, to highlight the many facets of marginalized or hidden volunteering in Northern Ireland. The author does not attempt to dilute or conceptualise the stories presented. He makes it clear that by listening and sharing volunteers’ stories, the very rich social contribution of volunteering emerges beyond the facts and figures of voluntary activity, often to challenge ignorance and prejudice.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Davis Smith, Ellis, Howlett. & O’Brien (2005) for an exploration between volunteering and social exclusion.



This vision of volunteering as a positive force in conflictual situations is also supported by Xanana Gusmão (President of Timor-Leste), who suggests that volunteering in conflictual and post-conflict situations is a noble cause, a way of working towards reconciliation “as it demonstrates a sense of responsibility and does not ask for any benefits in return” (2003: 21). For Gusmão volunteering is about broad participation in peace building and social justice. Equally positive although somewhat introductory in nature, Goldring (2004: 293) provides three different introductory perspectives on conflict resolution in Northern Ireland and concludes that Northern Ireland has many voluntary groups which are an important part of “the informal structure of peace”.

#### **2.4 Agents of the State or Statements of Agency?**

Increased volunteer visibility, in recent years (in the UK and Ireland) reflects an increased government and international valuing of volunteering as a panacea for civic involvement, personal development and active citizenship, according to Burns (2001), Halfpenny & Reid (2002), Mac Neela (2003), among others. This is reiterated by other researchers, for example, Brudney & Williamson (2000), Lewis (2005) and Milligan & Conradson (2006). The interim report on the International Year of Volunteers (2001) suggested that volunteering is a key element in community regeneration and a trigger mechanism for engaging groups and individuals (Michael, 2001). This report, among others, notes the precarious relationship between the UK government supporting the voluntary sector whilst allowing it to preserve its independence (Lewis, 2005). As David Blunkett (2001) notes:

Voluntary activity is the cornerstone of any civilised society. It is the glue that binds people together and fosters a sense of common purpose. It is an essential building block in our work to create a more inclusive society. It contains the principles of commitment and engagement that are the foundations of democracy. A strong culture of volunteering brings with it confident individuals, empowered communities which are safe and friendly places to

live, better services, local and national government is more responsive and a more vibrant economy.

Accepting such a positive position, a number of government initiatives have been launched to encourage, acknowledge and value volunteering. In the UK the Active Community Initiative, 'Time bank' and Millennium Volunteer Schemes (MVS) are but three recent examples. Early indications suggested that these initiatives achieved their objectives of building social capacity and community renewal (Seyfang, 2001). However, there is criticism of government 'bandwagon jumping' as well as seeking to orientate voluntary organisations to filling gaps and meeting the needs identified by government. Research has sought to counter this position suggesting that through its very existence volunteering promotes social renewal, community development and individual agency (Bacon, 2003).

In a business-like manner, greater commercialism, aggressive recruitment and media attention has publicised the spectrum of voluntary activity alongside this increased government attention (Burns, 2001; Barnett Donaghy, 2004). Beside such development is an increasing number of charitable, community and voluntary organisations leading to competition for volunteer resources (Williamson, Scott & Halfpenny, 2000). This has also led to an increasingly diverse volunteer population bringing with it challenges and tensions (VDA, 2005). Such growth has also allowed for involvement in specialist tasks such as fundraising and counselling, structural tasks such as committee work and volunteer-related training and employment. This has focused attention on how to work with volunteers. Brudney & Williamson's (2000) research into the role of volunteer coordinators within N.I. Health & Social Services Trusts reveals some of the difficulties of introducing volunteer policies without understanding organisational ethos. Although Lukka & Ellis (2001), reiterate this notion of volunteers being neither a cheap workforce nor 'agents of the state', *The Commission on the Future of Volunteering* suggests that training is key to

developing literacy and understanding on volunteering. Their starting point is accepting that the introduction of volunteering into an organisation is multi-layered. As such, organisations need to recognise that volunteers, employees, client groups, managers, organisation leaders and policy makers all impact upon volunteer experience (McCurley & Lynch, 1998). As one volunteer interviewed notes:

R7 *...what volunteering means to us as an organisation and trying to sort of help understand what our vision is and what approach we should take and how volunteering is or isn't socially accepted. Also what is fair and what is the role of volunteers? How they learn how they are as a resource to you and what is your responsibility to them. So definitely we would talk a lot about those issues and the values and ethics<sup>17</sup>.*

This increased interest in the voluntary sector is also reflected through professional and academic involvement with accredited programmes, training courses, conferences and research publications in volunteering (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). Halfpenny & Reid (2002), suggest that such developments pose a challenge to the very definition of volunteering as well as presenting practical issues. For example, such a diverse range of activity, coupled with a lack of voluntary sector understanding, has prompted researchers to identify the difficulties in responding to changes and developments taking place in the voluntary sector (Horton Smith, 1997; Dekker, 2002; DSD, 2001; VDA, 2005). This is echoed internationally. Merrill & Safrit's (2003) examination of volunteering mega-trends and Stevens & Slack's (1998) assessment of voluntarism and structural change in Canadian Sports organisations provide evidence of institutional and strategic dimensions specific to different contexts.

Furthermore, voluntary research is growing in relation to seasonal, overseas and episodic opportunities to add to the 188,000 charities registered with the UK Charities Commission. There is even the notion of 'voluntourism'. With

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<sup>17</sup> All volunteer transcripts are in italics and are coded for anonymity - either R1, R2, RL, etc. My contribution, as interviewer is in bold and initiated with 'I'.

over 200,000 Britons taking gap year experiences, students are becoming the 'new colonists' as the needs of volunteers are placed in contest with those of the communities they supposedly serve. For example, nearly 50,000 people have so far expressed interest in volunteering in the 2012 Olympic Games<sup>18</sup> (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4175886.stm>). Volunteering, it may be suggested, is becoming big business.

A cursory glance, therefore, reveals volunteering as a complex and rich social phenomenon where increased political attention raises issues of credibility and accountability. In particular, the context of volunteering once thought of as local and specific is now being translated and transformed at organisational and societal level. Furthermore, volunteer-related research has, predominantly, been concerned with volunteering in formal settings, where it is generally perceived as a productive activity resulting in benefits for persons, groups, communities and causes to which voluntary activity occurs. This, therefore, raises the question what do mean when we use the terms volunteers and volunteering.

## 2.5 Defining Volunteering

Lukka and Ellis (2001: 88) suggest that some of the difficulty in defining volunteering is due to it occupying a paradoxical position. "It [volunteering] lacks precision, as there is no clear-cut definition of what it encompasses. On the other hand, it has become extremely narrowly defined in the minds of the general population". This worldwide phenomenon, which means different things to different people and contexts, is increasingly appearing in debates on civic renewal (Dekker, 2002; Jochum, Pratten & Wilding, 2005), social processes (Bacon, 1998; Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003), environmental engagement (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003), organisational change (Hinings, Thibault, Slack, & Kikulis, 1996) and political structures (Gorard & Rees,

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<sup>18</sup> This figure has already surpassed the numbers volunteering at the 2004 Olympic Games ([volunteers@athens2004.com](mailto:volunteers@athens2004.com)).

2002; Taylor & Warburton, 2003). In general terms, researchers and policymakers are in agreement that volunteering makes a significant contribution to the socio-economic fabric of societies according to a cultural, historical and political context (Putnam, 2000). They are not, however, in agreement about what defines volunteering.

Several research areas have, however, emerged to help clarify the nature of volunteering. The distinction, for example, between formal volunteering (that which takes place within organisational settings) and informal volunteering (helping as an individual without any necessary structure (Dekker, *op cit.*). Merrill & Safrit (2003) suggest a strong relationship between volunteering, leisure and work. Lukka & Ellis (2001) suggest that images, such as the middle-class middle-aged lady in the charity shop, together with other culturally grounded references exude a perception of volunteering which serves to exclude many voluntary activities and examples. They allude to a polarised understanding of volunteering and conclude that terms such as 'giving', 'sharing' and 'duty' are terms more accessible to understanding volunteering from the 'bottom-up'.

Whether 'bottom-up' or 'top-down' there are assumptions about defining volunteering, in relation to the contexts in which such activity occurs. First, that it takes place independent of state control or society setting and second, that it reacts to a perceived societal need in a positive/productive manner (O'Halloran, 2004). These assumptions are contested by Deakin and Kemp in their influential 1996 *Report on the Commission of the Voluntary Sector within the UK* when they highlight the commitment of the state to keep much of the voluntary sector centre stage. Their 61 recommendations, broadly speaking, sought to develop an understanding of the relationship with the state that avoids encroachment whilst simultaneously keeping the voluntary sector at the cutting edge of policy and practice<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Lewis (2005) for an up-to-date view of the British Government's approach to the voluntary sector through the many compacts and partnerships.

Davis Smith, Ellis, Howlett & O'Brien (2005), suggest that volunteering influences and responds to the dynamics of society. Their research in the UK suggests that volunteering challenges our understanding of community development and social exclusion. Focusing predominantly upon formal volunteering they identify how volunteering can combat social isolation, facilitate community capacity building and focus upon micro and macro inequalities. There is also a shifting ideological approach to voluntarism: from active citizens to active communities and now, I would suggest with a 'social capital' lens, to an active synthesis of both.

Although manifesting in a number of debates around civil society, for the purposes of this study Dekker's (2002: 33) definition is a useful starting point. That is, volunteering can be defined as "non-obligatory, unpaid, takes place in an organised context and it is carried out for the benefit of others". The Volunteer Development Agency (2005) adds to this position by defining volunteering as:

The commitment of time and energy for the benefits of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside ones immediate family. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain.

Such definitions start to distinguish between active membership and active citizenship to focus upon the characteristics of volunteering. Davis Smith (2000) has added a typology to embrace less formal voluntary activities and promote inclusion. This focuses upon what is often missing within such definitions: the contextual aspect of volunteering. I would, therefore, add to Dekker's initial definition, 'whilst reflecting contextual issues, traditions and relationships'.

## **2.6 Volunteering - a Caveat?**

There is, however, a caveat to this definition. That the above features seem important in defining volunteering is not in question. Volunteering in

Northern Ireland is better understood due, in part, to the number of organisations, initiatives and mechanisms to support volunteering. Relatively little evidence exists, however, on the effectiveness of applying such a definition when considering the experiences of volunteering. See, for example Brudney & Williamson (2000). Neither do such definitions reflect historical developments to comprehend how and when organisations embraced voluntary activity.

More recently, racist attacks in Belfast by alleged voluntary organisations also confirm that any generalised view of volunteering in post-conflict societies, as presented by Gusmão (*op cit.*), ignores some of the prominent features of communities and societies within post conflictual societies. Some of these features need further illumination to understand the issues associated with volunteering in 'contested' societies. For example, the potential translation and transference of violence and how volunteering responds (McVeigh and Rolston, 2007). As Acheson *et al* (2006) note, despite increased shared activity between communities a pessimism exists surrounding the dependency upon funding to sustain many cross-community initiatives.

As mentioned in the opening chapter, another feature is that peace building-related activity cannot always be easily seen, researched or talked about. Such exposure to research can be perceived as too challenging. In a study looking at voluntary activity within faith-based voluntary initiatives and congregations in Northern Ireland, Bacon (2003: 129) focused upon the capacity for community engagement. In doing so, he highlights the cross-community dimension of voluntary activity and notes the difficulty of getting volunteers' views of such involvement. "Respondents were cautious about any exposure of the details of their voluntary activity". He also suggests that volunteering within a contested society often requires additional and complex welfare considerations and quotes one minister as saying that voluntary activity has to take place "below the line of sight"

(*ibid*). This point is also highlighted by Cochrane & Dunn (2002) and Williamson, Scott & Halfpenny (2000: 52):

In divided societies or regions the evaluation of broad aim social programmes is often a difficult political and intellectual exercise. Because they fear identification, respondents may tend to mute critical comments...., are genuinely anxious to support anything that seems likely to promote alternatives."

Bacon's attention to the individual and their role in community/social action informs how the very experience of volunteering views what a peaceful society is. This point is taken to a different conclusion by Morrow and Wilson (1995: 69), when they suggest that only within a stable society can the voluntary and community sector, "raise difficulties and criticisms about the structure of the society without everyone becoming afraid". As mentioned previously, volunteers can define and construct their volunteering as a 'time-out' from the tension and impact of 'the troubles' or as a reinforcement of their distance from such violence - a way of coexisting. Indeed, it may eventually prove too taxing to both live within such conflictual circumstances and volunteer. As Fitzduff (1988: 202) suggests people can:

Become weary, and turn aside from the daily destructive happenings that occur to destroy the lives of people all-around us - though some more than others, depending on your class, and where you live. It is tempting to try and get on with whatever life you have and to ignore as far as possible the daily signs of an unfinished war. Most people do just that, for greater or lesser periods of time.

Another feature of volunteering within such a society is the commitment to an inescapable concern. Reflecting upon the research into political violence, Guelke (2003) suggests that the crisis of governability in Northern Ireland has led to a crisis of domestic and community legitimacy where lesser communities are actively challenging dominant communities. According to Guelke, Frank Wright recognised that some people were no longer prepared to simply coexist, to acquiesce to the systems of violence and actively sought new relationships and possibilities. That they did so was, in part, due to the



inescapable reality and immediacy of suffering and oppression. For example, Hall (1997: 5) quotes Jim McCorry, to raise the issue of violent impact upon individuals and communities. "I have seen caring fathers, caring sons, become people who, because they felt that their cause justified it resorted to violence and ultimately enjoyed killing. People change through violence, and begin to mirror their oppressors". People saw volunteering as having a critical role to challenge their community and/or society. A similar perspective is taken by Freire (1972: 21), when talking about coexistence. In Freire's view, coexistence is about trying to 'soften' the power of the oppressor, a "form of false generosity". Volunteering, on the other hand, often demonstrates a commitment to co-create new possibilities and tackle painful, oppressive issues. Voluntary activity in Freire (*ibid*) and Guelkes' (2003) view is to be part of a struggle against the lived reality of false generosity and unavoidable oppression.

Connected to the above point, a further difference is highlighted by Freire (*op cit.*) and Gusmão (*op cit.*). They suggest that voluntary activity is necessary for peace building in contested societies whilst distrust in public bodies prevents meaningful civil engagement or dialogue<sup>20</sup>. As Gusmão (*ibid*: 21) concludes, "too often, state institutions are ineffectual because they are designed to solve problems through appeasement." This connection between violence and governance is acknowledged by Wilkinson (2006: 29), when he states that, "liberal democracy is seriously threatened by revolutionary terrorism when there is a general withdrawal of popular support from government." Volunteering, on the other hand, is about inclusive participation, reducing fear, building trust and optimism, and learning about the impact of conflict upon others and themselves (CRC, 1998).

In summary and in contrast to non-contested societies, those seeking to volunteer in NI have different demands to contend with (Jarman & O'Hallaran, 2000). These include geographic restrictions, voluntary

organisational perceptions, and the degree of change possible when the social and political background is negated by violent forces (Milligan & Conradson, 2006). Nevertheless, volunteering suggests a vibrancy and organisation, a credibility and creativity, and it spans grass-roots work to political possibilities. There is, however, a relative deficiency “about the relationship between the dynamics of the conflict and civil society” (Acheson, *et al*, 2006: 114). Research, on the whole, has tended to ignore these volunteering contradictions choosing instead to focus upon individual positive attributes or the underlying political/social conditions that lead or sustain volunteering. There is a need, then, to understanding peace building as it relates to volunteers and volunteering in contested societies.

## 2.7 Understanding Peace Building

Peace building is often defined as a process in a society when there is a will to move beyond some form of violence or experience of oppression and there is a systematic need to reconcile differences. In the case of East Timor there was a need for a National Reconciliation Policy, and in South Africa a Truth and Reconciliation process. In Northern Ireland there is recognition that peace building includes such distinct yet interrelated elements. This includes the important role of civil society (McCartney, 1999).

In each situation the overall goal of building peace is often divided into reconciliation between perpetrators and victims, dealing with societal and individual trauma as well as the psychological and political will to marry the past difficulties, the present realities and the future possibilities (Stanford, 1976). The President of Timor-Leste, Xanana Gusmao (2003: 18), for example, sums up a definition of peace building as a *sacred goal*, “not the mere absence of conflict, nor merely an agreement between countries to avoid war - it must derive from the peace of mind within each human being, from the solidarity between individuals and from the tolerance within society until it reaches the level of mutual respect between countries.”

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<sup>20</sup> See also, Birrell & Williamson (2001).

Liechty and Clegg (2001) suggest that peace building is a matter of generational change requiring the following key steps. First, recognition that all people are implicated at every level and structure of society. Second, the need for a clear and consistent commitment to peace building which includes the meaning and exposes the dynamics of conflict. Finally, they recognise that peace building is about taking risks and developing a vision of reconciled community. Mansergh (cited in McCartney, 1999), suggests that beyond these intentional elements there is a need for favourable conditions, the search for agreed aspects and clarification of expectations.

Lederach (1997: 109), adds to this picture by suggesting that three elements convey both the purpose and philosophy of peace building. These include *capacity building*, "the process of reinforcing the inherent capabilities and understandings of people related to the challenge of conflict in their context", *relationship building* and *strategy*. He also proposes a three tier model of peace making. At the top of his pyramid is the elite leadership, the second tier are Non Government Organisations (NGO's), organisational structures and religious leaders, and the third level is community leadership. His model emphasises the importance of progress at all levels. It does not, however, explain the volunteer's contribution or what level of understanding is needed to relate to the success of this model.

Williams & Williams (1994) also discuss the importance of relationship building; however, they relate this to the development of mediation skills. They are concerned with practical approaches and engagement for sustaining peaceful outcomes. Lederach's conclusion is different. He suggests the need to conceptualise peace building through structure, process, reconciliation, resources and coordination. Morrow (2000: 26) returns to this relational perspective, defining peace building, "as a quality of relationship which can allow for real difference while maintaining an insistence on equity and the mutual rights and responsibilities that arise from interdependence."

His focus, like Williams & Williams (1994) is on the quality of relationship and establishing the spaces and timing to allow this to happen.

Collectively, these introductory points provide an opening towards an understanding of many of the ideas concerning peace building, whilst simultaneously acknowledging some of the elements that exist within a contested society. These exist from the very subtle and polite forms of contestation which hide the attitude and beliefs that underpin such structures to particularly violent and obvious expressions of a contested society (Liechty & Clegg, 2001). In Northern Ireland, for example, language, schooling, housing and sport are segregated which allows a particular expression of exclusion, containment, suspicion, avoidance and violence. All of which, at times, may seem 'too hot to handle' yet need to be understood and addressed to build peace. In summary, these points suggest that peace building is a process, a solution-based aspiration, a long term goal and a relational dynamic that has individual, community and political responsibilities.

Having mapped out some of the preliminary areas it is important to consider not just the impact of volunteering to beneficiaries, individuals, communities and society itself, but to reflect upon volunteers' own experiences. The scarcity of research on volunteers learning has caught the attention of practitioners, researchers and policymakers alike, particularly in light of the growing suggestion that volunteering helps counter many post-conflictual problems such as poverty, unemployment and depression (Cloonan and Crossan, 2002; Huzejrovic, 2003; Kearney, 2003).

## **2.8 Understanding Volunteering and Learning**

The notion of people benefiting or learning through volunteering is not rare. It is, however, rarely visible in research terms and there are two immediate reasons for this. First, people rarely volunteer with clarity of their own

learning needs or goals (Darvill, Perkins, & Unell, 1988). There are, for example, numerous studies looking at the complex personal reasons for volunteering other than simply 'to do good' (Mac Neela, 2003). Locke, Ellis & Davis Smith (2003), among others, consider ways to welcome and retain volunteers. There are initiatives to attract volunteers within particular communities as well as develop the learning capacity of volunteer managers. See, for example, McCurley & Lynch (1998) for managing volunteers and the 'Learning to Learn - Looping the Lifelong Learning Loop (L4)' initiative from Volunteer England (2004). There are, however, relatively few studies considering the experience of volunteers as learners.

Second, and connected to the above point, McGivney (1999) suggests that volunteers (through incidental learning activities) gain a personal learning starting point often without realising it (they often learn without considering they are learning). As Coffield (2000) suggests, it is perceived through necessity rather than as dispensable learning.

Although McGivney's focus is the community setting of informal learning she notes the important role of voluntary bodies and the notion of learning, for volunteers, happening without clear identification. Her direction is clear (and focused): informal learning experiences require appropriate pathways and guidance to provide and promote community development and regeneration particularly for those marginalized. What is less clear, however, is how can learning be understood if it is tacit, unintentional, and embedded in action: a by-product of volunteering rather than within formal educational goals? This is a common theme raised by other researchers focusing upon lifelong learning, adult and informal learning (see, for example, Jeffs & Smith, 1999; Field & Spence, 1998; Williamson, 1999; Coffield, 2000). McGivney (2001) returns to informal learning repeatedly to suggest neglect and ambivalence exists towards this important educational facet.

Commissioned to explore the relationship between adult learning, the statutory and voluntary sector, Tusting & Barton (2003) and Darvill *et al.* (*op. cit.*) suggest that volunteering can provide important educational experiences and learning that can transfer to other life experiences, such as work. The authors are keen to avoid generalisations or advance an understanding of the relationship between formal and informal learning opportunities. They do, however, explore whether volunteers learn, what and how they learn as described by volunteers themselves. Interestingly, for the authors, the importance of individual learning such as skill development outweighs the impact of such learning in relation to the social and community context. For Gaskin (2004) it is the link between young people, volunteering and civic engagement that is her focus<sup>21</sup>. Although her research is upon developing a coherent UK picture toward this group of volunteers, the area of volunteer learning is seen as ranging from broad benefits to specific skill acquisition.

Foley (1999) explores informal learning generally whilst reflecting upon people getting involved in voluntary activity, social struggle and political action. His main interest is the learning dimension of emancipatory social struggle. He draws upon a wide-ranging number of cases to illuminate the learning that occurs as people struggle to make sense of what is happening to them when they challenge oppression. Although volunteer learning is treated as a uniform element of voluntary activity he brings into debate the relationship between volunteering as a social movement and volunteering as a site of learning. Eventually he brings these points together through adult education theory drawing on the work of Michael Welton (1993; 1995), among others, to suggest that such activity provides sites of 'social revolutionary' learning. This learning, Foley suggests, is informal and incidental reflecting a very different position to mainstream adult education theory. Such difference, he suggests, manifests through the dynamics and effects of social movement activity.

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<sup>21</sup> This relationship between community needs and specific learning goals emerges in Service Learning research. See, for example, Billig & Waterman (2003).

Darvill *et al* (*op.cit.*) suggest that it is not surprising that there is little detailed attention paid to volunteers-as-learners. Many people rarely expect or intend to learn when they volunteer despite the wide-ranging benefits that McGivney (1999) suggests. In contested or conflictual situations this lack of understanding is even more complex, according to Spinner-Halev (2003). He suggests that educational understanding has to incorporate important political and reconciliatory goals. A similar point is raised by Daniels (2003) in her study about female community leadership training in an African settlement. She suggests that narrowly defined learning methodologies are found wanting and her work explores the relationship between informal learning, conflict resolution and social action. Her conclusion is simple - everyday learning is negotiated, ambiguous, complex and contested - something that can transform and disrupt lives. Kovan & Dirkx (2003), in their study of the role of transformative learning in people participating in social movements, suggest two similar points. First, there is little understanding of the learning process of activists and; second, factors beyond an individual's scope influence learning and participation.

Such research collectively raises the question of what is understood by volunteers-as-learners on at least four fronts. First, the volunteer-as-learner is something yet to be fully explored as Darvill *et al* (1988) suggest. They also raise the obvious general questions of what and how do volunteers learn? Reflecting upon work-based contexts, Eraut (2000) suggests a typology to understand how volunteers learn within what he terms 'non-formal' learning. This term is used to describe organised educational activity that exists outside of formal education. Within this framework implicit learning is located at one end of the non-formal learning spectrum, deliberate learning at the other and reactive learning in-between. They are neither linear nor hierarchal but reflect the complexities of situational learning, of people and contexts and tacit knowledge in action. Investigating this area of learning is filled with difficulties. He suggests: not only is implicit learning difficult to

detect without prolonged observation, but reactive learning and some deliberate learning are unlikely to be consciously recalled unless there was an unusually dramatic outcome" (Eraut, 2000: 15). This difficulty of identification is also acknowledged by Spinner-Halev (2003) in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian context. Williamson, Scott and Halfpenny (2000), also question how volunteers and voluntary organisations have contributed to the experience, knowledge and analysis of local governance within Northern Ireland.

Second, learning through volunteering is something that is often seen as unpremeditated, incidental or embedded in the action and activity of volunteering and subsequently difficult to observe or evaluate (Darvill *et al*, 1988). Third, seeking to learn as a volunteer can appear to cast aspersions on the very philanthropic giving nature of volunteering – is volunteering to learn a contradictory notion (Illich, 1998; Foley, 1999). Fourth, confusion about how to understand volunteer learning often results in an umbrella of frameworks being used as the point of departure, such as 'lifelong learning' (McGivney, 2001), active citizenship (Dekker, 2002) and/or 'informal learning'.

It is worth taking a moment to consider what informal learning is since the terms informal, non-formal and service learning are often used interchangeably and associated with volunteer learning. Aligned with these terms is another one, social capital which, according to Coffield (2000), has helped some researchers to make sense of data. Bacon's (2003) research into 'Communities, Churches and Social Capital in Northern Ireland' provides a useful introduction to the ideological debate on social capital. Field and Spence (*op. cit.*), however, suggest that the notion of social capital should not be used uncritically since in Northern Ireland with its segregated and contested communities, high levels of social capital reflect the intransigent positions of such communities.



McGivney (1999; 2001), reflects on the difficulty of finding a suitable definition for informal learning. Although she suggests it is a process by which individuals acquire values, skills and knowledge from daily activities and experiences, she is keen to understand it within traditional educational structures. Coffield (2000: 16) adds to the difficulty of definition suggesting that investigating informal learning presents two problems: those of "awareness and representation". His research reflects the importance associated with lifelong learning and what has been termed the learning society and raises the question about recognising and describing informal learning processes. There are others, such as Gorard & Rees (2002: 106) who welcome the inclusion of informal learning as part of a larger framework for lifelong learning and learning careers. They also question some of the generalised statements about how informal learning is understood. In particular they suggest that informal learners do not readily appear on statistics or through survey methods. Indeed, their research suggests that curiosity, interest and enjoyment as much as practical considerations may be key descriptions in understanding informal learning (Gorard, Rees, Fevre & Furlong, 1998). On the other hand, service learning (often seen as a complementary experiential component of tertiary education) integrates meaningful community service to enrich learning experiences. Extending the notion of learning through voluntary involvement, service learning explicitly includes features which foster learning about larger societal issues (Billig & Waterman, 2003). Smith and Spurling (1997) suggest that such instances extend further the idea of a learning career, suggesting that individual learning accounts will allow people to save, borrow or gain credit for learning. They place key to this position the relationship between the voluntary, private and public sectors leaning heavily towards the relationship between the individual and government to measure the strength and wealth of learning potential.

This is not to say that there are no formal adult learning programmes looking at the relation between learning, conflict and reconciliation. Ogonor (2003),

for example, investigated the impact of conflict resolution training with rural women in Nigeria. Although the study focused primarily on a type of conflict-resolution training, one recommendation was to develop non-formal learning which reflects the rural context and social stability of each region. This study also served to highlight the importance of marrying political/cultural context and educational understanding.

For Jeffs and Smith (1999), the difficulty of definition often surrounds labels that reflect an informal educator's client group or place of work. Their focus is primarily on using informal education with a commitment to respect, well-being and social democracy. These are broad aims. Their concern is, ultimately, with a process of fostering learning in life in all of its settings. The area of transformative learning is useful here in trying to bridge the complexities of conflict, reconciliation, violence and learning. O'Sullivan (1999) brings into question 'quality of life education' or what Giddens (1991) refers to as 'life politics', in how can we live and how should we live together. Collectively, they indicate the interrelationship between places and practice in the transformation of capability or understanding. Returning to Eraut (2000: 12), the key issues being raised are not that learning is not always happening but that learning about peace building is concerned with what lies beyond the moment. Its focus is "upon significant changes in capability or understanding." For the purpose of this study the term 'informal learning' is important to encapsulate the variety of settings, opportunities and experiences as well as the promoting of learning.

### **2.8.1 Volunteers Learning about Peace Building**

Up until now research in peace, reconciliation and conflict has, not surprisingly, suggested the need to consider each context - politically, historically and geographically. The same has been suggested in the field of volunteering (Mohan, Twigg, Jones & Barnard, 2006). What has not been fully explored is how volunteers learn about peace building or how the scope and magnitude of the violence that surrounds them influences the

opportunities or predisposition to learn (O'Sullivan, *op cit.*). In Northern Ireland, learning positively about and beyond 'the troubles' has predominately focused upon attempts within formal education to understand about difference within mutually interdependent frameworks - Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) being the best-known (see, for example, Smith, & Robinson, 1992, 1996; Wright, 1993). Spinner-Halev (2003: 52) reflects upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to suggest that "education in divided societies has to begin with different assumptions than education in other societies." He goes on to suggest that education can be an aid or obstacle to reconciliation. Unlike Northern Ireland he does not support arguments for common schools or integrated curriculum. Although he is not specific about the form of reconciliation needed or the difference between societies which are divided and those which are contested, several important points emerge. First, as in Northern Ireland, he recognises the limitations of the 'contact hypothesis'. This hypothesis suggests that increased contact with the 'other' is sufficient for people to learn to be mutually tolerant and respectful of each other. In Northern Ireland, educationalists placed great trust in the ability of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage (a cross curricular initiative) to break down barriers between pupils. Although there is limited evidence to suggest it has made an impact (see, for example Caul, 1993; DENI report 1999/2000), there is evidence of it starting the process of awareness and respect for difference (Smith & Dunn, 1990).

Second, there is an assumption that learning about peace-building will be increased with changes in civil and structural ways (Martin & Williamson, 2002). Schools are an important part of the reconciliation process. However, investigations into the areas of peace and conflict reconciliation, although widely treated as highly desirable educational goals, are relatively thin on the ground to support this assumption. Field and Spence (1998), for example, investigated adult participation in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Although prompted by relatively low levels of participation in adult learning in Northern Ireland, they make passing comment surrounding the relationship

between the geography of sectarianism and deterrence towards learning<sup>22</sup>. They also hint at the importance of informal learning within a wider social and cultural framework. This is not unique to Northern Ireland. Harber (2000) for instance, notes a similar relationship between violence and education in South Africa. What Field and Spence (*op. cit.*) do allude to is the importance of local networks, the influence of family and the value associated with informal learning opportunities.

This notion of networks receives greater attention in Williamson, Scott & Halfpenny's (2000) study on district partnerships as described previously. They interviewed those involved with partnerships and concluded that such membership and commitment to such structures reveals an institutional learning about peace-building and reconciliation, in a society where political and government initiatives have been easily rejected. Despite the difficulties of defining such terms as 'peace and reconciliation', the partnership structure stipulates the importance of involving the community and voluntary sector. This recognition of the role of the sector to occupy the space of the much discussed 'democratic deficit' raises two issues. First, the real or perceived ability of the voluntary sector to influence public policy, "by taking an unprecedented role in decision making and in the allocation of resources, particularly with regard to social inclusion" (*ibid*: 51). This is contrasted by Lewis (2005), who suggests, at a UK level, that the voluntary and community sector can never have an equal say in partnerships and compacts. Second, by concentrating on those areas and people who have suffered most, the tendency to focus and fund the voluntary sector reinforces traditional views on sectarianism. It may inadvertently focus upon learning about victimhood - that is, supporting those whose need is easily identified. Learning becomes an issue of visibility and whether certain communities are ready or willing to engage. Nevertheless, the authors bring together the importance of starting to understand the role of the sector in relation to peace and reconciliation.

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<sup>22</sup> See also, Mohan, Twigg, Jones & Barnard (2006) for a general investigation of geographical variations in voluntary action.

To leave the review here would be to suggest that volunteering in the area of peace building in Northern Ireland is simpler than it really is. As a volunteer, there is no single understanding or common picture. Whyte's (1994: 259) comprehensive analysis of Northern Ireland identifies how local differences, "make the community divide much more complex than one might imagine from drawing on region-wide generalisations." He points out that any understanding needs to accept such complexity whilst integrating psychological, religious, political and economic perspective<sup>23</sup>.

### 2.8.2 Volunteer Participation

As a backdrop to the above areas, there is also a need to consider volunteer participation. In recent years research on volunteer participation has tended to focus upon three different discourses which reflect different participatory emphasis. One emphasis is upon volunteer patterns, processes, cycles or careers (see, for example, Burns, 2001; Bussell & Forbes, 2003). How and why do volunteers get involved, for how long and what happens to them during and after such voluntary experience? Another focus is upon volunteering being integrated into wider social and societal relationships (Lloyd, Marsden & Scott, 1991; Putnam, 2000; Milligan & Conradson, 2006). What are volunteers doing, and for the benefit of whom? This suggests that voluntary and community groups enable important views and concerns to be expressed. As such, volunteer participation becomes a form of civic representation. Such emphasis is often about placing a value upon volunteering (see for example, Bacon, 1998<sup>24</sup>). As Jochum, Pratten & Wilding (2005:33) note: "voluntary and community organisations represent the partial perspectives of their specific constituencies and some can be more concerned with their own mission than with the wider public interest". The third focus

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<sup>23</sup> See also Wilkinson (2006) for a broad analysis of conflict and democratic process.

<sup>24</sup> Bacon's (1998) survey, '*Splendid and Disappointing*', examines whether a reconstructed society (post conflictual) could be imagined and experienced through churches providing volunteering through the life of the Church and the wider community. 87 churches were surveyed to analyse the ways in which the Church, through the voluntary action of members, contributes to the well-being of its own and the wider community.

emphasises moral/philosophical debates around volunteering and philanthropy, giving, service, charity and governance. See for example Prouteau, (1999), Jhin (2003) and Davis (2007). Dekker (2002), in his article, *On The Prospects of Volunteering in Civil Society*, cuts through these different discourses to suggest that a new understanding is required within volunteering to accompany profound societal and global changes. An associated aim of this enquiry is, therefore, to consider whether volunteers who learn about and engage in peace building inform a larger picture of volunteer participation.

Voluntary participation has often been assessed through measurable terms. A number of national surveys, for example, have attempted to quantify volunteer participation. The 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (HOCS) found that 40% of 16 – 24 year olds had been involved in formal volunteering (in Gaskin, 2004), the 2000 Scottish Household Survey found that 27% of the adult population volunteered regularly, and over 20% of the Irish population volunteered (Ruddle & Mulvihull, 1995, 1999).

Although it is possible to gain reliable information from the plethora of surveys on voluntary organisations which provide formal volunteering opportunities, it is more difficult to understand the many informal and ‘hidden’ volunteer experiences or opportunities (Ruddle & Donoghue, 1995; Williamson, 1995). As such, current understanding on a quantifiable level reflects the spectrum of formal, observable and accounted aspects of volunteering<sup>25</sup>.

With such diversity of activity it is difficult to accurately summarise the scale or scope of volunteer participation. Arnstein (1969, in Gustafsson & Driver, 2005), has proposed a ladder of participation to understand public participation. She charts a sliding scale from tokenism, information-sharing,

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<sup>25</sup> See also Acheson, Cairns, Stringer & Williamson (2006) for an examination of formal organisations in NI contributing to (or not) cross-community and community relations work.

consultation, partnership to power-sharing. Arnstein is particularly concerned with community engagement and active citizenship. Among others, Gustafsson & Driver (2005) and Lewis (2005) question the validity of such hierarchical definitions and agenda-setting ideals; however, their starting point is of a stable uncontested society and contractual development with government. As such, they fail to grasp how volunteers as outsiders, with limited local knowledge, may be accepted as co-learners. It also assumes that local people can readily participate and that local government can engage and mobilise citizens. Whilst acknowledging such flaws there is, nevertheless, a need to understand modes of participation since volunteers are actively engaging with social issues and, as will be seen, challenge current understanding. Gustafsson & Driver (*ibid.*: 533) state that “many [volunteers] harbour doubts whether their voice will be heard – and whether it will make a difference in the face of paid professionals and public servants.”

## 2.9 Summary

This chapter concludes that volunteering should not be viewed as entirely positive or uncritically. Such a rose-tinted picture is littered by contradictory terms and activities. There are a number of volunteering traditions in Northern Ireland that help maintain an optimistic picture of volunteering. On the one hand there is an emphasis upon how voluntary engagement can improve people’s communal, economic and social conditions to bring about positive change. This debate is clearly visible in relation to social capital and reflects a shifting of the boundaries between the state and civil society (Kelly, 2006). On the other hand there is a focus on volunteering improving people’s skills and capabilities (Dekker, 2002). There are also claims that there is an increasing commitment to supporting volunteer participation and equality (Grey, 2002). Some of these assertions are fuelled by a view that promoting and sustaining better volunteer programmes will create a better society.

Apart from the difficulties of attempting to define volunteering, partly due to the current proximity of government influence as a replacement to under funded public services (Milligan & Conradson, 2006) and as a regenerative political force (Gaskin, 2004), there is also an uneasy and inequitable relationship with institutional structures and policy shapers, according to Lewis (2005). Whilst it could be argued that volunteering plays a significant and developing role within these islands at the beginning of the twenty first century such tensions and the constellation of voluntary developments suggest a more complex picture.

There is a need, then, to understand the contextual and cultural picture further, according to Cockram (2002) and Cochrane & Dunn (2002). Collectively, their research assesses the impact of national attempts to transfer into the voluntary sector functions hitherto performed by government. In doing so their focus, as others, often eclipses an understanding of the experiences of volunteers and in particular their learning experiences. Understanding such learning is further clouded by the interchangeable use of informal, non-formal and service learning terms to explain multilayered, complex involvement in which individuals gain from and make meaning of volunteering. This study rejects the terms and indication of service and non-formal learning, not through lack of importance but due to their focus upon academic integration which includes, to some extent, curricular components and formal goals. The focus is upon informal learning.

Volunteering, it seems, is becoming more visible than volunteers. The following chapter, therefore, discusses the methodology considered most suited to exploring informal volunteer learning experiences in the area of peace building.



**Methodology: the what, where how and when****3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter introduced and analysed the different strands of volunteer literature in the UK, and specifically in the contested society of Northern Ireland. In noting the lack of attention to those volunteering in the area of peace building an embryonic question emerged as the focus of this study to consider the experience of volunteers engaged in peace building activities. Although this question may continue to be refined (Darlington & Scott, 2002), this chapter describes the methodology used to research into such volunteering experiences. It is divided into three sections.

The first section describes the methodology including rationale. That is, I take a particular view of research and build upon this to clarify the assumptions and position of the study. The second section relates to the basis of the research, exploring issues related to the qualitative research method of interviewing. Such analysis will also deal with research matters including; field relations, access and accessibility, communicability, and how qualitative interview procedures are realised in practice. The final section focuses on the process and technicalities of conducting this research, outlining the advantages and limitations of using semi-structured interviews before examining the process by which the data can be translated and applied in this study.

**3.2 Rationale**

According to Creswell (1994: 7) the methodology is the “entire process of the study”, and seeks to provide “rich context bound information,” patterns or theories that help explain a phenomenon. Jankowicz (1995: 174) adds to this suggesting that it is the “analysis of, and the rationale for, the particular method or methods used in a given study”. From this starting point a

number of questions emerge. How can the researcher “go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998: 108). What is the fullest, most informative framework and methods appropriate for such investigation? Furthermore, what is the role of researcher concerning such frameworks?

I should also be concerned, according to Jensen (cited in Apfel & Simon, 1996), about the interface between fieldwork, the political context and the textual representation. This includes an assessment of the challenges and issues, which arise when studying sensitive topics in difficult situations or societies. As Jensen (*ibid*: 208), notes, “when research is made possible in war-torn or violent settings, researchers must be aware of the highly politicized context”. As mentioned previously, volunteering and volunteer research has become particularly politicised in recent years, in the UK, (Lewis, 2005), and within Northern Ireland, according to Birrell & Williamson (2001).

Traditionally there have been two ideological stances in relation to research; positivism and subjectivism. Each of these stances is governed by philosophical assumptions. The research question in this study is subjective, focusing on the distinctive and relational aspects of volunteer experiences. To understand such experiences, the assumption is that a qualitative or subjective perspective is the most appropriate to understand the meaning that people attribute to these volunteering experiences.

The starting point, therefore, is that a quantitative approach would not give sufficient scope, as Crawford (2003: 16) notes in his research on volunteers involved in the UDA:

The questionnaires and the box-ticking became increasingly irrelevant, given the richness of oral history accounts of people who became individually involved in the Northern Ireland conflict. As each was so diverse, unique and individual, it became increasingly difficult to make any assertions or generalisations about paramilitary loyalists.

Jensen's research (*op cit.*) supports this position when examining effects of soldier-parent absence on children in violent and war-torn situations. His study highlights the limitations of relying upon apparently reliable and valid quantitative measures in contested contexts.

There is always a concern of the role, relationship and context when choosing to act as the primary instrument for qualitative data collection, according to Silverman (2005). In relation to this point, several researchers, including Gubrium and Holstein (2003: 11), focus upon researcher and authorial presence to understand the particularities of being in the researched world. They are particularly concerned with how a researcher "insinuates him - or herself into the text." Interacting with those being researched raises a number of issues. These include, for example, the values attached to words, language, context, process and the methods employed (Briggs, 2003). This study is exploratory in nature. It is interested in process, meaning and understanding gained through volunteer explanations, reflections and descriptions. It is unlike a quantitative framework, which seeks to replicate and generalise "principles that are true all the time and in all conditions, the goal [of qualitative research] is understanding of specific circumstances, how and why things happen in a complex world" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 38).

Denzin & Lincoln (1994), suggest that a major strength of qualitative research is in its ability to progress the 'conceptual framework' of the study in relatively new and unexplored fields. It allows the researcher to identify key issues and manage the study's own picture as it emerges. Apfel & Simons' (1996: 20) research into children in violent settings, speaks of the profoundly political backcloth, the commitment to try to understand and change violent conditions and the need "to break new ground and innovate beyond the comforts provided by the guidelines of their training". In this case, what are the implications of researching people, engaged in voluntary peace building;

an area bereft of qualitative examination and replete with research challenges?

Having stated that a qualitative stance, rather than quantitative, will be adopted, it is not the intention to enter into the traditional spurious qualitative versus quantitative debate in this chapter. That is a debate that has been addressed many times so eloquently by others. For the interested reader Creswell (1994), Dadds & Hart (2001) and Bell (2005), among others, provide considerable discussion including combined approaches<sup>26</sup>. Despite this ongoing debate researchers agree that, ultimately, the goal is to establish a framework in such a way that those receiving research findings, as well as those who conduct research, know it to be trustworthy and worthwhile (Mason, 2002).

There are several reasons for choosing a qualitative approach in this study. First, there is a dearth of qualitative research considering volunteers' experiences as mentioned previously. This is due, in part, to the challenges of researching sensitive issues, and the relatively recent research interest in volunteering (Jenkins, 1988; Lee, 1993; Crawford, 2003; Gaskin, 2004). In contrast, there are ample quantifiable attempts to understand volunteering. See, for example, Ruddle & Mulvihull (1995, 1999) for national volunteer surveys in Ireland, and in Northern Ireland, general surveys have examined volunteer contribution and development (DSD, 2002). One concern, however, of relying upon surveys or experimental approaches lies in the "unscientific ventriloquism that they authorise: of speaking for the lives and realities of 'our subjects' without them being actively present in that process" rather than clarifying the importance attached to articulating dimensions of social life (Wadsworth, in Reason & Bradbury, 2001:420). Collectively, such

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<sup>26</sup> The value of individual and combined research paradigms is further examined by Green, Carracelli, and Graham (1989) and Gubrium & Holstein (2003), as they seek to resolve the lengthy adversarial paradigmatic debate. Gorad with Taylor (2004: 166) conclude that the responsibility rests with researchers halting, "this wasteful, capacity destroying strife between alleged 'paradigms'."

approaches to voluntary research seem to hold an implicit pluralist welfare perspective aimed at increased participation through policy development.

Second, and connected to the above point, peace-building research has tended to focus upon strategies to mitigate the impact of conflict (Apfel & Simon, 1996), rather than the experience of those volunteering to challenge the dominance of violence within post-conflict contexts. As Brooks (2002: 14) notes, the dominant model of understanding volunteering “makes the other, more personal answers more difficult to talk about.” There are exceptions. O’Hagan (2001) and Bacon (1998, 2003) use the words, experiences and stories of volunteers to explore volunteer understanding and numerous Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) utilise volunteer experiences to highlight the importance of peace building<sup>27</sup>. What is sometimes ignored from volunteer research, however, is the experience of people voluntarily engaging in peace building.

Third, although recent qualitative studies have started to add to this research picture, particularly with reference to defining volunteering as a social phenomenon (Putnam, 2000), researchers have, on the whole, yet to explore fully the experiences of volunteers, especially in relation to learning. Hearing their views, understanding their perceptions, recognising their learning, reflecting upon their issues or the variety of learning opportunities is still relatively unknown (Darvill, Perkins & Unell, 1988; Graham & Foley, 2001; Franberg, 2002). A more robust analysis of those involved must, therefore, take into account not just circumstances and outcomes of volunteering but the primacy of volunteer perceptions and understandings arising from such experiences<sup>28</sup>.

Fourth, there is a need, as Kelly (2006) suggests, to seek input from people with a variety of perspectives on the potential benefits and risks engaging

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, International Red Cross organisations ([www.redcross.int](http://www.redcross.int), [www.ifrc.org](http://www.ifrc.org) ).

<sup>28</sup> See also Welton (1993) for an assessment of conflictual contexts as sites of learning.

particular communities. Care, however, must be taken to avoid, what Robbins (cited in Sluka, 2000) in his ethnographic study of Argentinean generals who had perpetrated particularly violent acts calls, 'ethnographic seduction' - that is, the influence of being too immersed with a particular group resulting in a sympathetic portrayal. Do volunteers engaged in peace building inadvertently advance a particular perspective or think they are obliged to provide facts and truth, as if an answer to peace building exists? The empathetic power of suffering, the legacy of a conflict peppered by intercommunal violence, economic stagnation, international condemnation and social divisions can easily cloud perspectives and questions, according to Bornstein (2001)<sup>29</sup>. Researchers suggest that questions and answers are not neutral. They are multilayered, even indifference is "an exterior aspect of the desire of oneself" (Girard, 1965: 106). Kaptein (1994), among others, suggests that the focus should be on understanding relationships and processes, influences and perspectives. O'Hagan (2001: 4) highlights the powerful impact upon himself through interviewing a range of volunteers, when he says; "I now think that the notion of 'do gooders' is a false idea born out of prejudice."

Such accounts are not, however, the first experiences of peace building volunteers in Northern Ireland to be told. Corrigan Maguire (<http://www.peacepeople.com>), for example, provides an account of the 'Peace People' movement. Using a case study approach, she notes the tension between the need for justice and reconciliation which highlights the highly politicised context of peace making/building in community and voluntary settings.

Finally, contested and post-conflictual societies are unique. Intimidation, surveillance, persecution, subjugation, discrimination, interrogation, exclusion and post-conflict related violence impact upon an individual and

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<sup>29</sup> See also Garman (1998, in Shackleton & Smyth) for a demonstration of the difficulty in writing about her experiences in a post-conflictual peace building experience in Bosnia, described as '*exotic*'

group's experience of social life (Morrow & Wilson, 1995; Bornstein, 2001; Daniels, 2003; Zinsstag, 2005). This has, until recently, limited the range of data collection to more traditional means. In some cases people cannot or will not share their ideas, thoughts or feelings when research is imposed or there is a perceived threat (Dadds & Hart, 2001). This, therefore, places limits on generalisation as suggested by Crawford (2003). Although qualitative research is characterised by multiple methods thus allowing various forms of research speaking, observing and listening to occur, there has been limited research into the benefit to those studied in such contexts. For example, Hall (1997) discusses the benefits of bringing together ex-combatants, community workers and victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within Northern Ireland to consider 'native learning' and cultural comparison.

With a paradigm established, it is important to have a research question or questions, thus providing some direction and clarity to find out more about that which is being explored. In the case of this study the research question reflects a phenomenological approach that seeks to describe the very "essence" of the topic (Creswell, 1994). It "focuses on the subjective, unusual, and unexpected aspects of the world around us" (Lee, 2002: 23). The emphasis of this approach is upon the uniqueness of the situation knowing that the data collected, "may be achieved at the price of its reliability or its representativeness" (McNeill and Chapman, 2005: 21). This notion of cost or sacrifice in research is misleading. Bassey (1995), for example, suggests that quality in qualitative research can be achieved if attended to throughout the research process. These stages include focusing upon the framing of the question, appropriateness of the rationale, choice of setting, clarity of ethics, self awareness and lucidity of account<sup>30</sup>.

Relating to question formulation, the qualitative researcher, according to Allison (1993: 25), "whilst not formulating precise questions prior to

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*horror and bitter wisdom*'.

engagement in the research, as in that subscribing to the scientific method, nevertheless usually has a general feeling of the problematic nature of the situation," and is "refined as the research progresses". Anderson with Arsenault (1998: 122), suggest that such an approach "also relies on retrospective reflection" by the researcher and the phenomenon researched. In this study I sought to bring into focus a comprehensive account of people voluntarily engaged in peace building activities "as discursive phenomena and the way they are reified as reflections of the social phenomena depicted in questions and answers" (Briggs, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2003: 244). As such, the approach of this thesis is inductive, written in the spirit of grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In other words, the social phenomenon of peace building volunteering has not yet been fully explained, therefore there is a need to learn more about it. The how, what, where and with whom, to explore such phenomenon requires a method. What emerges, what connections, themes or similarities with other phenomena is then ordered and concluded by considering what, if anything, should be done with the data collected. This usually means allowing themes, patterns and understanding to emerge from the data following a non-standardised exploratory method of investigation and analysis.

Having established a methodological position and question to direct the study, the next stage is to consider the most appropriate setting in which to carry out the research and to identify the most suitable method. In qualitative research there are a wide range of techniques available based on observation, interview, interaction, narrative, conversation or discourse analysis, as well as unobtrusive modes of gathering knowledge.

### **3.3 Research Method**

Initial and informal discussions with volunteers together with current research suggest that no standard or common volunteer experience exists;

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<sup>30</sup> See also, Czarniawska (2004) for further critique of 'reliability' and 'validity' as conformity to dominant rules of research.



therefore I sought a method that allows volunteers to describe and explain such unique and distinctive experiences<sup>31</sup>. As with Hatch (1983), Brooks (2002) and Crawford (2003), my preferred method is to carry out in-depth semi-structured interviews with a selection of volunteers allowing them to recall, recount and review their own unique volunteer perspectives using their own words, experiences and actions on a one-to-one basis. Although Crawford's interest is in exploring the subjective perceptions of voluntary paramilitary activity, my interest is in peace building volunteers.

There are several reasons for rejecting other research methods. Participant observation is not appropriate due to the potential impact of being present but not completely involved in peace building activities. This additional dynamic may distract volunteers from attending to activities and/or groups. A case study approach was also rejected. This approach seeks to bring to life a case through exploratory, descriptive or explanatory means utilising multiple sources of evidence (see Yin, 1994). Although such an approach may allow a variety of aspects to emerge such as organisational development (see, for example Bacon, 2003), volunteer experiences span a number of organisations and my interest rests with the primacy of the volunteer experience.

Focus groups would also be difficult since issues of sectarianism can limit certain aspects of interaction. Experience of coexistence suggests that "mixing has usually been subject to unspoken but definite limits" (Liechty & Clegg, 2001:195). As such, any group would need to take into account what the above authors describe as 'the level'. This refers to the boundaries people set in Northern Ireland beyond which discussion would not happen.

The level sets the point one does not go beyond in sectarian terms. The level might in any given situation tell people things like: where they *may* shop and where they *ought* to shop; what

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, O'Hagan (2001) for a range of volunteer accounts.

they can talk about with their own and what they can talk about with others..." (*ibid*: 205).

There is usually an understanding of the consequences of moving beyond *the level*. Sectarianism also has a tendency to magnify difference. This has been considered by social psychologists as intergroup discrimination. In short, sectarianism's negative group categorisation, which may promote benign or direct discrimination, could jeopardise individual disclosure and therefore limit potential sharing.

There are also practical difficulties in bringing volunteers together to carry out group interviews. Talking and listening to volunteers can be rather invasive - research becomes a distraction from their tasks (Bond, 1999). Furthermore, there is an issue of anonymity, which would not be practical in a group interview method (Lee, 1993). I was concerned that, in such a context, privacy, confidentiality and trust could not be managed as effectively as in a one-to-one interview.

Burden (2000) describes voluntary research using participant observation in community theatre. She suggests that by allowing interview participants access to transcripts together with her own research journal provided a non-threatening and facilitatory climate. There are, however, implications in accessing peace-building group work for structured observation. For some groups it is inappropriate to be present where group formation, social observations and dynamics carries with it the risk of undermining peace building. Harris's (1972) study in rural Northern Ireland used observation and interview to look at a particular community. Her study raised the challenge of superficially courteous relations. As such participating and/or observing vulnerable groups require special consideration from both ethical and practical perspectives.

Rejecting the above methods I decided upon interviews which are, according to Fontana & Frey (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 645), "one of the most

common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings.” Through interviews, people are able to share experiences of their lives, and create knowledge or reflect upon specific experiences. Information and understanding provides a contextual foundation, which can support future understanding. What is particularly relevant here is that I consider such interactions, aware that research interviews are successful as events in which we share knowledge, negotiate sensitive issues and initiate or develop understanding. My analysis is strongly influenced by the ways in which qualitative interviewing is viewed as the construction of uncertain knowledge (Griffiths, 1998), and the ways that these interviews provide a contextual basis for understanding peace-building voluntary experiences.

### **3.4 The Research Setting**

As mentioned previously, data for this research comes from a series of recorded interviews. Although the primary method was through interviews there were a number of informal discussions with other researchers as well as volunteers and practitioners. The 14 interviews were conducted between June 2005 and September 2006. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix B and C). Although the volunteers were engaged with several different organisations and communities, they had all at some point in time come volunteered with one particular organisation - the Corrymeela Community<sup>32</sup>.

For people wishing to volunteer with ‘Corrymeela’ often their first substantial contact is with a volunteer coordinator, whose job it is to (a) illicit people’s preferences for specific kinds of volunteering, (b) help volunteers engage in a manner relevant to their circumstances, experience and aspirations, and (c) devise suitable training and ongoing support. As volunteer coordinator over a period of five years, I came into contact with many volunteers both formally and in social settings. Providing support for

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<sup>32</sup> See Davey (1986) for analysis of the contribution of ‘Corrymeela’ to peace and reconciliation work within and beyond Northern Ireland.

volunteers reflected a 'person-centred' philosophy intended to encourage volunteers to embed and translate their volunteering experiences. Volunteers, as such, would discuss elements of their learning, understanding and questions relating to peace building, as well as their own personal circumstances and development.

My experience as volunteer coordinator raised several issues which would ultimately lead me to commence this study. First, volunteers were describing important learning experiences, however, there was limited research to substantiate or contrast their accounts. Furthermore, an implication of my role was to advise volunteers, help them develop in a variety of ways. However, I was also charged with gaining a certain quality of information to help support and develop the organisation. Being aware, however, that such experiences cannot always be translated into organisational norms; much of what was said was not being fully utilised within the larger context.

Second, having established working relationships with volunteers, I had the potential to access volunteers as research participants. This, however, meant that while my intention was to interview volunteers as a researcher, volunteers perceived the interview in relation to my professional role. One concern, therefore, was about the ways in which I could influence the study, in relation to data collection and reporting. It was noticeable, for example, how the volunteers would seek to recount shared experiences and stories rather than provide specific analysis. This corresponds to Miller and Glassner's (1997: 101) point; "interviewees sometimes responded to interviewers through the use of familiar narrative constructs, rather than by providing meaningful insights into their subjective view".

Connected to this notion of influence is how volunteers perceive my research request. Their perspectives on being asked - why take part in it - seem to raise at least four reasons why they may agree to take part. First, they are curious, born out of previous interview experiences, research or even the

novelty? Second, a sense of obligation - that is, they value volunteering and this is perceived as a potential value to volunteering. It is a 'de facto' element of volunteering to be asked or invited. Or, a duty to me through our past or current relationship. Third, I (and possibly others) am exercising coercion either consciously or unconsciously. As volunteer coordinator I have previously asked them to fulfil tasks and duties. As a researcher I am, therefore, embellished with other roles. Furthermore, some of the participants are known to each other, therefore, they may have heard about the research and seek to be part of the 'in-group'. Fourth, previously interviews and meetings as a volunteer have been fruitful, they have learned or benefited in some form. This, then, is another learning opportunity. Or finally, a combination of the above.

The research setting would also require me to be aware of the challenges and difficulties, as researcher, when undertaking research. This may include listening to sensitive, private, trauma-related or violent stories. For example, recognising my own inability to contain intense emotional reactions. Furthermore, recognising my clinging to the professional role of working-researcher and understanding relational context issues (Apfel, & Simon, 1996) in order to understand the complex behaviour of interviewer interacting with interviewees without imposing *a priori* categorisation. I noticed, for example, having to cope with my own feelings of anger, avoidance, the impact of bonding or even colluding with the interviewee. Some of these issues which emerged during interviews can be seen below:

R3     *I was working with a cross community family group. It became known as the week from hell because everything that could go wrong did go wrong. We had overcrowding, racism, sectarianism, attempted arson, homophobia, sexism, every ism.*

I        *Wow [shared muted laughter]*

The above passage reveals how I allowed my own reactions to influence the interview direction whilst trying to keep the discussion open enough for

further reflections to continue. There is often, however, a fine balance between encouraging and leading the interviewee.

A further implication for considering my choice of research setting is a need to understand the context or backcloth - Northern Ireland. It is not the intention to attempt an overview or guide concerning peace building research. There is, however, a need to add some contextualisation in an attempt to understand the relationship of choosing to research volunteering within Northern Ireland.

### **3.5 Why Northern Ireland?**

This study focuses its research on Northern Ireland for several reasons. First, there is a high level of voluntary and community sector activity as discussed in the previous chapters. As a consequence information and participants are more readily available (Williamson, Scott and Halfpenny, 2000). Second, the author worked and volunteered within the voluntary sector for over ten years thus had personal and professional interest, access and experience of volunteering. Third, although described as one of the most heavily researched areas of the world (Whyte, 1994), there is still much to learn. Volunteers are engaged with a multitude of organisational and informal settings. Although there is considerable research emphasising the role of activists campaigning for peace and protesting against violent regimes and war, there is relatively little evidence of volunteering service and giving embedded in community activity and peaceful social change. The move from exploring relationships external to the troubles to inter and intra community tensions adds a potentially new dimension of social change (CRC, 1998). This is echoed by McVeigh & Rolston (2007) in their analysis of the perceived developments (or lack of) from community to good relations. Volunteers, it is suggested, play an important yet still to be fully uncovered aspect of these societal developments (Acheson et al, 2006). In these circumstances, the aim is not to try and add further analysis to the troubles but to understand the context of those who seek to challenge violence.

### 3.6 Ethical Imperative

Reflecting upon the need to balance reliable and systematic data collection whilst simultaneously safeguarding research subjects, Taber (2002), among others, notes the importance of an ethical stance<sup>33</sup>. Traditionally, such concerns have involved negotiating topics such as informed consent, degree of anonymity and protection from harm. Respect for individuals and making judgements about well-being reflect the possibility that interviewees may well entrust the researcher with secrets or sensitive information (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). For many qualitative researchers anonymity and confidentiality are important techniques for protecting research participants (Punch, 1986). By protecting a respondent's identity, the researcher assumes that they are serving the best interests of participants. However, as Daniels (2003: 192), suggests, "it could be interpreted as presumptuous to assume that all participants want anonymity or that they are in need of protection."

There are other concerns that are less obvious in relation to the responsibility of reporting. This is not a simple list of do's and don'ts. Crawford (2003: 19) recalls, for example, how his ethical and procedural naivety manifested when interviewing UDA volunteers inside the Maze prison:

I had known about how the evidence was gathered against Adair, but stupidly enough, I hadn't made the connection. Tape recording in this context was also, as I increasingly realised, simply too dangerous, potentially risking everyone's personal security.

And later on;

Some of those interviewed wished to remain anonymous, others were aware that they could be identified through their stories, while a minority wished to be named.

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, The Ethical Standards in Public Life, etc. (Scotland) Act 2000.

In Crawford's example, and connected to the above volunteer comments, research which ignores issues and agendas of marginalisation, exclusion and potential oppositional activism, bring into question ethical positioning within social science research<sup>34</sup>. Punch (*op cit.*: 71) argues against ethical codes, guides and standards, suggesting that, "openness, debate, individual responsibility, and professional accountability on the conduct of research are more likely to spell out a sensible and healthy approach". My attempts to follow an established ethical protocol created a totally unexpected dilemma at several stages. The first was when several participants dismissed my attempt to introduce informed consent forms. Even discussing the issue created initial resistance:

P1 *there's no need to do that Mike, I don't have anything to hide, I trust you.*

And at the start of the interview (R7):

I *I am supposed to get written consent in the form of this letter. I realise that when I mentioned this previously you weren't interested so do you want me to ignore this?*

R7 *Laughing throughout and nodding.*

Furthermore:

I *As I said previously I'm going to use this information for part of my doctoral studies and anything that can connect you to this interview will be erased or made anonymous. Is that OK?*

R8 *[headshaking] I'm sure there's nothing I'm going to say that will jeopardise myself.*

Those interviewed seemed to dismiss this protocol and yet simultaneously expected a particular relationship to be maintained. This point has been echoed by Robinson-Plant (2005: 104) from a cross-cultural perspective. He says: "attempts to negotiate ethical codes of practice are met either with non-comprehension or dismissed as a joke". Later on when checking with volunteers interviewed about the method of returning transcripts of

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<sup>34</sup> See also, Mojab & Dobson (2008) for a discussion concerning the role of NGO's in reconstructing and weakening a new and more democratic Iraq.



volunteer validation, I was similarly confronted by considerable surprise and resistance. Seeking to authenticate their account seemed to challenge the very authenticity of the interview.

Traditional views on ethical commitments to research tend to seek a balance between research benefits and risk to subjects. As Smith (1975: 5) suggests, "recognition is given to the fact that the researcher's obligation must match the study risks." I found interviewing personally transformative and simultaneously fatiguing as my own foibles, insecurities and prejudices prevailed. I had to acknowledge how to manage my own disclosure as well as being sensitive to the needs of others. Such concern also needs to understand the timeframe as stories and conflict can be intergenerational. There is always the potential for trauma or healing and transformation to be passed from older generation to younger and vice versa, as Bar-on (1996) notes.

One interviewee insisted on the interview being by the beach. Although this created a huge difficulty in transcription afterwards, more challenging was working through my own feelings of anger struggling to listen against the continual 'background noise' of the sea. It took me considerable time for me to acknowledge my own feelings and the impact on how I utilised this and other transcripts.

The notion of safety emerged within my research in a number of ways. First, there is an assumption that I have the knowledge, skill and ability to manage the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of the participant. Free from harm in the broadest sense included the collection of data, which was stored in secure digital format and discussing with and seeking agreement with participants regarding the format and content of interviews. This included the processing of data, representation and explaining how such data will be verified. Second, safety is also considered as part of fieldwork

relations. This includes gaining access, understanding my preparation for each interview and the manner in which I conduct myself.

Punch (1986) and Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) note the importance of understanding cultural and political differences, some of which are open to researcher management and others not. For instance being male, speaking with a North-Eastern English accent being in Northern Ireland, having a certain status through current and past involvement and being of a certain age. Although these do not necessarily determine absolute responses they shape relationships in distinct ways. How was I to negotiate potential social defences, cultural differences and linguistic nuances?

Similar problems and freedoms to fieldwork can also arise, as mentioned above, when being a working researcher. That is, having status and trust ascribed as a worker in a field, whilst trying to develop a researching role. This can challenge the notion of trust based on previous associations without clarifying the trust within the current stance. Ethically, I sought to clarify my purpose without exploiting friendships or manipulating relationships.

### **3.7 Trust and safety**

The task of saying what is trust becomes complex because the process of trusting is itself one of extraordinary complexity. In fact, maintaining interaction during interviews usually means not discussing trust at all. Rosenblatt (2003: 228), for example, suggests that the interviewer “should use good interviewing skills to build rapport that will lead the interviewee to disclose more as the interview progresses.” This process of building trust seems rather exploitive and manipulative. Rarely is trust discussed in relation to the research relationships or the material/processes within them. Indeed, for some respondents, the interview process may be the introduction to what White (1996: 57) defines as social trust. That is, to trust “the institutions within which they are living are informed by goodwill towards

all members of the society". Ultimately, to entrust is to protect, it implies a duty, a responsibility to care at some level.

Seale (1999) uses the term trust, to describe "professionalized friendliness", of developing quality and fostering interdependence. Such aims, however, are to do with gaining access and could also be interpreted as reliance or even manipulation. Punch (1986: 72) suggests that the aim of trust often leads to a double betrayal, "first by them of you but then by you of them". This is a recurring theme, especially when considering the politics and ethics of fieldwork<sup>35</sup>.

These introductory points identify some of the limitations of understanding trust. As White (*op.cit.*: 53) points out, they fail "to capture the kinds of relationships between parents and children, friends and lovers that seem perhaps obvious examples of trust relationships". This 'taken-for-granted' understanding of what trust is needs to be challenged since research maintains and assumes an understanding of trust, often intuitively, through practice and tradition without clarifying what is important in the construction and development of trust.

A number of things persuade me that there is a great deal more going on regarding trust during interviews. For example, how interviewees raise (either consciously or unconsciously) the notion of trust.

R5 *it is not a straightforward process and you can't simply do an activity and then people trust each other. One young man in particular said he would be shot if anyone knew he was even meeting Catholics... he had lied to his family about where he was going. This discussion happened at the beginning of the weekend and allowed others to appreciate the risk that he had taken.*

Trust, in this conversation, is also part of the dynamics of working in new groups, relationships and settings. What has been written about trust and research raises great hopes and expectations. It promises the well being of

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Rubin and Rubin (1995).

those researched through validating committees, supervision, professional conduct and post-activity accounts. It also proposes a dispositional aspect to learning through trust. That is, such experiences will enhance the ability to discern whom to trust and whom not to, when to trust and when not to. What this position fails to attend to, however, is the meaning of trust itself. What is talked about is being committed to an 'increase in trust' without examining what is meant by trust (Baier, 1993).

Equally important to understanding what is meant by the term trust is how to apply this understanding within a research setting. White (1996), for instance, suggests that trust has to be understood and used in the right spirit – trust is more than simply a behaviour policy towards something or someone. To what extent does probing during a qualitative interview threaten the relationship? How trusting, therefore, is someone in accepting that I would know when to stop? The answers are not straightforward and part of the difficulty resides in the researcher's role, the practices followed and the commitment to the people studied.

Furthermore, trust is often discussed as an indicator of the researcher's role, the level of reliance required to study informants and settings (Creswell, 1994), and as a basis for developing rapport (Mann & Stewart, 2003). What is talked about, however, is being reliant upon a level of relationship to enable research. These points bring into focus the relationship between trust and reliance. Reliance and reliability, for example, bring into question how long must you rely on (or trust) someone or something before (s)he is deemed reliable (trustworthy).

This study, as Rosenblatt (2003) suggests, starts with the assumption that I carry out such interviews with a clear and shared understanding of the importance of developing trust. Rubin & Rubin (1995) suggest that you should let people know about your study, the level of participation, the degree of voluntary contribution and confidentiality. My experience,

however, is that producing an informed consent statement prior to or at the start of an interview is at least awkward and at worst an untrusting starting point. Indeed, most interviewees were puzzled and dismissive of this procedure. In short, they were starting from a different position and seeking to establish a particular level of formality and relationship. On two occasions, for example, I was ushered into the interviewee's bedrooms, due to the availability of private space and presence of other people. The experience of vulnerability and associated feelings had to be managed alongside the comfort and convenience for the interviewee. Collectively, volunteers seemed far more concerned about relational rather than institutional trust.

Furthermore, I was concerned that regardless of whether I am reliant, trusting or simply naïve, there is an element of interactional deceit and it is vital that I do not deceive myself into believing that what I hear is simply the truth based upon levels of trust (Punch, 1986). Understanding that what I say, how I listen, how authentic I am within the research process demonstrates the importance of trust. Ultimately, an understanding of trust, I would suggest, is an indicator not just of relationship but also an ethical barometer against which to gauge the validity of the research process.

### **3.8 Interviewing**

Interviewing has developed vastly over recent years. Initially perceived as a face-to-face, principally neutral and procedurally scientific research tool - a conduit for extracting experiential knowledge through a prescribed format - interviewing nowadays is viewed as having diverse purposes (Gubrium, & Holstein, 2003), varying levels of interaction and relationship (Chirban, 1996) and multiple structures and data analysis techniques. It has been suggested that it is neither simply a research technique (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) nor a conversation tool (Drever, 2003). It is a method and a process of interaction, learning and relationship. Furthermore, it is used within a multitude of educational settings, according to Hall and Hall (1988), who explore the importance of questions and listening. On a similar note, Bond (1999), and

Connelly, Milburn and Thomson (1996), whose central focus is upon educational and adult guidance respectively note how counselling practices within educational settings have led to debates around integration and differentiation of interview roles and questioning techniques. Chapman (2000) and Taber (2002) provide discussion on what questions are permissible, legal and empowering and what answers are authentic, insightful and helpful. Together they consider the research subject's perspective when being interviewed. Interviewing is, therefore, seen as increasingly sophisticated research method versatile to many settings (Drew, Raymond & Weinberg, 2006). On a wider level, such scope reflects the view of living in an interview society (Silverman, 2005). The question is, however, what method of interviewing is most appropriate? To understand this, it is important to reconsider the initial research question, the methodological framework and form of data analysis.

O'Hagan (2001) used semi-structured in-depth interviews to understand volunteering as examples of living on the edge in Northern Ireland. Asking in-depth questions and exploring a range of historical experiences around volunteering provided the 'human touch' to those who pioneered new ventures across a range of social issues and this resonated with my own interests. There was, however, little interest in trying to analyse or collate the volunteer stories other than to acknowledge their notable contribution and richness of story. Millar & Crabtree (2004) suggest that "depth interviewing" is a type of conversational research journey that challenges the traditional view of interviewing as "one way" interaction. They suggest that the interview can be viewed as interactive and intimate, and conceptualise the interview process so that both interviewer and interviewee can be heard and understood.

They also warn of traditional interviewing techniques, which "attempt to standardise listening in an effort to mine the gold of information stored in the respondents. This narrow and limiting understanding is appropriate

only within the paradigms of materialistic inquiry" (*ibid*: 185). Furthermore, they warn of the structured approach, which runs the risk of phrasing the researchers own concerns rather than allowing the interviewees' perceptions and meanings to evolve. As Rosenblatt (2003: 227) notes,

even if I am in a post-modern and perspectival world as I read and write social science, the people I interview offer me truth and pushed me to be like the reporters, detectives, and others they believe to be seekers of truth.

Some of these perceptions might appear invisible using standardised questions and may fail to take account of the interactional character of interviews, according to Drew, Raymond & Weinberg (2006). Their conclusion, which includes the role of the interviewer, suggests qualitative semi-structured depth interviews take account of such risks.

For me, however, the nearer I got to selecting a method of data collection and analysis, the more doubts emerged. I started to suspect that problems of trying to get to maintain split attention - that is, attending to the interviewee whilst paying attention to my own here-and-now feelings triggered by their account - might blur my ability to conduct research effectively. I also worried that my inability to deal with volunteers expressing strong feelings or revealing sensitive/private experiences. Furthermore, I questioned whether the level of interaction, trust and exploration could influence interviewees' attempts to produce what they assumed I wanted to hear. Finally, I felt uneasy about how to deal with particular features of our relationships which may allow undue prominence to certain topics. Drew, Raymond & Weinberg (*ibid*: 32) summarise these points suggesting two major issues face social scientists seeking to use interviews to collect data. "One concerns the factors that can lead to the collection of distorted, biased or irrelevant data. A second concern is with those variables that can inhibit the interview as a data gathering procedure".

My own experiences of interviewing suggested that any starting point needed to acknowledge my own preconceptions. Millar & Crabtree (2004: 190) suggest that such “self exploration helps tune the research instrument, the interviewer, for playing his or her part in the interview and, from being a better listener, for heightening intuition, and knowing how to use self disclosure wisely.” This critical self-exploration also helps to unmask any cross-cultural bias thus clarifying the validity of the process (Griffiths, 1998).

### **3.8.1 Interview Design: Sampling and Piloting**

Having made the choice to use interviewing, the next stage is the preparation. This includes developing a question schedule to cover the range of issues, piloting - including analysis and the interview itself. Before I could pilot, however, I also needed to establish a selection process, what is often referred to as a sampling strategy. For this study I selected respondents that could provide a diversity and richness of information pertinent to peace building volunteering. I sought people from a variety of backgrounds, ages and voluntary experiences. The key focus was on volunteer experiences. I was interested to speak to people who had volunteered within the area of peace building. As such, the sampling strategy is purposeful. This is often termed homogenous sampling. I wanted people with recent and relevant exposure to volunteering, and I wanted people from a range of backgrounds (see Appendix B, for background data of the fourteen participants) Informal discussions with Professor Kearney, an authority on volunteering in Northern Ireland, suggested a representative cross-section; however, time constraints restricted the number of respondents possible. I, therefore, sought people who had experience of volunteering in Northern Ireland from a nationalist and loyalist perspective, some who had experienced volunteering in other conflictual contexts and with a range of voluntary organisations. Such variety also includes peace building volunteering in different community contexts. There is a side note to this. When the interpretation of two interviews revealed insights into the influence of peace building and career aspiration, I decided to stop any further interviewing where



respondents also worked in the community relations field. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2004) note the importance of data saturation and suggest using more than one sampling strategy to account for cultural and contextual influences.

The interviews are organised around an interview guide (see Appendices C & D) consisting of open ended questions that allowed exploration of personal experiences as well as grand questions, with associated prompts/probes. The guide outlines the format for the interview, including opening questions, followed by the introduction of the study's main themes to questions designed to detail volunteer experiences and perceptions. Prompts and probes are used throughout to support the interview as well as maintain a positive climate of trust, communication and informality. There may be times when the format is deviated in order for the respondent to take the lead, develop new ideas or reflect upon some connection or revelation.

Although considerable informal discussion raised a number of issues which helped focus the study, I started with two pilot interviews. Research guides tend to emphasise stages or foci in the sampling, pre-pilot and piloting stages. My experience was much more evolutionary as volunteer interaction allowed a more organic construction of questions and areas of consideration through the activity of enquiry. As Hammersley & Atkinson (1995: 28) note, "even chance encounters or personal experiences may provide motive and opportunity for research." This led to an ongoing tension between trying to make sense of current methods of research and my own emerging experience.

Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2004), suggest that once ready to start interviewing there is a need to set the scene. This includes practice, learning the questions thoroughly, equipment checking and selecting the setting. I used everyday locations in line with volunteer requests and audio-recorded the interviews. As such, settings included the communal lounge of participants,

interviewer's lounge, Community Centre quiet room, participant bedroom and beachside location.

As with Dadds & Hart (2001), developing this research meant embracing the kind of reflective enquiry which surfaced during the data gathering process. I wanted the research to be accessible, engaging and meaningful to volunteers and for those who expressed interest. I also felt the need to negotiate what constituted valid and worthwhile research rather than simply borrow methods of social science enquiry and apply them. This individual perspective meant accepting informal discussions volunteered by people. For example, when a discussion emerged regarding my study, one volunteer added her own view:

*R L I believe that as a volunteer we have the chance to spend time, do work and use our skills in a genuine way, enjoying the fact of forgetting about the material payment but having always the satisfaction of helping others.*

For RL, having the opportunity to engage in the process, knowing the personal style of investigation I was pursuing allowed the opportunity to 'dive in'. It thus becomes clear that this volunteer has in mind contributing to the research, without wishing to be moved into any formal research structure. There is also a cultural and linguistic interpretation needed. There is often a need, when interpreting comments provided in a second language, to recognise how brevity may reflect vocabulary limitations rather than depth of understanding. However, this response suggests a need to elaborate on how volunteering is described. The decision to encompass interaction and information beyond the accepted norms of academic research and initial interview boundaries, "was often, paradoxically, linked to feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence about working, in the ways of 'academic' work" (Dadds & Hart, *ibid*: 148).

### 3.8.2 Question format and development

A number of researchers, such as Ackroyd & Hughes (1992) and Clough & Nutbrown (2002) provide guides to help formulate research questions. They do not, however, guide you through the dynamics when you need to step from interviewer to supporter when a volunteer shares intimate experiences or becomes anxious. This collision into the life of another, or the 'waiting, feeling posture' when silence follows a question, suggests that learning and understanding cannot be discerned solely by skilful well-crafted questions. Such questions need supportive prompts and probes and a well prepared interviewer aware of varying modes of engagement. Although questions need to be checked for redundancy, phrasing and overall criticality, it is also the ability to tailor questions, prompts and probes to ensure interaction is congruent to the stage and relationship within each interview.

The questions are designed to reflect grounded theory methods which stress discovery and emergence (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). That is, the interview is allowed to emerge gradually through the course of the topics. Such steps are taken to 'dejeopardise' volunteers (Lee, 1993) and to be responsive to rather than avoid volunteer reactions to the interview itself. This required me to discuss, prior to the interview, and usually over the telephone, the question area and to contextualise the research.

The questions are set out to act as a guide and focal point rather than script or prescription. As can be seen from the guide in Appendices C & D, the questions had supporting elements through probes as well as overarching themes.

### 3.8.3 Response mode

Although semi-structured, each question, probe and answer was initially seen as meaningful to be understood and accounted accordingly. Millar & Crabtree (*op.cit.*: 186-187) suggest that this position is false. "Both the interviewer and the respondent have multiple social roles beyond their roles

as interviewer and interviewee.” Understanding the interview as a communication event rather than a controlled verbal information exchange reflected my desire to avoid conventional ‘monological’ style of traditional research reporting which can appear vacuous. This evolution of research was influenced by volunteers asking about my study in a way that allowed for multiple interpretations such as being empowered and ultimately entering into more focused dialogue. It also reflects what Silverman (2004) refers to as the balance between a realist and narrative approach to interview data. In this approach he suggests that five areas need to be considered when looking at responses to interviews. First, to what extent is it appropriate to consider a single meaning being attached to any particular response? This reflects my methodological stance which suggests that both content and context require analysis. Second, how analytical does the research need to be? I am seeking to understand three connected yet complex areas, rather than an analysis of the way volunteering is described. Third, what claims can be attached to such analysis? I am not seeking a representative sample of volunteering; this research does not seek to make any grand generalisations. The fourth and fifth questions suggest alternative methods and analysis, which have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Nevertheless, there is a need to understand the impact of analysing the talk and the presentation of written text.

### **3.8.4 Data analysis**

Levels of transcription of qualitative data depend on the purpose of the interviews. Various researchers identify how transcription can vary from a full verbatim transcript to note based or indeed memory based report. Although time-consuming a transcription-based strategy was adopted in this study. Some researchers suggest that all communications should be observed including body language, gestures and tones of voice. However, others state that non-verbal communication need not be included. There is also a lack of consensus on how much editing should be carried out. At one level editing is a matter of preference. Indeed on occasions, when the spoken word was the respondent’s second language, I had to decide whether ‘cleaning-up’ the

transcript would impact upon the meaning communicated. This highlights the importance of the interviewer recognising his or her role as a research tool both during and after each interview.

I chose to transcribe all words including my own. A square bracket marks any added information by me to enhance clarity only. Furthermore, dialogue has been punctuated to reflect pauses or added to clarify emphasis only when necessary. At other times sentences seem prolonged. Only significant non-verbal features are included, for example (nodding) and any comments about the dialogue that I have made are highlighted. All transcripts are in italics, my contribution is in bold and initiated with 'I'. All volunteers are given a respondent code -either R1, R2, RL, etc.

This leads to the question of analysis. The specific theoretical perspectives and analytical approaches considered were discourse analysis; conversational analysis; and, narrative analysis. Although each approach emphasizes different aspects of language and therefore interview use, they all view language as social interaction, and are concerned with the social contexts in which discourse is embedded. Ultimately, all three approaches are implicated since interview structure, interaction and representation reflect context, power, interaction and learning. None, individually, was considered sufficient since interviews are viewed as places of constructed interaction and I was interested in the dynamic emergence of themes connected to talk-in-interaction and narrative fidelity (Czarniawska, 2004). Again, this reflects my attempt to allow understanding and analysis to emerge rather than follow a prescribed format.

### **3.8.5 My role and position**

I became interested in peace building when I started to volunteer at a peace and reconciliation centre in Northern Ireland in the early 1990's. It was challenging volunteering to offer support for victims, survivors and perpetrators. It was also daunting reflecting upon my involvement,

intentions and experiences in such settings. When talking and listening to other volunteers it emerged that they had equally impacting experiences, being challenged for 'doing good'. Sharing such moments and experiences I became aware of the untold stories and experiences of volunteers seeking to build peace. Approaches to volunteering seemed replete with demographics, history of voluntary movements, motivations, and so on. There was, however, difficulty finding research to illuminate volunteer experiences of peace building. I wanted to find out more about the experience of such volunteers.

I also wondered, at that time, what it would be like to research volunteering. What kind of impact would moving between working and researching in the voluntary sector have on me or volunteers? What kind of training would I need and how would my past training in human relations impact on how I perceive, interact and record these volunteer stories. It is, of course, impossible to provide any definitive answers to such questions. The experience of reading, reflecting, writing, transcribing and then drafting and redrafting is unique. It is also impossible to be prescriptive about my assumptions. Do I need to be an expert to ask such questions; do people expect instant learning from me or feedback about their answers? Rosenblatt (2003) suggests that interviewees perceive the interviewer as searching for the truth. When challenged about my research from one volunteer I noticed an air of disappointment when my answer did not reveal any earth shattering information. Nevertheless, there are some common themes that emerge when other researchers talk of being a researcher. Throughout this penultimate section I will try to describe some of my experience in learning to be a researcher, and reflect on the meaning and implication to how this study was conducted.

I use the term 'researcher' which immediately suggests a set of skills and experiences in relation to types of research design, to reflect the fundamental similarity to other professional researchers as well as those who research

alongside other work roles. I fall into this latter group. This creates an interesting intersection between official or correct narrative, tacit culture and the dualistic role of being a researching worker. What really goes on for each researcher is often as interesting, informative and significant to the research (Griffiths, 1998).

Some writers have portrayed qualitative researchers as pathfinders, astute observers, facilitators of participant's disclosure, experts with a topic, setting or subject in order to develop some innate understanding. They are also represented as facilitators of inquiry on their own real journey (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Geraci (2001, in Dadds & Hart), for example, describes an outsider's attempt to develop an understanding of autism as well as the validity and ethical considerations when interpreting those who will not or cannot share their feelings or ideas.

By contrast, other writers have focused on the importance of describing access issues, the role of gatekeepers and the development of field relations (Creswell, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). My experience of researching volunteering lies somewhere between these latter two points. The over-idealised image of researcher as expert or truth seeker presented initially by Reason & Bradbury (2001) and Geraci (2001) suggests researchers are expert safe crackers just needing to find the right combination. For me, it denies the empowering nature of research as shared learning as discussed by (Griffiths, *op cit.*: 67). He speaks of the uniqueness and uncertainty of educational research dependant upon "personal responses to the timbre of a voice, to a way of catching an eye, to a sense of humour or to a habit of bodily posture. The capacity for the researcher to be empathic to individual suffering, their own cultural story or the existing linguistic relationship suggests that such research can lay no claim to abstract neutrality."

The experience of research interviewing, for me, encompasses much more than simply being in a room with a recorder asking people questions once I

have organised the research. Doing research is clearly at the core but being a researcher is a complex professional and personal task. Two main experiences have emerged, for me, in considering this research, as a researcher. First, what it is like to be in a research interview with participants. Second, the impact of researching and considering how my views impact upon the validity of the research as a whole.

In a sense all interviewing is 'person-centred'. The degree to which this is achieved, however varies considerably. From a linear perspective, at one end, I was seeking responses and the volunteer is the bearer of news, information or experience. An important feature is, therefore, my ability to achieve a sense of readiness or openness together with appropriate interaction. This is achieved in a number of ways. There are questions which require minimal engagement; as such the participant can utter the briefest of responses. The interview proceeds until sufficient responses are squeezed out – like toothpaste being extracted from a tube to be used in a different but important function. The tube is emptied and the toothpaste used! At the other end responses may require the sharing of feelings, intimate or painful experiences or the recounting of significant relationships, affiliations and moments in a person's life. I recognised the need to be imaginatively and sensitively engaged to ensure the health and well-being of the volunteer. Researchers also need to be aware of health and well-being issues. For example, the support needs of researcher and participant following emotionally powerful interview disclosure, as Zinstag (2005) notes.

My experience of interviewing volunteers ranged along a continuum from activity to passivity. Actively engaged at times I felt as if I were with the person's experiences, empathising with their volunteer moments and sharing recollections and reflections. Passive engagement, on the other hand felt like waiting, hovering for an answer to get going, to move on. At this point, I would feel numbness, a distance from their story, almost rudeness. What I learned was to recognise my own distance and resonance, the importance of



effective interviewing and the difficulties in the task of being a researcher listening to myself whilst listening to the other. This complex moving between interviewer and participant awareness is captured well by Chirban (1996) and Drew, Raymond & Weinberg (2006).

The experience of interviewing, for me, was not just about levels of awareness or attention during the ebb and flow of the interview. It was also about power and control. Issues of power and control emerge in a number of ways. For Griffiths (1998) it is about living with uncertainty as a researcher. For Lee (1993) it is the relationship between researcher and social or political power, individual encroachment and researcher well-being. A constant element for me when interviewing was how threatening is this research? There were three broad areas. First, how intrusive was the interaction especially when dealing with areas that are private, stressful or even sacred? Second, how incriminating were the responses? When one participant talked about being labelled as a 'Taig Lover', it revealed personal, cultural and political identity as well as a certain level of understanding about sectarianism. It also demonstrated a preparedness to disclose which, in turn, requires ongoing attention (see page 65, for an example of interviewee clues regarding disclosure clarity). When I hear sectarian experiences or stories from volunteers, I think I am learning something about sectarianism. I do not necessarily accept this as the only possible explanation or account of sectarianism – it is not the only truth. I do, however, think that I am learning about how volunteering offers a new perspective on sectarianism. What I have learned, and continue to learn, is the importance of making sense from what I hear from interviewees. This something is my perspective.

Finally, perspective is also reflected through the expectations I hold regarding how sensitive the topic of peace building may be or how well the volunteer may engage with the interview. This is accompanied by a degree of stress. This stress continued when I considered how written transcriptions because the data is unique and personal, could reveal the volunteers'

identity. This led me to consider my responsibilities regarding protecting anonymity in relation to the confidential interview and any subsequent emotions expressed or thoughts revealed. Being able to discuss with participants beforehand how I was going to use the interview data, the method of recording and the level of interaction allowed me to address the level of conversational partnership that I was seeking. There are, of course, further ethical issues which led to both personal and moral dilemmas. Apart from some of the obvious ones such as lies, deceit, concealment and bending the truth (Punch, 1986), I also recognised resistance, feelings of obligation to the researcher and my own close identification with the people studied (Brown, 2000).

I also questioned why anyone should believe what has been said during my interviews. At the same time, I wondered why should I accept what volunteers have told me? Rubin and Rubin (1995: 85), suggests that well-designed research should be designed to produce good and convincing research. Although the terms validity and reliability are used to define qualitative research standards, they suggest that qualitative research should be judged for its “transparency, consistency, coherence, and communicability”.

Often an interviewee would ask me about my experience or what I have learned from others interviewed. They would also check that the interview data was of value to me. I would also be contacted afterwards to ask how my research was progressing or to clarify a point raised. People seemed genuinely interested in two overarching aspects. First, as with Rosenblatt (2003), they think I want to know the truth. In Northern Ireland this notion of truth is often polarised into two culturally defined perspectives embedded with fear and suspicion. As Griffiths (1998: 82) notes “there is no possibility of the acquisition or creation of stable, unchanging knowledge, since all knowledge must be subject to critique from other viewpoints”.

Furthermore, interviewees expressed a genuine interest in the research as part of their own curiosity or development. This notion of development is often entwined with a sense of embarrassment, awkwardness or lack of articulation on how to broach sensitive areas. Although Lee (1993: 103) suggests how and why to approach a sensitive topic, especially as interviewees “may not realise that once an interview begins what they might reveal, in what ways, or at what risk”, he does not deal with unintended deceit when a respondent does not know how to articulate clearly, or purposively withholding that which will influence how they may be perceived.

### 3.9 Summary

This chapter has sought to describe the methodology used to research into peace building volunteering experiences. It began with a general introduction to the qualitative approach, continued with the basis of the research, and concluded by identifying issues related to the qualitative research method of interviewing. Part of the challenge is selecting a robust method to allow the phenomenon of volunteering, the accounts of volunteers and the reality behind volunteering to emerge in synergy with the data collection process. As Czarniawska (2004: 23) notes when seeking to reconcile methodological actions, events and interpretation, “the perspective orientation of life with the retrospective orientation of narrative”.

In conclusion, the semi-structured interview as a particular field research technique was chosen because: (a) other ethnographic approaches were deemed inappropriate. Volunteers working with groups on sensitive issues do not easily allow for structured observation or naïve participation. (b) Peace building volunteers are familiar and comfortable talking about activities and events as well as discussing sensitive, intimate issues. (c) Discourse about volunteering often ignores their stories, activities and learning. (d) This study is exploratory and (e) my aim is to discover individual experiences and understandings about peace building through

volunteering. Implicit within this approach is the common conversational endeavour that implicates me within the interview process. It is not just about collecting views and opinions; it is a dialogue which may open up learning. This chapter, therefore, in many ways forms a bridge between what others have said about volunteering, peace building and volunteer learning in chapters one and two, how best to explore what volunteers have to say about such experiences and my attempts to make sense of this emerging data in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### **Discussion: what is said, told and revealed.**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will revisit the three main thesis themes utilising volunteer accounts. The first of these, not surprisingly, is centred on the notion of peace building. How volunteers talk about, reflect upon, engage and interact with activities and people to gain an insight into doing and understanding peace building. Furthermore, their perceptions, reflections and how these relate to academic discourses on peace building will be explored.

The second theme is related to the more general question regarding volunteer participation in post-conflictual societies and here volunteers explore the paradox that volunteering is becoming more centrally defined in a time when volunteering is being seen as important at the cutting edge of social and welfare support (Kearney, 2003). Also examined, how such participation reflects some of the wider issues on volunteerism such as civic participation and community involvement. The first two themes focus upon volunteering and its contribution to social issues and change. The final theme considers the benefits to volunteers themselves – their own learning. This is discussed in relation to informal education as outlined in previous chapters.

In relation to such learning, Hall (1997: 4-5) describes how Eddie Kinner, who spent 13 years imprisoned for paramilitary involvement with the Ulster Volunteer Force, reflects, “I believe that any peace process must be founded on fundamental socio-economic change, not cosmetic, temporary, cobbled-together change.” For Eddie the concern is with societal change. For the volunteer quoted below the desire is to explore people’s expectations as a volunteer. Different experiences, it could be suggested, create different emphasis. This difference starts to uncover the uniqueness of volunteering

and informal learning. That is, learning about the relationship between local and personal experiences and a broader analysis of underlying issues as the below extract reveals:

*R8 I feel sometimes uncomfortable with the whole peace and reconciliation thing kind of not wanting to be flippant or talk about peace and niceness because I feel very sensitive about being seen as [a volunteer] here to solve other people's problems. I felt quite embarrassed by that possibility.*

Further points arise from such comments. First, volunteering is presented as a struggle - quietly learning about, developing and engaging with a more critical perspective. Indeed, the above volunteer (R8) shies away from describing volunteering as a panacea for conflict. Second, the promotion of mutual respect and collective action. The suggestion being raised is: volunteers need to pay special attention to their involvement and interactions. Third, bringing forth such reflection is a form of educational practice connected to self and social action.

This is not to suggest that if interviewed in other situations, any of the volunteers interviewed might use a variety of other words. As such, when volunteer interviews are imbedded into this chapter they represent a synthesis of volunteer accounts, informal discussions and researcher interpretation. The following discussions, therefore, consider both the specific responses and overarching generic themes emerging from volunteer interviews. That is, looking at how all statements made by each interviewee are interrelated. What are the contradictions and consistencies? What is the 'big picture' of what the interviewees are trying to say - and how does every individual statement from each interviewee relate to this big picture?

## **4.2 Volunteers and Peace Building**

Despite the starting point that living in post-conflictual societies exposes many to the harrowing impact of conflict, often leaving individuals and communities depleted of energy or structure, some people seek to learn about, challenge and relate differently to such conflict through voluntary

activities (Kelly, 2006). Although not everyone feels compelled to give up their time and energy to become positively involved, those that do suggest that such experiences do not incur immediate or forthright understanding of peace building. Volunteers prefer to speak of the challenges of involvement that span personal and social perspectives. For instance:

*R8 You could be working very long hours and it could be emotionally as well as physically draining especially with family and school groups. You would really have to be on the ball.*

*R12 It was a very positive experience for me, a very difficult experience for me in terms of giving me a broader perspective on life in Northern Ireland. Not just from how I see or experience it.*

Indeed, volunteers suggest that terms such as peace, conflict and reconciliation are not easily understood. Volunteers note, for example, that:

*R11 Peace building itself is a term that can be used so widely that is difficult to - it is very general and difficult to be specific.*

*R2 ...to understand any kind of conflict you must then learn about peace building and it is not something you learn in school... at least not in Bosnia.*

*R8 Peace building as a concept involves where there has been some form of conflict helping people to work together to look at the issues and outcomes of such conflict.*

Although such comments demonstrate an implicit and explicit view of peace building, a picture of the relationships, processes, settings and learning potential also emerges. Terms and settings, however, can be misleading (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). Such learning can be rooted in the places, interests and experiences of ordinary people, however, their responses also start to detail a utilitarian agenda towards greater social cohesion when they suggest that peace building involves:

*R5 ...challenging the myths of conflict. In some small way, as a volunteer, making a difference to a society which was torn between being very individualistic and fearful of the past.*

R1 *... a grass roots effort at re-building broken relationships, healing wounds. It enables people to come out of the past and into the future. It is also about learning from the past.*

The above comments start to explore aspects of peace building from the systemic and historic sectarianism of Northern Ireland to their own involvement. It is about visualising a future with important societal filters of awareness as a result of their experience and seeing volunteering embedded in this plan. It also starts to focus on defining what is peace building?

#### 4.2.1 Defining Peace Building

In relation to the above passages it may be possible to surmise that volunteers do not offer an easily shared definition of peace building. That's not to say that they are not thinking or talking about peace building through such voluntary experiences. They do, however, introduce some of the issues underpinning a definition and understanding of peace building. For example, the tension between describing something either too vague to define anything in particular or too limited to take in the big picture. As one volunteer suggests, when focusing upon the issue of interface areas:

R8 *...in certain places where there is a lot of intercommunity tension like an interface area where the two communities meet or don't meet, there may be physical or geographical structures to separate and ...seeing if there is a way of bringing them together in some form.*

Here the above volunteer describes the difficulties of contact between differing groups and communities. How peace building occurs, what is learned and how it is (or is not) talked about may reflect dimensions of peace and reconciliation still to be uncovered<sup>36</sup>. This also raises the importance of learning through dialogue and negotiation. Volunteers, for example, provide a conduit to explore the level of preparedness to talk about and act for peace at a community level. As such they act as a reframing lens, as the volunteer below suggests:

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<sup>36</sup> See also, Bloom & Reichert (1998) and Kelly (2006) for emerging and changing terminology and issues.



R11 *... being part of a community, living and working with diversity. ...how can we bring two different communities, conflictual communities or groups together, well that's clearly peace building ...you can offer a different perspective and that's all peace building to me.*

The notion of community relations as introduced in the opening chapter might be, according to the above comments, more helpful than understanding more grandiose terms such as peace building. Although such talk may not correspond with academic terms of reference, volunteers recognise and reinforce current theoretical viewpoints concerning peace and reconciliation. For instance, when R8, above, considers that the absence of violence or 'contact' does not necessarily result in peace. The lack of terminology should not, however, be confused with a lack of understanding. There is inevitably a tension between talking about peace building principles and peace building as volunteering practice. As one volunteer intimates:

R7 *...in terms of peace building we don't always have to be entirely at peace. I suppose I think of a spectrum with war at one end, communal violence in the middle and peace at the other end. Volunteering for me is working nearer towards the peace end.*

Indeed, collectively volunteers suggest that peace, as a concept, is not separate from other reconciliatory elements and requires a change in personal, community and political relationships to flourish (Guelke, 2003; McCartney, 2006). They also raise key reconciliatory issues. For example, the depersonalising of conflict to "look at the issues" (R8) or the mobilisation of community support through specific groups<sup>37</sup>. Such intervention, however, often requires effective personal and inter group communication (Brown, 2000), as mentioned below:

R4 *...to allow people to share their own stories and through the listening to those stories you get an understanding and that's what I found out about volunteering. It was about different communities coming together and doing good activities that were well planned.*

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Kaldor's (2006) discussion on the mobilisation of community support through women's groups.

Volunteers, reflecting upon such experiences that define and actualise peace building, also note the importance and possible limitations of volunteer involvement. For instance:

- R1 *A major thing in peace building for me is in building relationships. This requires time, effort and space to be created for this to happen. This cannot always be possible volunteering.*
- R6 *It is very frustrating as I say because,... you are not sure whether you're making any sort of lasting difference. I have worked in youth work and would often say that if you make a difference to one person that's a very important job. ...but in a lot of the time you're never going to know who you have made a difference to.*

The above passages challenge the value of 'contact' by reflecting upon the importance of relationship, as well as synthesising their past experiences and the factors of context, time and professional roles. This is elaborated upon further in the following passage.

- R5 *We [volunteers] provide a vital service alongside paid workers to support groups. The role of a volunteer is vital to complement those who are pressurized to deliver programmes, support and develop more work within the community.*

Whilst peace building is talked about as complementing social and welfare provision, it assumes a chronological timing often related to policy and structure. Volunteers, however, suggest another timeframe. The timeframe discussed in the above passages places such experiences in the history of a particular social context. The point is, such accounts of peace building use different time frames: those that are punctuated by important relationships, events and contexts. Furthermore, volunteers mobilised into such service challenge the notion of being seen as a replacement for declining social and welfare provision (Milligan & Conradson, 2006). Indeed, relying more upon volunteers may offer new benefits, learning and relationships as volunteers engage with those having professional responsibilities.

### 4.2.2 Helping in context

The notion of helping, giving back and 'doing good' is not new to volunteer research (Brooks, 2002; Merrill & Safrit, 2003; Michael, 2001). The understanding, however, of people participating voluntarily to help foster an understanding of historical, political, communal conflict or help promote change is. This form of involvement transcends organisational structures or arrangements (Ogonor, 2003). Coy & Woehrle (2000), suggest that such voluntary participation allows new social networks to be accessed, and new ways in which resources can be shared. Volunteers infer a more developmental understanding is needed, one that includes a sense of momentum to transcend organisational boundaries, as the comments below intimate:

- P1 *I suppose what interests me is the fact that it's kind of a circular organisation, flat, everyone work together doing lots of different activities. It doesn't matter whether you work for the organisation, volunteer or come as a member of a group.*
- R7 *...through volunteering we can help build peace. And being involved in that process I think that is really important here [NI]. I think it's just there's a lot of stuff around the sector having issues around volunteers and burnout, disillusionment or people just having a bad experience from the organisation not having clearly thought out why volunteers should be involved in peace building.*

The above passages challenge the assumption that voluntary involvement is an easily pliable resource for peace building that benefits the individual, the organisation and society equally. As Lederach (1997: 97) notes, "considerable attention must be given to discovering and building on the cultural resources for conflict resolution that exist within each context." Ultimately, his point is on creating a shared responsibility, strategic commitment and interdependency upon resources, structures and the building of what he calls a *peace constituency*. That is, a broad integrative framework of understanding upon how resources, such as volunteers, are understood not just in financial terms but also within a socio-cultural and organisational configuration. The passage above also questions the appropriateness and understanding when

involving volunteers. Furthermore, what is the influence, if at all, of organisational ethos and behaviour? The above passages suggest a reflection upon the types of organisation or new kinds of social structure that are sustaining, non-alienating and purposeful for voluntary peace building engagement (McCartney, 1999).

Although attempts to understand inclusion, social economy and civic responsibility, from a volunteer perspective suggest an insight into organisational trends and developments (Milligan & Conradson, 2006), volunteers add a more personal analysis of reconciliatory activity and participation:

R6 *...it was really my own focus upon my own personal development and professional development so the peace building stuff took quite a while to dawn on me exactly how that worked and how I contributed to that so the reason for voluntary work was initially more for my own personal gain.*

Kearney (2003: 49) reinforces this notion, when he states that, “peace building demands personal involvement. It is not a process for others. It is a process for you and me.” Although optimistic, even idealistic, this is embedded in volunteer comments. For instance, being able to distinguish between a peace process and the goal of peace; “*peace building and peace, you don't see that at once*” (R9). Societal, organisational and moral reflections suggest a more engaging level of understanding by volunteers:

R1 *... not being a paid worker can be advantageous in that it shows no material gain to be made as a volunteer.*

R2 *I have an experience of being involved and affected by a conflict in my country, and that experience helps me to understand, to communicate and to learn, to myself and other people, about peace advantages and peace solutions, and most of all how to deal with conflict.*

Another way of thinking about such involvement is to consider the impact on local people and local outcomes. Arnstein (1969) suggested a hierarchal spectrum to understand participation that covers a range of structures and practices. At one end of the spectrum the outcome reflects little change in

power or representation, with locals being co-opted into community participation. Volunteers, for example, talk of poorly constructed cross community work.

*R12 helping those who are poor or homeless and then [the volunteer] goes into a nine to five job which perpetuates levels of inequality that leads to people who are poor or homeless and all of the other social consequences.*

The other end of the spectrum suggests local people empowered to act collectively and strategically to address local issues and challenge the notion of false generosity as the above volunteer notes. The scale between these poles assumes, at each stage, a universality of participation and activity as well as community stability. Such participation also suggests a concern for the well-being of all rather than a strategy to foster a new participatory democracy (Cairns & Frey, 2003). Such frames of reference tend to be time bound, efficiency driven and view public involvement as a challenge. This position starts from a position of deficiency and ignores the many interdependent and interactive roles of volunteers acting within and between communities. At the 'chalk face,' for example, one volunteer discusses participation in relation to professional duties and career development.

*P1 Sometimes being a volunteer means that you're often seen as being professional. It's a kind of short cut to professionalism I suppose.*

Although there is a proliferation of NGO's and peace and reconciliation work taking place in Northern Ireland, relatively little is seen from the voluntary and community sectors contribution. As Kearney (2003) and Cochrane & Dunn (2002: 151) note, "much of the most useful activity in this field is conducted invisibly and is not tied to particular events." Volunteers talk of the invisibility of volunteering as part of a long-term reconciliatory aim, that is without any expectation of immediate or visible result (Williams & Williams, 1994). There is also the notion of being visible and involved without heralding any authoritative voice, as one volunteer notes:

R8 *I think people have to have a reason to pull away from violence and I think volunteers help provide role models to look at other ways of being.... providing good role models in terms of being more knowledgeable to help with discussions, the important thing with volunteers is not taking the initiative but being there to support. I also think there is a lot of peace building that goes on behind the scenes just informal discussion, casual conversation, just passing a towel to someone.*

This volunteer is reflecting upon helping as a structural concept. Working and acting together to understand and act on the structures and processes that affect the lives of people in particular communities. The emphasis is not on 'self-help' but on interdependent help. Furthermore, raising the awareness to others that volunteers can be of assistance, coalescence and maintaining and modelling integrity. For those who had volunteered in different conflictual contexts, there was also evidence of spreading hope and inspiration. As such, volunteering is a highly visible aspect of a lifestyle and choices:

R9 *...it [volunteering] was something that made a huge impact on my life and my preferences of what I'm going to do what I would like to do with my life. But I tell this to people mostly people in Bosnia especially they don't have opportunity to find out more about volunteering. This is very difficult to make them understand because they expect to get something in return out of volunteering.*

Studies on volunteer motivation underscore the importance of this humanistic discourse of helping (Hatch, 1983 and Mac Neela, 2003) and suggest the need to understand more clearly the relationship between volunteers and the commitments made through volunteering. Yet missing from these suggestions is an understanding of the fundamental nature of such participation where elements of human rights, reconciliation and mediation evolve. This is not to deny the importance of other voluntary organisations responding to social change and human suffering, however, there are unique differences in participation. For instance, the ease with which, as outsiders, volunteers are accepted into cross-community dialogue and activity.

P2 *I think volunteering is a safe role. Although some people see you as an expert I don't think of myself like that I just think that being on the outside is useful. I can give a different community view in a safe way.*

#### 4.2.3 Volunteer Awareness

As mentioned previously, there are challenges when volunteering alongside those who have witnessed such violence firsthand. Zinsstag's (2005) account of sexual violence in post-conflict situations, for example, suggests that such trauma and subsequent healing, as well as coming to terms with the past, can take several generations. This is echoed by one volunteer:

R12 *it may still take thirty, forty or fifty years plus, before there is more of an environment that could support such change rather than it be counter cultural.*

Such accounts also raise important reconciliatory elements such as the balance between remembering and changing. This then raises the question, whether the responsibility for peace building rests unequally on the shoulders of disadvantaged communities or volunteer/community groups? If so, is there a need to consider professional training for volunteers and to what extent can voluntary organisations train volunteers. This includes how volunteers understand, accept and thrive upon such responsibility, as described below:

R7 *I've certainly had some hard experiences in terms of judgement calls. Judgements around do I do something or do I not say something and it depends on the responsibility I am given in my role.*

Volunteers talking about sensitive issues also raise an awareness of the impact of social and personal traumatic experiences including potential traumatic re-enactment. This exposure to violence as indicated below raises the issue of violence as a social practice, knowing that it is on the horizon of the social imagination. For the volunteer, there is a prevailing logic that violence is part-and-parcel of post-conflictual societies and peace building, but such experiences also enable the potential to challenge and change such practices.

- R7 *Being around other violent people gave me confidence and it was tricky although when I was in it I was just dealing with it and I was very happy not to go to pieces in that situation. ... I think volunteering has helped that.*

Although such experience may be insufficient to produce any specific guidelines regarding participation, there is, nevertheless, recognition of the implicit and manifest impact through such involvement and developing such capacity, as the volunteer below notes:

- R2 *As a volunteer I have to help. Sometimes it means keeping group together, sometimes to help group see other point of view or feelings. Sometimes I do nothing but watch. ... I don't mean I do nothing. I'm thinking what is going on, who is speaking, who is listening. Sometimes I look to other staff to see if they are thinking to say something. I try to think what is happening for group - what is the development.*

Trauma-informed psychoeducational development as discussed by Bloom and Reichert (1998)<sup>38</sup> and Zinsstag (2005) suggest that awareness is often the starting point. This willingness to be part of and learn through such personal and socially challenging experiences is noted directly by volunteers:

- R8 *As a volunteer you don't know what's coming down the line for a person. This might have been very different ten or twenty years ago when the troubles were at their most violent. There still is paramilitary activity. I remember the Holy Cross incident in 2001 and being a volunteer then, it was important to help.*

#### **4.2.4 The Challenges of Learning about Peace Building.**

Spinner Halev (2003: 53) suggests that education and learning in divided societies has to begin with different aims and assumptions, including a parallel political process of reconciliation. "The aim of education in divided societies should not just be the goals of autonomy and citizenship, but also the difficult goal of reconciliation." He questions the validity of transporting liberal arguments into divided societies that focus upon individual and not group rights.



The idea of learning through volunteering poses a number of challenges. It is informal, tacit and contested - something which makes demands on how to think and act socially, politically and culturally. As Kovan & Dirkx (2003: 100) note when considering the lives of environmental activists, "missing from these suggestions is an understanding of the fundamental nature of the learning process involved in helping to achieve or maintain commitment for activist work." Furthermore, learning about peace building requires an introduction to often difficult issues which challenge personal values, development, discovery and self preservation, as stated by one volunteer:

R3 *I remember a flags workshop, about what flag is yours. I remember standing under the tricolour and then under the union jack and I was called traitor.*

It also involves engaging with people regarding their past and present experiences within a larger historical and societal context as well as acknowledging change and transformation as important goals, as suggested below:

R8 *There were different kinds of agendas. As part of its remit as a peace and reconciliation centre quite often working with schools groups to help educate young people. ...you would have basically Protestant and Catholic schools trying to get youngsters to realise, hey you don't have to throw bricks at each other - and they might be - and this might be supplementary to things they are doing at school.*

There is also something very special talking and learning about peace building. Reflecting upon experiences, being open to sensitive issues and activities suggests understanding peace building is an important focus. Volunteers note, for example, when asked of their understanding:

R1 *It is about justice and equality. In a sense it is also about a process of reconciliation. Ultimately and hopefully it can be about forgiveness.*

P1 *What I have learnt is that volunteering and peace building is a two way process. I have learned so much about myself as well as about other people.*

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<sup>38</sup> see Bloom's Sanctuary Model for in-depth perspective on social traumatic experiences ([www.sanctuaryweb.com](http://www.sanctuaryweb.com) ).

- R2 *Every day you can learn something new about these particular matters, there's no formula for peace building or reconciliation, so it is about attitude, beliefs, feelings, experience, background. And because I'm from the region which was involved in conflict, I felt that I need to learn as much as I can about these matters and to try to bring back that experience and knowledge to Bosnia.*

Although these passages, as conversational events, reflect individual perspectives, they also suggest learning through the sharing of experience and understanding. An account offered in discussion by one volunteer, for example, may be a source of information or reflection for another. This is not to suggest that volunteers are striving for mutuality and consensus regarding peace building. Indeed, such accounts do not identify a *eureka* moment or a response to some clarion call for peace. Their responses do, however, suggest pragmatism about engaging with such challenging concepts. At one level Brooks (2002: 15) describes it as, "just getting on with it". Indeed, initial self-reflection suggests, simply and generally, contributing within the community sector. This is further reiterated below:

- R11 *I wouldn't normally describe myself in relation to peace building. Just somebody who works in the voluntary sector and promotes social justice but not really a peace building volunteer.*

Through such activity or discussion volunteers do they necessarily see themselves debating academically or seeking some conceptual understanding. They do, however, raise several points concerning learning about themselves, the social and historical context, knowledge, skills and understanding relating to peace building. These include discussing different processes and skills needed. For example:

- R4 *It was really interesting to separate the groups and say go for it, don't hold back or say whatever you are going to say and then to bring it together and some of the kids began to realise their eyes aren't close together or they think the same about us.*

- R5 *To bring people to look beyond religion and see things that are shared.*

*R8 As a volunteer I learned a lot of transferable skills and it was very influential for learning about my future career.*

Collectively, such comments raise a number of issues. They suggest that peace building is a term used to describe a process, relationship and important domain of social and political experience, as described by one volunteer:

*P2 I remember afterwards some of the children wrote to us to say that they were still talking to children from the other school. And I got to see and experience the troubles from those youngsters' perspectives and to see how the school is or isn't helping.*

Volunteers also note how such involvement can provide alternative viewpoints, what McCartney (1999) describes as reframing. That is, helping to raise different perspectives on conflictual issues through a variety of experiences:

*R4 Peace building didn't have to be about the big activities.*

Being with others and recognising the impact of entering another person's world is often described as establishing empathetic relationships (Hall & Hall, 1988). In noting the importance of relationship to conflict and its alternative, reconciliation, Lederach (1997: 20) suggests that peace building "encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships." This relationship issue is reiterated by Morrow (2000: 13), when he suggests that peace building can be defined as "a quality of relationship which can allow for real difference while maintaining an insistence on equity and the mutual rights and responsibilities that arise from interdependence."

In summary, there is clearly more happening to volunteers than simply learning about defining peace building. Learning within such settings is not just a technical process - how to do peace building activities - nor is it value free, learning is contextual (Foley, 1999). There are complex social issues

relating to the role and relationship of volunteers to peace and reconciliation (Hall, 1997). Such complexity includes how volunteers define themselves through loyalties, principles, activities, networks and relationships:

- R7 *my value, and belief system has grown up with my volunteering experiences; ... through volunteering we can help build peace.*
- R5 *I also think peace building should start within ourselves and our own families, relationships and communities.*

Such extracts also reflect a language of helping, a gentle revolution through dialogue, searching and commitment. They also introduce a choreography of mutuality. As Milligan & Conradson (2006) note, a core element of a 'pluralised' social economy is where individuals engage in the development of responsible communities. A contrast, they suggest, to the addiction present in individualised consumption. This idea of a dynamic relationship between self, others and the political and social context (see also Apfel & Simon, 1996 & Lederach, 1997) is evident in a number of volunteer responses:

- R1 *We rotated the monthly meetings so that each member hosted the forum within their own community setting. This was important so that ordinary people would be aware of the existence and nature of the forum. I also was involved in organising events that would bring the whole of the district together in a common and inclusive way. In terms of peace building, I believe that this approach enabled listening, participation and dialogue on an inclusive basis within the forum, developing understanding, knowledge and building relationships. Getting to know each other safely.*

*"It was only when the local community volunteers encouraged a hands across the sectarian divide that they came together. From this beginning, concerned lay people felt it was time for the Inter Friendship Group" (Hugh Campbell, Volunteer. O'Hagan, 2001).*

- R8 *I am very conscious of not wanting to make people feel patronised because even most kids know that bigotry is wrong and I simply didn't want to preach about that. Peace building is partly about providing contact opportunities. Although I think there is a danger that peace building can be seen as preaching to the converted. Obviously there will always be some difficulties with different types of group... I think people have to have a reason to look at other ways of being.*



Volunteers voice a sensitivity when learning about peace building and reconciliation. Indeed, their comments suggest not talking directly about peace building in relation to results or outcome. Rather, their concern is with personal understanding, designing activities, learning about others and supporting social change. There is also recognition that some stages of reconciliation create their own challenges and require time and patience. As Coy and Woehrle (2000: 10) suggest, it is sometimes simply enough “to agree to disagree”. Even then, however, there is learning when and how to understand the ‘status quo’, as one volunteer notes:

*R11 I mean, you know from your experience that [peace building] didn't happen every day but yes it certainly did happen and that would be something that made me conscious of the peace process.*

The following sections will expand upon volunteers’ peace building explanations, to highlight some of the emerging descriptions and understandings starting with a theoretical backcloth.

### **4.3 Theoretical reflections**

Morrow (2000: 26) states that prior to 1994, “much effort in Northern Ireland ...had been focused on containing conflict and maintaining civil society.” Since then the focus has been on how to transform this legacy into a more understanding, tolerant and prosperous society. This transformation requires an understanding of the political, cultural and theoretical complexity which informs development within post-conflictual societies (Whyte, 1994). It also requires support from people and communities, as two volunteers suggest:

*R12 I think the role of voluntary organisations was probably up until now only a safety valve rather than something that was ever going to make a huge impact on the ground.*

*R11 Peace and reconciliation needs more than activities to make it run and tick, peace building is not separate from living. That thing is really important.*

The significance of volunteers talking about peace building can be seen at several levels. First, they contextualise peace building. Engaging with people

they enable learning about and sharing of experiences. Second, they allow civic activity to be considered and reconstructed alongside peace building processes. The conscious effort of offering themselves to another person, group or perspective tends to stimulate reflection, as one volunteer notes.

R8 *Peace building is partly about providing contact opportunities. There are some groups that I've worked with such as prisoner groups or people who have previously been involved in paramilitary organisations who already know about conflict and reconciliation.*

Third, they take account of informal and formal relationships. As Kelly (2006: 13) adds, "it is imperative that communication between communities is established, divisions are broken down, prejudices and stereotypes are dispelled and meaningful relationships are formed."

R11 *Coming from a situation of conflict to Northern Ireland, there are some similarities although we knew it would be very different, the context is very different. Some of the similarities are about a war situation moving into peace and we thought there are some connections we could make and build on.*

The above comments, collectively, help introduce two of the main theories which have influenced the development of community relations and peace building understanding in Northern Ireland since the 1970's. That is, *contact theory* (Allport, 1954) and *social capital* (Putnam, 2000).

#### **4.3.1 Contact Theory**

Volunteers note the importance and limitations of contact between communities and, to some extent, their role within this process. For example:

R12 *Certainly through my volunteer experiences and the other voluntary activities. ...relationships were built that would not have been built otherwise. But the reality of peace building and reconciliation work generally is for it to be meaningful it needs to be at a community level where people are living so it's all very well getting people together and making some kind of relationship even friendship but if you don't have an opportunity to continue where they live it probably is of limited impact.*

R7 *...volunteers may not get to know the person long enough to establish a real supporting relationship...*

Such 'contact theory', which originates from social psychology, especially the work of Gordon Allport (1954), suggests the importance of bringing together individuals from opposing communities or groups. Contact theory's starting premise is, to some extent, the more individuals are in contact with those from opposing groups the more likely existing prejudices and stereotypes can be learned and challenged (Kelly, 2006).

R11 *...you could see people's barriers slowly coming down, moving across to relate to each other and seeing other people as just the same and no different.*

This is not necessarily straightforward as one volunteer notes:

R5 *Discussion was quite heated with open conflict about why they should accept each other and how difficult it would be for them on their return to their respective communities.*

P1 *Knowing that I have to accept sectarianism as long as there is violence.*

What volunteers have recognised is that, similar to other researchers such as Kelly (2006) and Spinner Halev (2003), there are limitations to contact when it is not sustainable, evolving or consolidatory. Allport (*op cit.*) suggests a list of conditions he believes needs to be met to challenge or reduce prejudice. Of these, the first was the sustainability and cooperative nature of such contact. Volunteers, when reflecting upon early contact-based programmes, note the failings of poorly planned contact:

R3 *We did have some joint sports day events to try and bring the different schools together but it was just more competition to see who was better.*

R4 *...so it was trying to bring people together using activities since they weren't meeting in schools because of the way Northern Ireland is. The schooling is quite separate in most cases. You were mixing but everyone was kind of wary about who you were mixing with. So it was about getting to know people in your community and trying to work with people beyond your own community and religious persuasion.*

Volunteers are not justifying integrated or segregated education, they are reflecting upon the importance of contact and daily living. In doing so they

are considering new conversations and interactions, finding out what different situations feel like. At one level this may seem incidental – but it is not accidental. Freire (1972) and Illich (1998) talk of the importance of dialogue and conviviality as times, places and processes for exploration and learning as suggested below:

- R4     *...to allow people to share their own stories and through the listening to those stories you get an understanding and that's what I found about volunteering.*
- R8     *On one occasion I remember I was talking to someone who had been recruited into a paramilitary organisation briefly and I got an insight into how you would get involved into that.*
- R9     *It is difficult to be somebody else and you don't really want to be but you are pulled into this kind of situation.*

One of the defining characteristics of above comments is the willingness, through such contact, to reflect upon others' abilities to endure and resist oppression. This by-product of such contact - that is, the role of volunteer learning, suggests that other domains of learning may be at play here. This picture of contact, however, is somewhat unsatisfactory. It fails to account for the factors which assist or detract from such contact. Such as:

- R11   *It can be very overtly talking about what is peace, what is reconciliation. How can we bring two different communities, conflictual communities or groups together well that's clearly peace building. ...How we live our lives, how we talk to other people that's a much larger picture of peace.*

Volunteers, however, rarely reflect upon such theoretical principles and yet support some of the insights gained or consider the issues surrounding what has been learned.

#### **4.3.2 Social Capital**

'Social capital theory' refers to the connections among and between individuals. It is, in Putnam's (2000: 19) words, "the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from the connections among individuals." Supporters of social capital tend to focus upon bonding,



bridging and linking elements to assess the impact of networks, relationships, social action and learning (Kelly, 2006). Volunteers note the importance of awareness-raising through such contact; relationship building through shared activity and trust building as a broader social and communal expectation<sup>39</sup>. Museums, relying upon volunteers yet expecting to operate in a business like manner also note a tension between financial, human and social capital (Smith, 2007). Another example is the evolution of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). A voluntary organisation which has, over the last hundred years, involved parents of pupils to support school life and now plays an important role in shaping school culture (PTA, 2007). According to Putnam (2000), key indicators of social capital include:

(a) Significant and durable networks, where volunteering fulfils an important function within community development. This networking issue is raised by volunteers in a number of ways.

- R1 *It [Community Relations Forum] was established to bring together members of the voluntary, public, statutory and private interests in the District, together with councillors and representatives of local church, education and community interests. I suppose being chairperson was a great honour and made me realise that I had to use all of my previous experience in terms of peace building.*
- R4 *One youth club had a court that you could play basketball and all kinds of stuff so it was trying to bring people together...*

Whether formal or informal, the above passages also raise the notion of interaction and support. People involved in such volunteering are also involved in often complex informal support networks. The composition of these includes friends, family and other volunteers. Future analysis may indicate (as it has done with older people) that those who engage in meaningful voluntary interaction may develop stronger social networks, are happier and perceive their circumstances more favourably (Wenger & Tucker, 2002).

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<sup>39</sup> see *A Shared Future* (2005) for analysis within NI.

(b) Relational experiences. The desire for inter group contact, understanding and friendships:

R8 *I would say at least half of my peer group are based on these [volunteering] experiences, people I've met at Corrymeela.*

R12 *... getting the chance to meet working class people or people from a working-class background especially working-class Catholics I really wouldn't have got to meet otherwise.*

(c) Social action. Responding to an issue which affects volunteers and others from different communities. Volunteers repeatedly spoke about the relationship between volunteering and wider societal structures:

R4 *I suppose as, when I got a bit older and became part of a committee and trying to work together and each of the different youth clubs had different resources all in close proximity and just because we are not at the same church. It's a shame.*

R9 *Nowadays you can make a huge impact on politicians as a volunteer, a huge impact on society, on community, you can make an impact now. If they [politicians] tried to do peace in politics we will do peace with the people.*

Although reflecting upon different contextual and contested experiences, the above passages suggest that individuals have different goals and interests which may emerge over time. The dynamics of such action are reflected by the acceptance and request for action in the above comments. In the following volunteer passage, the crucial features of social action emerge.

R12 *It is very easy to say that you are for peace or you want a more peaceful society but will you allow yourself to get involved or to learn from what other people have experienced. That is a very difficult thing to be committed to.*

Collectively, these three passages make explicit the variation in social action due to the contextual ambiguities. It may be suggested, however, that such accounts are no more than extracting voluntary effort to account positively for the synthesis of learning and struggle (Foley, 1999).

(d) A learning aim. Learning that highlights the tension between individual development and communal change, as volunteers note:

- R2 *Peace building is constant learning, it is a long lasting process, it becomes a way of life because it does influence on personal development and sometimes on professional development.*
- R11 *And inevitably as a volunteer you learn almost as much if not more than the people you're trying to be involved with.*

The above volunteers discuss the central importance of volunteering in helping them understand their own development and the challenges in a contested society. It is in this, rather than the provision of formal learning that such voluntary experiences are distinctive. For example:

- R5 *My role as a volunteer was very important to me as I feel not only did I learn a lot from that experience that in some small way as a vol. I was making a difference.*
- P2 *How some people seem to want to hold on to a status quo. ... If the troubles don't impact on you it is easy to ignore them to some extent.*

Such comments, collectively, provide a bridge between the rich contextualised analysis of peace building volunteering and the processes of engaging with hegemonic and oppositional ideologies. Such discourse is in itself a learning process (Foley, 1999). This desire to gain greater understanding of one another and issues that divide communities (Lampen, 1995) is further reflected upon in relation to personal learning:

- P1 *I remember being involved with a cross community youth club and it felt more like the old ground eyeing up those from the other side. I don't think all cross community work as a good idea. It needs to be carefully thought through.*

Although such reflection is important, Coffield (2000: 15) suggests that investigating informal learning in relation to such experiences is problematic:

Not only is implicit learning difficult to detect without prolonged observation, but reactive learning and some deliberative learning are unlikely to be consciously recalled unless there was an

unusually dramatic outcome. Worse still, potential respondents are unaccustomed to talking about learning and may find it difficult to respond to a request to do so.

Volunteers' responses, to some extent, echo this difficulty. When they do, it is couched in relation to their own personal development or specific skills to solve problems.

In summary, as a form of social facilitation, the contact hypothesis initially appears quite reasonable. It suggests that more contact between antagonistic social groups will undermine negative stereotypes, reduce prejudice and improve relations (Spinner-Halev, 2003). Volunteer comments, to some extent, support this. They also suggest, however, that such positive experiences will not end such antagonisms for three reasons. First, fear of others is one way communities define themselves. By scapegoating others, communities can strengthen their own sense of belonging. Alongside this is the need for appropriate authoritative structures, political will and graduated and sustained initiatives. This leads to the second point: fear of one's own community. People are less likely to redefine other communities for concern about whether they are seen to be challenging internal structures and relationships. "In conditions of group violence, it is difficult to retreat from communal feelings" (*ibid*: 57).

Third, individuals may choose to define such contact as extraordinary. Peace building could only happen here, now and because of these particular circumstances. Befriending a 'catholic' or 'protestant' is exceptional. He or she is okay, but the rest are not<sup>40</sup>. Rather than change the categorisation or re-evaluate attitudes, values or beliefs, the tendency is to overestimate the contextual influences and/or underestimate one's own interpretations or control. Or they convince themselves they are not sectarian because they

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<sup>40</sup> See Coy & Woehrle (2000) *Social Conflict and Collective Identities*, on what factors influence how children develop similar external social constructions.

have befriended someone from an opposing community, a trophy friend. The delicacy of this position is raised by volunteers:

R4 *There was a case of a wee boy whose uncle was a paramilitary. His uncle could not know he was up at Corrymeela or else the wee boy said his uncle would have gone mad. This boy really loved being at Corrymeela and he loved what we were doing all week and he was going home where he couldn't share that experience and that's an obstacle sometimes.*

And;

R5 *...one young man in particular said he would be shot if anyone knew he was even meeting Catholics at Corrymeela. He had lied to his family about where he was going. This discussion happened at the beginning of the weekend and allowed others to appreciate the risk that he had taken.*

Despite such efforts at meaningful contact many of which are well intentioned and appropriately constructed, there is an assumption that people are able to translate such experiences, challenge extraordinary community barriers or understand such new relationships.

Similar reservations are noted in relation to social capital (Cloonan & Crossan, 2002; Milligan & Conradson, 2006). At one level social capital may be considered more aspirational than operational (Kelly, 2006). Volunteers, for example, note that despite substantial efforts to build relationships and capacities, brief encounters, poor contact or lack of prior information may yield limited social or personal benefit.

R2 *If you are not provided with enough information, it makes difficult to build a right approach and communication as well. It means then that you need to play by ear but then you know that it can be risky because it's all about people and their lives.*

At another level, bonding and/or linking capital - the nature and levels of connectedness within communities and between different power brokers - may be particularly strong (see, for example, Bacon, 2003 & Crawford, 2003). This does not necessarily indicate a move away from over 30 years of violent

ethnic conflict<sup>41</sup>. It may simply reinforce intra-community bias. Nevertheless, the idea of social capital does offer the opportunity to re-focus from individualism to a more collective promotion of community and geographically defined support and understanding.

It follows from this initial view of social capital that such concepts provide a useful lens but not a complete explanation of all voluntary experiences. They do not account for the different participatory experiences or the notion of how and what volunteers learn. Volunteering around political and social struggle, for example, is often “tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognised as learning” (Foley, 1999: 3). Such concepts also fail to account for how volunteers access, question and begin to support the transformation of individuals, communities or themselves (Ranson, 1998). From the standpoint of volunteers, what seems to be happening is a collection of ideas about peace building that cannot be easily assimilated into or are resistant to analysis based solely out of these conceptions?

#### **4.4 Volunteer Participation**

It has been well documented that volunteers have complex personal reasons for volunteering (Gaskin, 2004). There is also ample historical evidence of the range and extent within voluntary and charitable organisations in response to social change, welfare and human suffering (Davis Smith, 2000). The extent of volunteer policies and programmes suggests an understanding of the variations of geographical, contextual and political participation as well as the motivations and capacity to volunteer (Mohan, Twigg, Jones & Barnard, 2006). There is also an emerging understanding that individuals within a group setting develop a collective identity in relation to peace movements (Kendrick in Coy & Woehrle, 2000). These studies, collectively, view volunteer participation as professionally and institutionally controlled. It is defined largely in formal, instrumental and individual terms (Crowther,

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<sup>41</sup> See also the interim report, *Evaluating Community-based and Voluntary Activity in Northern Ireland* (2001), Morrissey, M., McGinn, P. & McDonnell, B. CENI: Belfast.

2000). A significant absence in understanding participation is the extent to which it is understood in volunteer terms. It is important to understand the consequences of such participation. How do volunteers deal with unintended consequences? Are new skills learned and translated? How do we understand the roles developed or the benefits to those whom they serve?

Voluntary participation provides an avenue to actively contribute to society as well as demonstrating commitment and concern to local issues. Eberly (2003) notes how such participation is a silent and non-violent form of serving one's country. Kovan & Dirkx (2003: 101) add that such participation suggests "an openness to change" and reflects "a deep, profound form of ongoing learning". They also suggest that a loss of heart may emerge where conditions challenge the capacity of individuals to sustain their commitment. For example:

R6 *... it can be quite frustrating, you come here with an idea that what you're doing is contributing towards peace and reconciliation and then find a lot of time is running about after screaming kids. It is sometimes quite hard to make the connection between one thing and another.*

Brooks (2002) suggests that volunteers are part of the task but not part of the team. This notion of exclusion or limitation is challenged by volunteers interviewed. On the whole, volunteers spoke of being welcomed, of being accepted into their complementary relational position. For instance:

R4 *I worked alongside the family worker... This eventually led me along with another volunteer to lead and run our own family group and I think that was quite a significant event.*

Another level of participation raised by volunteers is the notion of community development. Volunteers repeatedly discuss working with particular communities, cross community work and reflecting upon their own sense of involvement.

R3 *I remember being in a flags workshop and I was the facilitator. There were three other teachers in there but they let me do it. I guess it was safer for them to some extent.*

This making sense of their experience without the imposition of an external mediated learning framework reflects some of Friere's (1972) notion of reflexive and critical understanding as suggested below:

R9 *Before the war it was different, let's say for example you asked people to build this road or build that bridge, there was brotherhood and unity that was our proverb from Tito the people would do this for free, they wouldn't get anything, they would do the job free and they would get loads of fun just socialising with other people who are coming from all around Yugoslavia I mean ex Yugoslavia.*

Williamson (1995) suggests that the dynamics and meaning within communities reflect intensely local issues, key associations and regional distinctions. His conclusion suggests the need to think historically about communities in order to understand their constructed and imagined development. His position, however, is from a stabilised rather than conflictual perspective although he does note, as others do, how others are marginalised, disconnected and excluded from communities (Sacks, 2002; Guelke, 2003). As such, understanding communities through volunteering requires working with people, enabling participants to collectively analyse and solve problems and issues. Outsiders, such as volunteers, possess different capabilities to shape community development, based upon empowering, equitable and more democratic criteria (Daniels, 2003).

R6 *...the opportunity to get people away from that [riots] and also do some cross community work... I mean hopefully they may be able to come back to their own community with a slightly different approach this summer to rub off on other people in the community.*

R5 *... it is finding out what people have in common as well as accept the diversity that exists in groups and communities. ... I think it's important because without it we would not be able to build up relationships to challenge any prejudices we hold especially in Northern Ireland where prejudices and division can be seen everyday. We can change our societies if we work collectively on things together rather than as communities fighting against each other or as individuals hiding.*



Reflecting upon contact between different communities, informal learning and diversity awareness raising, volunteer participation highlights the mosaic of social and societal engagement. What is also clear is that volunteers are recognising personal boundaries and a degree of political and social analysis.

R4 *So it was about getting to know people in your community and trying to work with people beyond your own community and religious persuasion. ... it was about different communities coming together in doing good activities that were well-planned but it was also about the simple...*

Crowther & Martin (2005: 8), reflecting upon a Freirian approach adapted to the twenty first century, suggest that “what is actually required to give most people real choices is precisely the kind of critical and reflexive education Freire insisted on as the right of all citizens”. Although not explicitly on the minds of volunteers, providing communities with the opportunities to contest their exclusion, identity or oppression, allows a level of participatory dialogue - a form of revitalised social purpose. As Crowther (2000: 482) notes, “it is an understanding of participation which draws on the experience of social purpose and radical tradition.”

#### **4.4.1 Participating at the edge**

Williams and Williams (1994: 14) suggest that the dynamics of conflict force people apart and/or to choose sides. Such dynamics increase fear, anxiety and distrust. Volunteers, for example, describe being ‘in the middle’ of such experiences and yet being at the edge of their own knowledge, experience and comfort. The above authors suggest that such participation is just that, being at the edge of social change by being in the middle of the action. Volunteers describe the demands of such participation:

R3 *I got into a big argument with one teacher and he was saying about being a Catholic and knowing some good Protestants and they are buried. We argued for about ten minutes and in the end I said, “fuck off” and walked away and I was scared but I thought no I’m in the right and he was wrong. I had to apologise for my language but we never really saw eye to eye. I met him several years later and I remember him saying are you still trying to do this*

*peace stuff and I just said are you still trying to teach. And we both laughed about it but we were both serious. Volunteering allowed me to explore what I believed.*

Furthermore:

R3 *there was another guy \_\_\_\_\_, and he kept eyeballing me. And the whole weekend he kept his distance ...as the group were getting on the bus he came up to me and shook my hand and gave me as much of a hug as was safe and said "you're all right for a taig". And I didn't really know what was going on for him and even when he got off the bus and approached me I was shitting a brick.*

Such encounters do not support the contention that volunteer participation is somehow transparent and easily comprehended. The above comments suggest that, in contrast with bureaucratic organisations, such encounters are challenging, creative and energising. Such experience and learning is 'hot' and situated in specific circumstances, timing and relationships. Alternatively, it may be scarcely visible, blending into the background as:

R11 *...the bread-and-butter, they just saw us as those people helping visitors and guests settle in, working in the kitchen, helping in the dining-room, running activities or helping out or welcoming people.*

From another perspective, one volunteer described having their view of the world challenged:

R12 *So to hear people saying things like, those that fought and died in the IRA are the same as those who fought in the first and Second World War was a, it completely blew my head away, that anyone could ever think that that was the case.*

Such participation is not just a way of developing knowledge and understanding. It is about risk taking. There is a richness of learning when there is uncertainty, vulnerability and challenge. This bridge between volunteer participation and the contextualised analysis of reconciliatory social activity as a learning process is discussed by Foley (1999). He suggests that learning and education are counter-balanced by an analysis of the political economy and micro-politics. It is here that anxiety, commitment, interdependence and judgement coalesce (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993).

Second, although Foley fails to account for the capacity of volunteers to impact upon communities, Williamson (1995) suggests there are considerable difficulties encountered by outsiders seeking to enter and influence local communities. Volunteer accounts, however, seem to challenge this perspective. Engaged in such activities, volunteers describe an engagement which offers quite a different perspective to communitarian thought of individual participation as detrimental to community (Delanty, 2003). Volunteers note, for example how:

- R10 *People in and around the Shankhill and Falls Road are in their own quiet way volunteering and are making a difference.*
- R11 *Being part of the community, to be part of the whole ethos living and working with diversity. Because we knew we were there with a particular purpose it makes sense to us and that makes it easy.*

Volunteers describe 'the troubles' as a creative and purposeful context. They suggest how involvement through presence, commitment and contribution, without any championing role can help make systems and experiences of oppression visible. Voluntary participation, from this perspective, is a mixture of personal fulfilment or individualised expression compatible with collective involvement. It can also be a reflection of important aspects of purposeful intervention, a move towards participatory justice and equity as can be seen in the following passages:

- R10 *It was just group facilitating, discussions, activities, I was just part of the Volunteering team and we would work with schools from the Protestant side and schools from the Catholic side and sat and discussed anything and everything. And we just tried to break down the barriers.*
- R12 *Certainly residentials where there's been some really good work done, relationships built that would not have been built otherwise. So in that sense, yes I can certainly say I have been involved in helping the peace process or reconciliation.*

This willingness and capacity to engage with issues of social exclusion, as well as openness to be changed by a commitment to liberation, social

obligation and civic participation, echoes many of the emancipatory issues raised by supporters of Freire (1972). Delanty (*op.cit.*: 121) adds, when considering social movements and community, that such participation “can be a means of releasing the cultural creativity” and “reinforce the quest for personal achievement”.

R4     *... volunteers as far as I can see it, the volunteers make a difference but on an individual basis where I as one person made a difference, I'm not sure.*

Whilst it may be suggested that such participation leads to a more inclusive understanding, the difficulties of volunteering on the edge, especially when volunteers must react ‘on the ground’, is that it is not always clear how volunteers become self-critical of such practice or the purpose of the various roles they are asked to perform. What is clear, however, is that such participation challenges the preoccupation with personal and career development associated with much of the current volunteer research.

#### **4.5 Volunteer Learning**

Volunteer descriptions of learning arise from a complex set of factors such as social interaction, informal incidents, critical reflection and transformative moments. Often considered as the education of daily living, it is difficult to know to what extent learning has occurred when rarely made explicit (Darvil *et al.*, 1988). Perhaps this complexity explains the relative dearth of understanding surrounding learning through volunteering. As McGivney (2001: 104) suggests:

The skills and knowledge acquired in the course of everyday life, such as the competencies developed in child rearing and managing domestic affairs and those developed in voluntary contexts are routinely ignored.

Conversely, volunteering may actually be a significant meeting place for an adult’s deep searching and society’s deep questions (Williamson, 1995). This, however, is not some new imagining. McAlister Brew (1946: 11) suggested over half a decade ago that “the time has come, however, when more

education, and above all continuing education throughout life, has become not only a matter of individual and social well-being but also a matter of urgency, of self-preservation, an essential indeed to the survival of any type of democratic civilisation." Several studies of people volunteering for the common good reflect this interrelationship between the self and a sense of learning (Grey, 2002).

Interestingly, as voluntary and community projects become more business like the demands on the voluntary sector have changed. This includes a more formalised approach to learning. Smith (2007: 11), for example, suggests that it is important to provide good training and match skills with interests, "we need volunteers with marketing and financial expertise but that person might be interested in a genealogy project. In this way we swap skill for interest." Is there, however, anything distinctive about the volunteer setting as a context for learning or is there anything specific about learning and peace building? These are complex questions and volunteers found it difficult to discuss learning connected to their voluntary work as well as the connection with other areas of their lives. Never-the-less, several volunteers discussed the area of learning which they regarded as unique to volunteering:

R4     *As volunteers we weren't the leaders but we were involved so it was also watching how other people work and learning from them.*

R5     *...in more informal ways by talking to group members in a relaxed setting and finding things in common. To see the person rather than the stereotypes.*

The above passages, collectively, suggest learning as distinctive in three main ways: the variety of experience offered which include understandings shaped by expert and active involvement, conscious of their relationships with other participants. Beyond learning about oneself there was also learning about community involvement/development and the possibility for social change. When considering different models of adult learning, Tusting and Barton (2003: 24) suggest that such critical awareness and social action

“promotes emancipation as desirable educational results.” Some of these areas will now be considered further.

#### 4.5.1 Learning about Trust Building

Proponents of social capital theory argue that the development of trust between individuals and communities has lasting benefits towards strangers and the very fabric of social institutions. This is often discussed in relation to the association between generalised trust and the density of voluntary and community organisations (Acheson *et al*, 2006). According to Kelly (2006), without such social interaction trust decays - it requires face-to-face encounters. Rarely, however, is trust discussed in relation to the institutional/societal relationship or the processes within which face-to-face interactions take place. White (1996: 57) reminds us of the importance of social trust when he speaks of the need of people, within a democratic society, to trust “that the institutions within which they are living are informed by goodwill towards all members of the society”. McNamee (1998) adds that trust cannot be demanded nor is it separate from society or the context. This notion of learning about trust emerges from volunteer comments in a number of ways. For instance, the role and importance of establishing trust.

- R1 *I tried to make sure before any meetings started that tea and coffee were there, we were providing a space and creating an atmosphere in which people would feel at ease and comfortable in discussions. I tried to ensure that every view was aired in discussions and that people felt respected and acknowledged.*
- R5 *You need to have trust to work with people and also know you are supported by others, volunteers may not get to know the person long enough to establish a real supporting relationship.*

Trust in the above passages is described as the promotion of a climate to value people's contribution to counter the distant relations within society. Although not as a specific aim, building or developing trust is something talked about by volunteers, in a number of ways.

- R5 *it is not a straightforward process and you can't simply do an activity and then people trust each other. One young man in particular said he would be shot if anyone knew he was even meeting Catholics... he had lied to his family about where he was going. This discussion happened at the beginning of the weekend and allowed others to appreciate the risk that he had taken.*
- R9 *...and they were asking me about my experience of war in Bosnia. And I was telling them. I tell them that I was 13 years old and I was just a kid and that nowadays I am missing my childhood so bad and six or seven of them were sitting in this smoking area where we were having this chat and actually they were saying I am missing my childhood as well.*

A number of key points emerge from the above passages. First, how volunteers experience trust with reference to the social settings. Developing trust is discussed in a relational and social context. Such trust is not blind, it is based on interaction and relationship. In this respect, the volunteers are exercising understanding of the impact of trust. They are not discussing trust as an expression or outcome of like-minded people being thrust together and getting on. Volunteers seem to be describing something more porous and fluid. Trust is not a certainty, an assumption or result. It is not seen as a search for something lost; volunteers describe an expression of values and communicative belonging.

Second, there is often an implicit assumption that volunteers, due to the nature of their giving, can be trusted. However counterintuitive, volunteers express the impact of how untrusting or unsure people are, in understanding the role of volunteers:

- R1 *There was a kind of tension though, as some professionals were sometimes unaware of how to work with volunteers.*
- R4 *...it's a really good being alongside someone who made the experience but can still say to you that really good, how do you do that? That's really important because that's how you feel valued as volunteer if you're allowed to try things out, to be supported and I think that's really important as a volunteer to be allowed to do that.*
- R5 *how volunteering is or isn't socially accepted. I think the way volunteers are used is very tricky issue for me, it's also about trust.*

The quality of trust or the lack of understanding how to embed trust within volunteering relationships suggested by the comments above illuminate structural and relational trust, as well as volunteer values and experience. Regardless of how positive volunteers describe developing trust, analysis of the above extracts also reveal some problematic aspects when considering the development of trust. For example, are these aspects common to most interactions, whether trust is something which is a psychological predisposition specific to peace building or merely assumed through the ethos of volunteering.

In contrast, blaming, ignorance and fear are often terms used to define unsolvable conflicts (Coy & Woehrle, 2000). Such terms are used by adversaries to define who is in, who to distrust, when to blame and how to ignore the needs of the others. White (*op.cit.*: 64), speaking at an educational level suggests that distrust has an important role to play at a social level. "It is important for teachers to try to guard against the blinders that hamper us all. For, in encouraging distrust of *our* bogeymen, it is all too easy to nurture an implicit trust in things that need to be questioned". If White is right in suggesting that distrust is important, how do people learn, understand and respond to volunteering in a trusting manner? There is more to this than accepting the experiences or motivations of volunteers. Nevertheless, volunteers note how others place constraints upon volunteer experiences.

*P1      sometimes as a volunteer you are the brunt of other peoples frustrations. I know sometimes paid staff feel they can have a moan with us.*

#### **4.5.2 Variety of experience**

Peace building organisations have their own ethos, systems and levels of integration. It would be mistaken to consider them as more open or democratic thereby allowing greater opportunities for volunteers. Nevertheless, such organisations generally provide opportunities to meet people from differing socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Interacting with people from all walks of life offers new insights, lifestyles



and attitudes (Darvil et al, 1988), as one volunteer noted when discussing, broadly, my research:

*R L I believe that being a volunteer we have the chance to spend time, do work and use our skills in a genuine way. I learnt that to be a volunteer is not easy but the challenge can be done and opens the door for many new friends around you. I felt the sense of community and that not always different opinion means conflicts, but is through sharing them, that we looked for solutions.*

Other comments, although noting a relationship to work also see volunteering as a process through which to challenge notions of power and the means by which this power is disseminated (Grey, 2002). For example:

*R12 a form of volunteering that moves beyond volunteering and to put that in context, my boss would talk about the merchant banker that would work one day a week in a soup kitchen helping those who are poor or homeless and then goes into a nine to five job which perpetuates levels of inequality...*

Volunteers are describing an intrinsic worth, having its own legitimacy, being valued for being non-professional, somehow being neutral whilst simultaneously entwined with governmental policy. This seems to support some of the recent governmental and corporate pedagogy exemplified through notions of active citizenship, civil renewal and service provision (Lewis, 2005).

The above passages suggest access to new information, training and skill development. Such development was often referred to through the range of opportunities to utilise such information and knowledge. This included developing new roles and taking on particular responsibilities. Consequences of such experiences may include an increase in self-confidence, and developing an awareness of one's capabilities. As RL mentioned above, satisfaction of learning how to help others often required new skill acquisition and being open to fostering learning in situations where people can experience new things, as described below:

*R7 People can do it for lots of reasons. They can do it for experience or to help a certain cause or because they are temporarily out of employment and bored or*

*just to meet people or to have a different experience. So the way people approach the thought of volunteering, what they are going to be doing can all be interlinked regarding the outcomes on what that volunteering means.*

Kearney (2003: 48) talks of the importance of the stories of reconciliation breaking down some of the myths and stereotypes “where conflict, tension and a lack of trust challenge the very fabric of community life.” In hearing such stories volunteers note the importance of stories as activities in their own right. For example:

R11 *It can be very overtly talking about what is peace, what is reconciliation. How can we bring two different communities, conflictual communities or groups together well that's clearly peace building. ...How we live our lives, how we talk to other people that's a much larger picture of peace. And how we perhaps try to challenge old ideas, prejudices of people.*

#### **4.5.3 Personal development**

In contrast to the informality of stories Lederach (1997: 107) questions the legitimacy of some forms of training to allow individuals to contribute fully to reconciliation work. “Considerable emphasis has been put on prescriptive models and techniques for handling conflict, with the result that proposals for action tend to focus mostly on the cognitive skills of analysing conflict and the communicative skills of negotiation.” The responses above emphasise awareness of others, respect for differing perspectives and lived experiences – it also suggests learning about oneself.

Inadvertently, such learning moves with government and educational policy to form a vital part of social reform (Grey, 2002). Such comments also underline why communities are not the only level of analysis or action for social problems. They do, however, start to clarify the ways in which people in such communities learn about their world. Furthermore, they provide opportunities to reflect and “develop themselves, with and through others, to greater levels of well-being, understanding, freedom and sustainable growth” (Williamson, 1995: 98).

This is not to suggest that volunteers are always aware of their own development. Volunteers may be socialised into the norms of an organisation without being aware either of their own learning, development or what some of the norms are. There is, nevertheless, a level of intention to learn or to recognise the impact of such experiences, what might be called reactive learning (Eraut, in Coffield, 2000). Although volunteers express how such learning is spontaneous and unplanned, they described varying levels of intentionality:

- R4 *I would describe it a lot as an opportunity to learn. ... on a personal level to learn more about yourself, learning new and different skills and learning how to deal with difficult situations. So an opportunity to learn is what I would really say. A lot of people kind of talk about volunteering as if it is something very altruistic that they are giving something and you shouldn't be expecting anything back because it's voluntary work or charitable but I don't agree with that at all. I think there is something that you get back, not financially but in terms of the skills you develop and also the feeling inside of doing very good work, people to get something back from what they are doing, like I say that is the main thing that I have gotten back.*
- P1 *It was exciting and hugely emotional. I was helping out about with children and adults in wheelchairs. I got to see the basketball and a lot more, helped with the lunches, with access, everything. Basketball is really violent. I could spend all morning just talking about it. It made me realise that I could do so much with my life.*
- R2 *Maybe at the end I can just add that I really appreciate my volunteering experience because peace building has become my way of life and it is something I can use in everyday situations.*

This notion of informal learning requires, according to Williamson (*op cit.*), a civil society to nurture it.

Volunteering is readily associated with a variety of personal benefits. Scottish guidance practitioners, for example, noted recently that, 40% of people seek volunteering for life long learning or employability outcomes<sup>42</sup>. Volunteers discussed such benefits with a mixture of embarrassment and importance from the importance of training, skill acquisition and

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<sup>42</sup> Career Scotland North East Community Guidance Newsletter, Edition 2, 2007.

development, to the more profound, professional and critical reflection (Graham & Foley, 2001). Other benefits were developed tacitly (Coffield, 2000) or through unintended consequences.

There may be unintended consequences of learning through volunteering. There are certainly concerns about the consequences of achieving 'peace'. These include, increases in sexual violence and racial violence as peace organisations and processes focus upon democratic forms of government perhaps to the detriment of other societal issues. McKie (2005: 134), for example, notes that "rape continues to be a crime associated with, and presumed to follow, the progress of wars and unrest."

There are two aspects to this issue: awareness and consequence. A person may volunteer for the benefit of an organisation without being aware of the norms implicit within peace building or the organisation. Volunteers have noted this previously that they were unaware of the impact upon others. Furthermore, what are the consequences of involving volunteers?

R7 *through volunteering we can help build peace. And being involved in that process I think that it is really important here. Some organisations have not clearly thought that out why volunteers should be involved in peace building and what are volunteers to do and why.*

R10 *I think it's a symbiotic relationship. Corrymeela could not exist without volunteers and Corrymeela generates volunteering. A very symbiotic relationship.*

The above comments suggest that volunteers talk about and question organisational attachment, its affirmative relationship to volunteering and peace building as well their contribution to such social practices. In relation to 'Corrymeela' they also start to debate its symbolic structure alongside volunteering as a form of social interaction.

#### 4.6 Summary

The starting point for this chapter was that the words and accounts presented by volunteers potentially carry more weight than previously acknowledged. Several themes and sub-themes emerged to reflect the richness of their accounts. Not just the places they volunteered, the people met, activities done and learning acquired but the participative understanding and awareness of peace building. This includes the distinction between peace building and other reconciliatory points - for example, the ease with which volunteers are accepted into the lives of people. This challenges previous concerns about outsider access and influence upon relational development. Questions concerning the extent to which volunteers consider themselves as peace builders are often overshadowed by a more humble and complementary approach where an understanding about traumatic past events and current local issues include "residential segregation, volatile interface areas, duplication of services, and ..., parades and flag-flying" (Kelly, 2006: 1). Volunteer interpretations suggest a criticality of voluntary involvement in peace building which includes different time frames and new relationship possibilities. What could be summarised as being (and becoming) more comfortable dealing with reconciliation and conflict in less structured settings (Minow, 1998). This contextual complexity is summed up by Morrow (2000: 26) when he suggests that answers to the question 'how do we build peace?' are tentative since "there is no single model of peace or sustainability."

Jeffs and Smith (1999) describe the importance of such openness to new and challenging learning opportunities as 'going with the flow'. Volunteer comments echo the importance of listening and being open to what others say. More than this, they suggest it is this predisposition or ability to attend. In attending they suggest that no activity is too trivial for learning and there is a need to recognise the importance of conviviality, consciousness and engagement. They note the importance of leaning about the meaning of community, engaging with processes and structures, discussing peace

building in relation to social cohesion and a collective sense of place and purpose. This allows volunteers to raise criticisms of theoretical perspectives including participation and trust building.

The importance of informal learning permeates the whole chapter and in many guises. Eraut (2000), notes the deeply inter-subjective and contextual nature when viewing 'volunteers-as-learners'. Volunteers describe learning as a necessity - indispensable and on the whole personal. Their experiences also suggest developing interpersonal skills, confidence and positive networks. This is in contrast to much of the current research upon volunteering with its focus upon motivation and control, management, government initiatives and structured participation (DSD, 2001). The Russell Commission (2004), for example, has a clear remit towards youth action and engagement as part of a structured picture to encourage active and engaged citizens. Finally, Foley (1999: 16) suggests that there is limited study, so far, on the learning dimension of such activity, struggle and/or movement. He suggests that further research on the nature of these learning processes "is crucial to the development of a truly emancipatory education and politics in our time". How then, if at all, do such themes and perspectives enable a greater understanding of volunteering and learning? This will be discussed in the final chapter.

## Bringing it all together

### 5.1 Introduction

At the beginning of this thesis I stated that current understandings surrounding volunteering seem underdeveloped by an overly-focused attention upon professional and political imperatives (Lewis, 2005). Those at the political helm of volunteering are promoting volunteering into a 'third force' to focus upon measurable social benefits and change. Methods of recruiting, training, supporting and developing volunteers reflect a wider transformation in volunteering (Meijs & Hoogstad, 2001). This, it has been contended, has challenged traditional narratives about volunteering which arise largely from accounts filed by researchers, practitioners and journalists depicting volunteers, volunteering or voluntary events in a 'rosy-tinted' picture. For example, Smith (2007: 10), reporting for the Glasgow Herald, proclaims that: "volunteers devote boundless energy and enthusiasm with a passion often missing in other professions. ...and it is such an important institution for the community".

Furthermore, people are being encouraged to volunteer for their own benefits, volunteering is becoming more visible and such covenantal relationships are often associated with civic duty, civil engagement and developing social capital (O'Connell, 1989; Dekker, 2002). The upshot of this is an increasingly formal and visible voluntary picture. This extends the view taken by Brooks (2002) that volunteering can be discussed in relation to: doing your duty; keeping busy; or, as a personal turning point.

Volunteering is not, however, just a technical or political process, as volunteers below note:

- R6 *I didn't really have a specific idea about why I wanted to get involved in peace building as such it was really my own focus upon my own personal development and professional development so the peace building stuff took quite a while to dawn on me exactly how that worked and how I contributed...*
- R8 *there is a lot of peace building that goes on behind the scenes just informal discussion, casual conversation – just passing a towel to someone.*

They also suggest there is something potentially unhealthy suggesting volunteering as a peace building tool. Volunteers suggest that peace-building is subtle, organic and multi-faceted. Through such accounts this thesis has recognised that volunteers describe peace-building as an informal process; participation as an intersection of a number of different facets; and volunteer learning that is filled with many meanings and interpretations. These three interrelated areas remain emblematic throughout this study.

From the discussions in Chapter Four it was shown that volunteers do talk about volunteering as an important aspect of personal development, recollecting significant events and reflecting upon opportunities to give or give back. Volunteers, however, resist attempts to categorise their experiences based on political directing towards a 'third force' or lifelong learning strategies as outlined in Chapter Two or the influence of professional and formal structures (Paterson, 1999; Putnam, 2000). This contrasts the surveys, contracts, government initiatives and volunteer material which seem to reinforce structural categorisation. Although there seems to be a lack of success in reducing state control, volunteers describe the importance of understanding the political/social context and democratic approaches in which to support individuals and communities. The underlying misconception, I would posit, is that principles of understanding can be separated from modes and context of participation. Contrary to this, as raised in the previous chapter, volunteers provide a rich and organic concept of peace building, learning and voluntary participation. This ranges from the activities performed to the practice of theorising and reflecting upon such involvement. That this diversity is not recognised in volunteering at



present is evident in the ways in which volunteering is researched, talked about and promoted. The sections herein conclude the themes of participation, peace-building and learning whilst offering direction for developing further research.

## **5.2 Volunteer Participation**

From the points raised in the previous chapter associated with volunteer participation, it would seem that there are a number of tensions. Volunteering would appear to fit with the ideologies of collectivism (communitarianism) and individualism, as well as the structures that are conventional and radical. There are volunteer policies favoured by UK and Irish government and there are discourses supported by volunteer agencies and community groups. Volunteer participation, therefore, appears to transcend traditional political boundaries, sociological interpretations and psychological constructions. In this respect it is educationally, sociologically and psychologically interesting.

To understand the complexities of such participation I have suggested a framework (figure 5.1) to enable a clearer appreciation of volunteer participation within a peace building context. It synthesises volunteer perspectives and current research as suggested by Dekker (2002) and Merrill & Safrit (2003).

The framework is based on two dichotomies: a 'mode of influence' which may be contextual or relational and a 'mode of participation' which may be individual or collective. Such axes separate out four distinct areas of participation.

Figure 5.1



The first quadrant concerns peace building activities and reflects the skills and techniques that volunteers learn and exercise. Volunteers describe, for example, how professional expertise and experiential learning collectively shape and inform their participation – beyond formal institutional arrangements. There is considerable history and tradition in Northern Ireland based upon this through ‘contact theory’ approach. This approach, because of its high profile and tradition, has persisted despite evidence which suggests that there is limited impact on people and communities (Bacon, 2003; Kelly, 2006). Volunteer comments echo this:

R8 *Definitely a lot of first contact ... I'm sure that is changing now in Northern Ireland. For example, up until recently there may not have been many black volunteers but I know now that is increasing. So there are kids who may not have spoken to a black person before or met someone from a different country so I think those incidents are quite formative and volunteering gives people that possibility. I think that can only increase.*

In the above passage the volunteer reflects critically on the notion of contact theory in two ways. First, optimism that Northern Ireland's ‘contact’

experience, together with a vibrant voluntary sector, will herald a more tolerant and diverse society. Second, an awareness that increasing diversity requires new voluntary understandings. McVeigh & Rolston (2007) counter this optimism, however, suggesting that sectarianism may become reconstituted, as a form of racism; to fit the new times.

The second quadrant is legislated action for peace building. Whilst the first area is favoured by volunteers 'getting on with it', this area is less tangible for volunteers. Here governing authorities, societal structures and international legislation mediate how volunteers can participate and understand participation. Consider, for example:

*R7 Although I've grown up in Northern Ireland I have not really had any direct experience of the troubles. Volunteering with victims and working around paramilitary organisations in Belfast and working with people from particularly hard-hit areas I can see evidence and I can hear their stories about what happened.*

Although participation is, perhaps, the most researched area within volunteering, it is surprising that volunteers stories are not utilised further especially given the range of opportunities and experiences. Survey literature on volunteer participation is extensive, convincing and characterised by similar findings. Does the informality of participation or the lack of accumulated understanding develop a distinctive kind of ignorance? Marginal, radical and hidden volunteering suggests an under researched relationship between volunteer participation and social change (CRC, 1998; Foley, 1999). Volunteers, for example, describe how experiences require them to understand organisational support, challenge hierarchical structures and consider historical contexts, as the following passage suggests:

*R5 I think peace building should be something that is brought in at a young age and the ways of mediating conflict should be alongside this.*

The above passage also suggests a need to understand the interface between political legacy, personal involvement and stewardship. Although these may

be seen as key principles in terms of volunteer conduct they are increasingly appearing as standards expected within public bodies and organisations<sup>43</sup>.

The next quadrant, the volunteering for peace building area, transcends political and organisational structures suggesting an inherently societal approach and how volunteers relate to the notion of peace building directly. Volunteers, for example, note:

- R3 *I had a real buzz, partly through the responsibility, but also knowing that people started using words like taig lover...and hear the same hatred. I think the penny dropped for some of them that it was just hatred with a target.*
- P2 *I'm not really involved in leading discussions but I like being involved. I would have been very apprehensive at the start even being involved in some of the things that we do now, so it is great learning.*

These two accounts suggest that becoming aware and confident to engage in peace building includes knowing about one's ability to participate. A number of volunteers also reflect on their own cultural and national experience of conflict as an aid to compare and contrast others' experiences of peace building. For example:

- R3 *it was challenging because the school was integrated and it was interesting to see if attitudes to Northern Ireland had changed... I had never worked with such a school. And I was leading other volunteers, including international volunteers. I was amazed how calm I was.*

Such involvement suggests that "the notion of participation... must be seen against a broader, and more significant, matrix which we might call 'societal participation'" (Crowther, 2000: 490). This approach suggests extending this individualistic insight to a more collective approach arising from experiences gained in such social, cultural and political contexts. Through peace building, volunteering is located in collective struggles to transform, modify or influence the context and condition in which they and others live. Volunteers

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<sup>43</sup> See for example, *The Ethical Standards in Public Life* (Scotland) Act 2000, which discusses the importance of key principles and model codes for both formal and informal public and community dealings.

also describe, for example, encouraging people to reflect upon and to challenge their own circumstances, attitudes and behaviours:

R12 *a real form of active citizenship actually ... to attack social injustices that exist not from being an expert on the issue simply from helping support young people do something about it. And inevitably as a volunteer you learn almost as much if not more as the people you're trying to be involved with.*

This volunteer brings to the surface a rich contextualised analysis and level of participation as well as a range of personal and collective actions needed to challenge prejudice and generate visions of a more socially just future. There is awareness, intention and understanding rather than just participation as a basis of social involvement.

Finally, the community involvement area involves volunteers participating collectively, not out of personal interest or advantage, but through engaging with and understanding belonging (Sacks, 2002). Volunteers speak of open-ended and unique relationships, challenging conventional forms of living and identifying alternative means to promote peace.

P2 *I suppose being a volunteer is about getting through to the groups we are with. It's like whispering rather than shouting.*

This is often described within the boundaries of the communitarian tradition, as described by the volunteers below:

R4 *We provided a vital service to complement, support and develop more work within the community. I think if volunteers are supported properly and given appropriate training and development opportunities they can enable peace building to happen with the groups that they come across.*

R6 *Knowledge is part of the peace process. And the peace and reconciliation needs more than activities to make it run and tick, peace building is not separate from living.*

Clearly these four areas to understanding volunteer participation have implications for the role of volunteers. For example, within the peace

building area instructional expertise is enhanced, whilst within the community involvement approach expertise is challenged.

Collectively, each area implies a different understanding of participation. Such participation constructs both volunteers and recipients of volunteering in different ways. Although not exclusive, each different area promotes, transforms and socialises volunteers within particular modes of subjectivity and meaning. Just as different strategies of peace building create different experiences and outcomes, so too do different approaches to voluntary participation. A closer look reveals that voluntary participation is an idea about individual belonging, a rich history of social learning and collective identity. Crowther (*op cit.*) concludes that the educative role of collectivities in struggle is characteristic of radical traditions of social change.

### 5.3 Volunteering and Learning

As a key objective, there has been a considerable amount said so far from volunteers undeniably engaged in learning. It has also been made clear that, in the context of peace building, learning is part of the process and the context. See, for example, Mojab & Dobson (2008) and Spinner-Halev (2003) for differing assessments of teaching and learning within the context of war and post-conflictual situations. My intention has been to demonstrate how current understandings that suggest learning as a by-product of volunteering are narrowly conceived – failing to see volunteering as a site, opportunity and process of informal learning (McGivney, 2001). The volunteer below, for example, explains the relationship between formal and informal learning opportunities.

*P1 the groups might be initially divided and we work with the programme. You couldn't start doing a flag exercise with the group. This could reinforce fear. But you also do subtle things, like getting people to do the dishes together.*

In one sense there is a growing recognition of the scale of learning outside formal educational structures despite the limited attention to volunteers as

learners (Darvill *et al*, 1988). Furthermore, engaging in peace building allows volunteers to learn about human conduct and the myriad of issues as and when they emerge. These include handling sensitive disclosure, understanding their own feelings, behaviour and values, group dynamics and the delivery of activities (Foley, 1999). To some extent, therefore, volunteers create their own learning, define their own interests and pursue what is valuable to them (Gorard, Rees, Fevre & Furlong, 1998). Their learning is defined not only by expert discourse but through learning about others and themselves. As described below.

*R7 ...also what is fair and what is the role of volunteers? How they learn. So definitely we would talk a lot about those issues and the values and ethics are coming to play.*

*R5 Also in more informal ways by talking to group members in a relaxed setting and finding things in common to bring people to look beyond religion and see things that are shared. To see the person rather than the stereotypes.*

In another sense, learning about peace building locates the volunteer in a social and political context. As such, learning is linked to the nature of social relationships, embedded in a range of discourses that are more than simply framing ways of talking and doing.

*R4 I suppose what really hit home to me, it's about allowing people to share their own stories and through the listening to those stories you get an understanding and that's what I found about volunteering.*

There is a pragmatic and a philosophical point here. The pragmatic point is that a volunteer's experience of learning is not embedded in any new social movement or associated with any curricular framework. Nevertheless, it does raise notions of educational practice, and how it generates its own process. Philosophically, learning about differences and conjoined histories, identifying oppression and committing to ending it through self education, initiating and supporting proactive responses demonstrate a commitment to liberation pedagogies. Ultimately, these points reflect an informal curriculum, an intersection of informal experiences, opportunist interaction

and unmanaged moments. That they are often unplanned does not mask the importance of learning.

### 5.3.1 Informal Learning

Volunteer learning is not described as rivalrous, nor does it provide a political position to counter easily identifiable enemies (Paterson in Crowther, Martin and Shaw, 1999). It does, however, distinguish between a person seeking to define and analyse their needs – that is, investigating their own aspirations, interests, skills and attitudes are explored together with what Tøsse, Falkenchrone, Puurula & Bergstedt (1998) describe as an integrative phase. That is, where learning is actualised individually and collectively. It is simultaneously individual and collective, as described below:

*R7 I can compare and understand a little bit more. Right now for example with the peace process there's not much flaring up but this is where peace building is most needed. It's still very close with people and very tense, it could just swing back so easily. Beyond that who knows.*

When volunteers are involved, as the passage above suggest, there is the chance to 'get alongside people', to join in activities and discussions, to learn and to encourage learning informally. This involvement suggests a number of motifs in volunteer learning. First, it highlights mindfulness - an interest in the volunteer's role in improving social conditions (Tett, 2002). As mentioned above and below:

*R8 providing good role models in terms of being more knowledgeable to help with discussion, the important thing with volunteers is not taking initiative but being there to support.*

Second, being 'supportive' suggests different possibilities, perspectives or outcomes. Not from a curriculum based position but to engage in activities which might help to develop a more critical perspective for themselves and assisting in a variety of educational practices such as 'reframing' (McCartney, 1999). This is also echoed by volunteer comments:



- R11 *I wouldn't describe myself as a peace builder or peace building volunteer. In my mind there is something kind of arrogant about it, it suggests that you're someone who has the answers and other people need to listen, but you can offer a different perspective and that's all peace building to me.*

Third, as described above, the volunteer expresses a desire for agency - that is people should be encouraged to engage rather than defend their own situation. Ranson (1998), for example, notes the importance of learning together to become a different form of society. Here the notion of authenticity, actuality and relevance are pertinent.

If we accept that volunteers do indeed learn through such experience, then it is possible to approach volunteer descriptions of their own understanding of peace building as 'larger' learning purposes. Ultimately, volunteers are describing an approach to process-based informal learning. That is, specific outcomes are not initially planned but there are important educational processes regarding the important aspiration of peace building and the intention to have meaningful and qualitative interactions. Some of the elements of informal learning are examined further in the following sections.

### 5.3.2 Mindfulness

In relation to informal education, Smith (1994: 260) suggests that the development to think critically combined with the cultivation of wisdom is about being mindful. "Some seem to approach this as a skill, but, more accurately, it is a disposition or frame of mind." As the following comments suggest:

- R3 *I suppose I am passionate about what I'm doing. It doesn't matter whether they are special needs or even if it means just warming up the room.*
- R2 *Sometimes a group can be working on issues when one person says something and the group then gets split, changes direction, gets annoyed or stops. As a volunteer I have to help. Sometimes it means keeping group together, sometimes to help a group see another point of view or feelings. Sometimes I do nothing but watch.*

I *When you are watching what are you thinking?*

- R2 *I don't mean I do nothing. I'm thinking what is going on, who is speaking, who is listening. Sometimes I look to other staff to see if they are thinking to say something. I try to think what is happening for group what is the development.*

What the above comments seem to be suggesting is a conception of learning as situated awareness, practice and synthesis. That is learning which may be discovered and experienced through direct involvement (Tøsse et al, 1998). Such mindfulness includes organisational understanding, management and dealing with difficulties. As such learning requires a range of approaches, negotiating beforehand, attending actively and altering where necessary. It is not rudderless conversation, it is creative curriculum enriched by meaningful dialogue determined by focused and engaging incidents. What stands out is the conscious translating of volunteering into meaningful learning, abstract understanding and recognition of self awareness and development.

### 5.3.3 Community Relations

Volunteers speak of helping individuals and groups to obtain an adequate understanding of their own position to enable them to make appropriate judgements about personal circumstances and contexts. Volunteers also describe long-standing factors and the challenges to initiate community development.

- R12 *It is very easy to say that you are for peace rules or you want a more peaceful society but will you allow yourself to get involved what learn from what other people have experienced. That is a very difficult thing to be committed to.*

However, change may also depend on personal timing, change readiness or incremental opportunities.

- R6 *you're not sure whether you're making any sort of lasting difference. I have worked in the area of youth work and would often say that if you make a difference to one person that's a very important job... but in a lot of the time you're never going to know who you have made a difference to. It's still a very important thing.*

Volunteer comments suggest that the community setting is both a location and an informal educational goal. Learning about community and communities through Community Relations work includes focusing upon justice, acknowledging and respecting differences as well as recognising and valuing our inextricably inter-linked existence. For example, the impact of supporting an individual dealing with personal issues, as described below.

R6 *something had happened here where this lad had gone from being very disrespectful not wanting to take part in anything to sticking his thumb up. A very small moment of everything that has happened to me as a volunteer but it really stuck in my mind.*

#### **5.3.4 Being an Informal Educator**

Attention to learning opportunities for those with whom they operate is raised repeatedly by volunteers. Indeed, because such learning is going on all the time volunteers do not reflect upon themselves as educators, service-providers or community workers. Nevertheless they do discuss the importance of providing a meaningful and positive learning climate. For example:

R12 *volunteers can act as coaches with small groups of youngsters and get them to identify issues that are important to them and help them do something about it. It could be bullying it could be something that is happening in their community or something big like global warming.*

Regardless of an inability to draw upon a coherent set of educational expectations concerning volunteer roles, they describe learning alongside youth workers, community workers, other volunteers and those with particular responsibilities. Their accounts suggest a willingness to engage with issues of inequality, oppression and reconciliation whilst learning about their own concerns, values and aspirations and that of others (McGivney, 2001). This informal approach to education is experiential, empowering and reflects a social and political value to activity.

## 5.4 Peace Building and Volunteering

During the last few decades there has been a shift in the emphasis of volunteering as a palliative support mechanism to a transformative, purposeful community and political force (Lewis, 2005). It has been suggested that volunteering gives expression as a resource for social mobilisation as well as a potentially quiet and yet radical form to assist the peace process (Kearney, 2003). While it may be clear that volunteering offers an alternative mode of knowing about peace building, the relative advantage of comprehending this mode has, on the whole, remained obscure (Burns, 2003). Indeed, Putnam (2000) suggests that people fail to see volunteering as a community service. This is contradicted by volunteer comments:

R6 *I do know it is very hard to talk about volunteering as peace building. It is a lot easier to talk about volunteering with a group or doing something as a volunteer.... not a week goes by when there isn't some important issue emerges to do with the troubles or [volunteers] contribution to peace building. I just don't stop to think about my role.*

Perhaps the obscurity exists partly because the meanings of volunteering, peace-building and associated learning are defined differently by individuals, according to the concepts, perceptions and activities engaged in. Such experiences are filtered by societal and organisational structures as well as the context. It is further complicated to analyse when taking into account that the models of society which helped construct these experiences also inform the methods of data collection possible (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1992). Furthermore, attempts to understand peace building have often considered those elements that determine the power and influence the power broking rather than the role of individuals volunteering to assist peace and reconciliation (McCartney, 2006). In Northern Ireland, for example, a multitude of organisations and structures are considered to be key functionaries in the promotion of peace building (Williamson *et al*, 2000; Wilson, 1999).

Volunteer comments suggest a desire to engage, learn about and promote a fairer society. They have described specific peace building aspects including: dealing with pain, bitterness and loss; confronting different perspectives on conflict related issues; helping to resolve issues of distrust, fear and a sense of insecurity; substituting for the absence of structures and complementing mechanisms and resources. The following volunteer examples illuminate some of these aspects.

*R2 To communicate and to learn about myself and other people, about peace advantages and peace solutions, and most of all how to deal with conflict.*

*R12 Hearing the difficult realities that exposed my own kind of sectarianism and prejudice where I would have thought I had none. I thought I was the most non-sectarian person in Northern Ireland until I was challenged in the way that pushed my buttons. That had never happened before and that made me think about what my own values and beliefs were.*

Even when the conflict remains strong volunteers start to exercise control through understanding this experience, and discussion moves into direct consideration of their own circumstances and learning. For example:

*R3 At the end of the weekend as the group were getting on the bus he came up to me and shook my hand and gave me as much of a hug as was safe and said "you're all right for a taig".... And I always remember that and that sometimes came back to me and kept me going.*

Volunteers also point to conflict as something which exists in its own time and social frame. People, whose life is dominated by conflict, seem to reflect not on a chronological timeframe but through a series of conflict related events. The basic cycle of daily, a week, month, etc. is replaced by diverse timeframes, which may be "chronological, cyclical or kairotic (a narrative time, punctuated by important events, which might even run backward in chronology)" (Czarniawska, 2004: 52). This timeframe is echoed by volunteer comments. For example:

*P1 it seems like a long time ago but it was just last year and they [two schools] came up on a cross community residential. I remember afterwards some of*

*the children wrote to us to say that they were still talking to children from the other school.*

Furthermore, peace building volunteering, it seems, works outside of structural and formal power based relationships whilst simultaneously acknowledging structures. Volunteering offers leeway to act, describe and interact not afforded other professionals. As one volunteer notes:

R8 *I can think of some powerful moments when this kid who was about six latched onto me. Knowing that this kid and possibly others don't have a good male role model - a lot of them wouldn't have a father. And the time it's a special relationship and you have to be very sensitive to child protection issues...*

Czarniawska (*ibid*), reflecting upon the work of the Jerome Bruner, suggests this narrative mode of reflecting and knowing is a way of bringing together into a meaningful whole, personal experiences, skill acquisition and knowledge development. Volunteers, for example, repeatedly discuss the idea of allowing different perspectives to be raised, discussed and reframed. This idea of reframing is considered as an important learning process in conflict resolution theory, where a person critically reflects upon different aspects and assumptions of a particular conflict (McCartney, 2006). Some obvious examples include:

R4 *there were still those issues that we had to look at. Issues around kind of myths about Protestantism and myths about Catholicism and looking at how are we going to go away together as two new groups and work over the weekend.*

R10 *... ignorance of each other's culture. Ignorant of the history -- you can go through the whole history and someone might choose to believe that only some of the facts that you tell them and that's difficult.*

I *So as a volunteer are you trying to educate people about Irish history?*

R10 *Maybe but that's not really your role as a volunteer. You are trying to just be there with people, do activities to break down barriers, the discussions generally help.*

Although such comments describe some general practices, and reflect on how organisations and professionals provide a prime site to develop such practices it is the outcome of a number of other factors, not least of which is the ability to take risks. It is also important to reflect on the area where there is most disagreement regarding peace building in Northern Ireland -- namely, what should be done and who should do it? Whyte (1994: 246) adds a pessimistic conclusion when he states that, "even those who substantially agree in their diagnosis of the problem reached no consensus on how to resolve it." His proposals ignore a micro analysis of volunteering that is not only of philanthropy and service but also of radicalism, communitarianism and activism. It is this combination and concerted effort that has led to much social change, according to Burns (2003).

Volunteers also describe and reflect upon the historical, spatial and relational context of the 'troubles' through the perspectives of others. In doing so they are identifying levels of societal awareness and a predisposition to social change. Their stories also question whether there is an over-emphasis on the value of peace rather than the importance of creating the space for conversations and commitment (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). Not that peace building is not an important goal - it is certainly described as important by volunteers. Peace building may, however, overemphasise the value of structural change at the expense of critically learning about notions of service, giving and relationship building. From a voluntary perspective, perhaps the challenge rests with presenting volunteering as a critical and sustained learning effort rather than dwelling on attending to the fall-out of conflict or perceiving volunteering as a benevolent invasion.

This presenting of peace building volunteering in 'a good light', raises the issue of how real, perceived or influenced are such narratives. Such dressing up or representation suggests that conflict can be contained and or positively transformed simply by introducing volunteers. Volunteers, however, implied that peace building does not come without purposeful effort. As one

volunteer mentioned, when working with a particular group trying to identify its own dynamic before considering its relationship to the troubles.

*R11 when you got a mixture of Catholic and Protestant and you could see people's barriers slowly coming down, moving across to relate to each other and seeing other people as just the same and no different.*

Volunteers also speak of working with people who live in communities where the struggle for peace is taking place and the need to attend to a language containing obstructive meanings and prejudices. They do not, however, speak of sensationalising or discrediting those with whom they volunteer. Rather the opposite. They often spoke of their wish to be involved because they felt they could have a role in facilitation, support or mere presence - allowing language and stories to be explored safely. In this sense volunteers are important and optimistic stakeholders in the peace process.

*R1 peace building needs to provide a safe space for people to explore differences, tackle prejudice and find ways to manage difference in conflict in a non-violent way... to create an enabling environment in which these difficult conversations can happen. Only when this is created, can issues of a more difficult nature be discussed and explored. The task of facilitators is to ensure that this environment comes about and the topics and issues are only discussed when the participants are ready. Peace building is a gradual process of relationship building.*

Volunteers note that this is not always possible. They do, however, note the growing opportunities, through volunteering, to talk about the consequences of violence.

*R3 The group that were up were a single identity group from East Belfast and they were learning about themselves so we started with names and it was very obvious from my name that I was catholic.*

This representation is both practical and political. It allows volunteers to note, for example, the relativism of social capital in relation to volunteering principles. And, in relation to contact theory how individual narratives suggest benefits previously under researched.



Such accounts are not unique to volunteering. Accounts and stories are, as Czarniawska (2004) notes, an important activity and feature of communal memory. O'Hagan (2001) and Kearney (2003) in capturing the stories of volunteers in Northern Ireland focuses upon the 'human touch'. This, however, is only one frame of reference.

In essence, the above sections raised by volunteers provide the concluding elements to how such experiences impact upon and inform peace building and learning. As was described in the preceding chapters, segregation in Northern Ireland exacerbates the community conflict. It is not surprising then, that cross-community and single identity work are discussed by volunteers as a way of ameliorating the conflict and integrating communities. In summary, volunteer learning emerges, not in recognised, sequenced events but through a rich tapestry of inclusive, relevant and significant moments - an evolving informal curriculum. As such, learning is described as being, doing, experiencing and reflecting, often from new perspectives, in new circumstances and with new people. Volunteering for peace does not necessarily involve expertly crafted programmes. They suggest that the proximity to violence and being aware of the need to engage with change; learning and practices are symbiotic. One concluding element which has repeatedly emerged whilst engaging with peace building volunteers is the principles that informed the management of this study.

## **5.5 Reviewing the Research**

Within this thesis, three central points have emerged from volunteer comments that questioned directly my own research principles. Generally speaking they reflect ethical considerations. First, the capacity of an individual to voluntarily take part in this research, what is often termed informed consent. Second, the ability to safeguard the identity of research subjects - to develop and maintain confidentiality. Third, when methods such as in-depth interviewing reveal personal, private or sensitive experiences, how to balance the tension between gathering information and being

sensitive to the needs of the individual. In summary, how intrusive can researchers be? According to Darlington and Scott (2002), these are core principles within research ethics.

They are not, however, as straightforward as many research code of ethics suggest. For example complications arose due to my previous manager-worker relationship and my shared voluntary experience with some of those interviewed. This relationship sometimes led to an assumption that levels of trust, knowledge base and shared understanding existed. For example, when volunteers comments were directed to support me or be validated. "I just hope what I have said is of use" (R6). Or when volunteers started to ask what I had found out, "I am interested in how you think this information will shape what you think?" (R11). Furthermore, volunteers response to the consent form and my reiteration at how interviewee's responses will be presented anonymously:

*P1      there's no need for that [consent form] Mike I don't have anything to hide, I trust you.*

*P2      to be honest no and I forgot to bring it [the consent form], but it's not a problem?*

*R8      I'm sure there's nothing I'm going to say that will jeopardise myself.*

Crawford (2003: 14) also notes important ethical issues when studying the Loyalist prisoners within Long Kesh prison, "going public with the research findings carried obvious implications and I resigned from the promotion board Northern Ireland, before being pushed." He goes on to discuss the importance of trust and security for himself. "I enjoyed the absolute protection of the organisation (UDA), and at certain times I had cause to be thankful," (*ibid*:18). The diminishing of structured consent in preference to relational trust characterise decision-making challenges associated with safeguarding participants and research in qualitative investigation. It also highlights volunteers' continued preferences to maintain distance from

organisational bureaucracy – the desire to remain unregulated is an issue often described by volunteers.

- R1 *Not being a paid worker can be advantageous in that shows no material gain to be made as a volunteer. It is also a clear demonstration of commitment to the process and to the personal integrity.*
- R2 *You know I have been volunteering with Corrymeela peace and reconciliation centre in Ballycastle?!*

The last passage demonstrates the difficulties of following a format which questions existing knowledge or relationships. In this instance the volunteer assumed that I knew where and how long they had volunteered. This passage is, therefore, also a question asking about the level and nature of interaction expected in the interview.

## 5.6 Looking Forward

It would be unrealistic to suggest that the volunteers accounted for in this study provide a complete picture of peace building volunteering. What I am sure, however, is the importance of volunteer accounts providing an important lens to view, engage and learn about peace building. Even if, as Putnam (2000) suggests, volunteering does not have the potency that it has previously.

What follows then is a small number of recommendations that emerge from the initial aim and objectives of this study.

- The above volunteers' experiences suggest a social vision that seems to enhance current views on volunteerism – a revitalised sense of democratic and social engagement. Further research is, therefore, encouraged to understand further such contribution and not just the sector's relationship to Government or the 'Market'.
- Volunteers, far from describing a 'propping up' of social welfare provision, describe complementary roles and learning from (and

within) organisations and professional practices. They also suggest, however, inherent tensions exist within organisational settings when work/volunteer relationships and learning is not clear. Organisations should further develop their capacity for understanding volunteer experiences alongside professionals.

- Volunteers describe the importance of learning. This contradicts earlier research on volunteer-learning as a 'by-product'. Informal learning, despite overlaps with service and non-formal learning themes or immersed in expert discourses, volunteering is a site where learning emerges organically and contextually and requires further research.
- Volunteers describe engagement at the very 'grass roots' of peace building and describe it as neither exclusive nor grandiose. Researchers, practitioners and policy makers should more actively seek to understand volunteering as a peace building vehicle.
- 'Voluntourism', gap year opportunities, volunteer programmes and volunteer training suggests a commoditisation of volunteering. The voluntary sector should seek to comprehend this emerging and highly visible personal identity/development notion of volunteering.
- Volunteering and volunteers should take heart; such experiences are benefiting a multitude. The sector as a whole is "an important site in Northern Ireland for cross-community mixing" (Acheson, *et al*, 2006: 10). Voluntary involvement and stories should be quietly celebrated further.

## **Appendices**

## **Appendix A: Glossary**

The following terms are used in the study and, therefore, a brief summary is provided on each. Brevity of each does not provide a conclusive picture rather a signpost to the relevance of each term to volunteering.

### **IRA (Irish Republican Army)**

The IRA is a Republican revolutionary movement and organisation out of which the provisional Irish Republican Army was formed in the early 1960s. Voluntary in nature its maintenance as a perceived military organisation and a radical civil rights initiative “was based on perfectly reasonable demands for fairer treatment for Catholics in the North of Ireland” (English, 2003: 82). Interestingly, membership of the IRA is often referred to in terms of career and movement, within which volunteerism is more often discussed in relation to recruitment.

### **UDA/UFF/UVF (Ulster Defence Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters/Ulster Volunteer Force)**

Loyalist paramilitary organisations established to unite Protestant defence organisations. Developed out of a sense of vulnerability in the 1970s, these organisations recruited volunteers from the British and Protestant community in Northern Ireland. Description of volunteers within each organisation is often described as a starting point within a paramilitary career.

## Appendix B

Please note that numbers below do not correspond to interviewees within the text for reasons of anonymity.

### Volunteer Summary

1. Male, late twenties, originates from Belfast. Mixed Religious background. Involved in volunteering for over 12 years. Currently working in youth and community work. Has volunteered for a number of different organisations. Some of these organisations concerned youth and community-based groups; others had specific community relations focus including the Corrymeela Community, Glencree Centre. The interview took place in friends lounge.
2. Female, late twenties, originates from a county town in Northern Ireland. Catholic background. Involved in volunteering for over 10 years with youth and church projects organised by local agencies. Volunteered and worked in N.I. for over three years in area of Peace and reconciliation. Currently living outside of Northern Ireland working and volunteering in social work – she currently volunteers for a church-based community group working with homeless groups and across multi-racial boundaries. The interview took place initially in Interviewers home, however, this was repeated by telephone as the interviewee was volunteering abroad at the time with homeless groups and some original data was lost.
3. Male, mid thirties, originates from Southern rural Ireland. Catholic background. Involved in volunteering for over 10 years as well as religious and political structures. Currently working in peace, reconciliation and community relations' (CR) work. Has volunteered for several years in a variety of CR settings. Some of these organisations concerned faith and community-based groups; others included the Corrymeela Community and Community Forum. The interview took place in the person's own home in the main living room.
4. Male, early thirties, originates from Bosnia & Herzegovina. Involved in volunteering for over 4 years in home country with local youth projects. Involved in exchanges with N.I. volunteers. Volunteered in N.I. for 12 months in area of Peace and reconciliation. Currently living and working in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The interview took place in interviewer's home whilst working in Northern Ireland.
5. Female, mid twenties, originates from Belfast. Protestant background. Involved in volunteering for over 10 years in Belfast with youth and church projects organised by local agencies. Some of these were in Belfast, others in surrounding towns. Volunteered and worked in N.I. for 18 months in area of Peace and reconciliation. Currently living and

working in Northern Ireland in social work. The interview took place in the interviewee's bedroom due to unexpected arrival of friends.

6. Female, late twenties, originates from Scotland. Involved in volunteering for over 7 years in Scotland and Northern Ireland with the homeless, youth and community projects. She volunteered and worked in N.I. for 14 months in area of Peace and Reconciliation. Currently living outside of Northern Ireland working and volunteering in community education. Has specific role promoting sex education with young people. The interview took place in interviewer's home.
7. Male, late twenties, originates from Scotland. Protestant background. Involved in volunteering for over 3 years. Originally volunteered with a national youth-focused organisation. Currently working in youth and community work. Has previously volunteered in Scotland. The interview took place in the lounge area of the person's place of work.
8. Male, early twenties, originates from rural Northern Ireland. Mixed Religious background. Involved in volunteering for over 6 years. Currently working in youth and community work. Has also volunteered within area of peace and reconciliation overseas. Some of these organisations concerned youth and community-based groups; others had specific community relations focus including the Corrymeela Community, Kilcranny House and Glencree Centre. The interview took place in park area as requested by the interviewee.
9. Male, late twenties, originates from England. Involved in volunteering for over 5 years. Currently working in youth and community work in NI. Has also volunteered in England for a national charity within a charity shop. The interview took place in interviewer's home.
10. Female, late twenties, originates from Bosnia & Herzegovina. Muslim background. Involved in volunteering for over 10 years in home country with youth projects organised by international agencies. Involved in exchanges with N.I. volunteers. Volunteered and worked in N.I. for 18 months in area of Peace and Reconciliation. Currently living and studying in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The interview took place in interviewer's home.
11. Male, early Forties, originates from rural Northern Ireland. Protestant background. Involved in volunteering for over 12 years as well including supporting religious organisations. Most of his experience volunteering is with youth and community-based groups; others had specific community relations focus including the Corrymeela



Community. Currently working in service industry. The interview took place in the person's own home in the main living room.

12. Female, mid forties, originates from England. Involved in volunteering for over 20 years in various developing countries and Northern Ireland with the homeless, youth and community projects. Volunteered in N.I. for 3 years in area of Peace and reconciliation. Currently living in Northern Ireland working and volunteering in community education. The interview took place in the interviewee's bedroom.
13. Female, mid twenties, originates from provincial town in Northern Ireland. Mixed religious background. Involved in volunteering for 6 - 7 years with disabled groups, youth and community projects, and peace and reconciliation. Currently living in Northern Ireland working and volunteering in community education. The interview took place in the community centre where the person was currently volunteering.
14. Male, late twenties, originates from Northern Ireland. Involved in volunteering for 3 years with health-related and cross community projects. Currently living in Northern Ireland working in health care and volunteering in community education, and peace and reconciliation. More lately has taken on voluntary leadership roles for both health-based and community relations charities including the Corrymeela Community.

## **Appendix C: Pilot interview schedule**

- Introduction – welcome – thank you
- Explanation about my role and the purpose of the research
- Explanation about what will happen to the data
- Describe degree of anonymity
- Answer any questions/concerns

### **Involvement in volunteering**

1. Could you tell me something about how you first got involved in volunteering – and when was this?
2. Can you say a little about any events, experiences, changes or developments to you since your initial volunteer involvement?
3. Are you currently volunteering with any particular organisation or group? If so, can you say something of the story of this organisation or group and what this means to you?

### **Contribution to volunteering**

4. Can you describe the activities, as a volunteer that you have done or been involved with?
5. Do you see any benefits of these activities to yourself or others?
6. Can you describe any relationships that are important to your voluntary experience?

### **Contribution to self**

7. Can you tell me something about your experiences of volunteering that have been or are particularly challenging?
8. Are there any courses/training in which you have been involved in, as part of your volunteering or you would like to do? Or could be beneficial?

### **Contribution to peace building**

9. How do you see volunteering with regards to the 'troubles'?
10. How do you see volunteering with regards to peace building generally?
11. Any points you would like to make or questions? THANK YOU

## Appendix D: Main Interview Schedule

- Introduction – welcome – thank you
- Explanation about my role and the purpose of the research
- Explanation about what will happen to the interview data
- Describe degree of anonymity, concerns & questions

- 1 **Can you say something about your volunteering experience/s?**  
Probe to check how volunteering is defined and experienced.  
Probe to find out what elements of the training were worthwhile.
- 2 **Continuity and discontinuity of volunteering: can you say something about what influenced you to continue or discontinue with your volunteering?**  
Probe to explore choices, influences and conclusions to volunteering experience.
- 3 **Have you talked with other people about your volunteering experience? If so, how do you describe it?**  
Explore people talked to, both in the past and now?
- 4 **Perceptions of peace building volunteer?**  
Any examples, stories of volunteering situations where you were involved in peace building?  
Probe to verify what feature(s) of the example are key to understanding peace building; may be checked how common/unusual such experience is for interviewee and voluntary organisation/group.
- 5 **How did this experience impact upon your knowledge, understanding or relationship to the troubles?**
- 6 **What kinds of things make peace building easy or hard within volunteering?**  
Probe to explore perception of difficulties within volunteering including other volunteers/colleagues/friends.  
Probe to explore professional discipline, personal relationships, organisation affiliation.
- 7 **From your experience how do you understand peace building within volunteering?**

Probe to explore variables, experiences or thoughts, without leading. In the light of discussion, opportunity to change or elaborate?

**8 Do you have any questions or comments (please take your time)?**

**Thank you**

## Appendix E: Respondent 11

**I** Are you happy here? [Nod] I mentioned about the consent form on the phone?

**R11** I didn't think we needed it. I'm fine without it.

**I** OK. Many thanks for doing this. I am not sure how well the tape is picking this up?

**R11** Do you want to test it?

**Test** [Shared laughter as I used a 1,2,3 style sound check]

**I** So many thanks again. I suppose what I am trying to do is look at people's experiences of being a volunteer involved in peace building, peace and reconciliation or whatever you want to call it. As I said previously I have a few questions and this will be all treated confidentially. I would like to start by asking you about how you got into volunteering?

**R11** No problem. Nearly all of my volunteering experience would have been at the Corrymeela Centre because my mum and dad were community members. So I kind of experienced Corrymeela for most of my life. But maybe a lot of people who go up there don't come back or don't get involved past being a teenager but I decided to spend time volunteering at the centre. I was 18 and decided to get involved in the summer programme. It was supposed to be for two weeks but I ended up staying to three and really got a lot out of volunteering more than I imagined with the chance to meet people from all over the world that I never would have met in a million years if I hadn't got involved there and I suppose meeting people in the groups and having a sense that I was making some kind of difference and they were making some kind of difference in my life was very important and that kind of got me hooked.

**I** When you say making a difference in your life, in what way was that?

- R11 It is very easy to say that you are for peace all you want a more peaceful society but will you allow yourself to get involved or to learn from what other people have experienced? That is a very difficult thing to be committed to. What I mean by that I suppose is, coming from a very middle-class background, a relatively safe place to live not without its trouble but compared to an interface area in Belfast and there is no comparison. So getting the chance to meet working class people or people from a working-class background especially working-class Catholics I will really wouldn't have got to meet otherwise. It was a very positive experience for me, a very difficult experience for me in terms of giving me a broader perspective on life in Northern Ireland. Not just from how I see or experience it.

**I A difficult experience in what way?**

- R11 I grew up in Corrymeela and had catholic friends but none of them would be highly politicised particularly since most of them would be middle-class as well. So to hear people saying things like people who fought and died in the IRA are the same as those who fought in the first and second world war was a, well it completely blew my head away, that anyone could ever think that that was the case. And hear things like that but they believe things like that and to find out where they come from. Hearing the difficult realities that exposed my own kind of sectarianism and prejudice where I would have thought I had none. I thought I was the most non-sectarian person in Northern Ireland until I was challenged in the way that pushed my buttons. That had never happened before and that made me think about what my own values and beliefs were.

**I Thanks. And now in terms of your volunteering experience are you asked or talk about your voluntary experiences?**

- R11 My current job is for a youth work organisation in Northern Ireland called *public achievement* and the model that we work on is that typically volunteers act as coaches with small groups of youngsters and get them to identify issues that are important to them and help them do something about it. It could be bullying it could be something is happening in the community or something big like global warming. It could be drugs alcohol or whatever it may be. The model is that volunteers do the work with young people. So my job is to recruit, train, co-ordinate, support volunteers in that role so my job now has volunteering central to it. But it is a form of volunteering that moves beyond volunteering and to put that in context, my boss would talk about the merchant banker that would work one day a week in a

soup kitchen helping those who are poor or homeless and then goes into a nine to five job which perpetuates levels of inequality that leads to people who are poor or homeless and all of the other social consequences. So that kind of volunteering is just dealing with the consequences of social injustice or whatever. Whereas the volunteering that I am trying to help develop is a real form of active citizenship actually getting young people while giving young people space to attack social injustices that exist not from being an expert on the issue simply from helping support young people do something about it. And inevitably as a volunteer you learn almost as much if not more as the people you're trying to be involved with.

**I Outside of this work setting are you asked about volunteering?**

R11 It is certainly something that I would talk about if asked. But I don't think it is something that I am asked that often. My closest circle of friends in Belfast would all be of a similar ilk. They would be involved in that kind of area and would know me well enough to know that I'm involved in volunteering. I suppose when I am with friends who are not part of that volunteering circle I wouldn't normally talk about it and I'm not ashamed about it, it is sometimes nice to get a break from all that kind of stuff. So if I'm asked about volunteering it is normally from someone who already knows something about that kind of stuff.

**I How do you see peace building fitting into that then – for example, do you see yourself as a peace building volunteer?**

R11 I wouldn't describe myself as a peace builder or peace building volunteer. In my mind there is something kind of arrogance about, it suggests that you're someone who has the answers and other people need to listen so I wouldn't normally describe myself in relation to peace building. Just somebody who works in the voluntary sector and promotes social justice but not really a peace building volunteer. Peace building itself is a term that can be used so widely that is difficult to, it is very general and difficult to be specific. Although I have no doubt that what I do makes a contribution towards the peace process.

**I Thank you. Can you think of an example where you've come away thinking I was involved in some peace and reconciliation work?**

R11 Certainly through my volunteer experiences at Corrymeela and the other voluntary activities. Certainly residencies where there's been some really good work done, relationships built that would not have

been built otherwise. So in that sense, yes I can certainly say I have been involved in helping the peace process or reconciliation. But the reality of peace building and reconciliation work generally is for it to be meaningful it needs to be at a community level where people are living so it's all very well getting people together and making some kind of relationship even friendship but if you don't have an opportunity to continue where they live it probably is of limited impact.

**I      Is it better then to volunteer in people's communities?**

R11    No, that's not to say it doesn't benefit an individual. It may cause a change within them but for it to really take root at a community level is very difficult. In terms of Northern Ireland it's probably only now where the political situation is beginning to bed down that that would be possible. I think the role of Corrymeela and other voluntary organisations was probably up until now only a safety valve rather than something that was ever going to make a huge impact on the ground.

**I      And now?**

R11    Now it can, the potential is there at least. It may still take 30, 40 or 50 years plus there is more of an environment that could support such change rather than it being counter cultural.

**I      From your own experience is there anything that makes it harder or easier to be a volunteer?**

R11    I suppose practically the fact that it takes time and time is precious or even money. If you want to support health through university or whatever and even now when I try to get up to volunteer or whatever time can be a problem. Certainly my experience as a full-time volunteer was very different because food was provided and an allowance was paid to me and all that kind of stuff which made it easy. I suppose the other thing is that my family is usually supportive of me volunteering so would help wherever they can. And I suppose my friends as well would be either supportive or not being dismissive of me going away to volunteer, kind of accepting. So in those terms nothing has been really problematic although more recently I have been asked about peace building now that we have a peace process.



**I      Has this led you to question what is peace building more recently then?**

R11    Kind of. When I finished my year as a full-time volunteer at Corrymeela I went on to work for an organisation called the Community Relations Council. The role that I had was looking at the European peace programme and what learning had been taken from all of that. I was involved in organising conferences and seminars that brought people together to discuss such learning and all of that kind of evaluative stuff. Some of the emerging themes were around the economy and economic development which was kind of alien to me as I had never seen peace building and volunteering as something that helps create through stability and economic development and I still don't believe that is the case yet. Yet the huge European investment over 10 years, I don't know how many million was heavily geared towards economic prosperity. The troubles in Northern Ireland is not as a result of economics and therefore I don't think economic solutions will solve the cultural problems. I suppose that angle of things and those voluntary organisations in receipt of peace money may consider themselves as peace building organisations and that for me is a dilemma. I have no doubt that a more stable society with better employment, people satisfied in their work and a life more generally is a good thing but it is not the be all and end all to solve the troubles. So I think more understanding of non economic involvement is an important part the peace process.

**I      What, away from the financial investment?**

R11    There was something else, I can't remember. [pause] I suppose the other challenge is what works? And I am not sure if anybody really knows what works for peace building or what peace building really is. There is no set recipe. For example the cross-community work of bringing Protestants and Catholics together, building relationships and sending them on again, I don't think will work any more. I think there is a lot of new work to be done in this environment that I've talked about in order to see what practices really work to change the society we live in.

**I      Are you hopeful?**

R11    Yeah, I'm quite hopeful. I have no doubt that things will get better especially since I have experienced both communities coming to peace building organisations as well as going to communities. I've also become slightly more pessimistic since I've seen the reality - where

and how people live - and I have seen how things are starting to change but I have no doubt there is still a lot of work to be done. The problem might be the lack of investment. There is a decreasing investment in the peace process within Northern Ireland but the reality is the best opportunity to do peace building is now. And that requires money and people, and volunteers are an integral part of that. All of that is a big investment. And I suppose some of the theories being followed around this kind of stuff is about when the money goes three things will happen. One, a lot of the work needed will be taken over by volunteers. Two, the work of voluntary and community services. And three, how the government goes about doing its business. My worry is that a lot of the money and investment goes to organisations and government and misses out the important role of the volunteer or it becomes messy.

**I** Thank you once again. I have no further questions at this stage, but as I said at the beginning to give you the chance to see if there are any questions or anything that you want to add?

R11 Looking at the role of peace building volunteers, I am just blown away about how you would structure that kind of thing?

**I** Great question. I suppose I'm looking at it at two levels. First listening to the richness of volunteer's experiences and stories and that gives me some idea of the importance of volunteering impacting upon and shaping people's lives as well as the lives of other people. That has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience and very inspiring. At another level there are also emerging themes and, in activities or stances that volunteers engage in. It could be advocacy, counselling, leading - a whole range of different things happening. I haven't seen much of this described anywhere in the literature that I have been reading. And I think this says something about the breadth and depth of peace building and not necessarily within professional language or structures.

R11 That sounds a lot like roles and tasks rather than themes?

**I** I think you're right, there is something here about roles and tasks. There is also something about what is being introduced to volunteering how is this being managed, fostered or developed. The professionalisation of volunteering. There is also something about cultures and countercultures. People volunteering because they recognise that the UVF or IRA are the most prominent voluntary culture to come out of the troubles.

R11    Interesting

**I        I think so, has that answered your question a wee bit?**

R11    Yes, thanks. There is someone in our office who is studying something similar, if you have a card I will put you in touch with them.

**I        Thanks that will be great and thanks again and I'll switch this off now.**

R11    *Nod*

**Appendix F:**

**Informal Volunteering Question asked of volunteers at the Pre-piloting stage of the study.**

**What do you feel you have learnt about peace building during your volunteering experience in Corrymeela/Northern Ireland?**

I believe that being a volunteer I have the chance to spend time, do work and use skills in a genuine way, enjoying the fact of forgetting about the material payment but have always the satisfaction of helping others. I learnt that to be a volunteer is not easy but the challenge can be done and opens the door for many new friends around you. At Corrymeela specially I felt the sense of Community and that not always different opinions means conflict, but is through sharing them, that we can look for solutions. (Ok Mike that was me. Remember I am still learning English. Please feel free to correct it).

**RL**

**Appendix G:**

**17 links Parade  
Carnoustie  
Angus  
DD7 7JF  
01241 851967**

Dear

Thanks for agreeing to speak to me about your volunteering experience. I will ring you in the next couple of days to finalise details of our meeting-up.

It might be helpful If I say a little about what I am doing. Throughout my experience in volunteering I have yet to fully appreciate the role of volunteers especially in relation to the NI context. With this in mind I want to hear from volunteers about their experiences. I am, therefore, seeking to find out about your experiences as a volunteer.

I have some questions I will be asking – such as “could you say a little about how you got into volunteering” - to help focus upon some of your experiences. There is nothing set in stone so please feel free at any time to interrupt or help me develop my questions. I can stop at any time. If anything arises later on I would be happy to talk more to you. You have my contact details.

To help me remember all that is said I will be using a tape recorder. Afterwards I will transcribe it, omitting your name, into my final thesis. All recordings will remain confidential between you and me and kept securely. Every attempt will be made to ensure anonymity. Furthermore, this research will be conducted in accordance with the standard research ethics as set by the University of Durham. I will bring along a consent form for you to sign.

Thanks again

Mike  
[m.bartle@dundeecollege.ac.uk](mailto:m.bartle@dundeecollege.ac.uk)

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