

NORTHERN IRISH WOMEN, THE PEACE PROCESS, & BREXIT:

AN EXTENDED NARRATIVE EMPATHY APPROACH

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## An Irish Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, in the land of saints and scholars, there lived a handsome young man named Kevin. One day he decided to retreat from the world and spend the rest of his life giving praise to God as a holy hermit. He then went to live high up on a ledge in a wild remote place indeed, called Glendalough, in the county of Wicklow. Now, there was also, at the same time, in the land of saints and scholars, a beautiful maiden, whose name is forgotten on account of the fact that it was never considered worth remembering. Well, didn't this beautiful maiden fall madly in love with the holy hermit. She made lots of attempts to talk to him, to get him to come down off his lonely ledge, for she wanted him to fall in love with her too and come away down and marry her. He didn't want to at all so he did a lot of praying, meditating, and confabbing with God, and after he was finished he decided to put an end to her wooing. And he did. The next time she came up to him he shoved her down off the top of his high ledge and she got broke to smithereens on the rocks far down below, and God was very pleased with the holy hermit. When he died, many years later, as an old, old, man, the people of Ireland acclaimed him a saint. And ever since, droves of nuns, from all over Ireland have converged on his tomb, annually, every year, to pray for the great virtue of chastity as practiced by holy Saint Kevin, the patron saint of woman beaters.

Frances Molloy (1998)

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

### Introduction

As I stepped off of the bus onto rainy Shankill Road, I was startled by the giant mural on the wall in front of me. It depicted a presumably male figure wearing a black balaclava that hid his face, a camouflage jacket, and black gloves. The barrel of his gun was directed right at me, and the eye that I could see was squinted shut. He was seeing me only through the scope of his weapon. Below this figure were the words “U.F.F. MEMBER.” To my left and right were more murals – depictions of Protestants who had lost their lives in the Troubles, portraits of the Queen of England, portraits of King William of Orange, the union jack, and many, many figures carrying guns. I had already spent a few days in the mostly British Protestant town of Newtownards, but I hadn’t seen anything like this. Even in the heart of Belfast there was no threatening iconography on the buildings. I knew that there were murals like this in certain sections of Irish Catholic Belfast and that I only needed to go a few blocks to find the Falls Road, where I would have seen equally menacing art from the opposite perspective. But knowing something exists abstractly and seeing it in person while going about an everyday task are different experiences. I was disconcerted, and the weight of the past fell heavily on my shoulders, despite having no personal connection to the history I was seeing.

The idea for this project originally stemmed from a trip I had taken to Belfast and Derry during a semester abroad in Ireland in 2014. I had never heard of the Troubles, the 30-year period of sectarian violence between Irish Catholic nationalists and British Protestant loyalists in Northern Ireland. I had difficulty understanding why two sects of Christianity underwent such a brutal conflict. As I learned more about the nuances of Northern Irish history, I began to understand that the conflict was much deeper than it appeared, and I grew fascinated with this

little country. The onset of Brexit in 2016 seemed to throw a wrench in the peace process, and I listened to Northern Irish news with growing curiosity. No one knew what was going to happen, and I couldn't help wondering what life was going to be like for the friends I had made who were from Northern Ireland. Questions concerning the experiences of people in Northern Ireland led to the development of this thesis. My graduate work in feminist research allowed me to narrow my focus and conduct research about women's experiences in Northern Ireland.

I was collecting data for this project when I came across the aforementioned mural in the Shankill. I had done plenty of research about Northern Ireland; I had talked to my friends from Northern Ireland; I had even visited multiple times. I knew as much as anyone in my position could know about the horrific history of this small country. And yet I was taken aback by this graphic depiction in a moment when I should have expected it, but somehow did not. This brief moment of deep disquiet brought my research into sharp focus. I was not just gathering narratives for the sake of completing this thesis. I was hearing the lived experiences of women who may have looked down the barrel of a real gun and dealt with their own disquieted souls. I knew that I needed to represent them and their stories accurately, and it is my hope that this project enables readers to grasp the reality of the lives of these women.

## **Overview**

Chapter 2 is the literature review that informs the content of this project. It first examines the historical context of Northern Ireland and then narrows focus onto the Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement. It next explores women's roles in Northern Ireland, both past and present, and then reviews the most recent developments of Brexit. Chapter 2 outlines Extended Narrative Empathy (ENE), which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. This chapter results in three Research Questions that guide this project:



RQ1: What narratives do women in Northern Ireland use to describe the lived experiences of women, both past and contemporary, during the Troubles and in the peace process?

RQ2: How do women in Northern Ireland discuss the potential economic, social, and political implications of Brexit on their personal lives and the lives of women?

RQ3: What narratives do women in Northern Ireland use to discuss women's roles in society and in politics?

Chapter 3 details the methodology used for this project. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather narratives used by women from Northern Ireland, and ENE was utilized to analyze these narratives. Chapter 4 applies ENE to answer the research questions, sorting participant narratives into three overarching categories: The Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Women's Roles in Northern Ireland. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of these narratives on the lives of women in Northern Ireland. An exercise called protagonist inversion, a fundamental aspect of ENE, is then conducted. Finally, the chapter examines the strengths and limitations of the study and provides direction for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this literature review, I will first entail a historical account of how Northern Ireland became its own nation separate from the Republic of Ireland, which will provide a foundational understanding as to why Northern Ireland is a post-conflict society. This account will be followed by the history of the Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement, which explains the thirty-year period of extreme sectarian violence that occurred in Northern Ireland and the document that brought the violence to a halt. I will then focus on a primary aspect of this project by outlining women's roles in Northern Ireland, beginning with the Troubles and ending with current literature. This will be followed by an examination of the literature on Brexit, an event that has impacted Northern Ireland politically, socially, and economically. Finally, I will present the theoretical framework for this thesis, Extended Narrative Empathy (ENE). This literature review culminates in the development of three research questions that guide this project.

### **Development of Northern Ireland**

Ireland and England have had an intertwined, complex history for centuries. It is difficult to discern an actual beginning to this relationship, but England officially asserted dominance over Ireland in 1541 under the rule of King Henry VIII (Stamp, 2014). It is important to note that Henry VIII renounced the authority of the Roman Catholic Church after the Pope refused to annul his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. He dissolved all Catholic monasteries and abbeys in England in 1536, founding the Protestant denomination of Anglicanism in Catholicism's stead (Church of England, 2011). Henry VIII sent thousands of English and Scottish Protestant settlers to the east of Ireland, which displaced the Irish Catholic farmers, forcing them to the west and south. This displacement sowed the seeds of conflict for centuries to come (Stamp, 2014).

The Irish fought British rule from the moment it began, and the Gaelic Lords were somewhat successful in the early decades. By 1607, however, most of the Irish leadership were forced to flee from Ireland, leaving much of the Irish population vulnerable to British colonization (Cavendish, 2007). The British developed an elaborate colonization scheme called the Plantation of Ulster in which six counties in the north of Ireland were reclaimed and settled by English and Scottish settlers (Cockburn, 1998; Hunter, 2018). This scheme was much more organized and complete than Henry VIII's colonization, leading to a British colonial population of approximately 30,000 people in Ulster by 1630. Comparatively, there were only 4,646 British colonists in North America in 1630 (Hunter, 2018).

This stronghold of British rule continued to grow through the centuries, as did disdain for Irish Catholicism. A code of laws that regulated the status of Catholics, called the "Penal Laws," were created over the course of 1691-1760. These laws were meant to disenfranchise the native Irish from all political and economic power in hopes that it would cause a mass conversion to Protestantism (Irish Penal Law, n.d.). These laws increased Irish resentment toward British rule, which resulted in several attempted rebellions through the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including Robert Emmet's rebellion of 1798, the Young Ireland Movement of the 1840s, the Rebellion of 1848, the Fenian Uprising of 1866, the Land War protest in the 1880s, and the Dynamite Campaign of the 1890s (McNamara, 2019). None of these rebellions were ultimately successful. In the midst of these rebellions, the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1852, also called the Great Hunger (Donnelly, 2002), caused the deaths of approximately one million Irish people due to hunger and related diseases, and caused another million Irish people to emigrate from Ireland. The population of Ireland, which was approximately 8.5 million in 1845, is currently 4.8 million – Ireland never fully recovered from the Potato Famine (Donnelly, 2002).

A bedraggled Ireland full of nationalist, anti-British sentiment limped into the twentieth century. After years of failed rebellions, the first step toward a successful revolution was taken on Easter Sunday in 1916. World War I had been raging for two years, and Irish rebels, calling themselves the Irish Republican Army (IRA), used this moment of British weakness to take an armed stand in Dublin (Sabur, 2017). This so-called Easter Rising would probably have been considered an unsuccessful rebellion – all of the leaders were captured and imprisoned right away, and Irish public sentiment was against these rebels. Irishmen and Englishmen alike were fighting in World War I, so it appeared to Irish citizens that this armed revolt was a self-sabotaging disregard for Irish soldiers and their sacrifice. However, British retaliation against these rebel leaders was harsh, secretive, and operated without trial (Sabur, 2017). The public sentiment in Ireland shifted, and the IRA saw a surge of support in response to British brutality.

The Anglo-Irish War, or the War of Independence, began in earnest in 1919. The IRA, which had strongholds in the west and south of Ireland, engaged in guerilla warfare with the British army, using their knowledge of local areas to ambush soldiers. Both the British army and the IRA committed terrible atrocities, and civilians often suffered in the crossfire (Stamp, 2014). Eventually, the fatigued British government presented an agreement to the IRA that would allow Ireland to be a free state – except for the six counties in the north that were primarily populated by British Protestants. These six counties of Ulster would remain in the United Kingdom (UK). The agreement was signed in 1921, and the Partition of Ireland was implemented (Stamp, 2014). Northern Ireland officially became a new country and a member of the UK in 1922.

### **The Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement**

The partition of Ireland left many Irish Catholics in Ulster feeling left behind by their brethren in the south. The systematic oppression of Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland

constructed by the Penal Laws lasted long after this code of laws had been dissolved (Keefe, 2019), and this oppression played out in physical segregation of populations. In the early 1900s through the 1960s, there was “an overwhelming impression of physical force being used to maintain segregation and contain any Catholic spark of rebellion” (Munck, 1992, p. 212). Catholics struggled to find jobs and housing due to discrimination. Citizens could not vote if they were not householders, meaning that Irish Catholics were vastly underrepresented in government (McWilliams, 1995). Many Catholics chose to emigrate at this time, increasing the majority Protestant-minority Catholic population gap, despite Catholic birthrates being double Protestant birthrates (Munck, 1992).

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969, a group of students organized a march from Belfast to the city of Derry/Londonderry in protest of this systematic discrimination. This seventy-mile march was modeled after the 1965 march led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and other civil rights activists from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, which these students viewed as a positive turning point for African American civil rights in the United States (Keefe, 2019). Four days into this march, just a few miles outside of Derry/Londonderry, the peaceful protest was met with violence, largely incited by the infamous Protestant preacher, Ian Paisley. The marchers were attacked with stones, lead pipes, and a myriad of other objects used as weapons to bludgeon them. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers, who made up the police force in Northern Ireland, mostly stood by and watched the scene unfold – some officers in a branch called the “B-Specials” even joined in on the beatings (Keefe, 2019). Edwina Stewart, a student marcher, said about the attack:

Whenever [the police] charged with batons and things... the people were never expecting it. We didn't expect them to have a go. It was terrible, it really was. It frightened me. I

ran.... In theory I knew about the RUC and what they did, how bad they were, but I just couldn't believe it (Munck, 1992, p. 219).

Eventually, members of the RUC broke up the fracas, but the students' hope for peace was dashed that day (Keefe, 2019).

That summer, as happened every summer in Derry/Londonderry, a loyalist (Protestant) order called the Apprentice Boys held a march to commemorate the Protestants who barred the city gates in 1688 in order to keep the Catholic forces of King James at bay. Every summer, the Apprentice Boys ended their march on the city walls and threw pennies into the Catholic ghetto, called the Bogside, below. The summer of 1969, this traditional act of provocation was met with retaliation, and violent riots broke out. This event became known as the Battle of the Bogside (Keefe, 2019, p. 27). News of the Battle of the Bogside spread to Belfast where gangs of Protestant youths began to destroy Catholic neighborhoods by torching houses and feeding the flames in order to spread the fires. Catholics involved in this incident later stated that the RUC and the B-Specials, who were supposed to be responding to this unrest, stood by while Protestant gangs committed crimes, but responded harshly to Catholics who attempted to fight back (Keefe, 2019). This night of crimes led to retaliation after retaliation across all cities in Northern Ireland. Car bombs, petrol bombs, shootings, beatings, and fires were common (Munck, 1992). In 1971, the British army was sent to quell the unrest, to the initial relief of the Catholic community. Irish Catholic women brought the army soldiers tea and cakes every afternoon in the first months of their arrival, grateful for their protection from the terror of loyalist paramilitaries (Aretxaga, 1997). However, it quickly became clear that the British army's loyalty was with those who best represented their own ideology – the British Protestant loyalists. The Troubles became a multi-faceted war between the Catholic republican paramilitaries, the Protestant loyalist paramilitaries,

and the British army, though the British army rarely engaged in battle with loyalist paramilitaries (Keefe, 2019). This conflict, which began with a civil rights march in 1969, would rage on for decades.

This general understanding of the beginning of the Troubles, while accurate, is simplistic. There were several factions of the Catholic civil rights movement, many of which did not see eye-to-eye ideologically (Munck, 1992), and it has been contested by various scholars and citizens whether the student protest was the catalyst for the violence that swept Northern Ireland for the following thirty years (McWilliams, 1995). What is not contested is that the Troubles heavily impacted the citizens who lived through them, particularly in their development of ethnic identity. Allen Feldman, in his 1991 ethnography of prisons in Northern Ireland, stated:

Political warfare in the urban sectors of Northern Ireland can be depicted as a Gramscian war of position between fractions of the “Catholic” and “Protestant” working class and between these fractions and the state. Yet... as much as ethnicity symbolizes in part an inequitable cultural division of labor that has precipitated communal violence, I have found that violence can effect [sic] autonomous and retroactive interventions in the construction of ethnicity.... The above dynamics attest to the modernist character of political violence in Northern Ireland, despite all popular and easy characterizations of this situation as an archaicized religious or tribal conflict (p. 5).

Here, Feldman is articulating that the violence of the Troubles *in and of itself* had an effect on the development of ethnic identity in Northern Ireland. An already divided nation became even more tribal as paramilitaries began to attack entire communities, regardless of whether or not the residents were part of an opposing paramilitary. Understanding one’s own ethnic identity and cultural position in Northern Ireland became a matter of life and death – a young person from

Belfast who happened to wander into the wrong neighborhood would likely never return (Munck, 1992).

This morbid reality impacted cultural identity, and it also inflicted immense trauma on the citizens of Northern Ireland. Angela Stephanie Mazzetti, a qualitative researcher who grew up in Northern Ireland, recounted a harrowing experience that emphasized the traumatic nature of her life in Northern Ireland:

One day [my partner and I] were shopping in a local supermarket when the coin mechanism from our trolley broke and flew into the air, resembling an impressive ‘whirring’ sound. We both instantly dropped to the floor much to the amusement of the other shoppers. This seemingly insignificant incident dramatically brought my vulnerability into focus, a vulnerability to which I had been exposed every day of my life up to this point, but I was now aware that my appraisal of everyday life was starting to change. As time went by, I could no longer imagine living a ‘normal’ life in Northern Ireland as the very real abnormality of that life was coming sharply into focus. I felt that I could no longer cope with the stress of living in such a volatile and hostile environment – my coping reserves were empty. Within a few weeks of the supermarket incident, we had secured jobs in England and relocated (Mazzetti, 2018, p. 53).

Mazzetti’s story is not unique amongst people who were raised in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The trauma caused by the violence was felt by citizens in both communities who were forced to face the consequences of living in conflict.

The Troubles were officially ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), also known as the Belfast Agreement. This agreement was voted into law by a joint referendum in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in which the vast majority of



Irish and Northern Irish voters voted in favor of the document. Its primary role was to implement power sharing in the government between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists, specifically between the two primary parties at time: the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Power sharing allowed for there to be a first minister, typically a position held by the larger British unionist party, and a deputy first minister, typically held by the Irish nationalist party, with equal power in the Northern Irish assembly. The GFA also instituted dual Irish and British nationality, improved relations between Ireland and the UK, and allowed for the early release of paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland jails (Kenny, 2018). There was significant US involvement in the development of the GFA, and US senator George J. Mitchell was sent as a special envoy to Northern Ireland by Bill Clinton's administration (MacGinty, 1997). Senator Mitchell served as a mediator, but John Hume, leader of the SDLP, and David Trimble, head of the UUP, are heralded as the true heroes of the GFA for leading polarized parties into a workable agreement that ended the violence of the Troubles (Kenny, 2018).

### **Women's Roles in Northern Ireland**

An aspect of Northern Ireland that is under researched is the experience of women in the current, ever-changing political and social climate. There are, however, works that examine the roles and experiences of women during the political and social climate of the Troubles (Aretxaga, 1997; Cockburn, 1998). These books explain the gendered nature of the sectarian violence that took place and describe the complicated roles women played during the Troubles.

Cynthia Cockburn (1998) developed an ethnography of women's peace organizations in three conflict areas: Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Her work was rooted in peace and conflict studies, particularly in the development of shared social spaces, the

impact of identity on peace and conflict, and the notion of transversal politics. Cockburn described transversal politics as a dialogue in which

... each participant in the dialogue brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity, but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different membership and identity. The process of shifting would not involve self-decentring [sic], abandoning one's political and other sources of belonging. But neither should rooting render us incapable of movement, of looking for connection with those, among 'the others' with whom we might find compatible values and goals (p. 8).

Cockburn argued that the Women's Support Network, the peace organization she worked with in Belfast, fostered transversal politics between Catholic and Protestant women by allowing them to focus on solutions to poverty and marginalization in both communities rather than focus on their stark political differences.

One of the primary emphases of Cockburn's work was the impact of gender on the experience of conflict. She claimed that, "these apparently ethnic wars are, in a sense, also gender wars... As well as defining a relation between peoples and land, they shape a certain relation between women and men. It is a relation of male dominance, in some cases frankly patriarchal" (p. 13). About Northern Ireland in particular, Cockburn explained, "at the time of my research in 1996, all Northern Ireland's members of the British and European parliaments were men. Men held 88 percent of local council seats. Indeed, men rule all institutions of power – church, state and quango" (p. 59). This political power was represented in social power as well, with Northern Ireland functioning as a patriarchy in which women were silenced and kept in the home. Cockburn explained:

The political violence of Northern Ireland gets transmitted directly into the family [through domestic violence].... But women I spoke with gave clear evidence that shame, fear and religious inhibition keep women from confiding in each other on matters like violent men, sex and sexuality, pregnancy, and abortion. Here in the women's centres those matters quickly come to the open and women find they are not any longer alone, drowning in silence (p.75).

Women's Support Network allowed women to find social space in which they could obtain support from other women, conduct transversal politics, and find purpose developing solutions for the problems in their communities. This social space allowed women to shift their identity just enough to recognize that conflict resolution was possible and that they could play an active role in bringing it about.

Aretxaga's 1997 ethnography is similar to Cockburn's, but with a different focus. Her work combined interpretive anthropology and poststructuralist feminist theory to show the gendered constitution of political violence, arguing that women's experience of violence is constantly shifting depending on the contingencies of history, social class, and ethnic identity. Aretxaga provided an in-depth review of women's roles and their implications, describing how the women of Northern Ireland were allotted the social role of mother first and foremost. The actions that women took during the Troubles, and the response to these actions, almost always pointed back to their role within the home.

Women were at times able to use this role to their advantage. For example, Aretxaga described the female protest to the Curfew of 1970, an act by the British army in July of 1970 that did not allow anyone to leave their homes for several days. Hundreds of women joined together to march against the curfew, primarily because they could not provide food for their families. The streets were flooded with women and children, chanting and screaming for the curfew to be lifted.

Had this been a demonstration of men the soldiers would have responded with tear gas and bullets, but to shoot women with kids... who resembled all too much the women of their own working-class neighborhoods seemed too ridiculous; the soldiers were

disconcerted and horrified at the sight of what they might have interpreted as female hysteria (Aretxaga, 1997, p. 58).

The women were successful, as their protest led to the absolution of the curfew.

While the women were markedly successful at utilizing their social role as mother in such protests, they were also heavily constrained by the role. Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution of 1937, the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, stated,

The state recognizes that by her life within the home, the woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall therefore endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home (Aretxaga, 1997, p. 63).

This article also banned divorce, prohibited contraception, and severely restricted salaried work for married women, which created a system of inequality against women. This conservative ideal was upheld in Northern Ireland, as well, because the Protestant government was equally patriarchal in social legislation.

The IRA also viewed women as subordinate. The women who did take a proactive, combatant role within the IRA first felt that there was no gender difference because they were just as likely to be arrested when caught with weapons or working against the British army. Their goal was the unity of Ireland, and the militant women's work toward that goal seemed to be appreciated by their male counterparts. Once in prison, however, the women quickly realized that they were not equal in the organization, despite being equal in sacrifice. The male prisoners held meetings, made organizational decisions, and eventually called a truce, but the female prisoners were not included at all (Aretxaga, 1997, p. 75-76). These examples, among others, describe the complicated, subordinate experiences of the women of Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

More disturbing stories of gendered and sexual violence throughout the Troubles also stem from the patriarchal nature of Northern Ireland. This patriarchy in combination with paramilitarism “means that there is a much wider tendency to use guns in the control and abuse of women within the context of domestic violence” (McWilliams, 1995, p. 15). McWilliams, who wrote a historical reflection on women in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, stated that domestic violence within individual households was a prevalent problem in Northern Ireland, but the violence against women extended beyond the domestic domain. There are cases, though few, of sectarian gang rape and murder of women from opposing communities. These cases, coupled with the wider sectarian violence and domestic violence, led to the deaths of hundreds of women between 1969 and 1995 (McWilliams 1995). Domestic violence continues to be a worrisome problem in Northern Ireland, with 31,817 reported incidents in 2019, which was the highest number since the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) began publishing these statistics in 2004 (PSNI Statistics Branch, 2019).

Despite, or perhaps because of, violence against women, women banded together across community lines. For example, in 1971, the British government under Margaret Thatcher removed free milk from schools (McWilliams, 1995). The so-called “Milk Campaign” was started by mothers from both Protestant and Catholic communities with a march in Belfast from the City Hall to Stormont. This campaign drew significant media attention, mostly due to the protestors’ nicknaming of the prime minister as “Thatcher the Milk Snatcher” (McWilliams, 1995). The group of women decided to adopt the title “Mothers of Belfast,” indicating their embrace of the social role held in high regard in Northern Ireland, as well as their cross-cultural unity as mothers who desired to protect and nurture their children. Despite gaining considerable attention and political support, the decision to end the supply of school milk was not reversed,

and Protestant women were forced to leave the campaign “because others in their community viewed the campaign as a Catholic antistate protest...” (McWilliams, 1995, p. 22). Another example of women working together came in 1985 when a group of women from both communities traveled together to London to lobby their Members of Parliament (MPs) to oppose the Social Security Bill, which would have significantly decreased women’s claims to welfare benefits. They were shocked when they arrived and their own representatives refused to meet with them because they were more concerned with opposing a potential peace agreement called the Anglo-Irish Agreement (McWilliams, 1995). The MPs were so entrenched in orange (Protestant) versus green (Catholic) politics that they did not give these women a second thought. The women decided to lobby MPs from outside Northern Ireland without success. They returned to Belfast with the understanding that their MPs were uninterested in issues that concerned them as women (McWilliams, 1995). Other women’s movements experienced various levels of success and cross-community involvement, but their consistent presence throughout the Troubles is indicative of women’s willingness to cross sectarian lines for the betterment of communities.

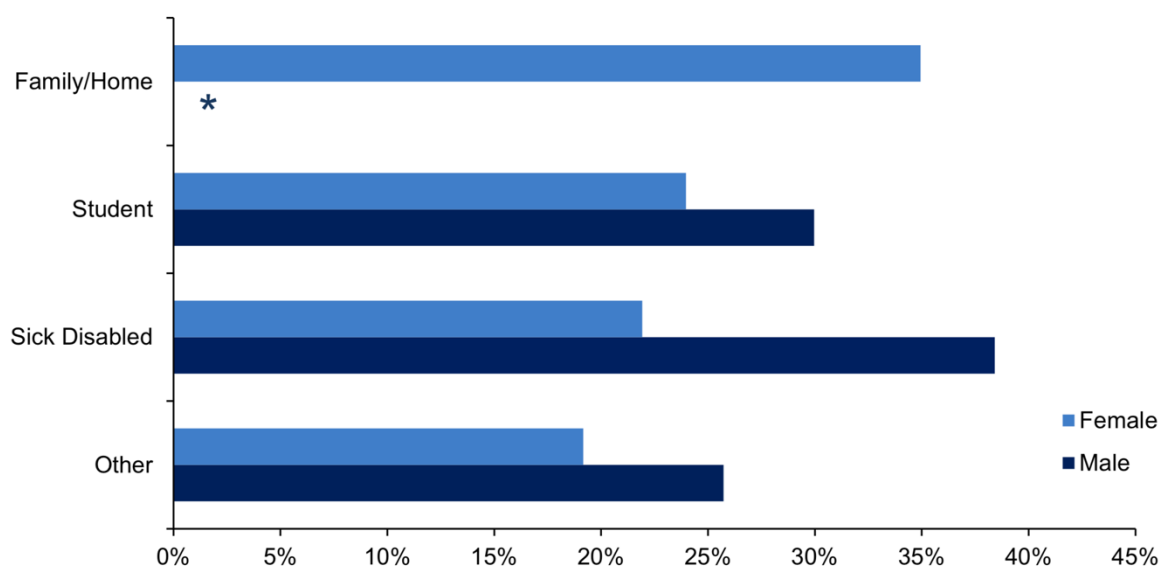
González (2018) described contemporary ways women have worked to contribute to the peace process, focusing on an organization called Women on the Peace Line (WPL). González focused on the concept of relational space, which must be developed in post-conflict societies for people from both sides to meet and build friendships. Shared physical spaces are important to this development of peace, but mutual physical spaces are meaningless if both sides do not feel safe to engage in relationship with each other. According to González, WPL functioned as a relational space by bringing together women from both Protestant and Catholic communities to engage in politically neutral activities, such as exercise classes and brunches. The women became a tight-knit group, despite political differences, because they focused on shared

experiences and similarities and discouraged contentious political conversations (González, 2018, p. 114-115). González detailed the impact such experiences had on women's lives, but she did not examine the political experiences of women or address the changes to women's social roles in the past twenty years. Recent political developments, particularly that of Brexit, suggest that the political landscape of Northern Ireland will continue to undergo drastic changes in the future, which may have an impact on women's social and relational spaces. It is important to examine women's experiences in conjunction with these developments, as opposed to separating the two phenomena. This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by acknowledging these impending political shifts and the impact they have on women's perceptions of their own lived experiences and relationships in Northern Ireland.

An important aspect of Northern Irish women's lived experiences is their involvement in the economy and labor market. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publishes a semi-annual report detailing women's existence in the labor market, the most recent having been published in 2018 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2018). This report outlined several key points. First, "The employment rate for males in Northern Ireland has been consistently higher than for females over the past ten years. Although the number of employees in Northern Ireland is evenly split between males and females, the number of self-employed males is more than double the number of self-employed females" (p. 1). This statement indicates that women in Northern Ireland are less likely to own their own businesses, which was supported by the statistic that only 9% of females in employment were self-employed (p. 5). Another key point states, "Over the past 10 years there have consistently been more economically inactive women than men. At July-September 2018 a third of working age women were economically inactive, compared to 23% of men" (p.1). The report also states, "Women

make up half of the working age population. However, a third of working age women are not in the labour force” (p. 4). The most common reason for this inactivity among women was “family and home commitments” (p. 1), which indicates that the constitutional phrase “mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home” (Artexaga, p. 63) is still prevalent in Northern Irish society to some extent. The figure below (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2018, p. 11) shows how drastic the difference is between men and women who are economically inactive due family constraints:

**Figure 6: Reasons for economic inactivity by gender (16-64), July – September 2018**



\*Figures too small for a reliable estimate.

*Note:* Figure reprinted from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. (2018). *Women in Northern Ireland 2018*.

The NISRA’s report also stated that 92% of female employees worked in the Service sector with 42% of female employees being in administrative or secretarial roles (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2018, p. 5). There is a similar phenomenon of so-called “pink-collared jobs” in the US (Miller, 2020), which are female-dominated professions, typically in the service industry, that involve lower wages than traditionally male-dominated blue- or



white-collar jobs, such as welding or practicing law. Deindustrialization and automation is reducing the number of manufacturing jobs typically held by men (Irwin, 2020), and many working-class men are not willing to take a large cut in pay to take on a societally deemed “feminine” job, such as nursing or secretarial work (Dill, Price-Glynn, & Rakovski, 2016). NIRSA’s report indicated that the gap between male and female employment has decreased slightly over the last ten years (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2018, p. 7), which may be due, in part, to the steady deindustrialization of the UK since the 1960s (Kitson & Michie, 2014) and a similar disdain for “pink-collar jobs” (Miller, 2020) among Northern Irish men. Women are playing an active role in the employment sector of Northern Ireland, but are still experiencing less employment than men, particularly self-employment, in part due to family and home restraints.

Women are also playing a role in Northern Ireland politically, as can be seen in the women who are leaders of the main political parties. These women are Arlene Foster of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), who is currently serving as First Minister of Northern Ireland; Michell O’Neill of Sinn Féin, who is the current Deputy First Minister; and Naomi Long of the Alliance Party, who was appointed to be Minister of Justice (Moriarty, 2020).

Three women were also all elected to the European Parliament, which is the first time all three seats have been filled by women. These women were Dianne Dodds of the DUP, Martina Anderson of Sinn Fein, and Naomi Long of Alliance. This is also the first time there has been an Alliance Party MEP (Member of European Parliament) in history (McCormack, 2019; Mills, 2019; Sunderland, 2019). Long’s surprising victory in the European Parliamentary election, along with large Alliance gains in the December 2019 general election (Northern Ireland election results, 2019), seems indicative of the anti-Brexit, anti-sectarian mood in Northern Ireland

(Mills, 2019), but the election of the two primary Catholic nationalist and Protestant unionist parties indicates that sectarian national identity still plays a large role in Northern Irish politics.

The final major aspect of women in Northern Ireland to be addressed in this literature review is the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace, and security. UNSCR 1325 was adopted by the UN in 2000, and it calls for the “full and equal participation of women and the integration of a gender perspective into all peace and security initiatives” (UNSCR 1325, n.d.). This document promises to protect women’s rights and takes into account the experiences of women in conflict and their contributions to building peace, and it is implemented through national action plans (NAPs). Development and delivery of NAPs is the responsibility of national governments (Women’s International, 2012). UNSCR 1325 has not been implemented in Northern Ireland, despite Northern Ireland meeting the document’s requirements of being a conflict country (Powell, 2019), and despite the fact that both the UK and Irish governments have created a NAP for UNSCR 1325 (Women’s International, 2012). In 2008, the UK government received recommendations for implementation of this resolution in Northern Ireland by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), but has failed to follow these recommendations (Powell, 2019; Women’s International, 2012).

The Irish government, however, has created a NAP that includes Northern Irish women in its commitment to “engage with appropriate Northern Ireland authorities to encourage development of policies and measures consistent with the aims of UNSCR 1325, in consultation with civil society organisations” (Ireland’s National Action Plan, 2011). However, Ireland has no constitutional jurisdiction to fully implement UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, feminist activism for this resolution “is limited by the legacies of a male dominated

peace process at the state level of society” (Women’s International, 2012), meaning that USNCR 1325 has taken a backseat to sectarian politics and maintenance of the tenuous peace in Northern Ireland by male politicians. Implementation of USNCR 1325 continues to be a point of focus for feminist lobbyists in Northern Ireland (Powell, 2019), but it has been deeply overshadowed by the occurrence of Brexit.

## **Brexit**

In a referendum on June 23, 2016, a 52% majority of voters in the United Kingdom chose to leave the European Union (EU) (Kenton, 2019). It is important for this project to note that only 44% of Northern Irish voters chose to leave the EU, while 56% voted to remain (EU referendum, 2016). On March 27, 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May invoked Article 50, a clause in the European Union Lisbon Treaty that outlined the steps to be taken by a country seeking to leave the bloc voluntarily (Kenton, 2019). This event became known as Brexit, or the British exit, from the EU. One of the primary problems posed by Brexit is that of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Both countries were members of the EU, and thus members of the same customs union. This means that all people and goods moving between Northern Ireland and Ireland could circulate freely with no customs checks or border controls. Practically speaking, the border was meaningless. Now the Irish border will be the only land crossing between the UK and the EU, meaning it may become a closed border (Flanagan, 2019).

Brexit is important to study at this moment in history in part because of the Irish border and the economic consequences, but also because of the impact it has on identities in Northern Ireland. The sectarian divide began as a chasm between those who identified as British and those who identified as Irish. Today there is a large group of people who identify as neither British nor Irish, but as Northern Irish (O’Toole, 2017). This term means different things in different

communities, but it indicates that the peace process has created a reduced polarization between the two primary communities of Catholics and Protestants. Brexit, as the *British* exit, is forcing people in Northern Ireland to grapple with the concept of a *British* identity, which is generally rejected by Irish nationalists. This identity question could cause the peace that exists in Northern Ireland to collapse along the same ethnic identity lines of the past. The full impact that Brexit will have on Northern Ireland is unclear, but it is a topic of considerable discussion among politicians, journalists, and in civil society (Bell, Gallagher, McCrea, & Kerr, 2019; Carr, 2018; Clark, 2019; Linehan & Leahy, 2019; McCormack, 2019; O’Toole, 2018a; O’Toole 2018b; O’Toole, 2019; Staunton, Taylor, & Kelly, 2018).

The implementation of Brexit has been a tumultuous affair. Prime Minister Theresa May negotiated several deals with the EU, none of which passed in British Parliament. One of May’s primary obstacles was the presence of the Northern Irish DUP in parliament, who absolutely refused to back a deal that included an Irish backstop (Syal, 2019). The backstop was a policy that would have maintained an open border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, but it would have required Northern Ireland to have a separate trade deal with the EU than the rest of the UK. The DUP, the primary party for British Protestant unionists, did not want Northern Ireland to be under any special circumstances because, in their view, Northern Ireland is just as British as England, Scotland, and Wales (Syal, 2019). Theresa May had to request several extensions to the Brexit timeline, and her continual inability to get a deal passed led to her resignation in 2019 (Castle, Barry, Mueller, Pérez-Peña, Specia, Tsang, Erlanger, & Schreuer, 2019).

May was replaced as the leader of the Conservative Party and as prime minister by Boris Johnson, former mayor of London, whose campaign slogan was simple – “Get Brexit Done” – whether or not a deal was agreed upon with the EU (UK general election, 2019). Johnson

initially had similar troubles getting a Brexit deal through parliament, and he decided to prorogue, or suspend, parliament in September of 2019, just before the October 31<sup>st</sup> Brexit deadline. Political opponents claimed that he did this in order to ensure that a no-deal Brexit would occur in October (Picheta, 2019). This decision to prorogue parliament was deemed unlawful in the Scottish supreme court, which was supported by the UK supreme court (Bowcott, Quinn, & Carrell, 2019). Parliament was reinstated, but no deal was agreed upon. Boris Johnson then called for a UK general election in hopes that his Conservative Party would take the majority of seats and he would be able to get a deal through Parliament. His hopes were met in December of 2019 when the Conservative Party swept elections throughout England and Wales, providing a much-needed parliamentary majority, while also weakening the DUP significantly (UK general election, 2019). Johnson was then able to make a deal with the EU that passed in Parliament, resulting in an official Brexit on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020 (Sandford, 2020). The current customs arrangement has put Northern Ireland in a tenuous position – it is officially in the UK's customs territory, meaning that it can participate in future British trade deals, but there has also been an EU-UK customs border instituted in the Irish Sea, meaning that Northern Ireland will follow the EU's customs rules (The Brexit deal explained, 2020). It is far too early to know what economic and political ramifications this Brexit deal will have on Northern Ireland.

Many political and social narratives surrounding Brexit have been built on anger and fear. Brexit began with English nationalist rhetoric claiming that England was under Europe's thumb and would be better off as a separate state. Proponents of this message used misleading statistics about the EU's influence in the UK to stoke anger in British citizens (O'Toole, 2016). In return, anti-Brexit campaigns used messages of fear, claiming that Britain would fall into economic ruin and that trade deals with the United States would lead to decreased standards in food and goods

(Choi, 2019). Narratives in Northern Ireland in particular have been emotionally charged, especially narratives surrounding the future of small businesses, the economy, and women's rights (SBS Dateline, 2019).

There have been scholarly reports published about the potential effect of Brexit on the lives of Northern Irish women and other gender minorities. These reports discuss how women would bear the brunt of an economic crisis, the potential loss of human rights protections offered by the EU, and the loss of EU funding that the women's sector and the peace sector are likely to experience (Galligan, 2019; Powell 2019). These reports focus on the legal, economic, and political impact of Brexit. To date, though, no scholarly research has examined the narratives Northern Irish women use to describe Brexit. This is important because individuals use narratives to convey lived experiences (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), and understanding these narratives would provide insight into how Northern Irish women perceive themselves to be impacted by Brexit. This would, in turn, provide insight into how women make choices regarding their lives and families in the wake of Brexit, such as how to vote, which passports to obtain, and where to live. By gathering narratives from Northern Irish women, as opposed to economic or political expert opinions concerning women, this study will make a significant contribution to the academic research on this topic.

### **Theoretical Framework: Narrative Paradigm & Extended Narrative Empathy (ENE)**

This project seeks to understand how Northern Irish women convey their lived experiences, meaning that this research focuses on the narratives and language used by individuals. The discipline of communication is particularly useful here because communication studies requires researchers to examine the mechanics individuals use to convey information and how those individuals construct meaning through communication mechanisms. Communication

mechanisms in this project take the shape of narratives. Past studies of women in Northern Ireland have focused on violence through the lens of transversal politics and social space (Cockburn, 1998), a feminist political lens (Aretxaga, 1997), a historical account of women's impact on the Troubles (McWilliams, 1995), the necessity of relational space in post-conflict peacebuilding (González, 2018), and potential economic and political effects of Brexit on women (Galligan, 2019; Powell, 2019). These are important research foci regarding Northern Irish women, and several of them utilize aspects of communication in their research, such as conflict resolution through relational communication (Cockburn, 1998) and discursive spaces (González, 2018). However, none of them utilize communication, particularly the communication of lived experience through narrative, as a central focus. It is important to give voice to individuals and examine the narratives they use to frame their lived experiences.

Additionally, given the contentious history of Northern Ireland and the subordinate position of Northern Irish women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is important that the theoretical framework of this thesis provide a way to give voice to the stories of women from as many perspectives as possible. This project will be operating from a narrative paradigm and, more specifically, will use the extended narrative empathy (ENE) theory. ENE “views culture as unfolding and interrelated narratives that can be interpreted in such a way as to connect the stories of humanity” (Clair, Rastogi, Blatchley, Clawson, Erdmann & Lee, 2016, p. 474). This theory allows the researcher to collect and analyze narratives with the intention of developing empathy while analyzing a social issue or political problem. ENE's focus on empathy development makes it an ideal framework for this thesis because Northern Ireland is a post-conflict society. Commitment to empathy will allow narratives from both sectarian backgrounds to be given equal weight in analysis, as opposed to privileging one viewpoint over another.

A key aspect of this theory is “poly-narratives,” which means that the narratives utilized must present different perspectives, not simply multiple narratives from the same side of an issue. Another key aspect of ENE is the practice of “overturning the protagonist for the antagonist...” (Clair et al., 2016, p. 476). The researcher is challenged to be aware of hegemonic narratives and seek out perspectives that are contentious to other narratives, as well as their own perspective.

More simply, ENE asks the researcher to identify three levels of narrative: primary, peripheral, and contentious. Primary narratives are a “collection of similar narratives [that] form a collective narrative.... These stories generally provide concordance... in one view” (Clair et al., 2016, p. 475). Peripheral narratives are “those stories which may fully or partially support” the primary narrative (Clair et al., 2016, p. 475). Peripheral narratives allow the researcher to obtain a more holistic view of the subject in question. Contentious narratives do not support the collective narrative and often display a view that is contrary to the primary narrative (Clair et al., 2016). These three levels of narrative allow the researcher to develop a broader, more comprehensive understanding of complex issues.

ENE also asks the researcher to conduct protagonist inversion, which can be done by portraying the antagonist as a protagonist in order for a contentious narrative to emerge. This thesis utilizes multiple narratives on multiple issues, so it would be superfluous to conduct this exercise for each narrative presented in the data, particularly for primary narratives that already have contentious counterparts. Instead, protagonist inversion will be conducted from my point of view as the researcher by articulating my perspective on the socio-political divide in Northern Ireland. Researchers cannot fully separate themselves from the biases they bring to their research (Ely, 2007), but an exercise in protagonist inversion allows them to be aware of these biases and



to practice giving voice to a perspective they do not initially favor. The empathy I developed through protagonist inversion is another reason why ENE was chosen to be the theoretical framework for this project. It allowed me to acknowledge my personal bias and move toward a nonpartisan perspective of a contentious issue, which is important when studying members of a post-conflict society.

Given all of the elements of this literature review, I will utilize ENE in order to develop an in-depth perspective of the narratives women in Northern Ireland use to describe their lived experiences. Specifically, ENE will be used to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What narratives do women in Northern Ireland use to describe the lived experiences of women, both past and contemporary, during the Troubles and in the peace process?

RQ 2: How do women in Northern Ireland discuss the potential economic, social, and political implications of Brexit on their personal lives and the lives of women?

RQ 3: What narratives do women in Northern Ireland use to discuss women's roles in society and in politics?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Qualitative research is used to understand the human experience as it happens in its natural setting. This requires researchers to gather data through observation, participant observation, interviews, and various other data collection methods that occur in the natural setting as opposed to data gathering in a controlled environment (Kim, 2015; Lindolf & Taylor, 2019). Qualitative research requires interpretation of data and the phenomena they represent in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Making sense of these meanings requires an intentional choice of specific methodology that serves as a lens through which to interpret data. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the chosen methodology – narrative inquiry – and the data collection and analysis processes.

#### **Narrative Inquiry**

Most qualitative researchers use words as data in their analysis, which often involves the construction or deconstruction of stories or narratives. This does not mean that all qualitative researchers are narrative researchers, though. Specifically, narrative researchers assume that the story is “one [unit], if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). Some narrative researchers use story as a metaphor to articulate their research, some employ sociolinguistic analytic tools to their field notes or interviews to piece together a generic narrative of their participants, some examine the impact of wider cultural narratives on human experience – there are many ways to utilize narratives in research (Kim, 2015).

Narrative inquiry specifically views narrative “as both the method and phenomena of the study,” focusing on human experience as expressed in stories, both first-person and secondhand (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). Narrative inquirers reconstruct their participants’ experiences

in relationship to other people and to the wider social environment, allowing them to reveal and connect the “experiential complexities and nuances of individuals and settings in varied contexts” (Macintyre Latta, Schnellert, Ondrik, & Sasges, 2018, p. 2). This allows the researcher to dive deeply into the way participants convey episodes that occur in their lives, and how participants attach meaning to their actions, relationships, and experiences.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006, as quoted in Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007, p. 22) developed a clear explanation of narrative inquiry as a methodology:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study.

If narrative inquiry is the study of experience as story, then the term “experience” should be discussed. This project is predicated upon John Dewey’s theory of experience. Put simply, experience is a person’s interpretation of their imagined past, present, and future. These interpretations are truly inexpressible, “inexpressible not because [experience] is so remote and transcendent, but because it is so immediately engrossing and matter of course” (Dewey, 1976 as cited in Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 38). As a goldfish cannot see the water in which it swims, so humans cannot truly see the experiences they live. Humans tend to interpret experiences that are specific instances or are specific, repeated thread of instances. For example, humans experience joy, but their interpretation of joy is centered on specific instances such as the first

time their lover held their hand or family celebrations of birthdays through the years. These interpretations are developed internally and communicated externally through narrative (Kim, 2015). Attempting to convey these narratives, then, involves a series of choices – people choose what details to put into their narratives in hopes that others will interpret their experience similarly.

This understanding of narrative as an individual's language choice has implications for how the narrative inquirer goes about research. Narratives are experiences filtered through personal interpretation and through attempts at external conveyance, meaning that narratives must be conveyed by the researcher in the context of the original narrator. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007, p. 32) explain that

... the regulative ideal for [narrative] inquiry is not to generate an exclusively faithful representation of a reality independent of the knower. The regulative ideal for inquiry is to generate a new relation between a human being and her environment – her life, community, world – one that 'makes possible a new way of dealing with them, and thus eventually creates a new kind of experienced objects, not more real than those which preceded but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive.'

Stated simply, the narrative inquirer must make the connection between the narrator and the narrator's environment in a way that makes their narratives cohesive and comprehensible.

In making this connection, the researcher is required to responsibly convey the intended narrative of the participant. Every researcher has a specific worldview or paradigm from which they operate, and it would be impossible for a narrative inquirer to remain completely objective given that research requires interpretation. However, the goal of the researcher should be to examine the narratives of their participants with the participants in mind.

Margot Ely (2007) articulated this concept in her discussion of representation in research writing, arguing that representation has a double meaning: “(1) the rhetorical forms we use in our efforts, (2) to re-present, evoke and discuss what we have lived and learned in doing narrative research” (p. 568). Writing clearly about the experiences of others requires continuous effort to convey our understandings in ways that honestly display the reality our participants narratively construct. Social reality is most often multifaceted and fluctuating, and the attempt to confine this reality into the written word can be daunting. Ely posits that our language creates reality, which places immense responsibility on the research writer. However, she also posits that narrative does not reflect “the” reality. Rather, “with the help of the reader, narrative creates a version of reality” (Ely, 2007, p. 571). The narrative inquirer’s responsibility, then, is to recreate the experiences of their participants in a way that conveys a version of reality most similar to the participants’ lived reality. The use of Extended Narrative Empathy (ENE) challenges the researcher to take this concept further by responsibly conveying the lived reality of multiple people from a variety of perspectives. ENE allows for the development of “poly-narratives,” which are collections of narratives that represent viewpoints that are dissimilar or in opposition (Clair, Rastogi, Blatchley, Clawson, Erdmann, & Lee, 2016, p. 476). Ethically representing all lived experiences expressed in the narrative data set challenges the narrative inquirer to develop empathy with narratives that may be conflicting to the narrative reality they deem most appropriate or accurate. This ultimately allows the inquirer to present a multi-faceted narrative reality in regard to contentious and complex issues (Clair, Carlo, Lam, Nussman, Phillips, Sánchez, Schnabel, & Yakova, 2014).

The reality and experiences of the participants involved in this thesis project have been conveyed as accurately as possible. The history, politics, and social climate of Northern Ireland

were examined in depth before data collection, which allowed participant narratives to be contextualized in the wider culture. Examination of these areas took many forms, including coursework about the history and political structures of Ireland, ethnographies about Northern Ireland and books by Northern Irish authors, Irish newspapers, podcasts from Northern Ireland and the UK, British and Irish television, and popular social media accounts and hashtags from Northern Ireland. These various channels provided insight into Northern Irish culture and daily life from a myriad of perspectives. Participant narratives were drawn out and represented as accurately as possible during data gathering, transcription, and in results. Specifically, this entailed asking clarifying and probing questions during interviews in regard to narratives, using exact dialogue and word usage of participants in transcription, and using direct participant verbiage in the results (Ely, 2007).

### **Procedures & Data Collection**

First, the project proposal for this thesis was approved by the thesis committee. Consent for the proposed research methods and procedures was procured from Ball State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which allowed data collection to commence. An interview protocol was developed to facilitate semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews. This was determined to be the best type of interview due to two factors. First, only one interview was able to be conducted with each participant, so some semblance of structure was required in order to obtain narratives that related to the research questions. An unstructured interview with no guiding protocol would not have been appropriate given the time restraints (Bernard, 2018). Second, this project is based entirely in narrative, so clarifying and/or probing questions were necessary in order to flesh out the narrative reality the participants were constructing. A structured interview protocol would not have allowed for these questions, which would have

inhibited understanding of the participant narratives (Bernard, 2018; Kim, 2015). The semi-structured interview protocol was first tested with a trusted friend from Northern Ireland, which allowed the protocol to be assessed for cultural appropriateness and sensitivity.

Once the interview protocol was tested and deemed appropriate, participant recruitment began. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was utilized. A recruitment email was sent to 42 women's organizations in Belfast, most of which were either resource centers or women-centered political organizations. These organizations were located in both unionist and nationalist communities across the city, and the email requested that interested participants set up an interview time. Existing connections in Belfast were also contacted to ask if they knew of any potential participants. They forwarded the email on to colleagues and friends. The interviews took place in Belfast in early January, 2020. The participants chose their preferred spaces for the interview, signed a consent form, and chose pseudonyms to be used in this thesis. Interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes (42 minutes – 73 minutes). All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed, resulting in 52 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Field notes and sketches were created immediately after these interviews to record details about the participants and their narratives.

### **Participants**

This research thesis involved four participants. All of them were women over 18 years of age, and all of them lived within 10 miles of Belfast's city center at the time of data collection. They ranged in age from 27 years to 65 years. In terms of occupation, the sample included a police officer, a social worker, a lobbyist for the women's sector, and a counselor-in-training. Two participants grew up in a primarily Protestant town 10 miles outside of Belfast, one grew up in a town on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and one grew up on Shankill

Road, a Protestant area in the center of Belfast. Two participants self-identified as Irish and two participants self-identified as British. When asked whether they identified as Catholic, Protestant, or neither, one participant identified as Catholic, one participant identified as Protestant, one participant identified as Christian, and one participant identified as socialist. Two participants were married, one participant was cohabitating with her partner, and one participant was single. The two married participants were also mothers; each had two children under the age of 10.

### **Data Analysis**

Data included transcribed interviews and hand-written field notes. Thematic analysis was used to code the documents using ENE as a guide (Clair, et al., 2016). The same coding scheme was used for both the interview transcriptions and the field notes. As mentioned in Chapter 2, ENE requires the consideration of primary narratives, peripheral narratives, and contentious narratives. These three types of narratives guided the first level of coding. Narratives that were repeated across the data set from all perspectives were considered primary. Narratives that only represented the perspective of two participants were considered peripheral, as were narratives that were in line with primary narratives, but only showed up in one interview. Contentious narratives were considered narratives that went against the sentiments of the primary narratives. These were held by only one participant. Once coded, these themes were used to address the research questions.

Additionally, ENE calls for an exercise called protagonist inversion. I conducted protagonist inversion as the researcher after the themes were coded, but before in-depth analysis began. Protagonist inversion allowed me to recognize the narratives that resonated with my personal perspective and to flip the role of protagonist and antagonist in order to acknowledge my biases and move toward an unbiased perspective of Northern Ireland.



Finally, a member check was conducted by sending participants an outline of the results, including direct quotes from members, in order to ensure that the results resonated with the participants' lived experiences and that participants felt accurately represented in this thesis. This member check was conducted with the researcher-participant relationship held in higher regard than the finality of the coded results in order to increase participant trust and increase the likelihood of accurate representation (Carlson, 2010).

In Chapter 4, the themes developed through transcript and field note coding will be outlined. Chapter 5 will then exhibit the analysis of these themes, as well as protagonist inversion, practical implications of this project, strengths of this project, limitations of this project, and directions for future research.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this project was to examine the narratives women from Northern Ireland utilized in order to make sense of their experiences, particularly in the context of the peace process and Brexit. Three specific research questions guided the project:

RQ1: What narratives do women in Northern Ireland use to describe the lived experiences of women, both past and contemporary, during the Troubles and in the peace process?

RQ2: How do women in Northern Ireland discuss the potential economic, social, and political implications of Brexit on their personal lives and the lives of women?

RQ3: What narratives do women in Northern Ireland use to discuss women's roles in society and in politics?

The following results are sorted into three narrative categories that address each Research Question in turn: The Troubles and the Peace Process, Brexit, and Women's Roles in Northern Ireland. Extended Narrative Empathy (ENE) has been utilized in each category to identify primary narratives, peripheral narratives, and contentious narratives, as outlined in Chapter 3.

### **The Troubles and the Peace Process**

#### ***Primary Narrative***

Leah is a 28-year-old activist, and she shared the following story:

“I was 7 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and I'm from south Armagh on the border and the back of my house was against an army barracks on a customs point, so from my early years it was a lot of army, military customs being stopped, um, because we lived on the border and would cross the border every day, we had to get out, get our car checked, get back in... every other week there was another bomb scare or bomb threat and we were being evacuated. I used to get evacuated from my house all of the time because of bombs and it was just, to me, I normalized it so much, it was just like, ‘Ugh, this is such an inconvenience.’ One time I was getting my hair done, I was getting it bleached, and a bomb went off and we had to evacuate the town, and I had to go knocking on doors going, ‘Can I wash this bleach off my hair before my hair burns? It's burning my scalp,’ and everyone just saw us all coming in running and it was all over UTV news, all of us running away with foils in our hair. I just

remember thinking, ‘Oh this will be a funny story,’ not even thinking about how serious it was that there was a bomb going off and that was why we had to leave.

Unsurprisingly, violence was pervasive in participant narratives when discussing the Troubles. Some participants experienced the violence directly, like Leah explained above, while others experienced it only indirectly through armed guard checks at stores and airports. Geographic location played a large role in the amount of violence the participants experienced. Claire explained, “I grew up in Newtownards, which is roughly about 11 miles outside of Belfast, but that 11 miles was enough of a distance that I literally didn’t know anything about [the Troubles] until I was older.” This physical division of populations was another clear aspect of the primary narrative. Northern Ireland in general, and Belfast in particular, are physically segregated along ethnic lines between Irish Catholics and British Protestants. While shared public spaces are increasing, residential areas remain largely divided (Huck, Whyatt, Dixon, Sturgeon, Hocking, Davies, Jarman, & Bryan, 2019). This was evident in the stories that participants shared in this project. Leah explained, “I’d never met a Protestant before, even though they’re half the population of Northern Ireland, because where I lived was all Irish, everyone’s Catholic.” Leah experienced this segregation her entire life, as did Claire, though from the opposite community:

Looking back, I don’t think I knew any Catholic families. My primary school was a Protestant primary school, the secondary school that I went to was a Protestant secondary school, and I know of one or two Catholic students that went to it, but primarily Protestant. And it wasn’t actually until I was much older in age, maybe my early teens, that I realized there was actually a Catholic church in the town.

Judith, who grew up in the same town as Claire, echoed this story:

I think there was one boy in my class at grammar school who was a Catholic... and that was kind of a big deal in those days whereas now nobody really gives two hoots, except if you live... either the border areas probably, or some of the, like, North or West Belfast or Londonderry or whatever.

Judith's comments emphasize the reality that there are still plenty of areas in Northern Ireland that remain segregated. One of those areas is Shankill Road, which is where Susan grew up:

I remember playing in Ballymurphy, I remember playing, you know, my aunt married a Catholic, so my cousins were all Catholic, so, you know, we all played together, grew up together, and then when the Troubles started, uh, we were no longer safe to do that. Not because of the family, but because of what was going on in the different areas.

Later in her interview, Susan explained that she is no longer limited in where she can go, but most people who live on Shankill Road still identify as Protestant.

The division of ethnic populations is reflected in the divisive politics between Sinn Féin, the party that typically represents Irish Catholics, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the party that typically represents British Protestants. The two parties remain in power, but my participants all discussed their disdain for the way the political parties operate due to their repeated experiences of disappointment and frustration in regard to politics. Judith explained:

[Northern Irish politics is] just so partisan. It's like, 'Whatever they say, I'm gonna say the opposite.' Doesn't matter whether it's what your constituents have voted for or what you said that your mandate was gonna be, it's literally, it appears to me, if they say one thing, I'm gonna say the opposite, irrespective of whether it makes sense, whether it's financially possible, whether it's [sigh] it's literally just 'I'm gonna say the opposite of what they say.'

None of my participants indicated loyalty to a specific party despite having grown up in segregated areas, which is a significant shift from the political mood during and right after the Troubles (Landow & Sergie, 2019). In the most recent election, both parties lost significant votes, mostly to the more centrist Alliance Party (Northern Ireland, 2019), indicating that my participants are not the only ones disdainful of Sinn Fein and the DUP. My participants interpreted this as a rejection vote of traditional Orange versus Green divide (British Protestant versus Irish Catholic), as did political commentators (Northern Ireland, 2019). Susan remarked:

If they don't make something of [the government] this time, you can see them two main parties not being the two main parties, that's just the way it is... They have [been in power for a long time], and the attitude, you just have to take the nurse's strike [for example]. The nurse's strike to me wasn't only a success for the nurses, it was also a success for the community because there was nobody that I spoke to who are very worried about our health service [that] complained about the nurses being on strike. And the health service would be one of the biggest things that people complain about, I never heard one person complain about the nurses being out on strike.

Susan's explanation indicates that citizens are so disillusioned with the current government that they supported a nurse's strike, which significantly limited access to health care, because an increase in nurse's salary would be better for their communities. This attitude is in part because Members of Parliament [MPs] received full pay and benefits through the government shut down while other public servants did not. Judith, a police officer, explained, "I missed out on three increments [of pay], but [the MPs] still got paid!"

This disillusionment with the current government also applies to the peace process. Leah remarked:

From the perspective of working in the women's sector, I would say that the peace process was political and hasn't really changed much on the ground. It was a political peace process that allowed power sharing, which was incredible, the compromises that the parties agreed on back then was just unheard of across the world, and I am very proud to be from a place that has such a strong, um, history like that, but in reality it, I think it has failed.

This sentiment was prevalent throughout the women's narratives. Susan, as a leader of the women's movement throughout the Troubles, said:

I believe that without the work that we were doing on the ground as a women's movement, we probably wouldn't have had a Good Friday Agreement, because we were able to say to people, it's hope... But stuff that I voted for within the Good Friday Agreement they still haven't got. Bill of Rights... civic form disappeared, so those were things that encouraged me to vote in favor of it, which never came about.

Judith, a police officer, distrusts the peace process because she still has to check her car for bombs every morning to ensure she will not be killed by dissident republicans. The continued

presence of paramilitaries was another layer of the primary narrative surrounding the Troubles and the peace process. The participants acknowledged that the current paramilitaries are not the same as they were during the Troubles, though they have the same names. Susan said:

You know, we have drugs being sold... I don't like saying that the paramilitary do it because... I think there's people carrying a banner of a paramilitary, but they're not paramilitary – we no longer have [the old] paramilitaries... We're 21 years on from paramilitarism. People got out of prison, that should've been the end of it... Over the last few years we're hearing about dissidents more and more and more... And the dissidents are a very, very small minority that take over small communities and where they're in those communities, those people are living in fear. They don't have the support of the whole community.

Here and later in her interview, Susan discussed paramilitaries in relation to the use and dispersion of drugs, and she compared the paramilitaries to gangs. This is a departure from the traditional perception of paramilitaries as defenders of their communities. In fact, Susan explained that she joined the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), a unionist paramilitary, as a teenager. She explained:

The UDA at that time wasn't an illegal organization, and my role within that was to look after the elderly people because we had no go areas, so our older generation, our elderly people within the no go areas, we had to make sure they got their milk, their bread, their butter, so it was more of a welfare helping nature, it wasn't about guns or bombs, because it wasn't an illegal organization. Later on, it became an illegal organization...

In the early stages of the Troubles, women like Susan would have been happy to join paramilitaries in order to support community members. Today, paramilitaries are not viewed with the same positivity.

The primary narrative surrounding the Troubles and the peace process is one of past violence, segregation of populations, disillusionment of the government and the peace process, and paramilitarism being replaced by gangsterism.

### *Peripheral Narratives*

In addition to these primary narratives, there are peripheral narratives that add layers to the story. One that was briefly mentioned by Susan earlier is the historical social impact of women on the peace process. She explained:

Women, we were working very hard prior to the Good Friday Agreement within communities and women were crossing over, we had to do a lot of work under the radar, we always did work together ten years before the Good Friday Agreement was even signed. So we were already friends, we were already working together, we were already protesting together...but we were doing it under the radar. The Good Friday Agreement came and people got out of prison, rightly or wrongly, it was part of the agreement, so they got released, but the people who were keeping communities going at that time were women. Women were the backbone of the communities, and, really, I think something should've been done for those people who kept communities going while the men were in prison.

Despite women's work to bring peace to their communities, they received little support and protection from the government. Leah explained specific failures in this regard:

The UK government and the Irish government are both signed up to the UN's women peace and security 1325 agreement, which is everything around conflict, post conflict, participation, everything ensuring that [in order] to move forward and have stability, you need to have gender equality, you need to have women recognized at every level of the conflict.... The UK government don't mention Northern Ireland because they refuse to call it a war, or a conflict, because if they call it a war, they have to be held accountable for war crimes, so they won't put any funding or any strategies into gender equality in Northern Ireland. Uh, so for us in the women's sector, it's very frustrating that they won't call it a war, they say that it was just a few acts of terrorism or internal fighting... I don't think that we'll ever fully have gender equality or a stable peace process until we recognize that women have been absent from every level, from negotiations to being recognized in what they did do.

Women's absence from negotiations and political conversations was emphasized multiple times by Leah and Susan, who both work in the women's sector. This indicates that women's past social role in developing peace was not mirrored in political representation.

Despite varied perspectives, no truly contentious narratives arose regarding the Troubles and the peace process. This was not the case with the next narrative theme, Brexit.

## Brexit

### *Primary Narratives*

The discussion surrounding Brexit typically began with a sigh, embarrassment, anger, or a combination of the three. This consistent reaction centered around a deep lack of trust in the UK government. Claire explained:

At this point, I just say, like, “Ugh...” if the rest of the world – and the rest of the world *are* looking at Britain because it been going on that long, I just feel at this point, oh my goodness, this is just embarrassing as a British person. This is just embarrassing.

While Claire was embarrassed of the UK government as a British person, Leah was angry as an Irish person:

I have absolutely zero faith in Boris Johnson or the conservatives that they even care about Northern Ireland.... They're absolutely ridiculous, there was leaked documents out recently where they've admitted that the Northern Ireland economy is going to be ruined, that they're going to put in two forms of borders, which is the most likely option. They know that this is the worst possible outcome for Northern Ireland and they know a hard Brexit does not suit any of us or our interests, but are going ahead with it...the whole thing is just incredibly frustrating to watch people who have absolutely no consideration for your country make every decision about your country. I think that's one thing people here are united on, is that we have no control, even if every single person in Northern Ireland voted yes to remain, it wouldn't have changed the outcome, so for me personally, I'm very frustrated.

The negative narrative surrounding Brexit is largely aimed at the UK government in part because participants believe that Northern Ireland will lose access to European funds and assets that the UK government is unlikely or unable to replace. Susan explained, “We get a lot of money from Europe here, especially within peace building, especially in our communities. I don't know if the government will subsidize that and give us what Europe has been giving us....” Judith discussed how Brexit has the potential to make her job as a police officer more difficult:

I know that we rely heavily on legislation and, like, European arrest warrants to get our job done, so if we lose all of that, that's going to have a big impact on my work... at the minute we've got a lot of foreign nationals here, we've got access to interpreters and



access to a lot of, Interpol, you know, and a lot of police databases, um, if we lose that, that's gonna make my day-to-day job a little more difficult.

The potential negative effects of Brexit resounded throughout the data set, emphasizing the pervasiveness of this narrative.

The final layer of the primary Brexit narrative departs from discussion of politics to discussion of identity. Every participant defined their ethnic British or Irish identity by which passport they held. Passports are increasing in importance with the onset of Brexit – people with Irish passports will have more travel access to the EU. Judith has two children, aged seven and four, and recently had to decide whether they would apply for British or Irish passports.

I wanted to get them Irish passports rather than British because, just in case, because I think that would give them much freer travel access, but my husband said no, he wants them to have British because we'll all be together going through the lanes [at the airport]... he said from a practical point of view, but it did cross my mind and I did get the forms and everything to get them Irish passports instead of British.

When asked if she herself would get an Irish passport, though, she said:

No, I mean, I'm British, um, I just would have given them the opportunity to have, I think, freer travel to America or to Europe on an Irish passport. I suppose they can choose for themselves when they're a bit bigger, they're getting British ones now, and that I suppose is the only... the only thing that has given me a second thought about them is the passport issue [because of] Brexit.

Given that passports are consistent markers of identity, Judith's willingness to get her children Irish passports, even from a practical standpoint, is a divergence from traditional ethnic identity practice, which has been explicitly caused by Brexit. Leah extended the depth of this Brexit passport narrative:

One other thing that really frustrates me is, so I'm an Irish citizen and I'm a UK citizen, um, I've only ever had an Irish passport. But now there's a hierarchy of rights with an Irish passport, so if you're from the south with an Irish passport you have access to the European court of human rights, you have European protections, you have the right to a whole number of different things, whereas if you live where I'm from in the north, even though you've the same Irish passport, you don't have any EU rights anymore because post-Brexit, it doesn't matter if we're Irish, we're in Northern Ireland which is in the UK,

so we lose all those rights. So I'm incredibly frustrated about this hierarchy of rights that the UK government doesn't seem to think is an issue because they think we're British.

So, while Irish passports would increase access to travel, they would not grant people from Northern Ireland full Irish citizenship, even if they identify ethnically as Irish. It is clear from the participant data that Brexit is a source of frustration, confusion, and embarrassment for women from various communities and backgrounds.

### *Peripheral Narratives*

A peripheral narrative about Brexit that was of sincere concern for some participants was the loss of human rights protections offered by the EU. Leah explained:

... the majority of women's rights in Northern Ireland have come from the EU, um, the right not to be discriminated against based on your gender, the right to maternity pay, the right not to be fired, um, if you're pregnant. A lot of our worker's rights, the majority of which were brought around women's experiences, have come from the EU. Also, a lot of funding has come through the EU, peace funding, which supports the cross-community programs, which so many women are running, as well for a lot of rural women, they completely rely on EU funding.

These participants' frustrations toward the UK government are based on the assumption that these human rights protections will not be replaced, which stems from primary narrative that the UK government does not care about Northern Ireland.

The other peripheral narrative centered around the possibility of a border poll that could lead to a United Ireland. Sinn Fein is the self-proclaimed Irish party that has been working toward Irish unity since partition began in the 1920s. Brexit provided Sinn Fein a platform to start up this conversation in earnest across a far wider base of the Northern Irish population. Rhetoric surrounding Irish Unity in the media is persistent and divisive (Carswell, 2019; Haverty, 2020). Participants in this study were not as concerned. Susan, when asked about whether Brexit was causing divisions to the point of Irish unity, said:

Well I think the two political parties tried that. You know, the border poll and about Brexit, and then we had an election and the two biggest parties didn't do too well on it. So, I think that was probably one of the issues that was an orange and green fight there. And people were fed up with it. You know, I don't fear a border poll because there's a lot of things that needs to happen before that could actually happen. Border polls, even if we voted for it today, it probably wouldn't happen for another fifteen years, because... there's a lot of stuff that needs to be put in place. And we need our society to be fixed before we can join another society. And Dublin needs to fix their problems first, too, before they can join in our society. So until you get it right in your own location, you can't go to the polls until you've got everything sorted.

Participants were not in fear of a border poll. Those that discussed a United Ireland echoed Susan's sentiment – it would be logistically difficult and unadvisable, but they would not necessarily be against it.

### *Contentious Narratives*

Contentious Brexit narratives stemmed only from Judith, primarily due to her tentative faith in the UK government.

And again, with my work, everything with my work has to be sort of marked off against human rights. I would imagine that we'll keep those. I don't know, I haven't read up on anything, I don't know, but I would say that the UK government would implement more protections and different things.

Judith was the only participant to mention the idea that the UK government would maintain human rights protections, even though she did so with uncertainty. Additionally, Judith was the only participant to claim that Northern Ireland's vote to remain was due to nationalist voting:

Well the, in the referendum, Northern Ireland voted to stay and that, I believe, was mainly the nationalist, the force of the nationalist voting, now I could be wrong, so if we leave Europe ever [laughs], um there might be a civil unrest or that might have an impact on politics down the line, um, the fact that the majority of people in Northern Ireland wanted to stay in Europe, so I don't know.

Again, Judith's uncertainty is evident. However, these are important contentious narratives to address despite uncertainty because they are narratives that presumably circulate in specific cultural groups, such as Judith's affluent Protestant community.

## Women's Roles

### *Primary Narratives*

The first aspect of women's roles in Northern Ireland that all participants agreed upon was that women have more rights now than they did during the Troubles. Susan reflected:

... it was the old school, you know, women didn't really, my mum didn't really have the same choices and the same opportunities as younger women, as me, because when you worked and you fell pregnant, you lost your job. And that only changed here in my lifetime, you know, not that long ago that that law changed... [and] women were entitled to go back to work, and that's where maternity leave came in, so there are some good success stories...

Claire echoed this, saying:

... it's a lot less frowned upon for women to pursue a career and put career before family. Um, and it's much more appropriate nowadays for women to have a career or a position in leadership or authority, and that's even in regard to like the police, joining the police, yes there would have been women police officers, but there's a much higher percentage nowadays than there would have been twenty years ago.

Despite these improved rights, participants also maintained that women needed to have a stronger voice in politics and society than they currently do. Susan explained:

I don't want to get rid of men, I think we need men round the table, but we need women round that table too because it's their community as well. And we have a history of men making a freaking pig's arse of it, to be honest with you, and all's we're saying is, "Just listen to what we have to say, because we have been listening to yous for years." ... We're the biggest majority of people, we're 51% of the population, so by right, we should have 51% of the positions around any table, but that's not what I'm looking – I'm just looking for women to be round the table to have another opinion of what's being said.

This narrative centered on the concept that women's situations will only improve if they have more say in their communities. The idea that women are still not equal with men was emphasized in the final aspect of the primary narrative: Women receive more abuse online than their male counterparts. Leah described how female politicians are addressed in Northern Irish media:

Naomi Long, they never stop talking about how she looks. They never stop talking about her weight and pretending like it's them concerned about her health. She's one of the strongest politicians that's ever been in Northern Ireland... but all [the media] can talk about is how she looks. Michelle O'Neill... deputy first minister, um, they kept calling her Barbie. She's blonde and wears makeup... a member of the Alliance party had a child about seven weeks ago and brought him to a council meeting, and she got so much abuse online... and that was just a disgrace. So much abuse. Another woman who's a member of the same party – so the first woman there was told that she shouldn't have gone [with her child], so another woman in the party didn't go because she was with her newborn child and they said she shouldn't have the job. So we're at the point where they're not used to seeing politicians of childbearing age having children because it's still the exception, it's not the norm so people don't know how to react to it and they can't get it in their heads that young women should be politicians because all they see is that still is, "Well if you're going to get married and have children, stay at home."

Overall, these primary narratives indicates that women have moved forward socially and politically in Northern Ireland since the Troubles, but they still lack equality in many areas.

### *Peripheral Narratives*

Several narratives in the data were in line with this primary narrative but were only mentioned by two participants. This seemed to, in part, be due to the fact that two participants work actively in the women's sector in Northern Ireland and are well-versed in issues concerning women. One narrative that was persistent in this half of the data set was that the prevalence of female politicians did not mean there was an increase in women's rights. Leah explained:

I think, yes it's great that we have these women in leadership running these parties, but if you're a woman who supports anti-women policies, you're no good to women. Just because you're a woman in leadership, doesn't mean you're someone to aspire to. There can be shitty women as well and there's some in Northern Ireland. There's some that would support sending women to jail for life for getting an abortion, so to me that doesn't seem like something to aspire to or necessarily a positive thing.

In regard to women representatives in Sinn Fein and the DUP, Susan remarked, "It doesn't matter who the leader is, whether it's a woman or a man, they have to toe the party line. So it's [the] parties we need to change, no matter who's leading it." These narratives undercut the original assumption of this project that women's lives and rights were improving because of the

female politicians at the table. The participants insisted that women's lives are improving because of women on the ground working for peace. Leah commented:

The majority of cross community initiatives that go on in Northern Ireland are run by women, uh, women's centers, community centers, different voluntary community organizations, which is the one sector in Northern Ireland that the majority of women work in, um, are the ones keeping pace on the ground, um, they're the groups starting the cross-community after school programs or, you know, lots of different projects are coming from these women.

Leah elaborated on this point, saying:

Women in Northern Ireland have been working cross-community for decades, and it's sometimes the only thing we share in common is our views that women should be allowed to do what they want with their bodies, but it was one of those things for me, working on cross-community campaigning on this [abortion] issue that it just, it really blew me away...

Despite this active involvement of women in grassroots peace movements, women are still the bearers of the trauma inflicted by the Troubles. Working class communities are falling farther and farther into poverty, and women are subsequently dealing with more domestic abuse. Leah asserted her frustration with this issue:

We don't have any proper domestic abuse legislation here, which is ridiculous because we have the highest domestic violence rates in Europe. We also have the highest murder rates of women, but they won't count them as hate crimes. So in Northern Ireland, because we're a post-conflict country, everything comes down to sectarianism and everything else is after that.... They don't know how many instances of gender based hate crime happen because they won't report it, so one thing we're currently campaigning on is having gender included as a protected characteristic of hate crime because there are a lot of studies on intergenerational trauma and how the trauma of the conflict is being passed up through generations and women are bearing the brunt of it and being killed....

This quote echoes the sentiment of all of the peripheral narratives in relation to women's roles in Northern Ireland, which is that Northern Irish women are struggling to be heard.

### *Contentious Narratives*

Similar to the narratives surrounding Brexit, a contentious narrative about women's roles became evident in Judith's narrative. It is opposed with the peripheral narratives outlined by

Leah and Susan. When asked about how women's roles have improved in Northern Ireland, Judith said:

Well, there have been a lot of changes in the law, for example, that... I think it's to do with equality rather than specifically women, so a lot of um, the LGBT community and their rights. But I know that for a long time in Northern Ireland, for example, a man could not [be convicted of raping] his wife, but now the law, the legislation has changed and that's no longer the case, so there actually have been changes in legislation in Northern Ireland.... Um, [that could have] just been the Equality Act that has allowed women to be doing jobs or standing in sessions of office that they weren't allowed to before.

In this quote, Judith says that women's progress in Northern Ireland was due to the Equality Act, which applied to many minority groups and not women specifically. This is in opposition to the narrative that women have been active in supporting each other and need a stronger voice in their communities in order to improve their quality of life.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I addressed the three research questions for this project with data from interview transcripts. I presented the women's narratives as outlined by ENE (see table below). Primary narratives surrounding the Troubles and the Peace Process included narratives of violence and segregation, disillusionment with the government and the peace process, and paramilitarism being replaced by gangsterism. The peripheral narratives concerned women's historic social role in the peace process, and women's political absence in the same process. There were no contentious narratives in this section.

Primary narratives surrounding Brexit involved experiences of embarrassment and frustration, loss of European funds and assets, and concern about passports both in terms of identity and access to the EU. Peripheral narratives included potential loss

of human rights protections and lack of fear concerning a border poll. The contentious Brexit narratives concerned faith in the UK government to replace EU funding and that Northern Ireland's vote to remain in the EU was due to nationalist voting.

Primary narratives about women's roles in Northern Ireland included improved rights for women since the Troubles, the current need for a stronger female voice in politics and society, and the abuse women receive online. The peripheral narratives were that the prevalence of female politicians did not correlate with an increase in women's rights, women's lives are improving because of women on the ground promoting peace, and that women bear the brunt of the trauma from the Troubles. The contentious narrative was that women's lives have improved due to the Equality Act. In the next chapter, these narratives will be discussed in greater depth, and the implications of these narratives will be explored.

Summary Table

Theme	Narrative
<b>The Troubles &amp; the peace process</b>	<p><b>Primary:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Violence during the Troubles</li> <li>- Segregation of populations</li> <li>- Disillusionment with the government</li> <li>- Disillusionment with the peace process</li> <li>- Gangsterism has replaced paramilitarism</li> </ul> <p><b>Peripheral:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women historically played a role in the peace process</li> <li>- Women historically have been absent politically in the peace process</li> </ul>
<b>Brexit</b>	<p><b>Primary:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experiences of embarrassment and frustration</li> <li>- Loss of European funds and assets</li> </ul>



<b>Brexit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Concern about passports, in terms of both identity and access to the EU</li> </ul> <p><b>Peripheral:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Potential loss of human rights protections</li> <li>- Lack of fear concerning a border poll/United Ireland</li> </ul> <p><b>Contentious:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The UK government will replace EU funding</li> <li>- Northern Ireland's vote to remain in the EU was due to nationalist voting</li> </ul>
<b>Women's Roles</b>	<p><b>Primary:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women's rights have improved since the Troubles</li> <li>- Women need a stronger voice in politics and society</li> <li>- Women receive abuse online from the media/social media</li> </ul> <p><b>Peripheral:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The prevalence of female politicians has not led to an increase in women's rights</li> <li>- Women's lives have improved due to women on the ground promoting peace</li> <li>- Women bear the brunt of the trauma from the Troubles</li> </ul> <p><b>Contentious:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women's lives have improved due to the Equality Act</li> </ul>

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will begin with interpretation of the narratives presented in Chapter 4, which will be outlined in the same format. An ENE exercise called protagonist inversion will then be utilized to explore how the researcher worked to avoid bias in this project. The practical implications that result from this project will then be discussed. The chapter will then describe the strengths and limitations of this project and will conclude with directions for future research.

### **The Troubles and the Peace Process**

#### ***Primary Narratives***

The primary narratives surrounding the Troubles and the peace process were of past violence, segregation of populations, disillusionment of the government and the peace process, and paramilitarism being replaced by gangsterism. Taken at face value, these narratives are all indicative of negative lived experiences. Negative experiences were certainly prevalent in the women's stories, but experience is nuanced, and these narratives were counterbalanced with positive aspects. For example, the experiences of violence are specifically *past* experiences, which are juxtaposed with current experiences of feeling safe in Belfast and the surrounding areas. As Barbara Biesecker (2002) observed, remembering the past and juxtaposing it with the present is a rhetorical device: "What we remember and how we remember it can tell us something significant about who we are as a people..." (p. 406). In this case, comparing the past to the present allowed women to rhetorically position themselves as "better off" than their historical counterparts through the enjoyment of more legal rights and protections. Additionally, the women commented on the freedom they feel to travel to various communities, despite continued residential segregation in many areas of Belfast. It could be argued that comparing the horrors of the past to the less violent present may make women's current lived experiences

appear better than they actually are. However, participants also indicated that women have a long way to go before equality and comprehensive peace is achieved in Northern Ireland, as will be discussed later. This indicates a relatively evenhanded view of the current situation: Things are better than they were, but they are not as good as they could be.

Even disillusionment with the government was met with some balanced positivity, such as when Susan said:

I'm optimistic because... I think there's a change of attitude in community, in people. I think the last couple of elections that we've had here, the last three elections, the two main parties lost a lot of votes, uh, people were starting to vote for other parties because they were fed up with the bickering. When we needed our health service, when we needed teaching, when we needed educational things improved in our communities, we were fighting over orange and green issues. And I think people got fed up with it. Not that they weren't less orange or no less green, it's just that a lot of people out there wanted a change in our politics. And I think the pressures on now, that I don't think communities and people are going to stand for it now, because they will go to the ballot box and they will do the right thing for them rather than voting within the tradition. A lot of people are starting to vote for people who will do the work. And I see a big change on the ground personally.

This positivity toward politics is really positivity toward the voters of Northern Ireland who are breaking with tradition in order to vote for candidates who will improve their communities. The narratives surrounding politics show an unrest in the participants that was reflected in the results of the 2019 general election. The reason Sinn Fein and the DUP lost so many votes is because Northern Irish voters are tired of the orange and green political divide. If this narrative trend continues, Northern Ireland will likely see a massive political shift over the next few decades away from the two main parties. This could prove to be a huge step toward comprehensive cross-community peace, especially if reducing the power of Sinn Fein and the DUP leads to the implementation of more peace legislation that can be practically implemented in communities.

Another narrative is that of paramilitarism being replaced by gangsterism. The participants all condemned this, emphasizing that paramilitaries today are not the same as they

were during the Troubles, even though they use the same names. The original intent of the paramilitaries – to protect their communities – could be seen as their current role today by those involved in these groups and possibly by those who were involved in them in the past, creating a nostalgic connection to the IRA, UDA, and others. The pervasiveness of negative narratives and terms like “gangsterism,” though, could lead to more widespread condemnation of these groups, which could ultimately lead to a loss of the nostalgic power these paramilitaries have in Northern Ireland. This shift away from support of modern paramilitaries may also lead to a break from traditional voting because moving away from sectarian politics would also involve moving away from support of sectarian groups, such as paramilitaries. The narratives of the participants in this project indicate that this could very well be the direction in which Northern Ireland is headed.

### *Peripheral Narratives*

The peripheral narratives surrounding the Troubles and the peace process were the historical social impact of women on the peace process and women’s absence from negotiations and political conversations. These two narratives overlap and indicate that women were not taken seriously by politicians during the peace process negotiations, despite their propensity to be catalysts for peace within Northern Irish communities. This narrative surrounding Northern Irish history emphasizes the culture of masculinity that inhibited women’s upward mobility for decades. Leah explained, “... a woman’s experience has never been considered a valid experience to build policy from [in Northern Ireland].” Women were not invited to be part of negotiations surrounding the Good Friday Agreement, so their needs and concerns were not represented by the document or ensuing peace process. The lack of women’s involvement in the political peace process perpetuated gender disparity in Northern Ireland, which is a struggle that continues to this day, as will be discussed in relation to women’s roles.

The lack of contentious narratives regarding the Troubles and the peace process is significant. The participants were from various backgrounds and experienced different levels of violence during and after the Troubles, but they all presented cohesive narratives. This lack of contention could be indicative of the wider narrative around the Troubles and the peace process in Northern Ireland. Citizens may have different perspective on the motives behind the violence of the Troubles, but there is little dispute about what happened during the Troubles and the ensuing peace process. These cohesive narratives could be utilized to promote common ground between sectarian communities, especially through the development of empathy for each other's grief and acknowledgement that the peace process needs more work in order to be beneficial for everyone in Northern Ireland.

## **Brexit**

### ***Primary Narratives***

The primary narratives surrounding Brexit were experiences of frustration or embarrassment, loss of European funds and assets, and concern about passports both in terms of identity and access to the EU. Recall Claire's statement:

At this point, I just say, like, "Ugh..." if the rest of the world – and the rest of the world *are* looking at Britain because it been going on that long, I just feel at this point, oh my goodness, this is just embarrassing as a British person. This is just embarrassing.

Note her repetition of "embarrassing" in this brief statement, which is a lexical modality speakers use to indicate strong emotion (Argaman, 2009). Likewise, Leah repeated the word "absolutely" three times in her quotation about Brexit on page 42, stating that she had *absolutely* zero faith in Boris Johnson and the Conservative party, they're *absolutely* ridiculous, and they have *absolutely* no consideration for Northern Ireland. Participants are not just mildly

embarrassed or frustrated – their language use indicates that they have a strong emotional response to narratives surrounding Brexit.

This strong emotive reaction to Brexit makes sense in the context of the EU funds and assets participants believe will be lost in the transition out of the EU. The development of peace in a post-conflict society requires a lot of resources, particularly financial resources (UNSCR 1325, n.d.), so the loss of EU funding could grind the Northern Ireland peace process to a halt. This would have consequences on the lived experiences of women in Northern Ireland, including the lack of access to the European Social Fund, which increases women's access to the workforce (Powell, 2019), or a possible resurgence of sectarian violence that would revert Northern Ireland to past conflict. The police's loss of access to Interpol and other EU databases may also negatively impact the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Judith explained that it would make her job more difficult as a police officer to lose access to those databases and arrest warrants, but it could also have negative consequences on the Northern Ireland population as a whole if it becomes more difficult for the police to arrest and charge criminals. In all, the negative narratives surrounding Brexit are emotionally charged because of the fear of the potential consequences that leaving the EU will have on Northern Ireland.

The final primary narrative around Brexit concerns identity in relation to passports. Judith's consideration of getting her children Irish passports, despite identifying as British herself, is particularly interesting. In this situation, Judith's social role as a mother concerned for the future of her children is evident. The primary motivation for her to get Irish passports for her children was the freedom of travel that Irish passports offer, which was a consideration for her children's distant future given that they are seven and four years old – much too young to travel alone. This indicates that her identity as a mother is stronger than her identity as a British citizen,

even though the British aspect of her identity is what inhibited her from considering an Irish passport for herself. Judith's ultimate compliance with her husband's decision to get their children British passports is another indicator of how her identity as a wife impacts her social role. In this particular instance, her identity as a wife had a stronger influence on her decision than her role as a mother and as a British person. The complicated layers of this narrative show how difficult it can be for women to decide what aspect of their identity to prioritize when making decisions about the potential consequences of Brexit.

The other aspect of narratives surrounding passports is that an Irish passport from Northern Ireland will not provide the same human rights protections as an Irish passport from Ireland. This could function differently for the two traditional ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. It could cause frustration for the Irish community, as it did for Leah. Despite being Irish and wanting to be closely tied to Ireland, her Irish passport does not grant her that level of Irish citizenship. She is inhibited from fully living the reality of her Irish identity. The British community, though, could see this as a way for them to embrace Irish passports for the sake of access to travel through the European Union without threat to their British identity. Northern Irish policy makes it so that having an Irish passport specifically from Northern Ireland does not make someone truly Irish, therefore British people like Judith can consider an Irish passport with fewer qualms. This policy could prove to become more complicated as Brexit moves forward, especially given that Northern Ireland is supposed to honor dual nationality, which is difficult given that these two nations are no longer both members of the EU. Access to rights, funds, and services offered by the EU are no longer available to Northern Ireland, which leads to the peripheral narratives surrounding Brexit.

### *Peripheral Narratives*

The first peripheral narrative is that Brexit will result in a loss of human rights protections, which is particularly concerning for Northern Irish women. As Leah explained,

... the majority of women's rights in Northern Ireland have come from the EU, um, the right not to be discriminated against based on your gender, the right to maternity pay, the right not to be fired, um, if you're pregnant. A lot of our worker's rights, the majority of which were brought around women's experiences, have come from the EU. Also, a lot of funding has come through the EU, peace funding, which supports the cross-community programs, which so many women are running, as well for a lot of rural women, they completely rely on EU funding.

This loss of rights ties into the earlier narrative surrounding the peace process – women were not represented in politics when the peace process was being designed, so the majority of women's aid comes from outside of the Northern Irish and UK governments. While it is unlikely that women will lose all of the rights Leah listed above, participants were seriously concerned that women's rights would be reduced by Brexit.

The other peripheral Brexit narrative centered on the possibility of a United Ireland. Participants were not in fear of a border poll, despite the political and media rhetoric of an inevitable United Ireland. Most participants agreed that a United Ireland would be logistically difficult, but they would not be against it. This narrative indicates that these women's experiences have led them to a place of general apathy toward a potentially huge political event that would impact their lives. This could be because Brexit itself has been so consuming and tiresome that the participants do not have the energy or the desire to concern themselves with a potential future. Participant apathy could also be present because most of the women would prefer a United Ireland over Brexit, primarily because EU membership is so important to them. There is less fear in rejoining the EU for these participants than leaving it, even if joining Ireland would cause large constitutional changes for both nations. Ultimately, though, this peripheral



narrative signifies that people in Northern Ireland are less concerned about a United Ireland than the media tends to portray.

### *Contentious Narratives*

The contentious narratives surrounding Brexit, supplied by Judith, were that the UK government would replace human rights protections and funding previously supplied by the EU and that Northern Ireland's vote to remain in the EU was due to nationalist voting. Both of these narratives represent a typically British Protestant viewpoint. If the UK government does supplement EU human rights protections and funding, then some of the fears about leaving the EU will prove to have no foundation. This would provide support for Brexit that is not seen in most of the narratives presented by the women in this project. Additionally, stating that the nationalists were the only group to vote to remain in the EU negates the assumption that Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland as a whole – it is only bad for nationalists. This perspective also lends legitimacy to Brexit because it would make sense that nationalists, who primarily identify as Irish, would not want to leave the EU because they would not wish to distance themselves in any way from Ireland. This narrative minimizes concerns over logistic complications of Brexit in favor of an identity-based perception of the 2016 referendum, making it seem that those who are concerned for the welfare of Northern Ireland – unionists – voted for Brexit while those who could care less about being in the UK voted to remain in the EU. The narratives of the other women negate such a simplistic view of attitudes toward Brexit, but this perspective is likely held by many British Protestants who were not well represented in this data set.

## **Women's Roles in Northern Ireland**

### ***Primary Narratives***

The primary narratives surrounding women's roles in Northern Ireland were that women's rights have improved since the troubles, the current need for a stronger female voice in politics and society, and that women receive online abuse.

The first of these connects to the previously mentioned narratives of violence and segregation in regard to the Troubles. Women have more rights and freedoms than they did before, and they experience less sectarian violence and segregation of populations than they did before. Again, this could indicate that women see their position in society as better than it actually is because they are comparing such a horrible past to the present. However, the second primary narrative – women need a stronger voice – shows that women are aware that they have a long way to go before reaching gender equality. Susan, a woman who has been working to improve women's rights since the Troubles, explained:

I work in the community, I work across all the interfaces, and I'm never asked to go to a meeting. It's all men. So that's one of the battles at the minute is to include the woman's voice within any peace-making documents, any peace conversations.

Women's steps toward equality in Northern Ireland have been primarily in the reduction of discrimination rather than in the empowerment of women's voices. These are different aspects of gender equality that both need to be improved in spaces where there is gender inequality (UNSCR 1325, n.d.). Companies allowing women to maintain their jobs after they become pregnant is a positive step, but it is not the same as having an advisory board that has 50% female representation.

Women are aware that they are not in a position of equal power with men, which is emphasized in how women are treated online by both the media and by users of social media.

The negative messages surrounding female competency in a political or working environment are pervasive enough that they were echoed in all of the women's explanations of women's experiences in Northern Ireland. Judith said, "...a man's job performance and his ability to do his work will be commented on, but it'll be 'So and so's having a bad hair day' or whatever before 'What a good job she's doing.'" This shows how the wider perception of women acts as a barrier to women having a voice in political or social life. A woman who is not taken seriously in whatever context she finds herself will not be able to make progress. The large amount of abuse women receive online in Northern Ireland is symptomatic of a larger negative attitude toward women, and it is more than likely that these women receive the same negative messages in face-to-face communication, as well. Until women get an equal, serious say in how Northern Ireland should move forward politically and socially, they will continue to be disadvantaged by policies in Northern Ireland.

Women often unintentionally reinforce sexism through their language use. For example, when asked whether female politicians' experiences would continue to improve as Northern Ireland moves forward, Judith replied, "I would say that [sexism in politics] is just the nature of it. And I don't necessarily think it's Northern Ireland politics, I think it's just the way it is, and I think it will take a long time to change." Phrases like "it's just the way it is" function to reify existing structures, making them seem permanent when they could, in fact, be changed (Clair, 1993). In this case, the language used suggests that sexism is a permanent fixture in politics. The phrase "it will take a long time to change" also serves to reify the patriarchal nature of Northern Ireland because it emphasizes the *current* permanence of this hierarchy with little indication of hope that it will actually change. This type of reification is commonly used by women in relation to gender hierarchy and patriarchal structures (Clair, 1993).

### *Peripheral Narratives*

The first peripheral narrative concerning women's roles in Northern Ireland was that the prevalence of female politicians did not mean there was an increase in women's rights. This narrative emphasized the sectarian aspect of Northern Irish politics. As Susan said, "It doesn't matter who the leader is, whether it's a woman or a man, they have to toe the party line. So it's [the] parties we need to change, no matter who's leading it." This, taken with the primary narrative that women face more scrutiny than men online, makes it clear that women who wish to advance in politics have to behave in a certain way to be successful. Women in politics are held to a higher standard than men, both in terms of physical appearance and in political and moral standing (Women's participation, 2019), so it stands to reason that the high-ranking female politicians in Northern Ireland maintain their position by engaging in the politics most valued by men. In the midst of Brexit and sectarian politics, political issues specific to women are not given much attention, and female politicians may feel that their political career cannot afford for them to push said issues. By not addressing women's issues in favor of sectarian issues, these female politicians are accepting dominant interests as more important than their own (Clair, 1993), which functions to maintain the gender status quo in politics.

Women who do devote their time and energy to women's issues, however, are making positive changes for women's rights, according to participants. Susan emphasized that the women who build peace are focused on the health and well-being of their communities, particularly the quality of schools, health services, public amenities, etc. This focus on community ties back to women's social role as a mother because many of these concerns are centered around the lives and futures of children. Claire and Judith, who both have young children, explained that their decisions regarding politics were primarily based on their

children's future. Susan, who does not have children, emphasized that her work with women always "goes back into the family." She explained:

I campaign and would be on a number of committees that allows me to campaign to get equality, uh, for women in particular, but there's a lot of stuff that women, if they did get equality, that will help the whole family, you know. It's not just a woman's issue, it's a woman's issue to carry it back into the family. If we had childcare, we could get women into work who would have a better way of life, a better standard of life, so they could feed that into their kids, and their kids then would have a better outlook in life. When you see that there's a work ethic within the family, then that's, that transfers down through generations.

This shows the pervasiveness of the perception in Northern Ireland that a woman's role is to ensure the betterment of her family and, thus, her community. Women who have worked together across sectarian divides have done so primarily to aid their families, as in the group Mothers of Belfast who engaged in the "milk campaign" in the 1970s. These grassroots groups have seen many successes in improving the lives of women and championing equality across Northern Ireland.

Despite successes, women still bear the brunt of the trauma inflicted by the troubles. This was reflected in the PSNI statistics of domestic violence rates in Northern Ireland (see page 15) and in the women's narratives for this project. This emphasizes the dire and tragic reality that women experience daily in Northern Ireland, especially, Leah explained, women in areas that are working class or that are currently controlled by paramilitaries. This is an experience that is distressingly common in post-conflict societies (UNSCR 1325, n.d.), which is why the UN instituted UNSCR 1325 in order to provide support for women in post-conflict societies and promote their engagement in all levels of politics and civil society (UNSCR 1325, n.d.). Northern Ireland's lack of a National Action Plan (NAP) to institute UNSCR 1325 was seen as a huge failing by Leah and Susan, and they both indicated that instituting UNSCR 1325 would aid tremendously in women's experience of violence and trauma.

All of these peripheral narratives in relation to women's roles in Northern Ireland were about women's inability to be heard and taken seriously. These narratives were emphasized multiple times by Leah and Susan, who both work in the women's sector. Judith and Claire both said that they believe women are more reasonable negotiators than men in general, but they did not specifically address women's oppression or lack of voice on important issues. This appears to primarily stem from the division of classes in Northern Ireland. Both Claire and Judith grew up in an affluent Protestant town eleven miles outside of Belfast. They both describe their upbringing as "sheltered" and acknowledged that they do not pay attention to politics. Many of their responses to questions about women and policy were met with, "I don't really know," which is a framing device that exhibits denotative hesitancy (Clair, 1993). Denotative hesitancy is used by a group that "has no language to express itself and thus accepts its own limited definition of self as dependent on the dominant group" (Clair, 1993, p.120). By admitting their ignorance about these political issues, Claire and Judith perpetuate their subordinate position by diminishing their own authority and credibility, allowing the dominant group (in this case, men) to continue to have power.

On the other hand, Leah and Susan grew up in poor communities that were heavily impacted by sectarian violence, though one was raised Irish Catholic and the other was raised British Protestant. Leah and Susan describe themselves as working class, and they are well-versed in issues that affect poor communities, especially women. They did not often use framing devices that supported patriarchal structures, such as reification or denotative hesitancy, which shows that they are confident that patriarchy does not have to be a permanent fixture of Northern Ireland (Clair, 1993). While it could not be said that all working-class poor are well-versed in policy and that all middle-class citizens are unaware, it seems that class impacted participant

awareness of the issues plaguing Northern Ireland. Women who were sheltered from the violence and the poverty did not *have* to understand these issues in the same way working-class women did, which impacted the narratives that they shared surrounding these issues.

Demographic differences such as class identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, age, residential location, and education heavily influence participant standing in regard to these narratives. The difference between peripheral and contentious narratives in this project is primarily determined by the number of participants that represent a certain demographic, who hear and circulate particular narratives. The surprising aspect of these demographics in this project is that three participants were raised in British Protestant homes, but other demographic factors such as class, residential location, and age had a stronger influence on the narratives they circulated. Susan's experience as a working-class woman who was involved in the trade union significantly shifted her perspective on women's issues and sectarian politics. Claire spent four years living in Galway, Ireland, which separated her from Northern Ireland and shaped the narratives she used in regard to sectarian divides and politics.

### *Contentious Narratives*

Judith maintained many aspects of her British Protestant identity in ways the other participants did not. She lived and studied in England for a few years, which may have bolstered her identity as a British person. Her narrative that women have advanced primarily due to the Equality Act is in direct opposition to the lived experiences of other participants. This narrative is likely more common in affluent British Protestant communities who seem to have more faith in the UK government and its policies than individuals in other communities do.

In regard to gender equality, Judith also said:

I would say in terms of promotion or opportunities [in the police force], doesn't matter whether you're male or female. There are a lot of women now going up the ranks in the

PSNI. Our head of branch is a woman and one of the Assistant Chief Constables is a woman... So she's like two down from the top, there's five [Assistant Chief Constables] and one's a woman. So there are a lot of women now going up the ranks. Um, which wouldn't have happened before.

To summarize, one out of five Assistant Chief Constables is a woman, and that position is “two down from top.” Judith perceived this to be “a lot” of women going up the ranks, which is a reasonable assumption when one considers the gender makeup of the police force over the past few decades. However, from an equality standpoint, women still do not appear to be well represented in leadership. One woman out of five positions, two positions down from the top is not equality. The important aspect of this situation to Judith is the improvement, not the actual result, allowing her to view gender equality in the police force more positively than it actually is. This could allow Judith and other women in similar demographic groups to be complacent in their understanding of women's rights and issues.

### **Protagonist Inversion**

In the above analysis, I utilized ENE to determine which narratives are primary, peripheral, and contentious. Another important aspect of ENE is an exercise called protagonist inversion in which a narrative is flipped and viewed from the antagonist's perspective (Clair et al., 2016). It is crucial for a researcher to engage in honest self-reflection in order to acknowledge the potential validity of narratives that they may not initially agree with. My protagonist inversion begins with identifying my biases.

I first learned about the history of the Troubles from an Irish perspective. Most of the professors who taught my Irish history and literature courses were openly against partition and believed that, one day, the Irish would finally throw off the shackles of the British and become a United Ireland once and for all. While I do not subscribe to the mindset that Northern Ireland remains occupied territory, I must acknowledge that my education laid a foundation that still



impacts my understanding of Northern Ireland. In my mind, the Irish were treated horrifically by British Protestants and they were right to revolt and demand equality. However, I also believe that the IRA committed terrible atrocities that caused extreme harm to their own communities as much as British communities. The Troubles were a tragedy. Equality has increased significantly since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, but whether the conflict was worth the loss of life and the pervasive trauma is difficult to say.

In regard to participant narratives, I was inclined to agree with Leah and Susan on contentious issues. This is in part because they were more well-versed and articulate in their narratives surrounding women's issues, politics, and Brexit, while Claire and Judith tended to be uncertain. However, it is also in part because I sympathize with the perspective that the UK government has not treated Ireland fairly and it has caused continuous problems in Northern Ireland.

I have strived to develop protagonist inversion throughout my findings and analysis by giving equal voice to narratives that lie outside of the narratives I find most authentic. Here, I will more specifically reframe my perspective through protagonist inversion.

By the time the twentieth century came, British families had been living in Ireland for centuries. Although I cannot condone the historically poor treatment of Irish Catholics, I understand that people cannot be held accountable for the ill-doings of their ancestors, and the British people who live in Northern Ireland today have just as much right to the land and to their culture as Irish Catholics. There is also a certain level of ignorance that comes with privilege that may have caused British Protestants to be unaware of how terrible conditions were for Irish Catholics at the beginning of the twentieth century. When violence broke out, it was likely terrifying for the British community who felt the need to protect their own interests, which were

not historically protected in Catholic Ireland. By the end of the Troubles, British Protestants in Northern Ireland were likely caught between relief that the violence was ending and fear that their rights would be reduced by the increase of Irish Catholic rights in the Good Friday Agreement.

In regard to women's rights, British Protestant women have seen major improvements in their situations. Northern Irish women can vote and they can maintain a job after becoming pregnant. They cannot be discriminated against based on sex or gender, and they are seeing more and more female representation in leadership. They likely acknowledge that things could be better for women (especially since women are judged on their appearance over their competence), but they see that life is better for them than it was for their mothers. They seem happy with their freedoms, they are likely concerned for the future of their children, and they may see themselves represented by figures like DUP leader Arlene Foster. They probably vote for the DUP because they want to ensure their rights as British citizens are protected, but they may switch parties if another party is likely to fix the school or health systems. In all, British Protestant women are likely not against women's rights or the improvement of the lives of women across Northern Ireland. They may simply be more concerned with their nuclear family and local community than they are with their country as a whole.

British Protestant women's concern for family and locality are aspects of my own place of origin – a small, midwestern farming community that emphasized the importance of neighbors helping neighbors. I can empathize with women who would vote in hopes of protecting their loved ones and surrounding community members because this is how I was originally taught to vote. However, my current social positioning as a married woman with no children (and no plan to have children), along with my intentional awareness of national and international issues, have

influenced the way I vote and discuss policies. It is tempting for me to expect a certain level of knowledge about feminist issues from other women, but acknowledging that I did not always know the definitions of “feminism” and “patriarchy” due to my own privilege allows me to have empathy for a perspective I did not initially understand in this project.

I wrote this exercise toward the beginning of the development of my findings. It has helped me to acknowledge the validity of a different narrative than I originally was drawn toward, and it has helped me be thoughtful about how personal history and demographics impacts lived experience. It has also kept me from being quick to dismiss a certain perspective, which has provided me with a more holistic perspective on Northern Ireland. This does not mean that I fully agree with any of the narratives my participants presented, and it would be foolish of me to approach any of the narratives without thoughtful analysis. However, it has given weight to a narrative perspective that I would not have been able to fully acknowledge otherwise.

Given the analysis of participant narratives through ENE and this exercise in protagonist inversion, it is clear that the experiences of women in Northern Ireland are complex and multi-faceted. There was agreement among my participants, though, that women’s roles could improve in Northern Ireland, which leads to the practical implications of this project.

### **Practical Implications**

The personal narratives analyzed in this thesis, along with larger societal narratives laid out in the literature review, lead to two specific practical implications. First, the advancement of the lives of women in Northern Ireland is dependent upon a political shift away from sectarian politics toward community-oriented politics. The disillusionment with sectarian Northern Irish politics was represented across all of the women’s narratives. Based on the results of the last few general elections in Northern Ireland, this political shift may be happening, but it would need to

be fostered in order to continue to grow. This could be achieved, in part, through narrative. Participants in this project who understood women's issues and were involved in grassroots organizations were articulate and passionate in the sharing of their narratives. If these narratives were to be shared with women who were unaware of these issues, they would likely be swayed into being more vocal in supporting other women. Judith and Claire often said, "I don't really know" when discussing political issues, meaning they may be convinced to vote for community-oriented candidates if they heard the narratives of Leah and Susan. If women continue to cross community, class, and political boundaries in order to have these conversations and unite over shared experiences, this political shift could grow to the point of making real change. Moving away from sectarian politics would allow room for politicians to implement policies that make positive practical improvements in communities, particularly in the support of women, which leads to the second practical implication.

A NAP for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 should be developed and put into motion in Northern Ireland. This resolution is meant to promote the engagement of women in politics and civil society, which would provide women with the financial and governmental support to make practical, positive changes in their communities. Ideally, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 would also encourage cross-community communication, which would allow unifying narratives to circulate in larger groups, leading to reconciliation through shared experiences. As Leah said:

I actually think that people in Northern Ireland have more in common with each other than they do different. We grew up with the same childhoods and there's a lot that we can relate to each other on that, let's say, someone from Dublin and myself wouldn't be able to, and I wish that was something that people recognized.

The implementation of UNSCR 1325 would provide support for women and could allow for the increase of reconciliation through improved relational connections between women of different

communities, which could lead to shared stories and recognition of similar experiences. UNSCR 1325 is a resolution that should have been implemented several years ago, and it will only come about if enough people – politicians in particular – are vocal about the gap it would fill in the Northern Irish peace process. The more that Northern Irish politics moves away from sectarianism, the more likely policies like UNSCR 1325 will be implemented, which will in turn allow for more positive, peace-oriented policies to be put into effect.

### **Strengths**

One of the strengths of this project is the practical implications that resulted from this project. The two aforementioned implications, if put into effect, could significantly enhance the experiences of women in Northern Ireland. This project also functions as a practical tool to give voice to Northern Irish women, allowing them to explain their experiences in their own words. Women from Northern Ireland who were not participants could find solidarity with participant narratives and could be inspired to take political action toward UNSCR 1325 or other policies focused on gender equality.

Second, this thesis was completed from the perspective of a third party who was not raised in Northern Ireland. While, as previously mentioned, the researcher did approach this project with biases, they were not biases tied to personal religious or political identity. This allowed for thoughtful analysis of each narrative while interrogating the effects of the researcher's standpoint on analysis and interpretation through protagonist inversion. The use of member checking aided in ensuring that the researcher was interpreting participant narratives correctly and that the analysis rang true to participants.

Third, this thesis sought to use the exact words of participants when presenting narratives in order to best represent their lived experiences. Providing so many quotes from participants

allows the reader a better glimpse into the language women used to tell their stories. This reduced the amount of third-party interpretation of narratives to make room for first person voice. Additionally, having only four participants allowed for extensive quotes from the same participants, providing a fuller perspective into their narrative social position.

Finally, this project has provided theoretical contributions to the communication discipline. ENE has been extended to analyze linguistic and rhetorical strategies that participants use to express emotion, reify existing social structures, and convey denotative hesitancy. Additionally, this thesis extended the use of ENE to a post-conflict society. This theory is meant to be used in order to develop solutions to complex problems that consider all perspectives on an issue. To date, it has not been used to address an issue as indefinite as the development of a peace process, nor has it been used to explore the perspectives of a particular demographic. This project has shown that it is a useful theory to utilize when addressing the lived experiences of group members in a complex situation.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this project is the small number of participants. Having a larger sample size could have a significant impact on the types of narratives that were considered primary, peripheral, and contentious. It could also have led to the development of more contentious narratives, particularly concerning the Troubles and the peace process, which had no contentious narratives at all. Even though participants represented both sides of the historic sectarian divide in Northern Ireland, only one of them grew up in Belfast during the Troubles. Gathering more narratives from women who experienced sectarian clashes firsthand may have resulted in contentious narratives. It would have been ideal to have a wider variety of ages and residential diversity, as well as more participants who experienced the Troubles while living in

Belfast or Derry/Londonderry, a city that also experienced extreme violence. It also would have been beneficial to have more ideological diversity and identity diversity. Only one participant was Irish Catholic, and the three who grew up British Protestant either rejected that identity or were hesitant to fully claim all aspects of that identity. It would have been beneficial to have more Irish Catholic participants and British Protestant participants who fully embraced those identities.

The second limitation was that only one interview was conducted per participant. Follow up interviews conducted after the first round of coding could have allowed for more clarity on narratives already in the data set, as well as the development of more narratives from the same participants. This could have led to the development of more in-depth analysis of the few participants that were a part of this project.

Third, the timeline of this project did not allow for participant observation. Initially the goal was to participate in at least one women's group in Belfast, whether that be a community class, a women's religious organization, or a political group. This would have allowed for a better understanding of how women's narratives build off of one another, and it would have allowed for analysis of the interactions between Northern Irish women. However, time constraints negated this aspect of the project.

Another limitation of this project is that the researcher is not from Northern Ireland. While this is in part a strength due to neutrality, it also was a limitation. There were aspects of Northern Irish culture that participants assumed the researcher would know that they did not, which made it difficult to contextualize narratives at times. It was also difficult to contextualize physical spaces in Belfast because the researcher did not know the history of each space, as in the opening story about the mural on Shankill Road. Already having a cultural understanding of

the physical space and the people would have aided in understanding the narratives and the participants.

Finally, using ENE as a theoretical framework had limitations. This theory is not widely used, and the scarcity of existing research made it difficult to build a robust foundation in the literature review of this project. The literature that is available does not provide in-depth detail of how to gather data and conduct an analysis. This lack of clarity, along with a sparsity of exemplars, led to analytical choices on the part of the researcher that may not align with the original intent of ENE but were appropriate for this project. ENE was a useful theory that allowed for exploratory research, but its lack of widespread use was a shortcoming.

### **Future Research**

There are many ways that this research could be extended. First, future research could examine women who are politicians in Northern Ireland to understand their lived experiences and their perception of their involvement in women's issues. This could be telling of the actual impact of sectarian politics and how female politicians grapple with their role in a post-conflict, patriarchal society. Second, research could be done exploring the narratives and political identities of the Good Friday Agreement generation (born between 1998-2002) concerning the peace process and Brexit. This demographic was born after the violence of the Troubles officially ended, but they were too young to vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum, so they did not have any political agency in two of the biggest events in Northern Ireland's political history. Examining the narratives they use to explain their lived experiences could allow insight into how they identify politically. Do they fall along the same sectarian lines as generations before them, or are they moving away from sectarian politics? This insight could provide understanding of Northern Ireland's future.



Third, this research could be conducted on a different under-researched demographic group in Northern Ireland, such a disabled population or those who graduated from an integrated school as opposed to a Catholic or Protestant school. This would give voice to smaller segments of the Northern Irish population, and their lived experiences in a post-conflict society could be explored in depth. Fourth, ENE could be used to examine a more specific issue in Northern Ireland, such as the continued presence of the peace walls in Belfast that segregate residential areas, or an element of Brexit. Focusing on a particular problem could result in specified solutions as opposed to general understandings of multiple perspectives. Finally, ENE could be used to examine a different mid-conflict or post-conflict society, such as Israel/Palestine or Sri Lanka. This could then result in holistic, practical ways to increase cross-community communication or solve problems unique to that society. ENE could also be used to provide marginalized groups with a platform to be heard in these societies.

In addition to these demographic, issue-based areas of potential research, this project could be used as a platform for research on conceptual issues. First, future research could explore how empathy could be developed on the part of the participants. This project did not involve any interactions between participants, and the member check was the only instance in which participants were exposed to the narratives provided by other participants. Empathy was developed only by the researcher and, potentially, the reader. It seems that ENE research is not reaching its full, practical potential by excluding the population being studied from empathy development. Future research could determine the best form of data collection that should be used to expose participants to other participant narratives in order to develop empathy. This could be done by starting with individual interviews to gather participant narratives. Then participants could be placed in focus groups with others who have different or opposing personal

narratives. Researchers could examine how participant narratives changed or remained the same when interacting with individuals from a different perspective. A follow up interview could then be conducted to understand why participants altered or bolstered their narratives and how exposure to other narratives impacted their perspective. This could bring insight into how exposure to narrative increases (or does not increase) empathy. Past studies have examined ways to develop empathy in participants, such as through shared relational space (González, 2018), reading fiction (Keen, 2006), watching films (Shapiro & Rucker, 2004), playing sports (Gano-Overway, 2013), and religious meditation in the classroom (Mamgain, 2010), but understanding how personal narratives impact empathy could be useful in the development of peace in post-conflict societies.

Another area of potential future research could be in the interaction of societal and personal narratives. The narratives explored in this project are personal narratives. How do these narratives support or contest larger societal narratives, or vice versa? How do individuals frame their personal narratives when their lived experiences conflict with societal narratives? Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (RDT 2.0), developed by Baxter (2011), could be used to examine this question. RDT 2.0 is based on the idea that “communication is a dialogic process wherein competing discourses interplay in various arrangements that reproduce, challenge, and/or create meaning(s)” (Suter & Norwood, 2017). RDT 2.0 would allow the researcher to examine how an individual linguistically frames their personal narrative when it conflicts with a societal narrative, rather than comparing multiple personal narratives. This could provide insight into the power of societal narratives and, potentially, ways to alter these narratives to promote cross-community communication and peace in post-conflict societies like Northern Ireland.

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