Original Research Reports

Intergroup Contact and Peacebuilding: Promoting Youth Civic Engagement in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Focusing on the post-accord generation in Northern Ireland, this study aimed to examine the role of intergroup contact in promoting support for peacebuilding and youth civic engagement. The sample comprised 466 youth (aged 14-15; 51% Catholic, 49% Protestant) who were born after the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and therefore represent a 'post-accord' generation. Recruited through their schools, youth completed scales on intergroup contact (quality and quantity), support for peacebuilding, and civic engagement. Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling and bootstrapped mediation in MPlus. Results found that support for peacebuilding partially mediated the association between higher quality and higher quantity contact and greater civic engagement (volunteering and political participation). Findings demonstrate that youth who are living with the legacy of protracted intergroup conflict can support peacebuilding and engage in constructive behaviours such as civic engagement. By recognising the peacebuilding potential of youth, especially in a post-accord generation, the findings may inform how to promote youth civic engagement and social reconstruction after conflict.

Keywords: intergroup contact, youth, peacebuilding, civic engagement, volunteering, political participation, Northern Ireland, post-conflict setting

Intergroup conflict has devastating consequences on society; it affects individuals, groups and communities as well as wider social and national structures. Understanding how to support constructive outcomes following conflict is therefore of urgent importance, especially for the next generation. One way to do this is through promoting positive and meaningful interactions between groups (Allport, 1954). Indeed, there is substantive evidence that intergroup contact reduces prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and growing evidence that contact promotes wider outcomes including civic engagement (Bowman, 2011; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). There is little research, however, which has examined the extent to which shared support towards peacebuilding that transcends intergroup boundaries mediates the relationship between contact and civic engagement.

Addressing this gap in the literature, the present study focuses on the extent to which the association between intergroup contact (quality and quantity) and youth civic engagement is mediated by support for peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, a historically divided society. Support for peacebuilding is defined as a specific orientation towards pathways to societal peace; that is, a construct broader than interpersonal or intergroup relations that encompasses positive peace, or a social system which creates "optimal environment in which human potential can flourish" (IEP, 2016, p. 3). Support for peacebuilding represents an endorsement of contextually relevant policies and practices that can advance societal peace; for example, symbolic, material and relational acts that aim to bring opposing sides together in constructive ways. The analyses advance research in a number of ways. First, moving beyond intergroup contact effects on prejudice reduction as individual-level change, the study introduces a new contextually embedded and broader theoretical variable of interest: support for peacebuilding. Second, adding to a growing body of literature which examines contact effects on civic engagement, the study extends findings from previous research on civic actions across group lines to include self-reported behaviours of two broader and more inclusive forms of civic engagement: volunteering and political participation. That is, what actions are young people taking to enhance the greater good in society beyond improving intergroup relations? Third, focusing on the post-accord generation has the potential to promote long-term peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Thus, this paper makes a new contribution, building on prejudice reduction and intergroup relations, by highlighting the mechanisms underlying the broader peacebuilding and civic potential of young people in a real-world conflict setting.

Intergroup Contact as a Peacebuilding Approach

The contact hypothesis is arguably one of the most successful theories in social psychology (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). Its basic premise is that bringing groups together, under favourable conditions, can help to reduce intergroup prejudice and in turn foster positive community relations (Allport, 1954). The contact hypothesis has been supported in a large range of studies which have illustrated a modest, but generally reliable relationship between contact and prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

To date, the majority of intergroup contact research has focused on a prejudice reduction model whereby changes in prejudice have been assessed as the primary outcome (McKeown & Dixon, 2017). This substantial and important body of research has dominated the field and has consistently demonstrated that positive contact can reduce bias, threat and anxiety (Stephan & Mealy, 2011; Stephan & Stephan, 1985), as well as increase empathy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008) and trust (Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009). Contact effects have been shown to reduce prejudice in laboratory settings with artificial groups and in real-world environments (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006 for a meta-analysis). Although contact does not always occur naturally (McKeown & Dixon, 2017) and may sometimes be negative (c.f. Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010; Connolly, 2000), Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that both naturally occurring contact and contact-focused interventions produced positive outcomes, on average, even among youth in conflict settings (McKeown & Cairns, 2012). The role of contact in promoting support for peacebuilding, however, has been given much less attention.

Peacebuilding can be defined as the long-term process of rebuilding societal relationships to promote an enduring peace (Lederach, 1997). The present research focuses on support for peacebuilding which is defined as a specific orientation towards pathways to peace that focuses beyond individuals and groups within an intergroup context. It is argued that support for peacebuilding represents a unique contribution to the literature and moves beyond previous variables of focus in the intergroup relations literature in a number of ways. First, support for peacebuilding is conceptualised as a contextually embedded orientation that is shared across members of groups in conflict,

rather than an individual or interpersonal measure of attitude or prejudice. Second, support for peacebuilding is a future orientation which is not relative to or embedded in past behaviours in the same way as reconciling difference or forgiving wrongdoing are. Third, support for peacebuilding is something which is a shared orientation (regardless of group identity) of how to promote a more positive society.

Christie (2006) argues that intergroup contact is often used as a tool for systemic peacebuilding. That is, in conflict societies where divisions are based on competing social identities, intergroup contact can be used to help prevent individuals from engaging in future violence. This is arguably because intergroup contact promotes empathy, trust, and interpersonal pro-social actions. These factors may be important antecedents and precursors of support for peacebuilding, which in turn, may motivate further action to help reconstruct society after conflict. That is, young people who support peacebuilding can become constructive change agents in society by engaging in civic engagement; a vibrant civil society has the potential to support broader peacebuilding initiatives aiming to transform a history of violent conflict (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). The connection between peacebuilding and civic engagement has mostly been studied in adult samples (e.g., Taylor, 2016). Research suggests that civil society provides a non-violent means to voice dissent in democratic societies (Chirot & McCauley, 2006). In ethnically-divided societies, previous research has shown that dense civil society networks may help to dampen and prevent violent outbreaks through a network of cross-cutting ties (Varshney, 2001). Therefore, this project focuses on how to encourage youth to embrace peacebuilding and contribute to reconstructing society in a post-accord setting (Corkalo Biruski & Ajdukovic, 2016; Taylor & McKeown, 2017).

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement "is the purview of every citizen, not only officials and professionals" (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 214). It may include a number of dimensions, but overall, civic engagement is a "process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern" (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013, p. 1894) and "promot[e] the quality of life in a community" (Ehrlich, 2000, p. 4). Thus, through both political participation, such as demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, or signing a petition (Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray, & Born, 2012), and non-political processes, such as volunteering, community service, sports or recreational clubs, cultural associations (Bringle, 2005; Cicognani et al., 2012), youth may try to improve their social environments. These two forms of civic engagement, political participation and volunteering, are not entirely interconnected nor entirely separate constructs; in fact, social participation such as volunteering often paves the way for political participation (Gauthier, 2003). In the present research, therefore, both types of civic engagement are considered.

Particularly in settings of intergroup conflict (Barber & Schluterman, 2009), more research is needed to understand which factors help to foster young people to become engaged citizens and participate in constructive social interactions (Yates & Youniss, 2006). That is, research should identify the underlying processes that can encourage youth to become peacemakers, not troublemakers (McEvoy-Levy, 2006; Taylor et al., 2014). Civic engagement is one form of youth peacebuilding potential (Taylor et al., 2017). Research around the globe has demonstrated the personal benefits, such as better physical and mental health outcomes, for youth who are engaged in civic life (e.g., Piliavin, 2005; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Yates & Youniss, 2006), and suggests that youth civic engagement can be related to peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Bužinkić, 2013; Corkalo Biruski, Ajdukovic, & Löw Stanic, 2014; McCouch, 2009).

Contact, Peacebuilding and Civic Engagement

To our knowledge, there is little research on how contact promotes (or not) civic engagement among youth in conflict settings. There is, however, some evidence outlining the relation between contact experiences and civic engagement amongst university students in the US, demonstrating the importance of attitudinal and value change in this process. For example, Gurin et al. (2004) examined the social, civic and political effects of an intergroup relations programme amongst university students who took part in the programme, compared to a matched control group who did not take part. Participants were surveyed upon entering university, at the end of the term (when the course took place) and four years later in their senior year. Findings demonstrate that students who had taken part in the programme had an increased interest in politics, increased participation in campus politics, and stronger commitment to post-college civic engagement in their senior year (four years following the programme) compared to matched senior students who did not take part in the programme. To consider programme self-section bias, Gurin et al. (2004) controlled for pre-university scores on perspective taking, perception of commonality in values and commitment to post-college civic engagement. Even controlling for these factors and other matched demographics, participants in the programme still scored higher on perspective taking and post-college civic commitments than the control group. However, controlling for pre-university scores on community involvement and motivation to promote racial/ethnic understanding, the programme no longer had an effect on post-college civic commitments. This may suggest that there are additional motivational factors, not only the direct experience of intergroup contact, which influence civic engagement; therefore, considering other potential predictors and mediators is important.

Further highlighting the role of contact in promoting civic engagement, Bowman (2011) uses the theory of planned behaviour to argue for the presence of a mediational process in which experiences with diverse others influence proximal outcomes (e.g., empathy, cultural knowledge). These proximal outcomes then lead to attitudes toward civic action and subjective norms regarding civic action, and in turn promote behavioural intentions and civic action. He then goes on to present findings from a meta-analysis of studies examining college diversity and civic engagement in the US and offers further support for this argument. Specifically, he found that exposure to racial diversity in college was associated with increased civic attitudes, increased civic behavioural intentions and increased civic behaviours. He argues, however, that there are differences among structural diversity (physical co-presence), classroom diversity (structured diversity activities) and informal interactional diversity (occurring outside of the classroom environment), with interpersonal interactions being associated with the strongest effects on civic behaviours. Bowman's claim aligns with intergroup contact theory research which highlights the importance of contact quality beyond contact quantity (e.g., Binder et al., 2009; Plant & Devine, 2003) and suggests that the better quality the contact, the more likely this is to be associated with civic engagement. Given, however, that both contact quality and contact quantity can have beneficial effects on intergroup attitudes (Binder et al., 2009), the relationship between each of these and civic engagement will be considered.

By focusing on self-reported civic engagement amongst youth in a post-accord setting, the current study also adds to the current literature on the effects of intergroup contact on collective action tendencies (for a review see Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012). This literature tends to focus specifically on actions to improve a groups' situation, rather than broader civic engagement, however, collective action can also be understood as including everyday activism (van Zomeren, 2013) and is therefore closely aligned to civic engagement. For example, measures of collective action often also include actions such as signing a petition.

A number of studies have focused on collective action tendencies of individuals living in conflict and post-conflict settings (Bilali, Vollhardt, & Rarick, 2017; Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Saguy, & van Zomeren, 2014; Saguy, Tausch,

Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009; Saguy, Tropp, & Hawi, 2013; Tabri & Conway, 2011; Taylor & Hanna, 2017; Taylor et al., 2017). Some of these studies have measured more than behavioural intentions and have included behavioural measures, such as signing a petition or donating raffle money in experimental settings. The current study focuses on a new predictor of collective action, support for peacebuilding, along with intergroup contact, and expands the range of outcomes by including measures of youths' self-reported behaviours. The goal is to understand how to promote constructive civic engagement in a post-accord society. Overall, this paper aims to understand the role that youth can play in society in terms of social reconstruction through civic engagement, and how contact, through support for peacebuilding, could help to promote multiple forms of engagement in Northern Ireland.

Research in Context

Northern Ireland is an ethno-politically divided society. The recent conflict emerged from disputes in the late 1960's over economic and political inequalities, but escalated into a violent conflict over the constitutional state of Northern Ireland (Cairns & Darby, 1998). In 1998, the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was signed which locked both groups into a power-sharing arrangement and institutionalized policies of intergroup equality. However, group relations remain fraught in Northern Ireland; low level of political violence persists and the political agreement remains unstable. As a result, the role of contact in promoting better intergroup relations is essential to reinforce and consolidate the fragile peace.

The population of Northern Ireland is just over 1.8 million, of which 45% self-identify as Catholic and 48% self-identity as Protestant. The current study focuses on young people born after 1998 who represent a 'post-accord' generation. Though not exposed to the most recent peak of intergroup violence, known as The Troubles, these young people still face on-going sectarianism and annual spikes in tension. For example, one in four adolescents is a victim of sectarian violence (Jarman, 2005) and over 80% have experienced sectarianism directly or indirectly (Byrne, Conway, & Ostermeyer, 2005). It is well documented that youth are not merely the passive victims of sectarianism and that they often engage in the annual parades and marches in July, which frequently turn to rioting and violence (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). What is less known, however, is how young people exposed to the aftermath of intergroup conflict engage (or not) in civic behaviours and whether this is associated with intergroup contact and support for peacebuilding.

Aim and Hypotheses

The aim of the present research is to examine the role of intergroup contact in promoting support for peacebuilding and the consequence these have on youth civic engagement. Previous research has found a positive effect of contact on intergroup attitudes in Northern Ireland (c.f. Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006; Hewstone et al., 2004; McKeown, Cairns, Stringer, & Rae, 2012; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004), but as yet little attention has been paid to its impact on support for peacebuilding and civic engagement amongst youth. It is argued here, however, that if support for peacebuilding is viewed as a positive and constructive orientation that such support could be promoted through intergroup contact. For example, contact has been associated with other peace processes such as trust (Tam et al., 2009), reconciliation and forgiveness (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006). It stands to reason, therefore, that positive and high frequency contact would be positively associated with support for peacebuilding. Further, if support for peacebuilding is viewed as a shared and positive orientation towards peaceful co-existence, then it could also be that support for peacebuilding will be associated with higher levels of civic engagement in society, as observed amongst other proximal outcomes in Bowman's (2011) meta-analysis.

Based on previous theoretical and empirical literature, therefore, it was hypothesised that: (1) high quality and high frequency contact would be associated with stronger support for peacebuilding, (2) support for peacebuilding will be associated with higher levels of civic engagement, including both volunteering and political participation, and (3) support for peacebuilding would mediate the relation between contact and civic engagement.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants (*N* = 466) were part of a larger study on positive youth development and were recruited from Year 11, ages 14-15 years old (50% male, 50% female; 51% Catholic, 49% Protestant) across a number of schools in urban and semi-urban areas of Northern Ireland. Schools were primarily selected to balance controlled (i.e., predominately Protestant) and maintained (i.e., predominately Catholic) schools. To control for socio-economic status, all schools were at the higher end of percentage of pupils receiving free school meals (range 30 to 65%). When possible, comprehensive schools, which include multiple academic abilities, were recruited; this ensured there was a range of academic levels among the pupils completing the survey. In addition, schools from both interfaced and non-interfaced areas were targeted. Interfaced schools are ones in which a controlled and maintained school are side by side, separated by only a 'peace wall' or some other physical boundary, such as a major road. Based on these primary selection criteria, however, because of the gender-segregated nature of some of the schools, the breakdown of gender and community background was not even across the entire sample (*n* = 56 Protestant males, *n* = 178 Catholic males; *n* = 183 Protestant females, *n* = 50 Catholic females). Principals gave initial permission for their Year 11 students to participate and a parental opt-out form was sent home. No opt-out forms were returned to the researchers via the school. Parental opt-out was selected because at age 16, youth in Northern Ireland can consent for themselves. In addition, all youth provided informed assent prior to initiating the study.

An initial pilot project was conducted in January 2016; small revisions were made to the format/order of the questionnaire to improve the flow and comprehension among pupils. These data were excluded from further analyses. The majority of the data were collected in February and March 2016 on a single day in each school. On the day of data collection, school teachers and administrators organised the pupils to take the on-line questionnaire in a group setting in the IT facilities at each institution. In recognition of their effort, modest compensation was offered to each school (£100) and classrooms that had over 75% participation also received a small incentive (£25/each) for a class event or supplies. A trained team of research assistants were in each of the IT classrooms and verbally explained the study as well as answered any questions that arose as pupils completed the questionnaire. At this point, none of the students opted-out of the study. A classroom teacher was also present during data collection, to extent possible, based on the school's timetable.

All data were collected through self-report on-line questionnaires completed in Qualtrics. Pupils who were not from the Catholic or Protestant community were excluded from the primary study (*N* = 34), and completed an alternative version of an on-line questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 20-35 minutes to complete, based on the pupils' reading comprehension. Missing data was extremely minimal because of the user-friendly nature of the online platform; for example, if a participant missed an item, they were reminded to fill it in before

proceeding to the next page of the online questionnaire. All procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast.

Measures

Intergroup Contact

Two dimensions of intergroup contact were assessed: quantity and quality. The single-item measure for each dimension was adapted from Tam et al. (2009), expanding the range of options to a 7-point Likert scale. For quantity contact, participants responded to the question "*How much contact do you have with people from the Protestant/Catholic community*" ranging from 1 *(none at all)* to 7 *(a great deal).* Quality contact was assessed with the question *"In general, when you meet people from the Protestant/Catholic community, do you find the contact pleasant or unpleasant"* with responses ranging from 1 (*very unpleasant*) to 7 (*very pleasant*). Higher scores indicated greater quantity and quality contact, respectively.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement was assessed using an adapted version of this scale with a similar age group in Northern Ireland (Taylor et al., 2017). Ten items were responded to using a 7-point Likert scale from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*very often*) about how often the participant had engaged in the following activities in the past year. Activities included 7 of the 8 items from Taylor et al. (2017) which were originally derived from a questionnaire developed for Northern Ireland (ARK, 2006) and an established measure for civic engagement (Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010). One additional question was further adapted from Zaff et al. (2010) that focused on helping in one's neighbourhood and two additional items such as participating in marching season and engaging on social media about political issues, were adapted from previous research Northern Ireland (ARK, 2006). In addition, participants could fill in examples of the types of activities for each of the items. The overall 10-item scale had acceptable internal consistency (α = .78), however, additional factor analyses were conducted as part of the preliminary analyses described below and identified two subscales, volunteering and political participation.

Support for Peacebuilding

The measure for youth support for peacebuilding was developed from a larger list of items that aimed to assess the degree of support for contentions/sacred issues, such as community murals, kerb painting, a united Ireland, parades, etc., compared to peacebuilding policies, such as shared education, symbolic peace markers, etc. (Bell, 2016; Leonard & McKnight, 2011; McAuley, 2004; Rutherford, 2016). An original list of 13 items that included contentious/sacred and peacebuilding statements was administered (see Appendix). For the purposes of this paper, an initial exploratory factor analysis confirmed the two dimensions of this scale and identified the eight peacebuilding items which included topics such as a Northern Irish identity, peace walls, integrated and shared education, peace bridge in Derry-Londonderry, mixed sports teams, etc. Participants responded the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The original eight peacebuilding items had acceptable internal consistency (α = .76), however, additional analyses were conducted below to ensure that support was shared across both communities.

Data Analytic Plan

A multiple group exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine the structure of the support for peacebuilding scale. That is, items that both Catholic and Protestant youth identified as shared support for peacebuilding

were retained for this scale. Based on previous research, an exploratory factor analysis was also conducted on the civic engagement items and identified the subscales of political participation and volunteering for this sample. Finally, a structural equation model was conducted to determine if the impact of more frequent and higher quality contact on youth civic engagement was mediated by their support for peacebuilding. All models were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation with the assumption that data were missing at random (Enders & Bandalos, 2001), and evaluated using the comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ .90, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ≤ .08, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤ .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

In Mplus, a multiple group exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the initial pool of peacebuilding items. Using a fixed factor approach, configural invariance was established with all factor loadings freely estimated (N = 457, χ^2(40) = 99.73, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .081, 95% CI [.061, .101], SRMR = .05). The chi-square difference test was used to compare the change in model fit for constraining the loading for each item, one by one, to be equal across both Catholic and Protestant youth. Of the eight original peacebuilding items, three were significantly different across groups: (2) *The Northern Irish identity offers a shared identity which can help bring communities living here together,* (3) *Learning about British and Irish history in Northern Ireland can help increase understanding relations in NI,* and (12) *Murals in Northern Ireland are reminders of community division and should be redesigned.* In terms of the factor loadings by group, all three items loaded higher on among Protestants compared to Catholics. The remaining five items were retained as the factor loadings were not significantly different for Catholics and Protestants: (1) *Peace walls in Northern Ireland should be taken down to improve community relations* (Leonard & McKnight, 2011), (8) *Integrated and shared education can help bring divided communities together* (McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004), (9) *Unionist, Loyalist, Nationalist and Republican political parties are preventing peace in Northern Ireland* (Mitchell, Evans, & O'Leary, 2009), (10) *The peace bridge in Derry-Londonderry is a physical symbol of change and cross-community engagement; more symbols like this are needed* (McDaid & Deeney, 2011), and (11) *Mixed sports teams of Catholics and Protestants encourage cross-community peacebuilding* (Bairner, 2013). Using this five-item scale, configural invariance was re-examined (N = 457, χ^2(10) = 17.74, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .058. 95% CI [.000, .102], SRMR = .03). Moving on to weak invariance, the chi-square test was non-significant, there was less than a .01 change in the CFI (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), and the RMSEA stayed within the CI of the configural invariance values, indicating weak factorial invariance (N = 457, χ^2(15) = 24.65, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .053, 95% CI [.000, .089], SRMR = .08). Strong factorial invariance could not be established. Therefore, the final five-item measure was retained in subsequent analyses as the factor loadings for these items were equivalent across Catholic and Protestant youth for the construct of support for peacebuilding.

Next, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the civic engagement items. A two-factor solution was the best fit to the data based on the scree plot and Eigen values over 1. The two factors extracted were consistent with the subscales identified by previous research with youth in Northern Ireland (Taylor et al., 2017). Overall, there was acceptable model fit (N = 457, χ^2(26) = 113.56, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .085, 95% CI [.070, .102], SRMR = .04). There were a number of cross loadings, but all items were retained on the subscale with the higher loading, often twice the size of the smaller loading. The first five items loaded on the 'volunteering' subscale, (1) *Taken part in a sponsored event,* (2) *Helped out at a school,* (3) *Volunteered your time,* (4) *Helped with fundraising and*

collected money (for charity), and (5) *Worked together with others to solve a problem in your neighbourhood,* while items (6) *Signed a petition,* (7) *Campaigned on behalf of a group (or charity),* (8) *Boycotted certain products,* and (10) *Engaged on social media with political issues,* loaded on the 'political participation' subscale. Only item (9) *Attended events in the marching season*, failed to load significantly on either factor and was dropped from further analyses. In terms of the open-ended examples of the types of volunteering and political participation, the majority of youth volunteering responses included actions that span group lines, such as taking part in sponsored walks, raising money for charity (e.g., Marie Curie, Action Cancer), helping at open nights at their school, and to a lesser extent, other activities such as coaching sports teams of younger children and helping at an animal welfare shelter. Examples that fell within the political forms of participation largely described boycotting products that harmed animals; there were no open-ended responses that indicated political participation in right-wing activities or other acts that reflect negative intergroup relations. The final two subscales were significantly correlated (Table 1); on average, youth who were higher in volunteering were also higher in political engagement.

Based on these preliminary analyses, the bivariate correlations for all manifest subscales and scales, along with the means and standard deviations, are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Bivariate Correlations for All Manifest Study Variables

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Female[a]	-	-	-					
2. Catholic[b]	-	-	-.55**	-				
3. Contact Quantity	2.60	2.09	.05	.05	-			
4. Contact Quality	3.54	1.70	.08	.01	.55**	-		
5. Support for Peacebuilding	4.27	1.12	.08	-0.01	.31**	.36**	-	
6. Volunteering	2.03	1.18	.20**	-.13**	.25**	.18**	.18**	-
7. Political participation	1.09	1.09	.14**	-.13**	.08	.03	.14**	.43**

[a]50% Male, 50% Female. [b]51% Catholic, 49% Protestant.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Primary Analysis

To address the primary research aim of examining the role of intergroup contact in promoting support for peace-building and civic engagement, a mediation model was conducted in Mplus (Stride, Gardner, Catley, & Thomas, 2015). As manifest indicators of single items, quantity and quality contact, along with the control indicators of gender (male = 0, female = 1) and community background (Protestant = 0, Catholic = 1), were added as exogenous variables. All exogenous predictors were allowed to correlate. Latent variables were constructed for support for peacebuilding and the two subscales of civic engagement, volunteering and political participation. In each case, the identified manifest indicators (i.e., items) were loaded on the respective latent constructs. The two endogenous outcomes of interest, volunteering and political participation, were allowed to correlate. Bootstrapped mediation with 10,000 replications produced confidence intervals for the indirect effects of both quantity and quality of inter-group contact on volunteering and political participation, via peacebuilding attitudes.

The overall model was a good fit to the data (N = 457, χ^2(124) = 314.64, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .058, 95% CI [.050, .066], SRMR = .05), see Figure 1. With regard to the demographic controls, neither gender not Catholic/Protestant

background was associated with volunteering or political civic engagement in this model. The two main predictors, quantity and quality of intergroup contact were significantly related; those youth who reported higher quantity also reported higher quality contact ($r = .55$, $p < .001$). The direct effects of both quantity ($β = .18$, $p < .01$) and quality ($β = .33$, $p < .001$) contact on support for peacebuilding were significant; that is, more and better quality contact was related to more support for peacebuilding. In turn, support for peacebuilding was positively associated with both volunteering ($β =.15$, $p < .05$) and political ($β =.18$, $p < .05$) forms of civic engagement. Finally, the multivariate nature of the model allowed for the covariance of the two outcomes, volunteering and political participation, to be estimated; the positive relation ($r = .60$, $p < .001$) was stronger than the bivariate correlation because it assessed relation between the unique variances of each construct, controlling for the influence of the other variables in the model.

With regard to mediation, there were significant indirect effects for all four pathways, quantity contact to volunteering ($b = .014$, $SE = .009$, 95% CI [.001, .033]) and political participation ($b = .016$, $SE = .010$, 95% CI [.002, .038]), as well as quality contact to volunteering ($b = .032$, $SE = .018$, 95% CI [.002, .066]) and political participation ($b = .037$, $SE = .019$, 95% CI [.005, .075]). The only remaining significant direct effect was from higher quantity contact to greater volunteering ($β = .21$, $p < .001$). Finally, an additional test of the primary model included setting the direct paths from quantity and quality contact to volunteering and political participation to 0. The indirect effects all remained significant, but using the chi-square difference test ($Δχ^2(4) = 19.23$), the additional model fit the data significantly worse than the primary mediation model. This indicates partial mediation in each case. Thus, for youth in Northern Ireland, greater quantity and quality contact was related to higher support for peacebuilding, which, in turn, was associated with greater civic engagement.[i]
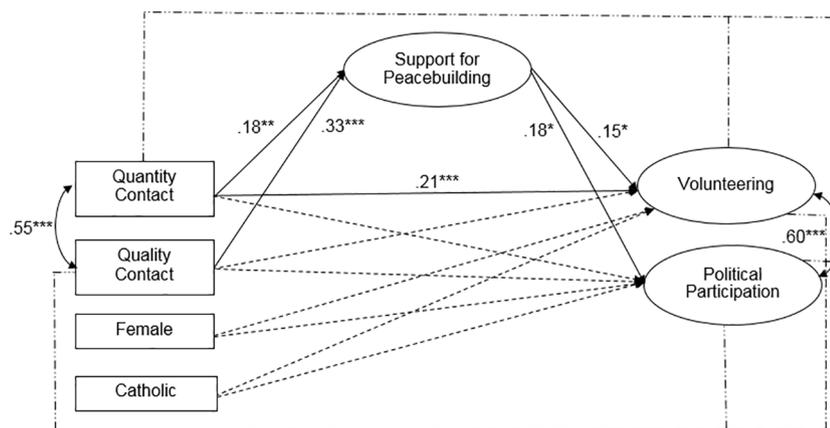
Figure 1. Structural equation model of support for peacebuilding as a mediator between youth quantity and quality intergroup contact and their levels of volunteering and political participation in Northern Ireland. Standardized coefficients ($β$) are reported. Error variances are omitted from the model for readability. Black full lines represent significant paths, dashed lines are non-significant, and dotted lines represent the indirect effects.

Note. Model Fit: ($N = 457$, $χ^2(124) = 314.64$, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .058, 95% CI [.050, .066], SRMR = .05).

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Alternative Analyses

Four alternative models were tested to demonstrate the stability and coherency of the primary mediational model. First, rather than just controlling for the possible direct effect of Catholic/Protestant group identity on the outcomes of volunteering and political participation, group-based differences in the overall model were tested. A multiple group mediation model was conducted in Mplus. Compared to the unconstrained model, where all paths are freely estimated for each group, each path was constrained to be equal across both Catholics and Protestants. Using the chi-square difference test, if the unconstrained model did not fit significantly better than the constrained model, that path constraint was retained. This procedure was conducted in a step-by-step fashion for every path in the model. All paths, including the indirect effects, were able to be constrained without significantly worse model fit (final multiple group model: N = 457, χ^2(260) = 507.37, CFI = .85, RMSEA = .064, 95% CI [.056, .073], SRMR = .08). That is, the primary mediational model tested could be constrained to be equal for both the Catholic and Protestant subsample, and the indirect effects remained significant for both groups (quantity contact to volunteering (b = .0164, SE = .008, 95% CI [.001, .038]) and political participation (b = .016, SE = .010, 95% CI [.001, .045]); quality contact to volunteering (b = .033, SE = .016, 95% CI [.000, .075]) and political participation (b = .037, SE = .019, 95% CI [.004, .081]).

Three additional alternative models were tested to examine potential ordering effects among the predictors and the mediator. Because of the saturated model, the fit across these models did not change. Therefore, there is no statistical test of which model is a better fit to the data. However, examining the indirect effects does shed light when comparing these alternative models to the primary model tested. Maintaining civic engagement as the primary outcome of interest, the second alternative model tested whether greater support for peacebuilding was related to quality and quantity intergroup contact, which in turn was associated with volunteering and political participation. The third and the fourth alternative models focused instead on support for peacebuilding as the outcome of interest. The third model tested whether civic engagement mediated the influence of quantity and quality contact on support for peacebuilding, while the fourth model examined intergroup contact as the mediator between civic engagement and support for peacebuilding.

In each of these three additional alternative models, the indirect effects were not significant, suggesting that the mediational pathways did not flow in these directions. Thus, the non-significant indirect effects across the alternative models lend support to the mediation proposed in the primary model; the hypothesized relation from contact, to support for peacebuilding to civic engagement may more accurately capture the mediational process among these constructs.

Discussion

In societies such as Northern Ireland, understanding how to promote constructive outcomes following sustained periods of intergroup conflict is vital for developing a more peaceful existence between groups. The present research examined the role of intergroup contact in promoting civic engagement (volunteering and political participation) mediated by support for peacebuilding, among the post-accord generation in Northern Ireland. Analyses revealed a coherent support for peacebuilding scale across Catholic and Protestant youth; moreover, this support was positively associated with higher quality and quantity intergroup contact. Suggesting that civic engagement in

contexts of intergroup divide may be a constructive and agentic response among young people, higher support for peacebuilding was, in turn, associated with greater volunteering and political participation.

These findings support previous research which suggests that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and promote more positive intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In support of our hypothesis, it was found that both contact quantity and quality were associated with higher support for peacebuilding. This is in line with previous research on contact effects on other outcomes associated with a more peaceful co-existence, such as empathy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), trust (Tam et al., 2009) and reconciliation (Hewstone et al., 2006). This study also offers support for Christie's (2006) argument that intergroup contact is an important tool for systemic peacebuilding, or an orientation that would support the long-term process of rebuilding societal relationships to promote an enduring peace (Lederach, 1997). Such a finding offers important opportunities for future research on the influence of inter-group contact on variables beyond prejudice reduction (McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

Analyses also found no significant differences in the levels of quality and quantity contact, or in the levels of social and political civic engagement, between Protestant and Catholic youth. That is, somewhat contrary to previous research which suggests that contact may increase support for social change for majority group members (e.g., Dixon et al., 2012) and reduce collective action tendencies amongst minority group members (Saguy et al., 2009), undermining long-term social justice aims, our results found constructive action outcomes for both Catholic and Protestant youth following intergroup contact. This finding may be a function of the current study's focus on broader civic engagement processes in Northern Ireland, rather than collective action focusing on social change to improve the situation of one particular group. It is important to note, however, that there were weak direct asso-ciations between contact and civic engagement. In line with Bowman's (2011) argument regarding the potential sequential nature of diversity effects on action, it was primarily through support for peacebuilding that contact was found to be associated with higher levels of civic engagement. That is, contact did not have a detrimental effect on participation; instead, intergroup contact was associated with higher levels of both forms of civic engagement through promoting support for peacebuilding. Future research should directly compare these general forms of civic engagement with collective action tendencies regarding social change to improve the status of a particular group.

The findings also indicated that support for peacebuilding was associated with higher civic engagement, including both volunteering and political participation. This is in line with previous research that has shown the importance of attitudes as underlying motivations for peacebuilding behaviours (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). That is, young people from both Catholic and Protestant background who ascribed to and endorse support for peacebuilding such as, symbolic memorials, removal of peace walls, integrated and shared education, contact through sports, and new forms of political participation outside of the primary historical parties, are more likely to also help rebuild society. For example, they may engage in more volunteering, such as collecting money for charities, helping at school or working to solve a problem in their neighbourhoods, and political participation, such as signing petitions, boycotting products, and engaging in social media about political issues. These forms of civic engagement are at the heart of building a vibrant civil society that can transform a history of violence intergroup conflict.

The analyses further highlighted the importance of support for peacebuilding. The relations among contact quality and quantity and both forms of civic engagement were partially mediated by support for peacebuilding. That is, higher quality and quantity contact was associated with higher support for peacebuilding, which in turn explained the higher levels of volunteering and political participation among young people in Northern Ireland. The finding

offers support for Bowman's (2011) argument that diversity experiences influence proximal outcomes which leads to attitudes towards civic action and subjective norms regarding civic action, which in turn promote behavioural intentions and civic action. Thus, these types of mediational models suggest key aspects to target for future interventions.

Limitations

Although this study has important implications for theory and practice, there are a number of limitations of this research. First because of the correlational design and cross-sectional data, conclusions about causation or directionality cannot be determined (Cole & Maxwell, 2009; Maxwell & Cole, 2007); however, support for the primary model tested, as compared to the alternative models, is found in this sample. In addition, the multivariate framework of the primary model provides a more stringent test by estimating the indirect effects for only the unique variance of each outcome. Second, the support for peacebuilding measure needs to be further tested amongst different samples in Northern Ireland to determine its validity and reliability. It would also be useful to examine how support for peacebuilding as explicitly future-focused and related to policies and practices, may be relate to other constructs such as forgiveness and reconciliation. Third, contact quality and quantity were measured using single items (to prevent the questionnaire being too long for youth) rather than the traditional multi-item measures. Future research should aim to address this limitation by using multi-item scales and including measures of friendship formation to better understand the difference between mere contact and friendship (Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009; Turner & Cameron, 2016). Relatedly, future research should also explicitly test naturally occurring or spontaneous contact vs. contact through more formal programmes or interventions. Fourth, while the positive connection between the support for peacebuilding and the civic engagement constructs of volunteering and political participation should be noted, it is also possible that some forms of engagement may contribute to further divisions. Future research should consider more in-depth qualitative exploration of the motivations and meanings of civic engagement for youth in divided societies. Importantly, this study was conducted with youth all born after the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement; however, future research should consider a generational comparison of the effects of contact on civic engagement through support for peacebuilding. That approach may offer important insights into the role of narratives and history on adult and youth civic engagement and peacebuilding in post-conflict settings. Finally, future research should also consider and test multiple mediators, such as empathy and trust, to complement the focus of the current paper on the importance of shared support for peacebuilding in a post-accord generation.

Implications

The findings of this study offer support for the peacebuilding potential of conflicted-affected youth. Youth living with the legacy of protracted intergroup conflict can support peacebuilding and engage in constructive societal behaviours. These results have important implications for policy and practice, highlighting the peacebuilding power of contact, which can be supported through formal and informal educational interventions in Northern Ireland (McKeown & Cairns, 2012). This suggests that intergroup contact schemes should go beyond prejudice reduction, and consider how to promote peacebuilding. One key area for this to occur in Northern Ireland is through the education system, where opportunities for contact may (or may not) exist. For example, through developing and introducing intergroup relations programmes in educational settings similar to that outlined by Gurin and colleagues (2004). Indeed, participants in this study were found to associate integrated and shared education, which facilitate intergroup contact, as a way to promote peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. This offers some support for policy-makers and practitioners to continue to provide such opportunities for Northern Ireland's youth, particularly in light of increasing funding cuts.

Complementing educational interventions, more sustained efforts to encourage contact through social activities is important, for example, through engaging in mixed sports, another item on the final support for peacebuilding scale. International and government support for such programmes, like Peace Players International which uses basketball to create "a safe and neutral space where young people can begin to form deep personal bonds and lasting friendships" in Northern Ireland, may hold promise (PPI, 2017). It is worth noting, however, that sports interventions do not always have positive effects and that this may differ depending on group status. For example, in a study examining sports interventions in Israel/Palestine Ditlmann and Samii (2016) found that participation had a positive effect on outgroup attitudes for Jewish youth, but a negative effect on outgroup attitudes for Arab-Palestinian youth. This suggests that caution should be applied as contact is not always positive (McKeown & Dixon, 2017) and some contact programmes may in fact reinforce negative intergroup perceptions (Connolly, 2000; Paolini et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it could be argued that intergroup contact programmes, including those which focus on sport, promote cooperation and common goals and can therefore be beneficial for intergroup relations. This assertion should be further tested in the Northern Ireland context.

Moving beyond contact, the items in the support for peacebuilding scale also suggest a desire amongst Northern Ireland's youth to change the social landscape in a way which promotes community relations, for example through the re-designing of murals, removing peace walls and developing more symbols of peace. More opportunities should be provided for youth to help to produce a future Northern Ireland in which they wish to live. Organisations such as Include Youth (IY, 2017) and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF, 2017), among others, are at the forefront of channelling youth voices to inform policy and practice.

The findings from this paper support a shift in research to recognise the peacebuilding potential of youth in post-accord societies. Future research should investigate how other individual, family and contextual factors may affect youth support for peacebuilding and behaviours. Particularly in post-accord societies, future research and practice should recognise and embrace the constructive agency of youth by providing opportunities for intergroup contact which can promote support for peacebuilding and in turn increased civic engagement to address issues of public concern.

Notes

i) To assess the possibility of common method variance (CMV) among the self-reported items, a separate model was estimated with the addition of a single latent variable, with all of the observed items as indicators (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The items for each of the two outcomes, volunteering and political participation, all significantly loaded on the common method factor; however, the support for peacebuilding items did not. Quantity ($p < .05$), but not quality, also loaded on to the common factor. In this model, Mplus did not calculate indirect effects with bootstrapping; however, the standardized indirect effects were as follows: indirect effect from quality contact to volunteering ($p = .02$), indirect effect from quantity contact to volunteering ($p = .08$), indirect effect from quality contact to political participation ($p = .01$), and indirect effect from quantity contact to volunteering ($p = .06$).

ii) 'Peace walls' are how the physical barriers between interface neighborhoods are referred to in Northern Ireland.

iii) 'Parades' is a generic term to refer to the Orange Order marches and celebrations that happen throughout the year, but primary during the summer months in Northern Ireland.

iv) 'Union Jack' refers to the British flag.

Funding

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Peacebuilding and Contentious Issues Items

Please respond below the extent to which you 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with the following statements:

1. *Peace walls[ii] in Northern Ireland should be taken down to improve community relations*

2. *The Northern Irish identity offers a shared identity which can help bring communities living here together*

3. *Learning about British and Irish history in Northern Ireland can help increase understanding relations in NI*

4. *Irish should become one of the official languages of Northern Ireland*

5. *Parades[iii] are an important part of Northern Ireland's culture and should remain*

6. *The Union Jack[iv] should be flown over Belfast City Hall at all times*

7. *Catholics should not marry Protestants, in the same way Protestants should not marry Catholics.*

8. *Integrated and shared education can help bring divided communities together*

9. *Unionist, Loyalist, Nationalist and Republican political parties are preventing peace in Northern Ireland*

10. *The peace bridge in Derry-Londonderry is a physical symbol of change and cross-community engagement; more symbols like this are needed*

11. *Mixed sports teams of Catholics and Protestants encourage cross-community peacebuilding*

12. *Murals in Northern Ireland are reminders of community division and should be redesigned*

13. *Sporting events should ditch 'God Save the Queen'*