POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE MACROSYSTEM: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF
NORTHERN IRISH NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

by

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According to social-ecological theory, the macrosystem refers to the overarching forces that project meaning and information to society (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Assessing individual development in contexts of political violence requires a systematic macro-level measurement. Prior research on post-accord Northern Ireland measured the macrosystem by coding news reports about peace and conflict from 2006-2011 (N = 6,082) and assessing trends in intergroup relations over time. The current study selected a sample of articles from this dataset (n = 144) and used a thematic analysis to identify the major themes comprising these trends. Reports that were coded as politically tense discussed policing and justice, memory, intractability, disruptions to family and community, othering, and violent imagery. Reports coded as positive discussed cooperation, leadership, systemic transformation, reflection, and optimism. By identifying the most salient features of political violence in the macrosystem, this study may inform future research on the processes through which macro-level factors influence individual development.
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INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the extensive impact of political violence on individual development, researchers have noted the importance of assessing the macrosystem (i.e., the overarching political and cultural patterns that permeate society) to better understand the processes through which this impact takes place (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns, 2009; Dubow et al., 2010). Although much research has discussed the theoretical importance of the macrosystem, empirical studies that incorporate systematic assessment of this system remain sparse. Disciplines outside of psychology that engage in macro-level research (i.e., political science, sociology, criminology) can provide insight into both the measurement and conceptualization of this level. Many of the existing measures from these disciplines, however, have a limited applicability for psychological research due to their narrow emphasis on state-level analyses, high thresholds for direct violence, and use of negative peace indicators (i.e., the absence of overt violence). These measures do not account for regional or inter-community violence, low-level violence such as tension, hostility, and segregation, or positive peace indicators (i.e., the presence of justice and constructive relationships). Further, these measures fail to capture the overarching discourse and societal narratives that influence individual attitudes about political violence. Previous research addressed these limitations by introducing systematic newspaper coding as a measure of the
macrosystem and using it to assess trends in intergroup relations in Northern Ireland (Townsend et al., 2016). The current study expands on this by conducting a thematic analysis on the content of the new reports in order to better interpret these trends. Developing a measurement of the macrosystem and refining the interpretation of this measurement are essential for the advancement of research into social ecologies of political violence, the transactions occurring across levels, and the relation between macro-level factors and individual functioning.

1.1 A Social Ecological Framework for Development

Early approaches to developmental research conceptualized an individual’s life trajectory in terms of either a blank slate open to boundless conditioning or a predetermined outcome dictated by a continuously unfolding genetic blueprint (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1977). In contemporary research, this paradigm has shifted toward a model of probabilistic epigenesis, which suggests that a given developmental outcome may be probable based on genetic propensities and early experience, but the individual’s trajectory is still largely dependent on environmental factors (Lerner & Kaufmann, 1985). In this Contextualistic View, psychological processes must be understood alongside social, cultural, and historical experience. The individual interacts dynamically and continuously with the environment and both mutually influence the other to drive the course of development. Recognizing the relationship between individual and context as a critical determinant of development, Urie Bronfenbrenner proposed a Social-Ecological Theory to account for the multiple layers of context that affect individual development.
This developmental framework was conceived as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next (see Figure 1.1).

The lowest level of analysis according to this model reflects variation in *ontogenetic development* and focuses on the individual’s psychological functioning and adaptation. Individual differences in emotion regulation, autonomic stress responses, and behavioral conduct are all included in this level, as well as features and interactions within the child’s biological/physiological systems (Cummings et al., 2009; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Although studies at this level are fundamental to understanding individual development, focusing too narrowly on this level can lead to unexplained variation. For instance, a review of research on the effects of war on children found that they exhibited a wide range of emotional, behavioral, and psychosomatic symptoms that were difficult to predict without accounting for variation in the broader context (Elbedour, ten Bensel, & Bastien, 1993). As a result, many psychologists have expanded their purview to examine interactions occurring across levels of the social ecology and the potential influence of outer systems on individual outcomes.
Most proximal to ontogenic development is the *microsystem*, which includes all the settings in which an individual interacts (e.g., family, school, work, peer groups). The microsystem directly impacts individuals by comprising the spaces in which they undergo socialization, form relationships, and build emotional and cognitive skills (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, within the family microsystem, individuals are influenced by such factors as parenting style, sibling relations, marital conflict, and socioeconomic status (Cox & Paley, 1997; Cummings & Cummings, 1998). Within the school system, they may be influenced by the curricula, teaching style, and peer relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Goeke-Morey, Taylor, Merrilees, Cummings, Cairns, & Shirlow, 2013). The *mesosystem* works in conjunction with this level, accounting for interrelations between each of the individual’s microsystems. Examples might include interactions between peer networks at school and in the community, as well as the influences of a parent’s workplace on the family.

A step beyond this layer is the *exosystem*, which includes factors outside the individual’s immediate setting that indirectly impact the inner systems and ontogenic development. This layer typically reflects dynamics occurring in the broader community, such as factors related to neighborhood crime, governing agencies, public resources, and the healthcare industry. Activities and changes within these localities can impact the individual by “trickling down” through the other people and systems in their life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1994).

The next level of the ecological framework, and the focus of the current study, is called the *macrosystem*. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977):

The *macrosystem* refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems,
of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are the concrete manifestations. Macrosystems are conceived and examined not only in structural terms but as carriers of information and ideology that, both explicitly and implicitly, endow meaning and motivation to particular agencies, social networks, roles, activities, and their interrelations. (p. 515)

In other words, this system reflects the sociocultural beliefs and values that permeate society and – either directly or indirectly – influence individual functioning. This system includes the overarching forces that shape patterns of social interaction and create structural blueprints for society (Neal & Neal, 2013). In his own application of the social ecological framework, Belsky (1980) describes the macrosystem as a “complex web of causative agents” that accounts for such things as societal attitudes and legal frameworks (p. 328-329). As macro-level patterns change over time, they can indirectly affect individual development by shifting factors in the the exosystem or microsystem, or they can directly affect individuals by transmitting information that shapes their attitudes, beliefs, and values (Cicchetti & Aber, 1998).

Finally, the outermost system is called the chronosystem, and it includes all the major life transitions and historical events that occur throughout development. These events re-direct the way individuals interact and respond to each of the other systems. Rather than acting in a vacuum, development occurs within each of the nested systems described above. Transactions occur across levels of the social ecology, and each system mutually influences one another to shape individual development and adaptation (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). When stressors in the outer ecosystems outweigh protective factors, the probability of maladaptation increases (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998). Application of the social ecological model encourages researchers to move beyond the mere identification of variables that correlate with individual outcomes to focus on the
processes through which they interact (Belsky, 1980). In trying to understand the complexity of psychological functioning and development over time, designs that include multiple levels of analysis may create a more robust understanding of the person-in-context than those that only include a single level (Cummings et al., 2009).

1.2 Social Ecologies of Political Violence

The majority of developmental research on political violence has focused on negative outcomes. These studies have documented internalizing problems such as posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety (Belsky, 2008; Furr, Comer, Edmunds, & Kendall, 2010; Hadi & Llabre, 2008; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004), as well as externalizing problems such as hyperactivity, aggression, and alcohol abuse (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2012; Boxer et al., 2013; Schiff, Benbenishty, McKay, DeVoe, Liu, & Hasin, 2006; Thabet, Karim, & Vostanis, 2006; Zahr, 1996). In light of the growing literature in developmental psychology on contexts of political violence and the symptoms that can result, there is a critical need for further examination of the developmental antecedents leading to these outcomes and the protective factors that buffer against them (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Examining why, how, for whom, and in what circumstances these symptoms develop necessitates a process-oriented approach that identifies the dynamic interactions underlying psychological outcomes, the broader causal factors influencing adjustment, and the social contexts that shape them (Dawes & Cairns, 1999; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Cicchetti & Cohen, 2006).

Researchers are beginning to move beyond contextual analysis that incorporates only one or two levels of analysis to give rigorous, systematic, and empirical attention to
community, political, and cultural factors operating in the social ecology (Cummings et al., 2009; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009). In settings characterized by intense political violence and intergroup conflict, challenges surfacing in the broader ecological systems have a particularly salient impact on individual development and adaptation. War and violent conflict impact the course of development not only by directly threatening the lives of individuals, but also by disrupting the environment in which healthy development occurs (Betancourt & Kahn, 2008). Beyond the individual’s immediate setting, political violence occurring in the “higher order social ecosystems” can indirectly influence development by shifting attitudes, policies, activities, and access to resources in the individual’s microsystems (Boxer, 2013). Cummings et al. (2009) proposed a framework for conceptualizing a social ecology of political violence, which provides examples of factors in each system that may impact individuals (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: A theoretical framework outlining a social ecology of political violence in Northern Ireland (Cummings et al., 2009)
As Figure 1.2 suggests, developmental outcomes may vary depending on the characteristics of each system and the transactions that occur across systems. For instance, individual outcomes may vary depending on their exposure to conflict as well as the type of violence encountered (Dawes & Cairns, 1999). For example, Barber’s (2008) research on youth and political violence contrasts the experiences of Palestinians and Bosnians. Whereas the former defined their experiences in terms of intrusion and humiliation, the latter described it in terms of destruction and loss of life. Barber suggests that the milieus specific to each conflict – including the “tactics, severity, duration, proximity, purpose, resolution, and impact,” (2008, p. 307) contribute to the variation in youth outcomes. A better understanding of individual experiences in contexts of political violence requires an approach that considers the unique dynamics operating within these outer systems and the transactions occurring across them (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993).

1.2.1 Political Violence and the Exosystem

Recent work on political violence and social-ecological theory has sought to differentiate between inter-community (e.g., ethnopolitical) and intra-community violence (Boxer et al, 2013; Goeke-Morey et al., 2009). For example, Goeke-Morey et al. (2009) found that inter-community and intra-community violence differentially predicted child adjustment problems in Northern Ireland. A 4-wave longitudinal study in Belfast further supports this by showing that perceptions of sectarian antisocial behavior in the community predicted higher youth maladjustment than did nonsectarian antisocial behavior (Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, Shirlow, & Goeke-Morey, 2013). Similarly, exposure to ethnopolitical violence predicted aggression among both Israeli and
Palestinian children, even after controlling for exposure to intra-community, school and family violence (Boxer et al., 2013).

Measures of the community that are not based on individual reports have also been used as a way of disentangling individual perceptions of the exosystem from more “objective” metrics. For example, research in Northern Ireland incorporated measures of “historical political violence” using the number of politically-motivated deaths recorded in the sampled neighborhoods (Cummings, Merrilees, Schermerhorn, Goeke-Morey, & Shirlow 2012), while crime statistics from local police reports have been used in both Northern Ireland (Cummings, et al., 2013) and Colombia (Restrepo, Spagat, & Vargas, 2006).

1.2.2 Political Violence and the Macrosystem

In a social ecology of political violence, the macrosystem subsumes the social, political, and cultural values that foster sectarianism, violence, reconciliation, and demands for justice. The social institutions in a given context “express and maintain culture, helping it shape and express the characteristics and psychology of an individual” (Staub, 1996, p.117). In regions of protracted conflict, these values are often transmitted through the master narratives operating in society. According to Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut (2014), individuals often engage with the dominant narratives of their ingroup as a way of coping with fear and insecurity or justifying violence against the outgroup. Hammack (2011) further suggests that individuals develop and construct identities by engaging with a matrix of discourses about social identity and cultural participation. His research with Israeli and Palestinian youth shows how they appropriate elements of their
respective master narratives and incorporate them into their identity (Hammack, 2011). For example, he shows that Jewish Israeli youth connected with themes of persecution, victimization, existential insecurity, and exceptionalism, whereas Palestinian youth connected with themes of collective loss, land dispossession, existential insecurity, and resistance. Because political violence is a societal process, a better understanding of the overarching societal discourses can shed light on the individual’s experience of conflict.

Although research has shown that societal beliefs and values can influence the course of development, operationalizing these constructs and measuring them in a systematic way can be difficult. Some scholars do not believe that macrocontexts can be measured quantitatively and instead argue that complex systems of cultural meaning are best captured through mixed method analyses (Cicchetti & Aber, 1998; Sullivan, 1998). In order to produce research that integrates across multiple levels of the social ecology and assesses the impact of overarching narratives on individual development, methodological issues related to measurement of the macrosystem need to be considered.

1.3 Measuring the Macrosystem

Interdisciplinary research on the economic, social, educational, and political systems that comprise Bronfenbrenner’s definition of the macrosystem have used different approaches to measuring political violence. In particular, disciplines such as political science, sociology, and criminology have developed datasets to analyze armed conflict. Although these datasets provide systematic information on war and organized violence over a wide range of years, which is useful for comparing levels of direct violence across time and between different nations, they also face three major
limitations and constraints. First, the majority of these datasets use the nation-state as their unit of analysis (e.g., Polity IV), which makes it impossible to assess political violence at a subnational/regional level or in cases of contested land, such as Northern Ireland or the Palestinian territories.

Second, these datasets operationalize conflict using thresholds of battle-related deaths (e.g., Correlates of War, Uppsala Conflict Data Program) or acts of terrorism (e.g., Political Terror Scale) as indicators of violence. When levels fall below established thresholds, such as in a post-accord period, these datasets stop tracking change. This makes it difficult to continue assessing conflict transformation following a peace agreement, as this type of analysis often requires attention to intergroup attitudes and behaviors beyond those that result in fatalities. Thus, although these datasets offer rich, time-series data that may provide cross-national comparisons of macrosystem factors, they are insufficient for psychological research related to post-accord peacebuilding.

These datasets also point to a third limitation: the reliance on indicators of negative peace to assess changes in political violence without incorporating indicators of positive peace. According to Galtung (1969), negative peace refers to the absence of overt conflict, while positive peace expands this concept to include the presence of justice, restoration of relationships, and creation of constructive social systems. A comprehensive approach to the impact of political violence on individuals requires attention to both of these constructs. Yet, all the datasets mentioned above rely solely on indicators of direct violence. Even the UK Peace Index relies on negative indicators such as homicide, violent crime, weapons crime, public disorder, and the number of police officers. Although these measures can provide useful information on intergroup
violence occurring at the community level, these metrics ultimately fail to account for positive advances in the peace process or intergroup progress throughout the years.

Interdisciplinary researchers often rely on survey methods to collect widespread information on public opinion and political perception (e.g., World Values Survey, Latin American Public Opinion Project). The use of large-scale surveys to gauge individual attitudes and aggregate them on a regional or national level can provide a broad sense of cultural norms and perceptions (Christ et al., 2014). Although this method can effectively measure societal beliefs regarding peace and conflict, population-wide longitudinal surveys and opinion polls can be quite expensive (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998), and many conflict settings lack the resources to conduct polling of this magnitude. In addition, major surveys tend to collect data on a yearly basis, making it difficult to detect changes in the macrosystem occurring within a year that may inform our understanding of the conflict or post-accord context. Further, because survey data derive from assessments in the microsystem, their adequacy as a measure of the macrosystem is debatable (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, measuring political violence in the macrosystem may necessitate a different approach than those used by existing datasets on armed conflict, crime statistics, and large-scale surveys.

1.4 Newspaper Data in Conflict Research

Scholars across disciplines use newspaper reports to analyze different aspects of society. News reports can be especially useful for analyzing political violence, because they provide basic observable facts about what happened and who was involved in events as they unfolded (Möller, 2011). Local news organizations tend to have the most detailed
coverage of conflict and a lower threshold for what is considered “newsworthy” relative to international newspapers (Öberg & Sollenberg, 2011). As a result, local news sources can be useful for highlighting the way discourses surrounding intergroup conflict and peace processes have been systematically produced, reproduced, and projected throughout society. Aggregating news reports over time can further highlight political trends and the ways in which individuals and groups respond to them (Myers & Caniglia, 2004; Townsend et al., 2016).

It is also important, however, to recognize that newspapers are not transparent conduits of political information, but instead use a particular lens for interpreting events (Möller, 2011; Myers and Caniglia, 2004). Local news in particular can include more bias and censorship than international sources, which are further removed from events and target an audience that is less affected by the outcome of the conflict (Öberg & Sollenberg, 2011). The uniqueness of an event and its political significance, the newspaper’s political leanings, reporters’ proximity to sources, and demands from an audience can all shift the nature of topics being reported (Oliver & Myers, 1999). This may be especially pervasive in reports related to peace and conflict, because news organizations tend to increase coverage on violent events while under-reporting on positive progress (Barranco & Wisler, 1999). News organizations may also shift their reporting patterns as readers become fatigued by ongoing reports on intractable conflict (Myers & Caniglia, 2004).

Yet, despite the potential selection bias, censorship, and reporting patterns, newspapers can directly impact the way people observe and interpret societal events (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Gitlin, 1979). By relaying information on events happening at
the political and community levels – regardless of how accurate or comprehensive – the form and content of news can shape and inform individual attitudes about the conflict. Rather than using the newspaper data as a means of objectively measuring political activity, it can be used to assess the overarching political climate surrounding a conflict. The present study will use newspaper data to assess the macrosystem in this way, analyzing the form and content of information being transmitted to individuals and the political climate created by these reporting patterns.

1.5 A Case Study: Post-accord Northern Ireland

Although the conflict in Northern Ireland dates back centuries, the most recent period of violence began in the 1960s and led to decades of divisions between Catholics/Republicans/Nationalists who wanted to create a united Ireland and Protestants/Loyalists/Unionists who wanted to remain a part of the United Kingdom (Muldoon, Trew, Todd, Rougier, & McLaughlin, 2007). Despite the relative success of structural reforms initiated by the 1998 Belfast Agreement (e.g., the creation of a power-sharing government and the decentralization of judicial powers from the UK to Northern Ireland), violence and intergroup tensions have persisted in the form of community segregation, dissident political groups, and sectarian-motivated crime (Shirlow, 2012). Flags, political murals, and “peace walls” continue to mark the more divisive neighborhoods, while annual participation in the summer parading season and celebrations of in-group culture have kept sectarianism at the surface (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). These in-group parades often lead to riots and political quarreling. Although bomb alerts, security searches, and constant threats of violence have largely subsided as a result of the ceasefires, individuals
are now exposed to a political climate in which the validity of the peace agreement is constantly questioned (Cairns et al., 2006). A deeper understanding of this political climate and its changes over time can better inform our understanding of individual development within this context.

Yet, systematic assessments of Northern Ireland’s macrosystem have been difficult due to the limitations of existing macro-level datasets used to measure armed conflict. These datasets cannot be applied to Northern Ireland, because post-accord tensions manifest through segregation, political intransigence, and low-level violence rather than high thresholds of ‘battle-related deaths’. In addition, these datasets typically use state-level metrics that code the United Kingdom as a whole rather than allowing for a subnational analysis that focuses directly on Northern Ireland. Lastly, the emphasis on conflict and violence in these datasets makes it difficult to assess indicators of positive peace, such as intergroup reconciliation and advances in the peace process.

A recent study by Townsend et al. (2016) addressed these challenges and limitations by introducing a new measure of the macrosystem and demonstrating its utility in Northern Ireland. This study systematically coded Northern Irish newspapers over a period of six years based on each article’s reflection of political tensions and positive relations between Catholics and Protestants, among other criteria. The overarching trends in political tensions were then compared to pre-existing macro-level measurements such as the Political Terror Scale and incidents of Sectarian Hate Crime (see Figure 1.3). In addition, codes in both political tensions and positive relations were averaged by month and used to assess the seasonal fluctuations across any given year (see Figure 1.4). The authors’ findings suggest that systematically coding news articles over a
period of time may contribute a more nuanced understanding of changes in the macrosystem than existing datasets.

Figure 1.3: Comparison of the newspaper coding with existing macro-level measurements for Northern Ireland (2006-2011). Each scale has been standardized by converting data into z-scores (Townsend et al., 2016)

Figure 1.4: Seasonal fluctuations in political tensions and positive relations between Catholics and Protestants as reflected in the newspaper articles, averaged by month, 2006-2011 (Townsend et al., 2016)
This method of newspaper coding addresses the limitations described above, because it allows for a subnational analysis, variation of time units, and indicators of both low-level violence and positive relations. However, without a better understanding of the newspaper reports defining these trends, it is impossible to know what changes in “political tensions” and “positive relations” actually mean. In other words, what type of information did coders interpret as reflecting high political tensions, and what type of information did they interpret as reflecting high positive relations? The current study seeks to answer these questions by using a thematic analysis of the newspaper articles to provide deeper insight into the particular discourses or events that individuals in Northern Ireland perceive as indicative of tension or positivity between Catholics and Protestants. These themes may then be used to guide future analyses of the Northern Ireland macrosystem in order to better understand how a changing political climate and shifts in the social ecology may ultimately impact individuals’ psychological functioning and behavior.
METHOD

2.1 Procedures

2.1.1 Article selection.

Using Lexis Nexis, newspaper articles from 2006-2011 were randomly selected from *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish News* – the two most circulated Northern Irish daily newspapers (Lambourne, 2013). All articles reflecting the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process were identified using the following keywords: sectarian, paramilitary, crime, violence, loyalist, republican, IRA (Irish Republican Army), UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), UDA (Ulster Defence Association), SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party), DUP (Democratic Unionist Party), nationalist, unionist, and Sinn Féin. To ensure that these search terms captured all articles in the online system that had any relation to the conflict and peace process, the retrieved articles were checked and cross-checked against hard copies of the newspapers across different days of the week. From the pool of all identified articles, two were randomly selected per newspaper per weekday so that a total of four articles were coded for each weekday during this period (N = 6,082).

2.1.2 Coding procedure

Sixteen undergraduate students were recruited from the University of Ulster Magee Campus in Northern Ireland to serve as coders for the project. Each article was
read by two Catholic students and two Protestant students and rated according to seven criteria. First, coders rated each article according to its overall reflection of positive = 0 or negative = 1 relations between Catholics and Protestants. For the following six criteria, articles were rated using a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much) on the degrees to which each article reflected (1) political tensions between Catholics and Protestants, (2) positive relations between Catholics and Protestants, (3) progress or benefit for Catholics, (4) progress or benefit for Protestants, (5) threat or detriment to Catholics, and (6) threat or detriment to Protestants. These constructs were intentionally separated, because an article could simultaneously indicate both political tensions and positive relations or both progress and threat. In other words, the constructs are not mutually exclusive. Coder pairings were alternated every 250 articles using an adapted Latin square design to account for potential drift.

Common to studies that investigate topics related to perception and attitudes, this study used a “naïve” or “untrained” coding system. Although manualized coding is common in psychological research, the use of strict coding guidelines can inhibit the coder’s ability to detect subtle nuances of emotion and group dynamics hidden in the subtext (Schulz & Waldinger, 2005). By using lay observers who are native to Northern Ireland instead of trained coders, we were able to increase ecological validity by retaining the coders’ ability to apply intuitive judgments to the articles’ content and interpret culturally- and historically-embedded information (Waldinger, Schulz, Hauser, Allen, & Crowell, 2004).
2.1.3 Inter-rater reliability

Four coders reviewed each news article, making it necessary to calculate a reliability index to demonstrate the amount of agreement among their ratings. The intra-class correlation (ICC) was determined to be the most appropriate statistic because (a) it is suitable for ordinal and interval data such as the Likert-scaled variables used in this study; (b) it can be applied when more than two coders rate each target; and (c) it accounts for the magnitude of agreement between coders rather than calculating “all-or-nothing” agreement (Hallgren, 2012). From the different cases of ICC specified by Shrout and Fleiss (1979), we applied a two-way random effects model using average measures and absolute agreement. This model generalizes beyond the particular sample of coders used in this study, and it is appropriate to use when multiple targets (i.e., articles) are rated by the same set of coders (McGraw & Wong, 1996). Further, because our research questions are based on the averaged rating across all four coders rather than the ratings of a single coder, the “average measures” unit of analysis can be reported (Hallgren, 2012). In a prior study using untrained coders, the inter-rater reliability was similarly calculated by averaging across several coders (Waldinger et al., 2004).

For each item, the ICC(2,k) coefficient was calculated for each set of 250 articles. ICC(2) refers to designs in which the coders have been randomly selected from a larger population, and each coder rates each article. The “k” indicates a reliability index calculated by averaging the measurements of k number of raters (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). The coefficients from each set of 250 were then averaged together to give a final ICC(2,k) of $\alpha = 0.58$ for political tensions and $\alpha = 0.68$ for positive relations. According
to Cicchetti (1994), coefficients between .40 and .59 have “fair” reliability, and between .60 and .74 have “good” reliability.

2.1.4 Measures

The quantitative dataset described above was used to select articles for the thematic analysis. In order to generate articles that represented both negative and positive peace, the “political tensions” and “positive relations” measures were used. For these two items, coders were asked to read each article and answer the following questions: (1) “How much do you think this article reflects political tensions between Catholics and Protestants?” and (2) “How much do you think this article reflects positive relations between Catholics and Protestants?” Each article was rated along a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much), with higher scores indicating more tension and more positivity.

2.1.5 Sampling from the dataset

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show the frequencies and distributions of “political tensions” and “positive relations” ratings across the entire dataset. As shown in Figure 2.1, the political tension codes followed a relatively normal distribution with the majority of articles reflecting medium political tensions ($M = 1.73, SD = 0.94$). Figure 2.2 shows that the distribution of positive relations codes is heavily skewed with the majority of articles reflecting low positive relations ($M = 0.77, SD = 0.82$).
Figure 2.1: Frequency distribution of article ratings according to their reflection of political tensions between Catholics and Protestants. $N = 6,070$

Figure 2.2: Frequency distribution of article ratings according to their reflection of positive relations between Catholics and Protestants. $N = 6,069$
Both the “political tensions” and “positive relations” items were used to select a total sample of 144 articles from the pool of 6,082 articles. This sample represented six categories: those that were rated as having high political tensions \((n=24)\), medium political tensions \((n=24)\), low political tensions \((n=24)\), high positive relations \((n=24)\), medium positive relations \((n=24)\), and low positive relations \((n=24)\). An equal number of articles was chosen for each of the categories despite the skewed distribution of “positive relations” codes.

To select the sample, first all the articles that had been coded at the highest level of political tensions were identified. This included all articles with an average rating between 3.75 and 4.0 \((n = 67, 1.1\%)\)\(^1\). Next, these articles were stratified by year and newspaper source in order to ensure that the sample included an even distribution across all six years and both newspapers (Belfast Telegraph and Irish News). Using a random number generator, two articles were randomly selected per newspaper per year to give a total of 24 articles. This procedure was repeated to select a sample of 24 articles that had been coded at a medium level of political tensions – those with an average rating of 2.0 \((n = 560, 9.2\%)\), and a sample of 24 articles that had been coded at the lowest level of political tensions – those with an average rating of 0 \((n = 229, 3.8\%)\). In total, the “political tensions” item was used to select and code 72 articles.

The same procedure was repeated for the “positive relations” item. After again stratifying the dataset by year and newspaper source, 24 articles were randomly selected from those coded at the highest level of positive relations, which included all articles with

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\(^1\) Only 23 articles had an average rating of 4.0. For this reason, the range was expanded to include all the articles with an average rating between 3.75 and 4.0. This wider range made it possible to select articles that were evenly distributed across each year and newspaper source. In 2008, only 1 article from the Belfast Telegraph and 0 articles from the Irish News had an average rating between 3.75 and 4.0. For this year, the range was further expanded to include articles coded between 3.5 and 4.0 \((n=7)\).
an average rating between 3.25 and 4.0 ($n = 83, 1.4\%$)\(^2\). In addition, 24 articles were randomly selected from the pool of articles that had been coded at a medium level of positive relations – those with an average rating of 2.0 ($n = 227, 3.7\%$), and 24 articles were randomly selected from the pool of articles that had been coded at the lowest level of positive relations – those with an average rating of 0 ($n = 1,700, 28.0\%$). In total, the “positive relations” item was used to select and code 72 articles.

2.2 Analysis Plan

2.2.1 Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyze the content of the newspaper articles and determine the patterns and categories of discourse that coders found to be indicative of political tension or positive relations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. One of the primary benefits of using thematic analysis over other qualitative methods (e.g., discourse analysis, content analysis) is its ability to be applied independently of theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows for a more inductive process where the researcher can describe the dataset in rich detail without restricting the analysis to pre-determined categories and keywords. Further, the themes generated by this analysis can highlight how individual meanings and experiences of the conflict may be “the effects of a range of discourses operating within society” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

Thematic analyses were carried out for the high political tensions and high positive relations articles to identify meaningful data extracts using the rigorous method

\(^2\) Only 1 article had an average rating of 4.0, and only 15 articles had an average rating between 3.75 and 4.0. For this reason, the range was expanded to include all those with an average rating between 3.25 and 4.0 so that the articles could be evenly distributed across each year and newspaper source.
outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I read through each of the 144 articles to familiarize myself with the data and obtain a sense of the articles’ content and breadth. Next, I re-read each of the articles while systematically coding data extracts that highlighted the article’s core message, appeared to be particularly interesting or meaningful, and signified repeated patterns across the dataset. Any extract of data could be left uncoded, given a single code, or given multiple codes. Although every analysis is to some degree influenced by the researcher’s own biases and theoretical positions, no theory was applied to generate these codes. Rather, codes were used to describe the “explicit or surface meanings of the data” rather than attempting “to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Table 1 provides a few examples of codes that were applied to data extracts. This coding was done using ATLAS.ti software in order to more easily organize the codes and data extracts.
TABLE 2.1
EXAMPLES OF CODES APPLIED TO DATA EXTRACTS
FOR “HIGH” POLITICAL TENSION AND POSITIVE RELATIONS ARTICLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Data Extract</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Political Tensions</td>
<td>“‘It would be a good thing if they provided the families with the evidence that there was collusion in the Dublin/Monaghan attacks,’ he said. ‘It would finally allow us to know what really happened and who was responsible for the murders of our loved ones.’”</td>
<td>Disruption to family; Police collusion; Truth-seeking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Political Tensions</td>
<td>“Mother-of-two Christina O’Loughlin was on her way home from work at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin city centre on May 17 1974 when three UVF car bombs exploded without warning.”</td>
<td>Disruption to family; Remembering violence; Paramilitary activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Positive Relations</td>
<td>“Declan Donnelly, lifestyle officer at Teemore, said the club is working towards the creation of a strategy ‘that will help further forward and enhance the culture of tolerance and respect that exists within the club’.”</td>
<td>Tolerance; respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Positive Relations</td>
<td>“Apprentice Boys spokesman Tommy Cheevers refused to speculate on the outcome of talks, but said loyalists were genuine in their effort to finding a solution to the issue of contentious marches.”</td>
<td>Looking for solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The coding procedure for the low and medium articles was slightly different. As indicated above, codes for the high-rated articles were assigned to all of the identified data extracts within each article. By comparison, codes for the low- and medium-rated articles were applied to each article as a whole. This was done for multiple reasons. First, most of the medium-rated articles included both positive and negative elements, which were spread throughout the article and difficult to capture using individual data extracts. Coding articles as a whole allowed for an analysis that took these tensions and contradictions into account. Second, data extracts within the low-rated articles could not
be coded in the same way as the other sets, because these articles by definition did not include or minimally included political tensions and/or positive relations; it is difficult to define and categorize the absence of something. Instead, each article was coded based on the elements explaining why it did not reflect tension or positivity. The purpose of the low-rated sets was to provide a contrast to the medium- and high-articles, which helped to better define their themes and explain the overall trends produced by the dataset.

After each set of articles was coded, the resulting lists of codes were sorted into overarching themes and sub-themes, which intended to capture “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 82). This is the phase where interpretive analysis occurs, as the researcher uses each collection of codes to infer an underlying concept or idea. Once organized, each theme was given a name, and both the codes and the data extracts (when applicable) were reviewed to make sure they fit within each theme.

### 2.2.2 Assistant coding

An undergraduate student from the University of Notre Dame served as an assistant or “validity” coder for this research in order to ensure that we both coded articles in a similar way and agreed on the themes emerging from the sample of articles. To do this, 20% of the total sample of articles was randomly selected (30 articles, five articles per category). Each of us independently coded these articles – underlining the data extracts that seemed interesting or important and marking why it was noteworthy. After coding separately, we met to compare and discuss our codes. Though it is difficult
to quantify the level of agreement, our discussions showed that – with a few exceptions – we had marked the same extracts for similar reasons. After the full list of codes was generated for each set of articles, we independently sorted the high political tensions and high positive relations codes into themes before meeting again to compare and discuss results.

For the high political tensions codes, there was high agreement between the themes that we each generated. I had sorted codes into the following six themes: (1) Intractability of conflict; (2) Policing and justice; (3) Othering; (4) Descriptions of violence; (5) Memories of violence; and (6) Disruption to family and community. The assistant coder grouped the codes into five themes, of which the first four agreed with mine both conceptually and by name: (1) Constancy of violence; (2) Distrust of police and nothing being done; (3) Dehumanization; (4) Types of violence; and (5) Emotional and personal responses. Whereas the other coder’s final theme was named “Emotional and personal responses”, I had split these codes into two separate themes named “Memories of violence” (which included *emotional* elements such as trauma) and “Disruption to family and community” (which included *personal* responses such as the effect on families and youth victims). Thus, it was evident that there were elements of agreement within these instances as well. After discussion, we agreed to use “Memories of violence” and “Disruption to family and community” rather than “Emotional and personal responses.”

For the high positive relations codes, there was medium to high agreement between the themes that each of us generated. I had generated the following four themes: (1) Reflection on the past; (2) Optimism about the future; (3) Intergroup cooperation,
which included two subthemes focused on Leadership and Communities; and (4) Systemic Transformation. The assistant coder generated five themes, of which the first four agreed with mine both conceptually and by name: (1) Looking back on the violence; (2) Progress and hope for the future; (3) Strong positive leadership; (4) Communities working together; and (5) Condemning violence. Whereas I had grouped the codes for “Strong positive leadership” and “Communities working together” as subthemes under “Intergroup cooperation”, the other coder had made these as stand-alone themes. After discussion, we decided to use them as stand-alone themes. I had also generated a theme named “Systemic transformation,” which included codes that the other coder had grouped under “Progress and hope for the future.” Similarly, the other coder had generated the theme of “Condemning violence” which I had grouped under the “Communities” subtheme. After discussion, we decided to keep “Systemic transformation” as a theme and discard “Condemning violence.”
RESULTS

3.1 High Political Tensions

3.1.1 Intractability of conflict

The most frequently occurring theme in the set of high political tension articles dealt with the intractability of conflict, comprising 24.8% of the total codes. This theme highlights the persistence and seeming permanence of violence in Northern Ireland and a sense that peace will never come. Some of the codes comprising this theme included patterned or reoccurring violence, slowing the peace process, and dissident attacks. For instance, the following extract was coded as reoccurring violence: “One of Belfast's most notorious interfaces has been the scene of sustained missile throwing since December”\(^3\), while the codes reoccurring violence and dissident attack were both applied to: “He was the gang’s tenth victim in less than a year”\(^4\). The codes dissident violence and slowing the peace process described both “Fear of the murder’s potentially devastating impact on the peace process emerged last night”\(^5\) and “Loyalist paramilitaries were ready to abandon

\(^3\) Bimpe Fatogun, ‘Sustained missile attacks’ at peace line, Irish News: April 20, 2006.


\(^5\) Claire Regan, Butchered; Dissidents blamed for mutilations and murder of ex-spy Donaldson. Belfast Telegraph: April 5, 2006.
their plans for decommissioning and return to arms after dissident republicans killed two soldiers and a policeman.***6

3.1.2 Descriptions of violence

21.4% of the coded extracts described various acts of violence, many of which contained graphic imagery. These included codes such as brutality, bombing, gun violence, violence without guns, and paramilitary operations. Some of the descriptions included a man “who only escaped his attackers when they went in search of a saw to cut him up and dispose of his body,”7 reports of a man found dead and “his right arm was almost severed,”8 and a taxi driver whose “remains lay across the front seats of his cab . . . burnt almost to destruction.”9

3.1.3 Policing and justice

A theme of policing and justice difficulties in Northern Ireland comprised 17.1% of the total codes. The theme included codes such as police biases, police collusion with paramilitaries, ineffective policing, distrusting police, and no justice for victims. Police collusion is evidenced by an official who commented, “I have no doubt that there was collusion between members of the UDR, RUC and loyalist paramilitaries on the attack on

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7  Deborah McAleese, Man convicted of brutal attack, Belfast Telegraph: June 27, 2007.
8  Claire Regan, Butchered; Dissidents blamed for mutilations and murder of ex-spy Donaldson. Belfast Telegraph: April 5, 2006.
Donnelly’s bar,”¹⁰ while ineffective policing, no justice for victims, and police collusion can be seen in a complaint that “the investigation had not been efficiently or properly carried out; no earnest effort was made to identify those responsible; and there were suspicions of state collusion in the murders.”¹¹

3.1.4 Disruption to family and community

One of the themes emerging from the analysis was disruption to family and community systems. This theme comprised 13.8% of the total codes and consisted mainly of extracts noting the effect of violence on entire families, particularly the families of victims. Effect on families can be seen in the following extracts: “Father-of-13 Joseph Morrissey was stabbed to death after being abducted by the Shankill Butcher gang”¹² and “The families of six men murdered . . . have spoken of their sense of "frustration" and "betrayal" at the lack of progress in catching their loved ones' killers.”¹³ This theme also included codes related to youth perpetrators, youth victims, displacement, and neighborhood disturbances.

3.1.5 Memories of violence

12.4% of the total codes were sorted into a theme based on memories of violence. Most of these extracts and nearly half of the articles in this set discussed violence that occurred during the height of the Troubles rather than violence occurring at the time the


¹¹ Seventeen years on and still nobody has been brought to justice, *Belfast Telegraph*: June 24, 2011.


¹³ Barry McCaffrey, Massacre families say police have treated them like mugs, *Irish News*: June 18, 2007.
article was written. This remembrance was most frequently based on truth-seeking, as in
the following extract: “The family of a taxi driver lured to his death by a loyalist murder
squad have called for an independent inquiry as they prepare to mark the 20th
anniversary of his killing,”14 although some others reported on emerging information
from declassified documents. This theme also included codes related to trauma and
ongoing effects, highlighting past events that continue to effect people in the present. For
example, a man that survived a particularly brutal sectarian attack was quoted as saying,
“‘I will always be nervous after what happened, which is why I have left Northern Ireland
and I am not sure if I will ever go back.’”15

3.1.6 Othering

Although all of the generated themes contain elements of intergroup divide, the
“othering” theme focuses on each group’s attitude toward the other group. This theme
comprised 10.5% of the total codes and included data extracts focused on distrusting the
other side, intergroup blame, dehumanization, and generalizing the outgroup. For
instance, reference to a sectarian act “carried out by ‘vermin’”16 was coded as
dehumanization, while the outgroup generalization code was applied to the following:
“The direction in which he was walking towards north Belfast meant the UVF gang knew
their victim was a Catholic.”17

14 Adrian Rutherford, Family of murder victim in call for fresh inquiry, Belfast Telegraph: October
20, 2010.


16 Lisa Smyth, Third attack on Orange Hall carried out by ‘sick vermin’, Belfast Telegraph: July 15,
2009.

3.2 Medium Political Tensions

Although the low-rated articles had perfect coder agreement (i.e., all coders rated it as a 0), and the high-rated articles had near-perfect agreement (i.e., an average rating between 3.75 and 4.0 across all coders), the medium-rated articles had much more coder disagreement. Among the sample of articles chosen for medium political tensions, only one article was rated as a 2 by all four coders. Analysis of these articles revealed that this agreement can be explained by the presence of both positive and negative elements of intergroup relations. Specifically, analysis showed that 11 of the articles (45.8%) discussed ongoing problems related to the conflict and peace process alongside a discussion of improvements, active investigations, and a search for solutions. These articles covered issues related to violence during the parading season, policing and justice failures, and dissident attacks, while also including elements of cross-community dialogue, commitment to the peace process, and efforts to transform broken systems. Six of the articles (25%) discussed political bickering and disagreement over legislation. Four of the articles (16.7%) elaborated on debates by providing multiple perspectives to an issues (e.g., how Belfast murals (mis)representation of history and the difficulty of balancing transparency with security). Three articles (12.5%) lacked a positive element and reported on either antisocial behavior or dissident violence that resulted in minor injuries rather than fatalities.
3.3 Low Political Tensions

Analysis of the low political tensions articles revealed that, overall, articles that reflected low political tensions often did not indicate progress or positive relations. Only four of the articles from this set (16.7%) reflected positive relations between Catholics and Protestants. These articles discussed cross-community projects and initiatives, working together toward common goals, and symbolic gestures from government leaders. The remaining 20 articles (83.3%) were unrelated to relations between Catholics and Protestants. Most of them discussed nonsectarian events in Northern Ireland (e.g., ordinary crime, antisocial behavior), while others reported on violence outside of Northern Ireland (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Toronto).

3.4 High Positive Relations

3.4.1 Intergroup cooperation

The theme of intergroup cooperation emerged from data extracts that reflected unity, tolerance and respect, reconciliation, and compromise. This comprised 26.6% of the total codes. The reconciliation code was applied to such extracts as “barriers that have divided so many people for too many long years came tumbling down”\(^\text{18}\) while both reconciliation and unity were applied to “people have spoken with one voice and have stood by peace, reconciliation, democracy, and freedom.”\(^\text{19}\) Compromise was evidenced by the statement: “Compromises have had to be made: compromise is a dirty word in the course of Irish politics, but people recognise that they had to be made.”\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{18}\) James Traynor, Old barriers fall at icon’s funeral, Irish News: May 22, 2008.


3.4.2 Systemic transformation

A theme of systemic transformation comprised 21.6% of the codes and focused on changes occurring in the present, such as implementation of the peace agreement, practical solutions to challenges, indicators of progress, and the transition from violent tactics to politics. Implementation of the agreement included reports such as Hillary Clinton’s visit to “hail the efforts of the two parties to 'complete the project' with the handover of police and justice responsibilities.”\(^{21}\) The indicators of progress code was applied to such extracts as “the completion of the restoration project was a timely reminder of political progress achieved across the island,”\(^{22}\) while the transition from violence to politics code included extracts like the following: “Once a centre of subversion, [Sinn Fein] is now strictly confined to the business of politics.”\(^{23}\)

3.4.3 Strong leadership

19.4% of the total codes were sorted into a theme based on strong leadership, which included extracts discussing leaders working together, symbolic gestures, dialogue, and positive role models. Both dialogue and leaders working together were applied to extracts like the following statement: “It was a remarkable act of leadership by Adams and McGuinness to talk the IRA into peace and to persuade them to settle for

\(^{21}\) On the brink of deal SF and DUP are poised for historic agreement, Belfast Telegraph: October 9, 2009.


something far less than they had demanded in 1993." Symbolic gestures referred to actions taken by leaders to indicate respect toward the other side, such as wearing a remembrance poppy: “SDLP leader Margaret Ritchie will make history this weekend when she becomes the first nationalist party leader to wear a red poppy at Remembrance Sunday ceremonies.”

3.4.4 Optimism about the future

With 16.7% of the total codes, this theme focused on orientations toward the future and included codes such as hope, which included: “At home we also have a renewed hope and purpose, for the first time in decades a real sense of vibrancy hangs in the air” while thinking about the future comprised extracts like “The future relationship between the Irish Government and the new Stormont administration was on today's agenda.” Other codes making up this theme included the potential for peace and a recognition that people can change.

3.4.5 Reflection on the past

The final theme made up 15.8% of the total codes and focused on the past. These data extracts reflected a shared history, which included that statement that “Your history is our history too”; and healing, which included a suggestion that “such moves would

help heal old wounds in Ireland.” This theme also included extracts about honoring victims, such as: “We can never forget those who have died or been injured or their families”30; and extracts about remembering the past, including: “They will take part in a reflection and remembrance service organised by the Ashton Community Trust.”

3.5 Medium Positive Relations

As mentioned above, most of the medium-rated articles included coder disagreement. This differed from the perfect (or near-perfect) coder agreement of low- and high-rated articles. Only four of the articles chosen for the medium positive relations sample was rated as a 2 by all coders. Similar to the medium political tensions articles, this can be explained by the presence of both positive and negative elements of intergroup relations. In this case, 14 of the articles (58.3%) discussed progress and advances in the peace process alongside ongoing policy challenges and political bickering. These included reports on the implementation of the peace agreement (i.e., power-sharing and devolution of justice powers), cross-community initiatives, and bipartisan legislation, each of which also highlighted disagreements between politicians and dissident opposition. Four of the articles (16.7%) discussed the possibility of a better future while also expressing skepticism and uncertainty, and four articles (16.7%) addressed the tension between honoring the past and moving on from it. The remaining three articles (12.5%) discussed cross-community support and unity in the midst of violence, grief and tragedy.

29 Steven McCaffery, Attwood follows Ritchie with war site visit, Irish News: November 22, 2010.
30 The Queen’s Visit – Queen offers her sympathy, Irish News: May 19, 2011.
31 Belfast Telegraph: September 27, 2010.
3.6 Low Positive Relations

Although most of the low political tensions articles were rated as such because the tensions or violence they identified were unrelated to the Northern Ireland conflict or peace process, most of the low positive relations articles indicated some level of political tensions between Catholics and Protestants. Specifically, 22 of the articles from this set (92%) reported on sectarian-motivated violence, riots, and political bickering. The remaining two articles (8.3%) were not explicitly sectarian but discussed violence against police and prisoners keeping pets.
DISCUSSION

The current study advanced the development of a new approach to systematically measure the macrosystem using post-accord Northern Ireland as a case study. The findings provide informative assessments of both positive and negative macro-level discourse, including the identification of core themes that individuals in Northern Ireland perceive as particularly indicative of tension or progress between Catholics and Protestants. This may facilitate future research on the social ecologies of political violence, the transactions occurring across levels, and the relation between macro-level factors and individual development.

This deeper understanding of the patterns and salient features comprising the macrosystem clarifies the interpretation of quantitative trends produced by the newspaper coding dataset and allows for a wider application of this measurement. In addition, these themes can be used to drive follow-up analyses that (1) connect each data extract to its publication date in order to assess changes in themes over time; (2) identify specific events that signify chronosystemic changes in Northern Ireland; (3) use a deductive analysis to provide a nuanced account of a single theme’s representation in the macrosystem and its manifestation in each level of the social ecology; and (4) assess the direct impact of changes in the macrosystem on individual development.
Thematic analyses revealed that news reports which were interpreted by culturally informed coders as reflecting high political tensions between Catholics and Protestants featured themes of intractability, policing and justice, memories of violence, disruptions to family and community, othering, and violent imagery. Articles reflecting medium political tensions included themes of political bickering, ongoing sectarian challenges, and antisocial behavior along with notes of improvement and the search for solutions. Low political tensions articles included some indication of positive relations but overwhelmingly emphasized violence outside of Northern Ireland or nonsectarian events.

News reports that were interpreted as reflecting high positive relations between Catholics and Protestants featured themes of cooperation, strong leadership, systemic transformation, optimism about the future, and reflection on the past. Medium positive relations signified advances in the peace process, hope for the future, cross-community support, and honoring the past while also discussing disagreements, obstacles, skepticism, and ongoing trauma and grief. Articles reflecting low positive relations almost entirely included reports on sectarian violence and political tension.

Most of the themes emerging from both sets of high-rated articles have been heavily theorized with regards to their role in violent conflict and their importance to the process of peacebuilding. This shows that these themes are not only confined to the macrosystem, but they emerge from and interact with other levels of the social ecology. For instance, social-psychological research on intractable conflict highlights the impact of these conflicts on individuals. Not only do intractable conflicts produce prolonged feelings of fear, hatred, anger, and guilt toward the out-group, but they also shape individual attitudes, perceptions, narratives, and identities (Coleman, 2000). The theme of
othering has been explored through psychological research on prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping (Fiske, 1998) as well as research on dehumanization (Haslam, 2006) and social identity theory (Merrilees, Cairns, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Shirlow, & Cummings, 2010). Research on family and community systems has revealed that disruptions to these systems can affect individuals’ emotional security – particularly with regards to children (Cummings et al., 2015).

Although there is less research and theory on positive peace indicators than there is on violence and conflict, most of the themes emerging from the high positive relations articles have been explored in some regard. Research related to reflections on the past – particularly through the process of storytelling – has shown its effect on both healing (Lederach & Lederach, 2010) and empowerment (Jackson, 2013; Senehi & Byrne, 2006). Optimism about the future has been theorized with regards to the personal and societal benefits of imaging the future (Boulding, 1990) and the effects of long-term hope on individuals’ openness to opportunity and progress (Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Porat, & Bar-Tal, 2014). Intergroup cooperation has also been studied from a psychological perspective through numerous studies related to contact theory (see the meta-analysis by Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and reconciliation (Kelman, 2008; Bar-Tal, 2000). The fact that there is such a large theoretical and empirical body of literature related to these themes supports a connection between the categories of discourse occurring in the macrosystem and individual responses to them.

Despite the strengths of this study, there are some potential limitations. The first of these relates to the sample size of articles selected for the thematic analysis. A decision was made to select a sample size that was large enough to represent an even distribution
across both newspaper source and year while still being manageable for the researcher. This resulted in two articles per newspaper per year, which makes up only 2.4% of the total articles included in the dataset. It is difficult to ascertain whether this percentage of articles truly represents the full dataset, and there may be additional themes that were not present in the sampled articles. Still, the themes that were identified through this analysis provide a starting point from which future research can develop.

Another potential limitation is the finding that articles rated as reflecting low political tensions overwhelmingly focused on either non-sectarian events in Northern Ireland or sectarian violence in other countries. As these articles were, for the most part, unrelated to the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland, they should not have been included in the dataset. This finding makes it slightly more difficult to interpret the meaning of quantitative trends produced by the newspaper coding data set. Regardless, the fluctuation of these trends is still influenced by the changing frequency of articles reflecting medium to high political tensions – all of which discuss issues related to intergroup relations.

Although this study was not integrated with the quantitative data in such a way that it could highlight chronosystemic events occurring from 2006-2011 or emphasize the change in themes over time, the analysis did provide a rich description of predominant themes occurring throughout the entire dataset – which better allows for more targeted studies in the future. By identifying the core themes defining political tension and positive relations between Catholics and Protestants, theories such as those mentioned above could be used to drive future studies that help disentangle the processes through which these themes emerge and interact. For instance, the finding that memories of past
violence are both pervasive in the macrosystem and a salient issue for those in Northern Ireland could lead to follow-up studies that provide a more nuanced account of this theme’s representation in the social-ecological system. Analyses could expand on the expression and impact of memories as they are represented in the macrosystem (e.g., using the newspaper dataset to explore this theme more deeply), the exosystem (e.g., community resources and initiatives that focus on memories of violence), the microsystem (e.g., the transference of memories from parents to children), and ontogenic development (e.g., the impact of memory on emotion regulation). Thus, the combination of newspaper coding and thematic analysis used in this study highlights the potential for further investigation into these themes and the way their macro-level manifestations shift over time and ultimately affect individual development.
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