“They have forgotten about us”: Leading change amongst loyalist paramilitary organisations

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This article assesses the changing nature of loyalist paramilitary organisations and evaluates the extent to which leaders of these organisations engender support for change within the Protestant working-class community. Since the end of the Troubles,[2] many former loyalist combatants have taken up new roles in society. Often, these roles claim to positively affect Protestant working-class communities, such as facilitating restorative justice schemes within communities, as well as developing inter-group relationships between Protestants and Catholics. This study investigated why loyalist paramilitaries lack support amongst the Protestant working-class community and why new leaders are emerging from this community. Six focus groups were conducted involving a range of people throughout Belfast and County Down. Drawing on the social identity approach to leadership, it was found that community members felt that loyalist paramilitaries – unlike new loyalist leaders – were not representative of their social identity and did not act to advance the interests of their group. The results advance the notion that to effectively lead a group of followers, leaders must carefully consider the social identity of the group they wish to influence.

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[2] The Troubles in Northern Ireland (late 1960s to 1998) refers to a thirty year violent conflict that was centred on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Two of the main protagonists were loyalists, whose goal was for Northern Ireland to remain as part of the United Kingdom, and republicans, whose goal was for Northern Ireland to become part of a United Ireland.

Introduction

Since the Good Friday Agreement, loyalist paramilitary organisations have struggled to adopt a meaningful and positive role in society. Despite their reputation as being solely concerned with criminal activity, loyalist paramilitaries have been involved in some positive enterprises, such as various conflict transformation initiatives (Shirlow 2012). The two main loyalist paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland are the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). These organisations were responsible for killing approximately 983 people during the Troubles, amounting to 27.4% of all Troubles-related fatalities (Smyth and Hamilton 2004). Loyalist paramilitary groups employed this violent strategy in order to combat republican paramilitary activity and maintain Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom. Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, loyalist paramilitary organisations have decommissioned their weapons and have officially stated that they are now adopting a more positive and community-centred role. However, due to the reluctance of some paramilitary members to adopt peaceful roles in society, this process of change has not been straightforward for the organisations; evidenced by a continued participation in organised crime and the willingness to carry out punishment attacks (25th Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission 2010).

Statements from loyalist paramilitary organisations often state how the loyalist community is fractured and lacking unity. For example, *The Loyalist* magazine (2013: 1 - produced by the UDA linked Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG)) stated that, "We (the loyalist community) have never been so divided and this is worrying". If we are to understand the fragmented nature of the loyalist community, it is necessary to explore how leaders within this community mobilise and influence community members to follow their lead and adopt certain actions. In order to analyse the success and failure of loyalist leaders in influencing the community, I will use a social psychology of leadership that is underpinned by the social identity approach (Haslam, Reicher and Platow 2011).

Traditional theories of leadership have tended to focus solely on the leader as an individual, aiming to determine what psychological characteristics and traits make an effective leader. The "great man" theory of leadership (James 1880) epitomises this individualistic focus. The idea behind this theory was that famous leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi were born with characteristics that furnished them with an ability to lead effectively. Different advocates of this idea have stressed the importance of different characteristics. For instance, Socrates stated that quickness of learning, good memory, shrewdness, as well as physical presence and prowess, were among the characteristics needed to be an effective leader (Plato 2001). In contemporary psychology, 'charisma' is the trait that has received most attention. The term encapsulates the 'special gift' that leaders purportedly possess, enabling them to mobilise and lead a group of followers (Marturano and Arsenault 2008). As a result of these in-built traits that leaders allegedly possess, they are able to dominate followers and inject them with a willpower and enthusiasm that they would otherwise lack (Reicher, Haslam and Platow 2007).

However, it has been found – through extensive reviews – that the relationship between personality traits and leadership is weak (Mann 1959; Stogdill 1948). Haslam *et al*. (2011) claim that the theoretical deficiency with these individualistic models of leadership is that they paint a very static picture of the leadership process and fail to account for the fluid nature of leadership across time and space. Weisberg (2004) uses the example of George Bush to show how leaders can change as their context varies. During his time as President of the United States of America, Bush's intelligence and verbal skills were questioned on various occasions, due to his grammatical errors, his invention of nonsensical words and his tendency to say the opposite of what he intended. However, as Weisberg notes, Bush has an excellent memory for baseball batting averages and other figures that matter to him; "Bush may not have been born stupid, but he has achieved stupidity, and now he wears it as a badge of honor" (2004: para 7). Individualistic and decontextualised theories of leadership are not capable of accounting for this changing nature of Bush's intelligence and verbal skills. The theory that I will now outline can account for why Bush claimed stupidity as a "badge of honor".

New Psychology of Leadership

Recently, a new understanding of leadership has emerged, one that not only studies the individual leader but also takes into account the identity of followers and the social factors that are contingent on leadership. Proponents of this theory are unconvinced by previous theories of leadership and therefore adopt a more 'bottom-up' definition of leadership: "Leadership, for us, is not simply about getting people to do things. It is about getting them to *want* to do things… It is about achieving influence, not securing compliance" (Haslam *et al.* 2011: x). Haslam and colleagues stress that for leaders to be effective, they must carefully manage their relationship with followers (hence the bottom-up approach). This interplay between leaders and followers emphasises the need to have an understanding of group psychology. Therefore, this article will draw on the social identity approach and subsequent new psychology of leadership (Haslam *et al.* 2011; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Henri Tajfel and John Turner formulated social identity theory in the 1970s to account for the part of a person's self-concept that is defined by their group membership. Social identity allows people to act together as a group; this could be as Manchester United fans, Catholics, or academics; this sense of social identity makes collective action possible and is highly valued by group members (Reicher *et al.* 2007). Jenkins (2008) states that group membership is useful for an individual, as it allows self-evaluation, provides an indication of appropriate behaviours and fosters self-esteem. Although Tajfel and Turner did not apply social identity theory specifically to leadership, the approach helps us realise how important it is for leaders to represent the group as a whole. As Adair (2008) claims, the most important word that a leader should use is "we" and the least important is "I"; the social identity approach allows us to understand how leaders negotiate this sense of "we-ness". The influential BBC Prison Study (Haslam and Reicher 2005) demonstrated the vital role that social identity has in leadership. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to the roles of prisoners or guards. The researchers found that meaningful and effective leadership was shown by the prisoners but not the guards; this was because only the prisoners possessed a sense of social identity which was strengthened by their collective goal to resist the guards' authority (Reicher *et al.*

2007). The guards did not acquire an effective leadership structure as they lacked a sense of common identity – this lack of a shared sense of social identity meant that the most basic structures, such as work shifts, could not be implemented as the guards did not trust each other and found it hard to reach agreements.

As leadership can be viewed as social identity management, Haslam *et al*. (2011) identify four components of identity leadership that determine its effectiveness: Identity Prototypicality, Identity Advancement, Identity Entrepreneurship and Identity Impresarioship. For the purposes of this short article, only the two components of this theory which are applied to the current study are outlined. These two components are particularly effective at explaining the leadership and identity dynamics that are relevant to the current study.

Identity Prototypicality: "Being one of us"

Successful leaders are able to effectively represent the shared social identity of the group. In other words, they are prototypical of this group and help to differentiate the in-group from rival out-groups. A leader's personality traits and actions that are desired by the culture of one group will be different to those valued by another group. Ineffective leadership is often a result of leaders setting themselves apart from the group. Being prototypical of the group and being perceived as 'one of the gang' can be illustrated by returning to the example of George Bush. As journalists have noted, when he includes ungrammatical and incoherent "Bushisms" in his speeches, Bush connects with Middle America (Drum 2004; Weisburg 2007) – the image of an 'ordinary man' who is prone to making verbal mistakes, and forms identifications with the general public. Indeed, other politicians who attack his imperfect language are prone to distancing themselves from the general public by representing themselves as high-brow intellectuals who have little in common with the ordinary American citizen. As Reicher *et al*. (2007) note, prototypicality can even be increased by adopting a certain dress sense; Bush's image as a regular guy is strengthened by wearing leather jackets and cowboy attire. Traditional theories of leadership (e.g. 'great man' (James 1880)) invariably stated that intelligence was a necessary trait for an effective leader. In some contexts however, group members value traits such as

trustworthiness and a down-to-earth attitude more than intelligence. A study by Turner and Haslam (2001) found that when an out-group had an intelligent leader, in-group members preferred an unintelligent leader who was considerate and dedicated. Studies like this show that there is not one unique profile that defines an effective leader; instead, group members value leadership traits that both represent the group and differentiate the group from rivals.

Identity Advancement: "Doing it for us"

Merely being seen as 'one of us' is not enough to achieve maximum effectiveness, leaders will also need to be perceived by group members as 'doing it for us'. This can be achieved by promoting the shared interests of the group in question, as opposed to prioritising selfish interests or the interests of rival out-groups (Steffens *et al.* 2014). Steffens *et al*. (2014: 1004) note that for leaders to promote the social identity of the group, they must be perceived as "contributing to the realization of group goals" and "acting to prevent group failures". Therefore, this component is focused on how leaders act, as opposed to who they are. The issue of fairness – and what group members define as fair – illustrates this component persuasively. If a leader understands the content of their group's social identity, they will be aware of what constitutes fairness. For instance, favouritism within a group is usually very dangerous for a leader, but favouring the in-group over an out-group is often desired by group members. Platow *et al*. (1997) carried out a study in New Zealand and found that people supported a health board CEO who equally allocated time on a kidney dialysis machine between two fellow New Zealanders. However, when the CEO had to divide time between a New Zealander and a foreigner, participants preferred the leader who allocated less time to the foreigner and more time to the in-group member. This is not to say that all groups value leaders who are biased towards the in-group. The content of some social identities means that group members value unbiased treatment of all groups; this explains why some organisations protest for the equal rights of minority groups. Again, this component shows that there is a need for fluid theories of leadership, whereby different leaders are desired in different groups, and desired leadership traits can change depending on the social context.

Method

Six focus groups were carried out with members of the Protestant working-class community. All 36 participants self-identified as Protestant working-class. 20 of these participants were male and 16 were female, ages ranged from 18 to 67. Participants from traditionally working-class areas were chosen as these are the areas that have the strongest and most visible presence of paramilitary organisations. Focus groups took place in North Belfast and West Belfast. These particular areas were chosen because they have a strong paramilitary presence and both contain a number of community groups who were reasonably accessible to researchers. Data was collected between November 2014 and March 2015. Initially, a search of community groups in North and West Belfast was conducted, and the researcher then approached a number of these groups and asked if they would be interested in participating; all groups who showed an interest in taking part in the research met with the research team, and all aspects of the study were discussed and considered. During the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss the topic of loyalist paramilitary organisations, and post-conflict loyalism in general. Ethical approval was granted before data collection took place.

After transcription of the focus groups, all discussion relating to leadership was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis has been defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). As the loyalist community are an under-researched group, thematic analysis was chosen due to its proficiency and flexibility in organising and making sense of a large data set. The researcher familiarised himself with the data through repeatedly reading the transcripts. Initial codes from the transcripts were then generated. Codes were used by the researcher to actively generate themes. These themes were all directly relevant to the research question; the identification of themes was based on the assertion that "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). Themes were defined and then reviewed in relation to how they each made a unique contribution towards a coherent narrative.

Results

This article now discusses how the two components outlined in the introduction were illustrated in the focus groups.

Identity Prototypicality

The following extract was recorded in a focus group when participants talked about the current UDA leadership in their area:

> *One of the top men in the UDA said that the 12th of July was the worst day of his year. Those are the sort of men who are supposed to be representing us. For any loyalist, it should be one of the favourite days of his year (Participant 1).*

Participant 1 perceives the current UDA leadership as not acting in ways that conform to the social identity of a loyalist. Participant 2 agreed with this respondent by making statements such as "how can anyone be a loyalist and hate the 12th?" So, despite the UDA claiming to be a loyalist group who represent the loyalist community, their leadership potential is compromised by their not acting in ways that are prototypical of the group they purport to represent.

Another UDA leader's prototypicality is questioned by Participant 3:

> *A certain UDA leader who is supposed to represent the people in this particular community doesn't even live here. He now lives about ten miles away. Surely he should live within the community with us.*

Participant 3 implies that a leader who is physically distant from the group cannot expect to lead and be representative of that group. The participants in this focus group also felt that they were "under constant attack from republicans". This perception has two effects. Firstly, this makes it even more unacceptable that someone who claims to lead the community has moved out – the leader has effectively left the community to

fend for themselves. Secondly, as this community has a sense of being *collectively* threatened, they want a leader who shares this collective feeling and will help to defend against it. By relocating, this leader does not share this feeling with the group and can therefore be perceived as not prototypical of the group.

Participant 4 is speaking in a focus group that is considering the flag protests:

> *When we were out protesting, some paramilitaries were telling us to get off the ground. That is completely unacceptable. As loyalists, we had a right to be there. They should have been supporting and taking part in the protests, not trying to stop them.*

This quote by Participant 4 is illustrative of the sort of actions that community members believe loyalists *should* be involved in. Again, as loyalist paramilitaries are not endorsing these preferred actions, they are not prototypical of the group. The majority of focus group participants supported the flag protests and simultaneously felt that mainstream loyalist paramilitary organisations opposed the flag protests. As a result of this, there emerged from the loyalist community new leaders and new groups who endorsed the protests and provided some structure to their activities.

Identity Advancement

Following on from Extract 3 – which demonstrated that paramilitaries who do not support the flag protests are not 'one of us' – an extract from Participant 5 shows how leaders who emerged during these protests were not only seen as 'one of us', but were also instrumental in advancing the interests of the group:

> *Paramilitaries here don't seem to value loyalist culture, but other men – who I'm sure you've seen in the news – do. They seem to care about our flag and want to protect our proud culture…they also expose republicanism for what it really is.*

This quotation from Participant 5 shows that by taking actions that advance and protect the values of the loyalist community, emergent leaders are acting in the interests of the group and therefore gaining support from followers. Participant 5 also talks about the ways in which the out-group (republicanism) is perceived by emergent leaders. By stating that they "expose republicanism", they are referring to how these new leaders constantly criticise republicans and point out their "evil" ways; this is in contrast to Participant 5's comments about paramilitary leaders:

> *Paramilitaries don't do anything for us anymore. They are more interested in keeping all their republican friends happy, they have forgotten about us. You see them shaking hands with republicans and all.*

Unlike new leaders who place a lot of emphasis on sullying the name of republicans, Participant 5 claims that paramilitary leaders – who now have a more amicable relationship with senior republicans – are more alienated from the community they claim to represent. The previous two quotes from Participant 5 illustrate how he views these two sets of leaders as having striking differences; whilst new leaders involved in flag protests are keen to highlight the negative intent of republicanism, paramilitaries in his area are engaging in cordial dialogue with senior republicans. It is clear that many focus group respondents value in-group favouritism and, therefore, the leader who shows both in-group favouritism and out-group derogation will be more effective in influencing followers.

Mainstream elements of loyalist paramilitaries claim to have a more "progressive" role in society today, evidenced by their engagement in cross-community peace-building initiatives. However, the Protestant working-class community do not feel that they benefit from these activities, as illustrated by Participant 6:

> *Our culture is being eroded and the republican community is getting everything they ask for. At the same time, our paramilitaries are trying to build relationships between communities. I think they should sort their own community out first.*

Conclusion

Evidence from the results section supports previous research which demonstrates that social identity has important consequences for leadership (Haslam and Reicher 2007; Haslam *et al*. 2011; Hogg 2001). In concordance with 'the new psychology of leadership' (Haslam *et al.* 2011), leadership effectiveness within loyalism is affected by the extent to which leaders are seen as prototypical of the group they wish to lead and the extent to which they advance the interests and social identity of the group in question.

Among the progressive elements of loyalist paramilitary organisations, there is a desire to develop loyalist ex-combatants into what Habermas (1992) called 'responsible participants' and to participate in various conflict transformation initiatives. These have involved former loyalist combatants developing cross-community groups to prevent interface violence and working with republicans to promote shared history (Shirlow 2012). However, as some former loyalist combatants leave behind a paramilitary lifestyle, characterised by an active and violent role in conflict, in favour of a peaceful and transformative role in a post-conflict society, community leadership problems become prevalent. These transformative roles have involved working alongside their republican counterparts Sinn Fein and developing cross-community projects (Bean 2010). Although Protestant working-class community members generally acknowledge that conflict transformation initiatives are positive and worthwhile, there is a perception that these initiatives have "left loyalist communities behind" (Participant 4). In North Belfast, where there has recently been a loyalist feud concerning the UDA leadership (Erwin 2014), a focus group respondent said that "all those initiatives came too soon and moved too fast for this community" (Participant 6). Therefore, as many community members felt their culture was under threat, paramilitary leaders in their area were concerned with other issues that did not coincide with the community's feelings.

If attempts by loyalist paramilitary organisations to implement positive change[3] are to be effective and supported by the loyalist community, leaders of change must consider the social identity of their own community and ensure changes contribute to the realisation of the community's goals. It is through the neglect of the loyalist community's goals and values that mainstream elements of loyalist paramilitaries have lost some community support to new and emerging loyalist leaders who seemingly stand up for the social identity that the community shares.

As this study has focused solely on traditionally working-class communities, future research could look outside of traditionally working-class communities and investigate the support or opposition that loyalist leaders elicit from other sections within the PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) community. Although focus groups are very useful in gaining rich data from a number of different community members simultaneously and investigating group dynamics, there are some limitations to this approach. For instance, participants may construct their responses in ways that simply function to please other group members or the researcher and do not reflect their honest beliefs. Participants may also be unwilling to reveal information on sensitive issues such as the discussion of paramilitary groups and therefore be unwilling to diverge too far from the consensus of the group (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003).

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[3] Positive change is synonymous with 'transformative loyalism' and 'progressive loyalism', whereby cross-community initiatives and peaceful means of community development are seen as having positive effects.

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