



Democratic Policing in Times of Trouble? Police Responses to Security Reforms and Transitional Justice in Northern Ireland

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

As institutional stakeholders in post-conflict security sector reform initiatives, the study of police officers can shed significant light on key questions about the durability and connections between democratic policing and peacebuilding. The article presents Northern Ireland as a case study to explore engagement of police officers in transitional justice and police reform processes after the Troubles (1968–1998). Semi-structured interviews with 19 retired officers who served both as members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) show how they have experienced disillusionment and dissatisfaction with specific outcomes of the political transition. Their reflections on the roles and responsibilities that officers maintain in implementing democratic policing principles reveal a response that extends beyond simple rejection or acceptance of police reform mandates. Their narratives also highlight that a holistic and pragmatic approach to (in)security to guide post-conflict engagement with community stakeholders would help overcome perceived resistance to institutional reforms.

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Over two decades after the signing of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (GFA/BA), Northern Ireland continues to confront significant challenges with its transition from the Troubles, a violent conflict that spanned from 1968 to 1998. While the GFA/BA marked the end of this period, it left unresolved issues surrounding the accountability of state and non-state actors for acts of violence committed during this time. Victims and survivors still struggle to obtain justice, as efforts to address historical abuses through legal and political means remain limited and contentious (Bradley and McBride 2025; Mallinder 2023).

Additionally, the post-conflict state and society face the ongoing task of reforming policing structures to align with democratic principles. The GFA/BA envisioned a policing system that would operate transparently, be accountable to the public, and gain legitimacy through community consent (Northern Ireland Office 1998). Yet, the implementation of these reforms has been fraught with tension (e.g. Hays 2012; Hearty 2019; Ellison and O'Rawe 2010; Lawther 2010; Mulcahy 2005; Murphy et al. 2017; O'Rawe 2005; Rea and Masefield 2014; Topping and Byrne 2012). As Northern Ireland continues its transition from conflict to peace, the dual challenges of seeking justice for past wrongs and ensuring a fair, impartial, and accountable policing system remain central to the region's ongoing efforts toward reconciliation and long-term stability.

Adherence to, and acceptance of, rule of law and reform in security and criminal justice sectors are key components of both peacebuilding and transitional justice processes (Ansorg et al. 2016; Crossley-Frolick and Dursun-Ozkanca 2012; Ghimire 2016; Goldsmith 2006; Trejo et al. 2018). A robust post-GFA/BA body of scholarship explores the applicability of experiences in Northern Ireland as a lesson-sharing model (e.g., Bayley 2008; Byrne 2015; Mulcahy 2005; 2006; Murphy 2015). The language of the GFA/BA describes what has, over time, coalesced into the current notion of 'democratic policing' (Manning 2010). That is policing that adheres to the rule of law and delivers service in a manner that: 1) is legitimized through public consent, 2) upholds human rights, 3) is accountable to the public, and 4) incorporates participation by the public in a representative fashion. Democratic policing also includes community policing, which entails the specific responsibility of building partnerships between the police and local communities to collaboratively address crime and social issues, and foster trust and mutual respect (Bonner 2020, Shilston 2015). More broadly, democratic policing has been advanced as useful framing to understand the points of tension and collaboration where conflict resolution, reconciliation, and rule of law intersect (Collantes Celador 2005; Muntingh et al 2022).

Thus, the tendons connecting transitional justice-based security sector reform and policing pose important questions about legitimacy, support, and sustainability (Gallen 2013; Wiatrowski and Goldstone 2010). In Northern Ireland, scholars have captured competing ethno-political and ethno-religious community narratives about policing activities in terms of whose interests are protected or targeted (Ellison and Smyth 2000; Holland 2021; Mulcahy 2006; Weitzer 1995). In simplistic terms, unionist/loyalist narratives emphasize the police role in maintaining the safety of a threatened Protestant state, even if, at times, the police are viewed as capitulating to the Westminster government or nationalist/republican demands. Nationalist/republican accounts stress the role of police in maintaining colonial rule, enforcing a long history of anti-Catholic legislation, and promoting unionist/loyalist interests (Holland 2021; Lawther 2010).

In Northern Ireland, policing has become an institution through which different stakeholders assess efforts toward historical reconciliation and peace (Lawther and Hearty 2021). We define stakeholders as local societal leaders and citizens, civil society organizations, and public servants such as police who have a vested interest in the safety, peace, and overall welfare of their communities. Therefore, implementation of democratic policing remains an ongoing, contested process despite major progress after the GFA/BA (Ellison 2007; Lawther 2010; O'Rawe 2005). Police reform in Northern Ireland was not simply produced; it was both informed and carried out by individuals, many of whom also served as police officers before 1998, with reforms aimed at changing their own practices. Previous research suggests that the individual and collective memories of RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) officers influenced their perceptions of change and reforms, as well as the legitimacy of the organizational transition (Mulcahy 2000; Murphy et al. 2017).

Here, we examine individual officers' own stories of police practice, behaviors, and roles during a period when the community questioned the legitimacy of the police and the state overall. Exploring officers' narratives of policing during conflict and transitional periods fills a gap in our understanding of the experienced, pragmatic aspects of security, peacebuilding, and transitional justice in Northern Ireland (Breheny and Stephens 2015; Eck et al. 2021; Nyman 2016). In doing so, we seek answers to two key questions. Do officers describe practices that would now be recognized as components of democratic policing during the Troubles? If so, what are the implications of understanding the experiences of officers in this way?

Our goals in answering these questions are twofold. First, we wanted to capture the variety of officers' personal attitudes and professional experiences towards policing in the pre-GFA/BA and political transition periods. This assessment may provide points of reflection about obtaining buy-in for future post-crisis police reform efforts. Second, we explore how officers in Northern Ireland negotiated the peacebuilding process by balancing their previous approaches to policing with new, explicit expectations of democratic policing. Here, we highlight a potential barrier to reform, that is, misalignment between officers' perceived lived experiences and the expectations for change held by stakeholders in a post-conflict society. In answering these questions, we contribute to the burgeoning literature that studies the long-term effects of transitional justice (McAuliffe 2021) by including perceptions of one group of such community stakeholders – police officers – who carried out security reform mandates during political transition.

Recognizing how others reflect on their lived experiences may be particularly difficult in societies still divided by sectarian conflict. People's understandings of identities are enduring and can pose significant challenges to institutional reform, especially when institutions are perceived as being dominated by one 'side' of a conflict. As Murphy et al. (2017: 409) establish in their own work:

.... the process of change undergone by policing in Northern Ireland facilitates a deeper understanding of organisational memory, at an individual and collective level as well as emotional memory in organisations that are involved in historical dialogue that has both internal and external ramifications.

In a post-conflict transition, it is the constituent members of policing institutions, that is, individual police officers, who must simultaneously inform and implement change

measures while negotiating new relationships with the communities they serve. We build on the literature focusing on organizational change ([Ellison and Smyth 2000](#); [Gordon 2008](#); [Mulcahy 2000, 2006](#); [Murphy et al. 2017](#)) to examine adoption of democratic policing from another, parallel lens. Here, we focus on personal reflections of retired police officers about their own approach to policing during the Troubles and how they engaged with the transition.

Examining the views of retired officers, rather than currently-serving officers, provides a complementary, longer view on policing and reform processes as they served through the period of violence and transition, but are now separated from any policing organization. Additionally, retirement can create shifts in relative perspective on an organization and career paths. Admittedly, these shifts create different sets of challenges, including both positive and negative emotional, psychological, or physical outcomes tied to service. However, holistic efforts to expand our understanding of transitional periods necessitate representing a variety of voices. Thus, retired officers not only offer far-reaching perspectives of policing change, but may be less constrained in sharing their experiences than might active police members.

Here, we strongly emphasize that we are *not* proposing that police engaged in democratic policing during the Troubles, nor that this approach to policing has been wholly implemented afterwards. What we posit is that if police officers *believe* they upheld values now defined as democratic policing before their inclusion in reform processes, awareness of such might inform strategies for positively engaging officers in future reform implementation. We suggest that certain self-reported efforts and professional attitudes held by practitioners prior to change can aid security sector reform advocates in developing approaches that bolster officer engagement. Awareness of lasting memories in Northern Ireland as a historical case offers a point of entry to understand the collaboration and resistance of key stakeholders in current and future security sector reform.

This article is organized into four parts. We first discuss the ties and tensions between transitional justice and rule of law to highlight how the concepts and framework underpinning democratic policing may serve as one conduit to understand the relationship between these two fields. We also provide a brief overview of the political transition in Northern Ireland as it relates to security sector reform and justice initiatives. We then pair a pragmatic approach to narrative analysis ([Nyman 2016](#)) with the application of a democratic policing coding framework to the reflections of retired police officers who worked during the Troubles and the transition period after the GFA/BA. Utilizing a 'lived experience' approach meant we could address our key questions about perceptions of policing in undemocratic contexts, and how officers use language currently applied to democratic policing to describe their experiences of policing during the Troubles and post-GFA/BA reform. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings and how they contribute to existing knowledge on long-term peace and transitional justice processes.

Our analysis is based on 19 semi-structured, conversational interviews with retired officers conducted by the first author in March 2020 and between July and October 2020. Given personal security concerns, retired police officers in Northern Ireland proved difficult to access ([Southern 2018](#)). However, our sample size is consistent with other qualitative studies with police officers ([Helfers and Nhan 2022](#); [Porter and Lee 2024](#); [Southern 2018](#)). The first 13 interviews were conducted in-person (with one additional online interview) with officers recruited through a key informant from

the Northern Ireland Retired Police Officers Association (NIRPOA). With additional snowball recruitment from previous participants, a second wave of online interviews were conducted between July and October 2020. Confidentiality was provided by using three-letter pseudonyms assigned by a randomized string-generator.

During conversations with the participating officers, questions centered on their experiences with police practice during the Troubles and with implementing measures recommended by the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (ICPNI) (also known as the ‘Patten Commission’) and legislated, in part, by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. Questions did not explicitly address democratic policing. Indeed, the interviews started as a pilot phase to gather preliminary insight into how historical experiences could be integrated into supporting current and future officers through difficult reform processes. During open coding the first author noted officers’ language referencing now-recognized democratic policing principles and sought insight from the second author for a transitional justice lens. Another round of collaborative coding by both authors proceeded first by applying four concepts of democratic policing (accountability, legitimacy, representation, and human dignity) to officers’ narratives.

We then defined patterns within comments addressing each of the four pre-defined concepts. Following the tenets of the Reflective Thematic Analysis approach we conducted a flexible, evolving coding process ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)), continually reviewing our coding of the interview content. In the end, we assessed how officers’ discussion of their practice reflected elements of what is now understood collectively as democratic policing and identified themes accordingly.

Unlike studies of collective memory, our study concentrated on individual sense-making and narrative, paying particular attention to divergent experiences. We acknowledge limitations arise as people describe memories about periods that may evoke emotional distress. For example, participants may have withheld information, or misremembered incidents that occurred several decades ago. Ultimately, we recognize that while narrative approaches offer invaluable insights into the lived experiences of individuals during conflict and transition, they must be critically examined, accounting for the complexities of memory and emotional responses.

DEMOCRATIC POLICING: A CONDUIT BETWEEN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND RULE OF LAW

Transitional justice includes a set of processes and tools that states and societies can adopt to address past crimes and initiate legal reforms to promote human rights. These mechanisms can include prosecutions, truth commissions, memorials, and reparations. They also may be structural, and include elements such as new constitutions and security sector reform, to ensure that the state will uphold rule of law and human rights at all levels of government and state bureaucracy.

However, there is a tension with the application of transitional justice during political and peacebuilding transitions, which could potentially destabilize relations and compromise the rights and recognitions of victims in the process ([Moffett 2015](#)). Further, transitional justice ‘aims to maintain some degree of order, while simultaneously advancing political transformation’ ([Leebaw 2008: 97](#)). While countries attempt to establish a durable rule of law, the very process of democratization means that the purpose and design of transitional justice is subject to public contestation and debate,

and possible co-optation by political elites with ulterior motives. Further, scholars and practitioners alike quickly scrutinize the idea that transitional justice serves as a direct vessel to the development of rights and rule of law (McAuliffe 2010; Sriram 2017). This includes raising questions about the lasting influence of transitional justice measures on democratic institutions and criminal justice systems regarding the strength of a country's legal institutions (Mihir and Sriram 2018).

To understand the relationship between transitional justice and building rule of law, we highlight two different perspectives. One explores how civil society actors, such as victim advocacy and human rights organizations, pursue accountability for human rights violations from previous periods of authoritarianism or conflict. The emphasis here is less about identifying the mechanisms that tether transitional justice processes to ordinary criminal justice systems. Instead, the focus concerns how transitional justice discourse, resources, and strategies in new political and legal contexts can establish justice for victims of previous eras (Collins 2010). A second perspective highlights the direct link between transitional justice and creating legal reforms to bolster the values associated with rule of law, including transparency, accountability, impartiality, and equality. In this regard, transitional justice can serve – and has served — as a foundation for (re-)establishing the rule of law and strengthening democratic institutions in transitional societies to prevent the reoccurrence of violence or authoritarianism (Arnould et al. 2020). Institutional change may thus include new or amended constitutions, civilian oversight over security apparatuses, special agencies devoted to human rights promotion and protection, as well as investigative units for victims of past crimes.

POLICING REFORMS IN TRANSITIONAL CONTEXTS

Post-transition policing and conflict-related police reform efforts belong to this second perspective. While transitional justice scholars emphasize the necessary processes of institutional reform, there has been relatively less consideration of policing and police officers within the transitional justice field, with important exceptions (Bonner 2020; Collins 2023; Goldsmith 2006; McGonigle Leyh 2021). And yet, reform measures associated with democratic policing speak to the values that transitional justice scholars argue are necessary for meaningful transformation within the state (Gordon 2008). These values include: responsiveness to citizen complaints, accountability, minimal levels of coercion, and respect for human rights (Bonner 2020; Pino and Wiatrowski 2006). Thus, there are some foundational values that must be incorporated in any reform process to ensure a reduction in violence and the rights of civilians (Stone and Ward 2000).

Examining attitudes among police officers is important because broader, institutional analyses examining the intersections of rule of law reforms and transitional justice initiatives may not include the individual stakeholders conducting such change. Institutional and organizational change, while essential, may omit points of stress that can only be exposed through the narratives of individuals at the center of change. Within the policing sector, exclusive attention on the macro-level can obscure and neglect the variation in attitudes, practices, and professional outlooks that individual officers bring to security reform (Toch 2008). After all, individual hostility towards necessary institutional reforms could hinder their effectiveness. For these reasons, how police members saw their mission during the conflict and how these views may impact their attitudes towards security reform require attention.

In the case of Northern Ireland, not only was there an overhaul in policing reform and oversight, but there have been several attempts within the structure of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to address historical cases related to the Troubles with, for example, the creation of the Historical Enquiries Team and the Legacy Investigation Branch. Justice remains elusive for many, further complicated by the passage of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 which took effect on May 1, 2024 ([Clenaghan 2023](#); [McEvoy 2024](#)). This act calls for the *end* of historical inquiries: instead, investigation of Troubles-related cases will be referred to the newly established, albeit controversial, Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR).

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING: TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

Northern Ireland serves as an instructive case on processes of transitional justice, post-conflict reconciliation, and security sector reform ([Gordon 2008](#)). Conflict-related institutional reform may run the risk of over-emphasizing public expectations of institutional outcomes, while obscuring the challenges experienced by those tasked with implementing change. Balancing pressures of conflict resolution mechanisms between the individual and institutional level is not unique to police officers, but may be particularly marked, given the role of security in post-conflict society. The case of Northern Ireland is illustrative of these tensions and how security reform is poised to deliver democratic policing. Northern Ireland offers a ‘most likely’ scenario for the success of this reform because the peace process was achieved after public deliberation and ratified by voters in a successful referendum. Learning about the tensions police officers felt and how they saw their role in the new Northern Ireland will help extract some lessons for dealing with security reform in transitional processes elsewhere, such as in Colombia, where conflict also operated under largely (albeit fragile) democratic rule.

In Northern Ireland, police reform involved disentangling civilian policing from British military action. Although the police were part of the security forces during the Troubles, they served a different function and role than the British military, albeit one that combined delivering ‘normal’ policing with counterinsurgency efforts. Even with their role in national security, the police worked under a different set of legal, operational, and mission guidelines than did the military. In fact, the policing and military missions changed and diverged throughout the 30-year period ([Bennett 2010](#); [2013](#)). Nonetheless, the danger to police from paramilitary attack often necessitated military units accompanying officers on patrol and responding to calls for assistance. The threat of attack also meant that individual officers carried personal protection weapons, were outfitted in flak jackets, worked out of fortified police stations, used armor-plated vehicles, and engaged in a more militaristic style of training. The blurring of lines and similarity between police and military in Northern Ireland resulted in the public observing what the Patten Commission referred to as a ‘military’ style of policing that presented an obstacle to building positive relationships with communities ([Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland or ICPNI 1999:16](#)).

The dual role of civilian police – delivering both counterterrorism and traditional policing services – did not start with the establishment of the RUC in 1922; in fact, this is foundational to understanding the development of policing across the island of Ireland in its colonial context. In Northern Ireland, however, that role was retained by the RUC

at the behest of a Unionist government after partition of the island in 1920 (Ryder 2004; Mulcahy 2006). Unlike conflict contexts where political systems failed, a democratic system remained functional, if weak, in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. However, for most of the Troubles, Northern Ireland was subject to direct rule by the UK Parliament, following suspension and closure of the devolved Parliament of Northern Ireland in 1973. After 1973 attempts were made again to devolve rule. Although devolution of power was a key measure of the GFA/BA, its full implementation remains a key obstacle to developing democratic processes in Northern Ireland today.

During the multi-party negotiations that culminated with the GFA/BA, policing was identified as an 'emotive' issue, recognizing the need for a 'police service capable of attracting and sustaining support from the community as a whole' (Northern Ireland Office 1998: 4). In September 1999, the ICPNI issued their report (the 'Patten Report') with 175 recommendations, many based on recommendations made earlier by the RUC's 1995 Fundamental Review under the direction of then-Acting Deputy Chief Constable (later Chief Constable) Ronnie Flanagan (ICPNI 1999; Murphy 2013; Royal Ulster Constabulary 1997). Although not the first attempt to implement police reform during the Troubles (McGarry 2000), post-GFA/BA changes to policing in Northern Ireland incorporated several themes, including community legitimacy, accountability, and human rights. In response to recommendations included in the Patten report, the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 put into place directives for implementing changes to policing, including an operational name change (Police Service of Northern Ireland) and adoption of new 'core policing principles.'

DEMOCRATIC POLICING FRAMEWORK

Policies and practices related to police reform deserve continued interrogation as the field evaluates longer-term impacts of post-conflict justice and reform initiatives. Here, we apply the framework of democratic policing to the narratives of retired officers to explore how transitional justice and rule of law intersect. As Karstedt (2015: 4) explains, 'Policing and police reform are a lynchpin in these packages of transformation, with the ultimate aim of establishing a trustworthy and therefore legitimate police force.' Based on previous work to distinguish the properties of democratic policing (Gordon 2008) we characterize it as providing security against threats to life, property, and community wellbeing by embracing the rule of law and values of accountability, legitimacy, representation, and human dignity. Here, we define each value or dimension and explain their significance to policing in Northern Ireland.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Police officers hold state-sanctioned powers to deny citizens particular rights such as freedom of movement and, in some circumstances, to use lethal force. Accountability, then, is core to public consent in the co-creation of policing mechanisms, particularly in periods following intense or prolonged mass violence or conflict (Bonner 2020). In the case of Northern Ireland, Patten recommendations addressing accountability encompassed changes to organizational oversight and governance, relationships with the community, and financial accountability (Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland 1999; Shearing 2010).

In our interviews, we identified several categories of references to accountability. For example, officers might have mentioned formal and informal checks on police practice and attitudes, processes of co-creation and public consent, or transparent

communication. Participants may have also spoken about formal internal or governmental frameworks of accountability, including investigation processes within an agency, review by formal accountability bodies (i.e., the Police Authority, Police Board, or the Ombudsman), judicial reviews, and community-based reporting mechanisms. Our accountability code also applies to comments about how community members, constituency groups, and civil society actors might respond to an officer's individual actions, agency policies, or standards of practice. Officers may have also revealed mechanisms or measures through which they, as individual professionals, maintained a practice of personal accountability or held colleagues responsible for their actions. Finally, we include comments referencing feelings of real or perceived impunity, for example, where responsible parties were not held to account or where there might be feelings that accountability would not be sought.

LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy refers to a recognition that bodies responsible for enforcing the authority of a government, like the police, do so within an agreed-upon framework of law and public consent (Hays 2012). Police that are viewed as legitimate actors in a community use minimal force to compel citizens to comply or to restore order. If police are viewed as illegitimate – either due to a perceived lack of rule of law or because the authority that they represent is, itself, viewed as illegitimate – there may be increased use of excessive force or other forms of coercive action to maintain public compliance. The legitimacy of police services, as forward-facing actors enforcing elements of state policy, is thus often inexorably tied to public perceptions of the legitimacy of the state.

To increase legitimacy, Patten measures targeted symbolic representation of policing services, including changes to the name, badge, and uniform and increased recruitment of women and Catholic officers to address ethno-religious and gender inequity within the service (ICPNI 1999; Shearing 2010). Recommendations also included revisions to community police practices, including an explicit shift of ethos to 'policing with the community' so that a diversity of community stakeholders were envisioned as partners in the process of policing (Shearing 2010: 32).

In coding for legitimacy, we noted responses that explicitly referenced the impact of police activities on community attitudes towards either the RUC or PSNI, as well as comments about public acceptance of police reform as a peacebuilding or post-conflict resolution mechanism. Attention was also paid to how participants described the impact they felt their personal approach or attitudes had on the acceptance or legitimacy of policing in Northern Ireland, as well as personal responses to how reform changed the role of policing as a state activity.

HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

As a concept encompassing all other reform measures, the Patten Commission recommended an explicit application of human rights standards to policing policies and conduct (Ellison and O'Rawe 2010; ICPNI 1999:18). To this end, Patten recommendations prioritized the training of police and civilian staff, codes of ethics and procedures, and a new oath. The report also recognized an inherent tension between policing and human rights – given that police officers hold the power to restrict freedoms and rights – and included a recommendation that the new Police Board monitor performance on human rights and that human rights be a component in officers' performance evaluations.

In coding responses that allude to human dignity and human rights, we considered how officers referred to themselves and community members in ways that recognized shared values, respect, and upholding human rights. Our concept of human dignity included officers' perceptions of their own humanity as policing professionals and that times they felt either supported as individuals or experienced dehumanization in relation to the community, to decisions made by politicians, or to the implementation of reform processes.

REPRESENTATION

We grounded this category of coding in descriptions of democratic policing as requiring broad representation of the community in policing agencies and structures. In the Patten Report – and in UK policing in general – mention is often made to the principle attributed to Robert Peel of 'policing with consent.' Although the origin of this principle has been obscured through time ([Scott 2010](#)), its basic premise is that 'police are the public and that the public are the police.' This principle argues that whereas it is in every citizen's interest to be concerned with public safety and community welfare, police officers are members of the public specially tasked with these duties. According to the commission, legitimacy is associated with accountability and an expectation that policing with consent includes broad representation of the community.

This representation would be accomplished by the cooperation of the community in developing policing practice, as well as in the composition of the police service itself. In particular, the Patten Commission focused on recruiting Catholic and female officers to the PSNI to address the historical imbalance of a majority-Protestant, majority-male RUC (see Section 14 of the Patten Report). Recommendations addressed what the commission believed might serve as a barrier to the recruitment and retention of Catholic, ethnic-minority, and female officers. These included building support for local policing teams and liaison activities, ethno-religious and political representation on the Police Board, improved coordination of parades, establishment of 'neutral' working environments, consideration of the impact on the public of 'forbidding' or 'threatening' appearances of police stations and equipment, and creation of new resources policies acknowledging family situations. Given the two-way relationship envisioned in the notion of policing with consent, our analysis considered 'representation' to signify instances where officers described how their actions, attitudes held by colleagues, or decisions made by their leaders or politicians, could create feelings of erasure or invisibility for either community members or officers.

RETIRED POLICE OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS OF POST-CONFLICT POLICE REFORM

Lived experiences of (in)security, as well as with professional responsibility for providing security, inform officers' responses and reactions at various stages of conflict and transition ([Nyman 2016](#)). Here, we explore our recognition of how officers embedded democratic policing principles in their perceptions of self and role as police officers during the Troubles and during the transition to post-GFA/BA peace. In the next section, we present three overarching themes that illustrate officers' intersecting views of accountability, legitimacy, human rights and dignity, and representation, as conditions for policing changed: 1) identity persistence and resistance, 2) attitudes towards institutional reform and 3) attitudes towards political change.

Officers routinely placed their identity in the context of the organization (RUC or PSNI) and the mandates they were responsible for carrying out. During the Troubles, the specific context of violence meant that some identified not only as enforcer (particularly of counterterrorism), but also as peacemaker. This was often a feature of discussion about the militarization of policing and the operational relationship between the RUC and the British military. While the two were distinct in mission and command, they were collectively envisioned as state security forces. Several officers emphasized, however, that within this institutional arrangement, there was considerable variation in how members of different military and RUC units carried out policing and police work. In general, respondents strongly stressed the contribution of military personnel to their safety during patrols, investigations, and home visits. Yet they noted how actions of the military and police created, at the least, inconsistent, and, at the most, contradictory, messages about policing and the role of police officers (JXE, VGI, DCS, HGD, KLU, CUJ, VGR, LAW, SUF). The convergence of policing and the military thus exacerbated issues of legitimacy already present in narratives about the history of the RUC and in clarifying the role of police in a divided society. JXE, for example, stressed that the police officer's role was that of a peacekeeper, both 'keeping the peace,' but also acting as an intermediary between the military and public:

Relationships between the army and the police, right throughout my career, were always strained...at patrol level, the soldier and the constable out on the beat were very much one on one trying to do one job and doing it together. But there were always tensions...the army would have said, "No, we want to do it this way," and the police [officer] would say, "No, no, no, we're not doing it that way. We're doing it this way." Most of that would have been around trying not to be too abrasive, trying not to ratchet up the tensions. You've got to know when to walk away...and I must say, the vast majority of police [knew] when to walk away. That's two different cultures and organizations. We're back to that enforcer, which is very much the military [and]...the police, which are well, [a] bit of a peacekeeper. (JXE)

Police identity also revolved around the organization and their vision of choice and professional discretion even within a hierarchical bureaucratic institution. In fact, more than one officer contextualized their own interaction with colleagues and members of the public by referencing their knowledge of community narratives (for example, grievances that Catholics might have with the RUC). They would then act in ways that they felt countered these negative narratives by representing 'policing,' regardless of RUC or PSNI membership. Many explained that this personal responsibility as policing professionals took different forms at different periods of their careers. For example, PPG felt that being a police officer meant remembering officers were part of the community while also reinforcing the rule of law:

As a police officer over here, you always knew that you were part of the community serving the community. You weren't separate from them. You're policing with the permission of the community almost. Obviously, there has to be a limit to that. If the community say, "It's okay if [name example denoting an ethno-religious identity] did it, but if [name example denoting another identity] did it, that's wrong," I have to say, "Listen, I'm sorry. There's no difference..." That's the police [officer]'s role. You're

applying the law. Those laws have been set down in statute. Everything else doesn't matter. (PPG)

In another example of what we note as identity persistence, NCB anticipated that, even with the post-GFA/BA organizational changes, their basic approach to the community and to policing would not radically change:

I was going to be the same sort of police officer that I'd always been because I had a lot of friends in the community...It didn't matter whether they were paramilitary or whether they were ordinary people. They all knew me from times that I'd been involved in their community. So, I didn't know whether they were going to see any change or expect any change. I would just have to go out and do the job now and see how things go. (NCB)

In essence, professional identity persisted for some officers; that is, despite the change in official name and context, officers still thought of themselves as doing the same work in the PSNI as they had under the RUC. This often meant separating the organizational identity from an overarching professional policing identity.

That said, officers who talked about being part of the community also often described how professional identity played a very personal role in relationship-building. Joining the police forced familial relationships and friendships to change. In fact, several used a familiar reference to police constituting a 'third' community in Northern Ireland, neither Protestant nor Catholic. While some resisted the pressure to cut themselves off from others, they recognized it was difficult for some and contributed to an unhealthy view toward the community:

So, that became a big thing where I suddenly realized [that] not everybody who wasn't a police officer was my enemy. Because they weren't, they weren't. And so, I felt it was very important and that was it. But there are others, and I'm being honest, even to this day, wouldn't come outside of the policing circle. They wouldn't. And I know that. And that's not healthy. That's not a healthy thing. (CUJ)

Feelings of disconnection also informed reflections on the transition from the RUC to serving in the PSNI (QNT, EQL). For example, QNT expressed concern and skepticism about the transition process and how new recruits might envisage their role as officers in the community. For QNT, this new post-Patten vision created safety risks and vulnerability for new officers, particularly as they felt that new recruits were not encouraged to seek advice from former RUC officers:

Because ... the new PSNI recruits were told not to take any advice from the older officers, they did silly things. And we could just see them, oh they're going to get killed, they're going to get killed. And it was this thing, especially the new Catholic officers that were coming into the force, "*Oh you can go home. You can go and still play GAA* [sports associated with the Catholic community], *or you can go wherever you want to go.*" And they couldn't. And they ended up getting murdered. But it was this thing that was being instilled into them that everybody's going to love the PSNI. (QNT)

Security risks also influenced the ways that police addressed representation within the service, as over 300 police officers were murdered during the Troubles and remained targets for sectarian attack and intimidation even after the transition from the

RUC to the PSNI (McAleese 2014). Officers thus confronted the complex interaction of being at the forefront of political change and being expected to be the bearers of democratic policing, while also facing the community's reluctance or outright resistance. In Northern Ireland, this still means a difference between community policing and locally-based police officers:

But as soon as something happens that the community is no longer on board with, you're at high risk and you possibly can't remain living in that community. That's a whole different issue to being from the community, but no longer living within it and maybe policing it. So, we actually can, you can reach out to certain communities, but even today, even officers who come from certain communities in Northern Ireland can't return to those communities, [as] their parents, and their family, they still live there. (XZT)

In the face of the relative unpredictability of violence, officers used their personal commitment to delivering police services to maintain a sense of normalcy, connection, and legitimacy for themselves and the public. Through the transitional period, security concerns continued, creating uncertainty among police personnel as to how external political, economic, and social reconciliation efforts would proceed. For many, however, policing during the transition meant negating contributions made during a period where violence affected the entire community, including themselves and their colleagues, through life-altering physical and psychological injury, violent death and mourning, and displacement from homes and communities. That said, many accepted their own emotional loss as a part of a broader social and institutional need. In other words, peace – an overarching goal they wanted – required rejection and erasure.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS INSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND IDENTITY

Participants emphasized the role of community but recognized serious limitations on the extent of personal influence and change. The retired officers reflected on how they tried to reconcile the role of police work with community expectations of police reform in Northern Ireland:

We changed and changed and changed until change fatigue set in. But then when we did all the things the community wanted and we asked them to help, they said, "That's your problem. That's your problem." Communities need to stand up and be counted as well. Everything in the world isn't a police problem. They [the police] don't have the answer to everything and they need to understand that. The community need to understand that. And maybe a little bit of joint training between communities and police. (HGD)

As mentioned above, participants often did not draw a distinct line in their personal practices and approaches between their time in the RUC and the PSNI. However, at the organizational level, several noted stark changes to the militarization of police. For example, LHF said, 'structures changed, we moved from military style policing to a community policing style of policing.' Others felt, however, that despite the institutional reforms, their attitudes about policing did not change (BNH, CUJ). Several, in fact, pointed to connections between the two organizations, referring more often to the post-GFA/BA transition as a realignment to deliver 'normal' policing in Northern Ireland. For example, KLU acknowledged that institutional overhaul was a correct

approach, establishing ‘tests’ to ensure that officers upheld values now explicitly used to describe the new approach to policing:

[It] was a massive undertaking, but it was the right one. And it identified tests. “Are we now impartial and free from party political control? Are we more representative of the community we serve? Are we open and transparent? Are we accountable? Are we effective and efficient in terms of how we use resources and how we engage with the public?” (KLU)

Community policing was described in the Patten Report as, ‘police participating in the community and responding to the needs of that community, and the community participating in its own policing and supporting the police’ (ICPNI 1999: 40). Officers noted the limitations that they felt in being able to deliver the services they wished. However, VGR expressed the view that the new emphasis on community policing, missed how they, as RUC officers, were already positioned to carry it out. ‘They reinvented the wheel. We were there, doing the community policing because we were actually in the middle of the community’ (VGR).

With the positioning of the RUC (as a state actor) as a party to the conflict in the Troubles, reform measures emphasized a tangible separation of the RUC from the PSNI as policing institutions. For example, the Patten Committee recommended changes to the symbolic representation of policing, including a name change, uniform and badging redesign, and removal of RUC-related memorabilia from stations. Still today, the distinction between the two agencies remains a point of public contention, represented by views as to whether the RUC was ‘disbanded,’ rather than incorporated into the PSNI. Officers in the study diverged regarding the personal impact of this organizational break, and what it meant for their relationship to the PSNI and to policing as a social institution. For some, changes to organizational priorities did not change their attachment to the RUC as an identity. In fact, participants expressed skepticism about the emphasis on institutional reform that stressed a distinct ‘new beginning’:

I didn’t like it, but I didn’t resist it because I felt that I had nothing to be ashamed of being in the RUC. In fact, I’m very proud to be in the RUC. And I just continued those ethics across, the same moral standing across, then in PSNI. And I saw it as a merger, but I don’t ever see myself ... I’ve never been able to see myself as a PSNI officer...but, I did police exactly the same way. Policed exactly the same way. (CUJ)

In fact, during conversation, one officer challenged the assumption once made by the first author behind the very question of a ‘transition’ from one agency to another, stating, ‘This is where you’re getting it wrong, because we didn’t change. We were the RUC in a different uniform’ (HBG). Some described more readily embracing principles of accountability and human dignity but offered less enthusiastic accounts of support for other changes. Yet, the lack of enthusiasm did not necessarily reflect explicit opposition to change or to processes of conflict resolution. Instead, change created emotions that both constrained and sustained their pattern of engagement. In Northern Ireland, the impact of the violence on members of the RUC continues to be a difficult subject to broach in discussions of legacy and victim recognition (Clenaghan 2023; Hearty 2019; Lawther 2010; Mulcahy 2000).

As expected, responses were varied, but several officers emphasized their understanding of the need for change (KLU, QID, XZT, JXE, EQL, HBG, SVO, VGI, CUJ), albeit with a realization that there would be a combination of benefits and losses,

both personal and organizational (HBG, PPG, HGD, NCB, VGR). To balance these, some focused on how police reform might create potential for changing intergenerational cycles of violence. When probed about their response to the reluctance of colleagues, PPG asked:

My first response to that would be to say, *“How do you know change won’t be good? Why are you always fearing or expecting it to be negative?”* Now, having went through the experience, I would say yes, there may be some negative aspects to it, but there were quite a few positive aspects. I think our circumstances here, you have to say we’re not living with the trauma and the bombings and shootings that we had. If the changing of the new from RUC to PSNI helped that, then I have to see that as a positive. (PPG)

With the establishment of the PSNI, training efforts reflected Patten-related commitments to uphold human rights and encourage community trust and legitimacy. Again, here we find that comments recognizing these efforts were received by some officers with ambivalence, if not outright resistance (HBG, LAW, QID). Participants were sympathetic, understanding that these reactions were likely grounded in doubt and personal experience having served in an environment characterized by explicit violence and threat. One officer, who was part of a team delivering human rights training during their PSNI career, described the resistance they encountered:

I had a flip chart in the classroom when I came in, and I wrote on it, *“don’t shoot the messenger.”* Because you’re dealing with a load of mostly men obviously, who had been working in the sort of environment that I talked to you about, and they’re saying, *“That’s mamby pamby stuff...You can’t do this and you can’t do that.”* (QID)

Another questioned the impact of human rights training, explaining that some trainers minimized its importance:

We very quickly learned to give the teachers and the trainers exactly what they needed. They said, *“Don’t ask any questions when you go into these training sessions because you’re watching the clock. If nobody has any questions by half past three in the afternoon, we’ll forsake our afternoon tea break, and we’ll get leaving early.”* (HBG)

Paradoxically, when asked how agencies could best support officers in facing difficulty in police-community relationships, training was mentioned (HGD) as a fundamental mechanism for instilling a sense of public service among personnel.

As with identity, institutional adoption of democratic policing principles was not experienced by many as a direct shift from previous practice. In fact, for some officers, reform did not create explicit change, but instead greater institutional and social support for a reorientation to aspects of practice that already met personal goals as policing professionals. Whereas officers hoped that change might provide new conditions for both safety and working in the community, they also expressed feeling judged about actions that were contextualized by an earlier time, different policies, and access to fewer resources (including technology) (HGD, NCB, DCS, CUJ, JXE, XZT, QID, CUJ). Training was a point of contention, with some referring to issues with the content of, and resistance to, the post-Patten human rights training. Although response to training was varied, there was also sentiment that training – particularly training early in an officer’s career – was key to shaping attitudes.

Among many of the participants, there remains a strong feeling that the emotional toll of their experiences during the Troubles and implementing change is not fully acknowledged. For example, they described a pressure to feel undue guilt (for the entirety of the Troubles violence, for example) or indicated that the contributions and sacrifices that they and their colleagues had made were dismissed (HGD, DCS, JXE, EQL, XZT, CUJ, VGR, QNT). They feel this in a larger context, however, where others' experiences (including members of paramilitary organizations) are voiced to shed light on legacies of mass violence in society. Their experiences suggest that implementation of democratic policing has, paradoxically, stifled opportunities for critical engagement of stakeholders in transitional justice processes. By overlooking these accounts, we run the risk of painting a simplistic picture of both officers' engagement in, and resistance to, reform efforts. Characterizing the state as a homogeneous institution can make us overlook support for, or resistance to, change. Officers' comments showed a complex balance between their own feelings of resentment (and those of their colleagues) with the justification for institutional change:

The suggestion was [made] that there was going to be peace in Northern Ireland. This came to a head and the agreements were made and everything was accepted, so like everyone who had a young family, I wanted peace in Northern Ireland for my family, so they didn't have to deal with anything [others] went through. So, that was an overriding factor. I was quite happy and prepared to accept all that took place...if we got to this where they could live in a "normal" society. (NCB)

Representation and human dignity were two concepts of democratic policing that emerged during interviewees' reflections. For example, one described policing as a 'human endeavor,' and as such, 'you need to be encouraging sort of the positives in human nature within police officers, recognizing the fact that we engage by necessity, that's their job to engage with a lot of the negative traits of human nature' (BNH). BNH acknowledged that officers with different backgrounds are, therefore, hugely beneficial to doing police work. Another officer suggested that values of truth and forgiveness were essential to rebuild the relationship between policing institutions and the community. They also acknowledged the complications of legal and financial redress for past injustices and legacy cases:

Between police and community, but I think that the community, I believe in my long experience will be so forgiving, if you tell the truth...Sounds so simplistic, but I do believe that if you come out and say, this is what happened now, the difficulty there is, of course, is the legal side of the claims, the compensation. (SUF)

Others hold ambivalent attitudes towards political change. While acknowledging the importance of policing to building peace, their comments demonstrate some resentment about how the RUC as an institution was handled during the transition and post-transition periods. At the same time, their emphasis on diversity in the police force as necessary for community engagement suggests a willingness to embrace some positive aspects of change. Officers' comments on institutional reform reveal a complex relationship between personal identity and perspectives on implementing institutional change. The intersection of democratic policing concepts and policing experiences during the Troubles in Northern Ireland were experienced with both

a general sense of acceptance, but also ambivalence towards some aspects of proposed reform.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening the rule of law is a foundational goal of transitional justice, and police reform is a critical part of this process. As Burke (2020: 2) emphasizes, 'While institutional aims to build trust and mutual respect between officers and the communities they serve are ostensibly admirable, many fall short in part because they are built absent the input of the very workers charged with implementing and enforcing those mandates—patrol officers.' Policing organizations represent an aggregate of individuals with different views on the social role of policing and responses to change (Sklansky 2007). A transition to democratic policing does not necessarily mean a wholesale change of attitudes and practices. Officers themselves admitted that the conflict eroded and constrained elements of police practice; reform, therefore, created an opportunity to explicitly re-align policing practice with new socio-political priorities. However, in periods of transition, police officers – some with experience working under those same conflict conditions – were then tasked with implementing reform measures and building new relationships in societies that remain, in many ways, divided.

For some segments of a divided society, the mechanisms of transitional justice are an implicit – if not explicit – recognition of a harm committed by an institution and, by association, its members. Thus, public expectations may demand that previous members of those institutions recognize this harm in a similar way and take accountability not only for their actions, but also for those of the institution (Shirlow 2018). This has implications for practices as basic as retraining and new officer education. Here we examined how retired police officers in Northern Ireland describe experience with transitional justice processes by documenting how they reference values associated with democratic policing (legitimacy, accountability, human dignity and rights, representation) in their narratives of police practice and reform.

By adopting a pragmatic, lived-experience approach to security (Nyman 2016) and using personal narratives as a unit of analysis, our study contributes to the broader fields of transitional justice and security sector reform. Using Northern Ireland as a case study, we illustrate the potential impact of personal history on conflict, narrative and meaning-making during security sector reform. 'Policing,' wrote the Commission, 'goes right to the heart of the sense of security and identity of both communities and, because of the differences between them, this seriously hampers the effectiveness of the police service in Northern Ireland' (ICPNI 1999: 2). As such, telling the story of police reform and transition in Northern Ireland must include those officers who, individually and collectively, engaged in policing before and after the establishment of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Human subjects research permission was obtained by the Stockton University Institutional Review Board in November 2019. Informed consent statement forms were distributed to and reviewed by each participant prior to the start of every interview and verbal consent obtained for recording and notetaking. Due to ethical considerations and limitations of permission, the data cannot be made publicly available.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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