



Diverse Perspectives on Mental Health

Legacy of 'The Troubles'

Narrator:

Just as individuals have their own stories, cities do as well. And in Belfast, some of this collective experience can be traced in the buildings and streets that make up the city. Here's Jim, an academic from Queens University Belfast. He's taking a drive round the place he calls home.

Jim:

We are just heading down to – down through a major artery called Great Victoria Street which in itself helps explain the history of this part of the world. It's a Victorian city, at one stage it was one of the wealthiest cities in the Empire, it had the biggest ship building yard in the Empire and the biggest linen industry in the Empire. The 20th Century wasn't necessarily that good for Northern Ireland in terms of its economy and society. As the Century progressed the place became progressively poorer and the large industries declined and in many ways the way the conflict arose in the last thirty years, can be associated with a lot of the issues around poverty and disparate access to services and wealth.

Narrator:

A city's history clearly shapes the kind of place it is today. But other influences are also at work. Jim believes the environment is the crucial first link.

Jim:

Belfast is located in quite a beautiful valley along the River Lagen, there is a large deep-sea loch surrounded by quite pleasant hills and mountains. The environment is clearly very important in terms of how the city developed, in terms of ship building, in terms of the linen industry and how in a way the conflict developed as well.

Narrator:

The city's economic fortunes are also important.

Jim:

During the 20th Century the economic system declined and some people argue that the decline in the economic situation of Belfast actually contributed to the troubles, there was less wealth in the city and therefore Protestants and Catholics began to compete for limited resources, and it's pretty clear on reflection to see how both Protestant and Catholic working class communities suffered because of this.

Narrator:

The two different identities created social boundaries that were clearly established by the time Alan was growing up.

Alan:

I suppose the messages really that were being passed across were that you know people who weren't like us who didn't come from our community you know who were the other, were people that um, that we couldn't trust and certainly couldn't build relationships with. So I think really it was one of largely being isolated within your own community and I am sure that wasn't just a Protestant thing, I mean I'm sure that was very much a Catholic thing as well, but the outset of it all was that um you grew with a strong sense of the other and also a strong sense of who you were and where you shouldn't go.

Narrator:

As the Troubles progressed, the social boundaries became fully-fledged geographical ones. Here's Geraldine, an Occupational Therapist working in North and West Belfast.

Geraldine:

Where we are situated at the minute is almost at a flash point because that is where traditionally trouble would flare up. Basically what it means is an interface area and I think that's what people who come to Belfast and Northern West Belfast in particular, are a bit shocked by it because people imagine there's just one divide, there are lots and lots of pockets and interface areas and they're where the difficulties arise.

Narrator:

At the height of the Troubles, the Falls Road was a notorious flashpoint. Here's Jim driving along it.

Jim:

Although it is hard to believe that there was this trouble when you look at the nature of the Falls Road, even though it's relatively poor compared to some parts of the city it still has a feeling of energy and a sense of community spirit. You may have heard the ambulance go past to go into the hospital, it had a police car in front of it – in the old days even ten years ago that police car could not have done that, it would have been a reinforced land rover. Nowadays we just have normal police cars, relatively normal police officers who no longer wear flak jackets even in the Falls Road.

Narrator:

The final way the city impacts on peoples' lives is through its politics. And in parts of Belfast, the politics are clearly visible on the streets.

Jim:

Flags and other forms of markers are used to mark off geographical and sectarian boundaries, so throughout many nationalist areas there are symbols of their sense of nationality and we have for example a few flags of the Irish Republic, the Irish tricolour flying on the Falls Road. Not so many as there used to be but still a potent symbol of the aspirations of this community to be part of The Republic of Ireland.

Narrator:

The other side shows different colours...

Jim:

On my left there is a small Protestant area which will be closed off with gates if troubles begin and you know it is a Protestant area because the pavements are painted red white and blue, again as a representation, as a symbol of their feeling about their nationality of being British.

Narrator:

At the time of our interview, the only politics in evidence were the politics of peace. But the political parties were still constructed through national identities. Here's Alan again.

Alan:

We still engage in tribal politics in this part of the world you know and I think that if our political leaders are not leading by example, well then they send out a very powerful message that you know look, it's not okay to engage the other. And if we are talking about a truly integrated society and a shared future and all of that, it has to happen at so many levels, you know integrated education is part of it, the kind of work that I do is part of it and integrated housing is part of it, but our political leaders leading by example is also part of that as well.

Narrator:

The city continues to develop. And as peace gathers momentum, there are signs that economic prosperity may be returning to Belfast.

Jim:

It's clearly evident nowadays as you drive through Belfast that this is quite an affluent city centre. Um there are many people coming to Belfast who would never have done so before because of the peace process, which started in 1998. So we have a sort of contrasting

experience as you drive through Belfast, parts of the past which reflect the troubled times we have had over the past thirty years, but the clear evidence of a growing sense of affluence and wellbeing in the city.

Narrator:

The legacy of the conflict lives on for many people in both the Catholic and the Protestant communities. Geraldine works with people from both sides of the sectarian divide. She's an occupational therapist at the Trauma Resource Centre for North and West Belfast Community Trust.

Geraldine:

The first challenge for ourselves in working with people is first of all acknowledging and addressing the difficulties that people are experiencing and normalising their experiences. In other words we spend a lot of time telling people that they are not actually abnormal and their response it was the situation that they came through that was abnormal and that is a challenge when it is a prolonged and protracted scenario.

Narrator:

Maria is a trauma therapist at the WAVE Trauma Resource Centre in north Belfast. She too works with people from both sides of the divide.

Maria:

You're looking at families that have lost loved ones quite dramatically, and you're looking at intergenerational trauma issues which have been passed down through family and family, complex trauma in that when a person presents they very very rarely present with one issue, you find when you start working with that person it is like peeling back the layers of an onion, you discover that there's been more trauma on top of more trauma and it would be my job to help them to peel back the layers and try and make some sense through processing what has happened.

Narrator:

Geraldine again

Geraldine:

The other challenge for us as mental health workers is in reintegrating people back into their communities and dealing with the divisions that exists within those communities. We have to be very very cognisant of where people are at, what's their frame of reference, where they feel safe and then where they can access services and where services are more accessible for them. So we have to do quite a lot of outreach working and go to where the person feels safe. I do a lot of reintegration reconnection, rehabilitation work with people and so those divisions I have to be very very aware of, political divisions, religious divides and even within – well maybe to the external eyes a homogenous community the divisions that exist within that – feuds for example that might be going on in communities. So you have to be very very politically aware to deal with mental health issues in an environment like this.

Narrator:

Mary is the manager of the Trauma Resource Centre, where Geraldine works.

Mary:

75% of our clients are male, and we're probably one of the only services that I'm aware of that males are engaging with within the health service. When peace came a lot of people I think, men in particular, might have had say for example psychotic episodes or they got really ill and they went to their GP or maybe they ended up with the psychiatrist and then they were referred – the reality is that 75% of people who either engage or who were victims of the violence, were male.

Narrator:

It's ironic that in a time of relative peace, the WAVE Trauma Resource Centre is experiencing a surge of new clients. Alan is the centre co-ordinator there.

Alan:

Our referral rates went through the roof whenever the first IRA was announced and the subsequent ceasefire from the loyalist commission, people did come forward in large numbers for help and there's been a steady flow ever from that. We still get referrals every month, every year, you know from people who were bereaved twenty or thirty years ago, just they're now coming to terms with it. At the moment we have the Historic Enquiries Team set up you know which is kind of investigating old murders and it's thrown up a lot of stuff for people, so we're getting some calls from that, and also with the ongoing peace process, a lot of people are feeling again very betrayed, you know – my loved one didn't die for terrorists to be in government, sort of attitude and I think that sometimes throws up difficulties for people.

Maria:

Now that we're in peace time, that people are presenting and manifesting issues which would indicate that they have lost their identity, so therefore they are coming to us with issues such as dysfunctional families, alcohol misuse, drug misuse, attachment issues. Safety was one of the biggest issues because it was literally you could have been here today gone tomorrow, so people were too busy surviving, so they didn't process anything, it was just a day to day – survival was what it was about, when you come into peace time you find that people are now getting a window to explore and look out and they're wondering what's happening to me? What's wrong? Am I going mad? When you can trace it right back to the trauma.

Narrator:

For many people in Belfast, the true legacy of the Troubles is a psychological burden that crosses genders, generations, and communities.

Maria:

There was no real monopoly on pain and suffering in this country and whether we like to admit that fact or we don't, that's how it is, nobody monopolised the suffering.

Narrator:

For Jim, finding a resolution requires a change of values.

Jim:

What often happens in Northern Ireland is many people believe that their experiences can be privileged over the experiences of others. We sometimes refer to this as a hierarchy of victimhood. By this I mean people who have suffered, who perhaps have lost their loved ones, who have been disabled, who have been traumatised, sometimes feel that this experience is worse in some way than the experience of others living in this community. What we find now, partly because of the peace process, is that some victims' groups can see how this hierarchy is perhaps not a viable way of finding their way to reconciliation and reparation. So the issue about ethics and values is very important in the context of Northern Ireland, these are very traumatic events that have happened and the way we see the world, our value base and the way that these values can be changed to the good, will hopefully provide a better context for living in Northern Ireland.

Narrator:

But as Mary points out, there's still a long way to go.

Mary:

The big reminder of course is while peace (inverted commas) and while political stability is a possibility, the reality is people are still having death threats, they're still being intimidated, families are being displaced, people are having still to move out who are under threat and some forms of punishment shootings and beatings are still going on, so it's not as if we're all living happy ever after here, victims are still coming forward in the present, you know we're not just dealing with the trauma of the past, very much dealing with the trauma of the present.