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# Comments on a Study of Northern Irish Political Attitudes

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**Abstract.** This article provides a commentary on the recent development of a set of objective measures of political attitudes among residents of Northern Ireland. The article is a continuation of a series on research that was presented at the 1998 American Psychological Association Convention, San Francisco, California.

Since the "Troubles" commenced, many observers have associated the term intractable conflict with sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Paul Irwing and Maurice Stringer, School of Behavioural and Communication Science, University of Ulster at Coleraine, have developed 28 objective measures of political attitudes that can be employed to better appreciate the psychological substrates and consequences of sectarian violence during the "Troubles." As well, their work has significant value to political psychology as an academic discipline and as action research.

While most studies involving the construction of attitude scales related to ingroup and outgroup phenomena have focused on artificial groups in the psychology laboratory or real groups involving rather innocuous phenomena, Irwing and Stringer studied groups of Catholics and Protestants who were residents of Northern Ireland and have lived with the "Troubles." This is a crucial academic distinction since intergroup conflicts characterized by extreme negative acts--e.g., terrorism--often seem to be very dependent on the unique specifics of social context. Secondly, while most studies are limited in scope and unlikely to represent the multi-dimensional and complex pattern of intergroup similarities and differences both inside and outside of the laboratory, Irwin and Stringer cast a wide conceptual referential net among their subjects in developing their scales. Thirdly, Irwing and Stringer, unlike the authors of most studies, focused on the most salient, robust, and comprehensive constructions of social identity for a population--the labels of "Protestant" and "Catholic" that are far more than religious in scope. Fourthly, Irwing and Stringer seem to have collected data that support the construct of an intrapsychic dynamic--previously posited by researchers on torturers, terrorists, and committers of atrocities among others--that describes how people may split off, relabel, or reinterpret negative aspects of their social identity. The data suggest that in Northern Ireland a majority of both Catholics and Protestants distance themselves from negative aspects of social identity--viz., terrorism and violence--by condemning these aspects (often to themselves and others) and professing good personal relationships with the other respective denomination. In this way, respondents are able to preserve a positive view of themselves and simultaneously maintain political attitudes--negative ones--likely to perpetuate the conflict. Concurrently, they may be sacrificing self-interest by increasing their level of identification with a negatively distinctive ingroup. Fifth, Irwing and Stringer carefully qualify their ample evidence of relatively moderate views held by Catholics and Protestants. After all, there are social desirability factors in assessment; the research participants were students; and data were collected during a time of public optimism about the prospects for peace.

Along with the usual caveats about (1) attitudes possessing state and/or trait status in various situations and at various times, (2) factors affecting the functional linkage of attitudes and behaviors, (3) attitudes spontaneously and continuously being subject to reconstruction and deconstruction, and (4) security concerns for life and limb affecting responses to questions, there is much that is admirable in this study.

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Irwing and Stringer advocate the use of their scales to study longitudinal trends and reactions to specific events and political initiatives (local, regional, national, international) in Northern Ireland. Although--as they state--additional scales will be needed to supplement the present armamentarium as events unfold, much may be learned about intractable conflict, Northern Ireland, and political psychology. (See Cairns, E., & Darby, J. (1998). The conflict in Northern Ireland: Causes, consequences, and controls. *American Psychologist*, 53, 754-760; Cairns, E., Lewis, C.A., Mumcu, O., & Waddell, N. (1998). Memories of recent ethnic conflict and their relationship to social identity. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 4, 13-22; Mercer, G.W., Bunting, B., & Snook, S. (1979). The effects of location, experiences with the civil disturbances and religion on death anxiety and manifest anxiety in a sample of Northern Ireland university students. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 18, 151-158; Soule, J.W. (1989). Issue conflict in Northern Ireland: The death of legislature. *Political Psychology*, 10, 725-744; Tajfel, H., & Turner, J.C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In S. Worchel & W.G. Austin (Eds.). *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.) (Keywords: Attitudes, Northern Ireland, Political Violence, Terrorism.)