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# The Revived Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland: Implications for an Applied Political Psychology of Peace?

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**Abstract.** This article describes commonly posited psychological phenomena that are allegedly associated with attenuating conflict. The article then considers whether these phenomena are causally implicated in Northern Ireland's improving peace prospects.

At the time of this writing, there has been a recent series of steps in Northern Ireland that--according to most political observers--bodes well for peace. The Ulster Unionist Party has voted to participate in a new local government that also is intended to include Sinn Fein, the Social Democratic and Labor Party, and the Democratic Unionists. The United Kingdom's House of Commons has voted to transfer significant political power to Belfast. The Irish Republic has dropped a constitutional element containing territorial claims to Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's new cabinet has actually been convened. The IRA will soon publicly nominate a representative to an independent commission on disarmament. Paeans are being expressed towards the mediation expertise of former United States Senator George Mitchell.

This latest run towards peace should allow applied political psychologists to identify the psychological phenomena most integral to resolving conflict. In essence, the latest events in Northern Ireland comprise data points of peace approximation in the area of human ethology. The problem, however, is in deciding which behavioral and even intrapsychic elements within ongoing streams of behavior and intrapsychic phenomena--all occurring within multiple ecologies, environments, and yet other contexts--are causally implicated in peace approximation.

Are the usual psychological suspects suspect? Have prescriptive approaches assuming universal models of conflict resolution been shown to be inferior to elicitive approaches that recognize distinctive cultural understandings that are elucidated through reflection and dialogue? What of the Conflict Resolution Model? Interactive problem solving? The role of cognitive and moral development stages? The modification and influence of cultural and status differences on positive intergroup contact? The social psychological assumptions--e.g., conflict as an interactive process with an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic--of various 3rd-party approaches? Frameworks that highlight the uneven, nonlinear nature of the flow of negotiation processes and how perceptions can be shaped concerning time-related costs, linkages among sets of negotiations, and the structuring of action-forcing events? The frequency, intensity, and meaning of cooperative task resolution with adversaries? Mere contact with adversaries? The role of socially constructed histories? The effectances of religion, class relations, generational differences, and material prosperity? Principles derived from Tavistock and National Training Laboratory group dynamics methods?

Unfortunately, competing philosophies of science and heterogeneous psychologies of political psychologists seem to ensure that what one desires to find is likely to be found. At worst, a self-serving plethora of methodological and analytic caveats will arise if one does not find what one desires. Although significant conflict may be resolving in Northern Ireland, it will remain alive and well amongst the individuals, groups, and sects advocating conflict resolution techniques. (See Doob, L.W., & Foltz,

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W.J. (1973). The Belfast Workshop: An application of group techniques to a destructive conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 17, 489-512; Feeney, M.C., & Davidson, J.A. (1996). Bridging the gap between the practical and the theoretical: An evaluation of a conflict resolution model. *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 2, 255-269; Kelman, H.C. (1999). Interactive problem solving as a metaphor for international conflict resolution: Lessons for the policy process. *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5, 201-218; Northern Ireland's New Cabinet Convenes After Britain Cedes Powers. (December 2, 1999). *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Watkins, M. (1998). Building momentum in negotiations: time-related costs and action-forcing events. *Negotiation Journal*, 14, 241-256; Thompson, J.L. (1989). Deprivation and political violence in Northern Ireland 1922-1985: A time-series analysis. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 33, 676-699; Young, D.W. (1998). Prescriptive and elicitive approaches to conflict resolution: Examples from Papua New Guinea. *Negotiation Journal*, 14, 211-220.) (Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Northern Ireland.)