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ARTICLE

The ethics of silence

Action research, community ‘truth-telling’ and post-conflict transition in the North of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Using a case study of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP), a community-based ‘truth-telling’ project in the North of Ireland, this article explores the role that action research can play in researching sensitive topics in violently divided societies. The article focuses on the ethics of carrying out research that could be potentially harmful for participants and researchers. The principles that underpinned the work of the ACP, including participation, local ownership and control, and the role of ‘insiders’ are critically examined. The article argues that in situations where political violence has occurred and marginalized groups have experienced social injustice, it is ethically impossible and morally reprehensible for social researchers to remain detached and silent. Action research methodologies are framed by a commitment to social justice, giving voice to those who are usually silenced, challenging structures of oppression and acting *with* ordinary people to bring about social change – therefore they offer appropriate research models for engaging in community-based ‘truth-telling’ in post-conflict situations.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- community ‘truth-telling’
- ethics
- North of Ireland
- political conflict

Introduction

Ardoyne is a socially disadvantaged republican working-class community in North Belfast with a population of approximately 7500. In 1998, in the wake of the cease-fires and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, an opportunity emerged for reflection on the past 30 years or more of political conflict. In July of that year the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) took advantage of the space created by the 'peace process' and the reflective mood to initiate what developed into a community driven 'truth-telling' process. There was no blueprint for this type of project locally or internationally. Over a four-year period the ACP collated and edited over 300 interviews, testimonies, and eyewitness accounts of relatives and friends of the 99 conflict-related deaths in the Ardoyne community. In 2002 a 543-page book was published entitled *Ardoyne: The untold truth*, containing the testimonies and six historical chapters contextualizing the conflict. However, as this article intends to demonstrate, the principles and processes that underpinned the work of the ACP encompassed much more than pulling together a series of interviews for the production of a book.

The various parties to the conflict between 1969 and 1998 killed a total of 99 people from Ardoyne (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002). Of these 50 were killed by loyalists, 26 by members of the security forces (British army and RUC) and 13 by various republican groups. Another six were members of the IRA killed inadvertently while on active service, one died accidentally, and in three cases it is unclear who was responsible. In addition, close to 35 per cent of the male population have been political prisoners over the past 30 years of conflict (Ardoyne Youth Providers Forum, 1998). As a republican working-class community, Ardoyne was subject to some of the most draconian and invidious state counter-insurgency strategies. Blanket surveillance and the activities of state intelligence agencies had a particularly damaging impact and engendered a deep sense of alienation and distrust, particularly of outsiders. It is against this backdrop that the ACP developed and carried out its work.

By using the Ardoyne Commemoration Project as a case study, this article explores the role that action research can play in researching sensitive topics in violently divided societies. It begins with a brief discussion of the underlying principles of action research and its ethical approach. It moves on to outline the ways in which the ACP fits an action research model by examining the nature of its work, the motivation for doing the research, its perceived beneficiaries and the processes involved. The authors then reflect on a number of ethical and political dilemmas that the ACP encountered. This draws on an evaluation of the work of the ACP (Lundy & McGovern, 2005). In particular the article critically examines the ethics of carrying out research that could be potentially harmful for participants and researchers. How the ACP addressed these issues is the focus of the remaining sections of the article. This entails a critical analysis of the underlying

principles and processes of the ACP, including: community participation; local ownership and control; and the role of 'insiders'. The article concludes that the action research approach adopted by the ACP was key to resolving a number of the ethical and political dilemmas that arose.

Action research: an ethical approach

The position that researchers take when faced with an ethical dilemma is likely to be affected by their motivation for doing the research, its purpose, and whom they see as benefiting from it. Action research rejects the position that research should be objective and value-free and that researchers should remain detached and neutral. It is an overtly political paradigm that engages researchers on equal terms with marginalized groups, those usually considered subjects, in a collaborative initiative to bring about social justice and social change. Therefore, action research is distinctive in the goals it seeks to achieve and the way in which it is carried out. Although developed in a range of locations and within a multiplicity of disciplines, at its most straightforward action research is defined by Anisur Rahman as having two core interconnected elements; it is 'action research that is participatory and participatory research that unites with action' (1993, p. 75; see also, Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003; Fals Borda, 1991). As Rahman also suggests, action research is a coherent attempt to retrieve and legitimate popular knowledge; 'a political practice challenging not only the idea of oppression through control of material production but also domination resulting from control over the means of knowledge production [including] the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge' (1993, p. 83). In a similar vein, Budd Hall has argued that action research is designed to 'gain a place at the knowledge-creating table' for those generally excluded from such processes (2001, p. 176).

A common focus that links the diverse fields of action research practice is 'how we go about generating knowledge that is both valid and vital to the well-being of individuals, communities, and for the promotion of large-scale democratic social change' (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 11). The key imperative is to conduct the research in an 'egalitarian manner', while the outcomes are understood to be directed toward creating 'opportunities for meaningful, democratic and liberatory action' (Lincoln, 2001, p. 129). The full and active involvement of participants is key to identifying strategies and raising consciousness, breaking down traditional hierarchical distinctions between academics and the community. Indeed, what have been termed 'organic-activist-researchers' (Park & Pellow, 1996, p. 138) may occupy the position of community member and researcher simultaneously. The manner in which the research is initiated, designed, conducted, and disseminated is itself intended to form part of a wider

emancipatory project by challenging the way in which knowledge is constituted and validated. Dialogue, critical reflection, and an openness to criticism from others are central to the democratization process and the breaking down of power relationships and decision-making control. As Stoecker (1997) points out, community members should not only advise on the shape and direction of the research but must have the opportunity to ‘at least collaboratively control the decision-making process’ (p. 4). The challenge action research offers to structures of oppression is particularly relevant to societies that are coming out of a period of political conflict and seeking to address social injustices and the legacies of the past.

As this article suggests, central to the work of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project was the adoption of action research strategies and methodologies. Indeed, the principles of community participation, local ownership, and control could be said to have been its greatest strengths. Local stakeholders (or the community) were fully involved in the initiation, design, decision-making, management, and delivery of the project. From the outset it was an egalitarian, consciousness-raising, and empowering initiative that was seeking to bring about change and social justice. It emerged and was driven by people within the community. However, it is also true to say that only a small number of ACP volunteers were familiar with the minutiae of action research pedagogy, strategies, and methodologies. What guided the project initially was a fairly rudimentary understanding of action research principles gained through involvement in community development work or studying as political prisoners. The two authors, one of whom was born and reared in Ardoyne and as such could be described as an organic-activist-researcher, joined the project a few months after its inception and added to this knowledge base. The experience of the ACP provides insights into the role that action research can play in ‘truth-telling’ initiatives in post-conflict societies.

Dangerous research: ethical issues

There has been considerable debate about the ethical implications of the potential harm in social research, both for those being researched and those who are carrying it out (Connolly, 2003; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Warwick, 1982). Though there is much disagreement (even on how harm may be interpreted) there is general awareness that social research can have significant consequences for those being studied. The key ethical principle is that the researcher should avoid negative repercussions both for those who have participated in the research and, more broadly, anyone affected by it (Connolly, 2003; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Those researching areas of political conflict have particularly reflected on such difficulties and dangers (Brewer, 1993; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000;

Meth & Malaza, 2003; Nordstrom & Robben, 1995; Sluka, 2000; Smyth & Robinson, 2001). These authors generally conclude that social division and political conflict deeply impact upon issues of access, interviewee presentation, the use of research for ends potentially detrimental to those being studied, and the physical safety of the researcher and researched.

Researchers therefore need to be particularly responsive to the issue of harm when carrying out sensitive research in violently divided societies if it involves vulnerable or marginalized groups and has the potential to be distressing to participants (Connolly, 2003; Smyth & Robinson, 2001). Speaking of such work in the North of Ireland, Connolly (2003) concluded that the experience of those participating in research has not always been positive. He found that some had been left with a feeling of being used and a perception that the researchers had little genuine concern for their particular needs or well-being. Others felt that the whole process had simply reinforced their general sense of powerlessness in society and that participation had actually been harmful.

Paradoxically perhaps, ethical concerns of this nature are often problematized in terms of the 'chilling effect' on future research, rather than the impact on participants, particularly in conflict situations (Israel, 2004; Meth & Malaza, 2003; Pickering, 2001, Sluka, 2000; Smyth & Robinson, 2001). Responding to this problem, anthropologists have been in the fore in calling on social scientists to take a moral stance, with particular regard to state terror and human rights abuses (Green, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Sluka, 2000). In a similar vein action research has insisted on the principles of working *with* the oppressed and marginalized, to empower and act as a force for social justice and change; indeed, this is the paradigm's *raison d'être*. This then raises the question: Do silence and academic by-standing raise moral and ethical concerns?

The Ardoyne Commemoration Project

From the outset the ACP was an entirely community-inspired initiative. In July 1998, in the context of the Peace Process, an ad hoc group of victims' relatives, concerned individuals, and representatives from community groups called a public meeting. Around 30 people attended and all were local residents. The objective of the meeting was to discuss ways in which the community might contest what they perceived as the public exclusion of the community's experiences of the conflict. Of particular concern was the way in which a hierarchy of victims appeared to be emerging and the less than equal recognition of all victims of the conflict (Lundy & McGovern, 2001). Dealing with the past and how the community might commemorate their own victims of the conflict were among the issues discussed.

After several fairly ad hoc public meetings and much discussion and debate it was eventually decided that the best way to do this would be through a book that allowed people the opportunity to tell their story in their own way. A committee of eight (later reduced to five) was elected to organize and begin work on the project and this subsequently provided the project's day-to-day organizational framework. A wider membership of people joined at various stages, contributing to decision-making and management of the project and assisting with specific tasks. Within the ACP there was a desire to democratize the research process.

Details of the formation of the ACP and its remit were published in the local newspaper and several NGO newsletters. During all stages of the project, the ACP made every effort to seek the views, opinions and active participation of the wider community. Throughout the project it regularly used the local media to inform the wider community about the progress of the project, to seek information or contact individuals, elicit feedback, and to encourage community participation. Several community forums and public meetings were also organized by the ACP (topics for these sessions included: the forgotten victims; the quest for truth and justice; and state collusion). These events were open to the general public and all relatives of victims from Ardoyne received a personal letter of invitation. They were held in a local hall and usually involved a discussion panel made up of representatives from community groups, victims groups, and campaigning organizations from the locality and other parts of the North. Attendance was good and on one occasion drew as many as 300 individuals. All of these events were video recorded.

The purpose of the forums was, again, to update relatives and the wider community on the progress of the project and generate active participation. But perhaps more importantly, these events were designed to create public space; to encourage and enable open dialogue and debate about highly sensitive issues that in the past had been unspoken or taboo. The ACP was seeking to stimulate reflection and by doing so challenge long-held viewpoints. In effect they were pushing the boundaries of what was, or was not, acceptable to articulate (Lundy & McGovern, 2005). A further and more long-term aim was to raise awareness and challenge specific injustices and the legacies of the past. The goals of the ACP and the processes adopted (discussed further below) were therefore clearly more than simply collecting interviews for a book.

It is difficult to put an exact figure on the number of local people who became involved in one way or another with the ACP, but literally dozens contributed to its work through their involvement with interviews, database collation, transcribing, returning edited interviews, and proof reading, etc. However, for the duration of the project there was a core group of at least five or six local people who were consistently involved in the day-to-day management and decision-making of the project. This was very much a bottom-up initiative and community participation was seen as a defining feature. The process and the

philosophy that underpinned it were designed to ensure that the community in effect took ownership and control of every aspect of the project. All of the members of the ACP committee were from the local community. The two authors joined the project a few months after it was initially set up. As mentioned earlier, one of the authors is from Ardoyne and was therefore readily accepted. Shortly after joining she became a member of the ACP committee. In the final year of the project the only 'outsider' (the other author) was elected to the committee. This local orientation, as we discuss later, was regarded as central to the ethos of the project for practical, philosophical and ethical reasons.

The Project was therefore challenging traditional hierarchies and the distinction between the academic and the community in the research process, particularly where the supposedly contradictory subject positions of researcher and community member were simultaneously occupied by the same individual(s) (Park & Pellow, 1996). In addition, community members did not simply advise on the shape and direction of the research; they collaboratively controlled the decision-making process and worked with the academics on an equal basis to identify action strategies.

The research itself was a greater task than any of those involved initially envisaged. It was decided that, if possible, three people would be interviewed in each case. These would include as a norm, the closest relative/s (i.e. spouse, parent or sibling), a near friend or neighbour, and/or anyone who had been an eyewitness to the events of the death. The list of interviewees was arrived at in consultation with the families, usually the spouse, parent and/or the other closest relative of the victim. Ultimately around 300 people were interviewed for the project by members of the ACP (and thus almost invariably themselves local people), usually in the home of the interviewee. Interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes and two hours and almost all were recorded. In addition, a series of oral history interviews were undertaken to provide background information on the development of the conflict in the area to support the writing of a series of historical context chapters.

The desire to democratize the research process was most evident in the decision to hand back the transcribed interview to the interviewee after an initial edit. Interviewees were given a completely free hand to alter their testimony in any way they saw fit. Participants were given pre-publication access to the complete case study. Although the general rule was that changes could only be made to one's own testimony, participants were told that any inaccuracies or issues of concern raised by the content of other testimonies should be brought to the attention of the ACP. If participants were happy with the content, they signed it and a member of the ACP later collected it. This painstaking process was to ensure that what went into the book was precisely what participants wished.

The handing back phase, giving editorial control to participants and creating a sense of ownership, was regarded by the committee as an essential thing to

do because it underpinned the key principles of the project. Moreover, because of the highly personal and sensitive nature of the work, it was crucial to allow families to see any information or detail they had not previously been aware of in other testimonies. At times unforeseen disputes and differences of opinion arose. It was therefore necessary for the project to provide points of contact to resolve such problems. Clearly this was a highly delicate and sensitive process and one that could only occur because of the rootedness of the project. The process in no small way helped build trust and encouraged those initially reluctant to participate. Although extremely time-consuming, adding a considerable workload and years to the duration of the project, such processes underpinned the action research approach adopted by the ACP. They were specifically designed to challenge traditional approaches to knowledge production and dissemination, and to ensure the work was conducted in an egalitarian manner with an end goal of liberatory action. It is precisely because action research is designed to validate and disseminate popular, community-based knowledge to challenge social marginalization and structures of oppression that it is particularly relevant in societies that have been shattered by armed conflict and are engaging in a process of post-conflict transformation.

Ardoyne, 'telling the truth': consequences and responses

The ethical aim of avoiding negative consequences for participants and others had implications for different aspects of the work of the ACP, including, for example, the interview process, data storage and the publication and dissemination of the research. Clearly these are complex issues all of which cannot be discussed within the confines of this article. While not unique to work dealing with sensitive research issues, such a context undoubtedly accentuates these dilemmas. Lee and Renzetti (1993) argue that sensitivity is most likely to occur in research that delves into deeply personal experiences, concerns issues of deviance and social control, or involves a critique of vested interest, or the exercise of coercion or domination. Given that the work of the ACP was dealing with the experience of violent bereavement and raising critical questions over the conduct of state and paramilitary forces, it undoubtedly fell into the category of sensitive. For example, a key aim of the ACP from the outset was to try and tell something of the life, as well as the circumstances of the death, of the victim. This invited people to speak of memories they may have suppressed or found little opportunity to discuss openly in the past. In addition, what came more to the fore as the project developed were the experiences of the relatives and friends of the victims in the aftermath of their loss. It has been suggested that revisiting such traumatic events may cause significant harm and lead to experiences of secondary traumatization (Bell, 2001; Connolly, 2003). As Meth and Malaza point out,

‘conducting research that is distressing (for participants and researchers) disrupts the seemingly unquestionable ethical objective of avoiding harm’ (2003, p. 146).

Such ethical concerns preoccupied the ACP and support and advice were sought from other groups and relevant individuals. At a practical level a number of measures were put in place with regards to the conduct of interviews centring on issues of disclosure and confidentiality. Participants were made fully aware of the control they had over the process, that they could stop interviews at anytime or withdraw from the research, temporarily or permanently. A great emphasis was placed upon wide-ranging discussion of the overall research procedure, from interview design to dissemination of the final testimonies, in order that relatives should be clear about what it was they were taking part in. Participants were encouraged to invite a friend or relative to accompany them while they gave their testimony as a means to ameliorate the potential emotional impact of the experience. The project also provided appropriate support services in the wake of the interview, giving contact details and information for locally and community-based victim and survivors counselling groups. In fact, this emerged as a priority as the research process got underway, and in retrospect was part of the steep learning curve that is part and parcel of undertaking community-based work. That said, it is worth noting that many, if not most, participants preferred to rely on family and friends rather than organized forms of therapeutic support. Ethical guidelines for the conduct of interviews were also drawn up amongst the project members and regular discussions took place so that those involved could share and learn from their experiences. Such meetings also acted as an informal means of providing mutual support amongst those carrying out the interviews. Indeed, the informality of support structures was largely a consequence of the local focus of the project.

A key issue of concern when doing sensitive research is the issue of trust about the purpose of the research and ultimately the use to which it will be put. In violently divided societies it matters enormously who carries out the research (Brewer, 1993; Feldman, 1991; Knox, 2001; Smyth & Robinson, 2001). One major advantage for the project was that such distrust could be circumvented because local people were conducting the research. The integrity of the researchers, their political commitment, and identification and empathy with interviewees produced a dynamic interaction and sense of responsibility that would be difficult for traditional research approaches to replicate. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, in terms of its personnel, working methods, and outlook, the ACP was, in many ways, almost indistinguishable from the community. In practical terms the grassroots nature of the ACP was seen as crucial in order to gain trust, enable access, and establish an empathetic relationship with interviewees. As one member of the ACP explained, ‘if we didn’t have the trust of the people we were interviewing, the project wasn’t going anywhere. People would have quite literally closed their doors’.

Of course the converse of the closeness of the interviewer to the interviewee and the community might have led to guarded responses and prevented the inclusion of particular issues and events. Clearly too there was likely to have been a level of self-censorship that made the accounts in some senses partial readings of the past. The close-knit nature of the community and the fact that participants were aware not only that their words would be seen by others giving testimony in their case, but would also eventually be published undoubtedly had an impact in this regard. Yet, all that said, and while there is a great deal of merit in such observations, subsequent evaluation of the participatory nature of the project suggests that its 'insider' character was critical for gaining access to previously excluded groups, voices and knowledge unobtainable in any other way (Lundy & McGovern, 2005).

Post-conflict transition and research as a form of action

Employing a participatory approach did not mean that the process of ethical engagement was straightforward. Indeed, as noted above, ethical dilemmas were frequent, intense and, in some instances, are ongoing. However, the action research approach adopted by the ACP was key to resolving a number of ethical and political issues. A central major ethical concern is the extent to which social research is potentially exploitative. This is not only tied to the question of how the research is carried out but also what participants get in return for being researched. As a result, trying to understand what it was that participants in the Ardoyne Project thought they would get out of the work, and the extent to which these expectations were achieved or not, was one of the central aims of the evaluation research that the authors conducted in the aftermath of the ACP (Lundy & McGovern, 2005). To this end a series of interviews were conducted with 30 relatives who had provided their testimonies to the ACP, four people who worked on the project, and six representatives of a range of groups and bodies within Ardoyne between May 2003 and March 2004.

It has been argued that a sense of victimhood often stems from memories of unacknowledged or unreconciled historic losses (Montville, 1993). It soon became clear that for most participants the main value in the work of the ACP was that it afforded them recognition. Some participants also stated that they found the interview process therapeutic. Many noted that they felt it was important that someone was listening and that a space was found to talk about personal and traumatic events that was often difficult to do even within families. Certainly such evidence suggests that speaking out had a therapeutic value for participants in general. At the same time, however, most felt that recalling traumatic memories was an emotional and sometimes difficult process for them and their families to undertake. Many had never spoken publicly about the death

of their loved one and the impact on their family. Yet, despite the difficulty in recounting traumatic experiences, giving one's testimony was generally viewed as an important and necessary thing to do in order to have their accounts recorded, documented, and put into the public arena. Time and again participants remarked that their own personal costs in giving testimony were secondary to the importance of raising awareness and having their story told. Here's how relatives of two victims put it:

I didn't find any healing in it whatsoever. As I say I found it more upsetting but worthwhile because you know your story was going to be told.

At the end of the day you wanted the truth of what did happen to your loved ones to come out, and I thought it was a perfect opportunity to give an interview. Everyone in my family that was interviewed felt that same way. That it was time the truth was told, you know, to get it across.

Closely tied to the question of recognition was the desire for remembrance. Again this was a primary factor motivating individuals to participate in the project. Giving testimony was regarded as a beneficial thing to do, not necessarily because the experience was therapeutic or cathartic, but because it brought a tangible outcome. For some this meant putting a human face on statistics and producing something that the community would collectively remember. The following quote reflects such views:

I think the success of the book [*Ardoyne: The untold truth*] was that it allowed people's own voices to tell the story. That's where everybody could identify with it because it was very much their story, it wasn't somebody else telling it. It was how they felt and saw things, and it worked for them, and people became real again. They no longer were just a statistic or a name on a wall, and it brought people to life again.

For many relatives the denial of 'truth' and an enduring sense of injustice was a key factor that prompted them to participate in the project. This desire or need to provide testimony was not just about telling one's story; it is better understood as bearing witness (Perks & Thomson, 1998). In these circumstances 'truth' is used to denounce or challenge a perceived injustice and to set aright an official account. It is, in this sense, a way of doing justice (Yudice, 1996). In a similar vein, it has been argued that the restoration of dignity to victims may be best achieved by a 'truth-telling' process that seeks to give the victim a full role in the telling of the story of a past of gross violations (Dyzenhaus, 2000). Participating in the ACP may therefore have been particularly important (and had a positive impact) for certain relatives because it enabled them to challenge what they perceived as the denial of truth. Certainly in the responses to the follow-up research, the restoration of dignity through recognition and acknowledgement in the book, particularly to families of alleged informers, was overwhelmingly regarded as a

welcome outcome of the project. There were 13 people in the community killed by republicans. A number were alleged informers. These were among the most sensitive and challenging cases that the ACP had to grapple with. Many participants, and not only those directly affected by such circumstances, talked about how important the process had been for opening up a space within the community for such difficult subjects to be discussed. That dialogue and recognition had been developed around experiences that had been shrouded in so much silence was widely seen as one of the most important contributions the project had made.

In addition, the relatives of victims of state violence were given the opportunity to challenge what they perceived as the denial of truth in official accounts. It was apparent that some relatives, and particularly those whose loved ones had been killed by the state, had never been told ‘the truth’ about the circumstances of the death. For some such families the ACP was credited with helping to restore dignity and, in some senses, achieving a level of justice through the power of ‘truth-telling’. However, the idea of doing justice in such cases is a complex affair and the importance of recognition needs to be set alongside the desire for acknowledgement and accountability from and of the state itself. Being given the space to tell ‘their truth’ may have been justice for some, but not for others, as this participant argued:

Some [relatives] see their justice as somehow somebody coming along at some stage and telling the truth. But also other people see their justice as them being given the space to tell their story, that’s their justice. So there is different levels, I think when you talk to so many different families and victims they have a different thing about justice but generally it is around truth-telling.

As a result of engaging in the ACP many participants argued that they had regained a sense of control over their own experiences and memories. As problematic as the concept undoubtedly is, there was a sense that the project had allowed for both individual and collective empowerment. For such relatives participation was seen as a way to challenge the negative label of victimhood that for many symbolized helplessness, passiveness and powerlessness. Involvement in the project through providing testimony, it was suggested, helped recast relatives in the role of proactive agents of change and not as either helpless or powerless. Again this was likened to the question of recognition as something that was not merely given or conferred but the result of an active process of taking. The project was therefore seen as a vehicle through which relatives could make recognition happen. This feeling of being more proactive and becoming agents of change was undoubtedly important to participants and appeared to promote a more positive sense of self and community. As discussed earlier, it is also a key characteristic of action research to raise consciousness and empower marginalized groups to challenge structures of oppression and bring about change.

Taking recognition was linked to the importance of documenting previously excluded or marginalized voices. The value and symbolism of individuals having the opportunity to tell their story was accentuated by a general perception in the area that they had been mistreated and misrepresented by those elements of society who often command the process of telling the present and the past; the media and academia. Antagonism toward the media was particularly strong for many relatives who felt that their experiences had been the subject of profound and often systematic misrepresentation. Setting the record straight and saying what really happened by writing back were powerful incentives for involvement in the ACP, as the comments of the following participant exemplify:

All that crap that has been written for thirty years, you know, about 'he was a terrorist' or 'she was a terrorist' or 'he deserved' or 'she deserved it' or whatever the case may be. This was an opportunity for people, particularly the families, to say that I am happy that I've done this [participated] and I'm happy that this story is finally being told and listened to and that it's out there competing with all this crap that's been written.

Almost all the participants argued that being able to challenge history and to engage in a process of writing their own past was one of the most important goals and achievements of the project. The editorial control provided through the handing back phase was almost universally credited with having afforded this crucial sense of ownership and agency of narration. Clearly, for those who were involved in providing their testimony for the book, achieving the emancipatory ends of the project (the validation of previously excluded popular knowledge, affording an opportunity to bear witness, and challenge dominant public sphere readings of the past) was as dependent on the actual process that was undertaken as it was upon the final outcome. What mattered was not only what 'truth' was told, but the process of 'telling the truth' itself.

Conclusion

Action research is designed to change the relationship between researcher and researched and to allow for the development of initiatives that contribute to positive social change. Indeed it is a central maxim of the approach that such means and ends are intimately interlinked. Within the context of a deeply divided society emerging from conflict, such as the North of Ireland, a legacy of suspicion, hostility and disillusionment make the achievement of either a particularly difficult and complex task. However, what this article has sought to illustrate is that it is precisely by engaging in a process informed by a participatory action research approach that a community-based form of 'truth-telling' can act as the means to permit previously unheard voices to emerge into the public realm and so

help shape the future in a progressive way. To do so does mean, though, that a number of ethical problems emerge as a consequence. Delving into the personal and collective memories of a community that has experienced the traumatic impact of conflict over three decades raises acute questions over the potential costs and benefits that such sensitive research will bring in its wake. Such considerations profoundly impacted the way in which the work of the ACP was carried out. That work was conducted by people from within the community and through an ongoing process of consultation with the community. Although at important junctures advice and help from some trusted outside groups and agencies were sought, the knowledge, skills and insights of people within the area were the primary resource the project could call upon. This meant that many, if not all, of those involved had not really undertaken such work before. Mistakes were made as a result and the learning curve about what could and could not be done was a steep one. Given the sensitivity of what was being undertaken, it was also a learning curve that presented all those involved with moments of self-doubt and deeply felt emotional concern. Yet, at the same time, insights that were intrinsic to the outlook and working practices of the project were the direct consequence of that complex mesh of relationships that bound together the relatively small number of those carrying out the work, the hundreds of people who provided testimonies and the wider community. What emerged from the evaluation of the project was that, for the overwhelming majority of participants, the best means of dealing with the ethical problems of sensitivity and danger was to ensure that those taking part understood precisely what the project was for, felt a sense of ownership and agency over its outcomes, and could directly shape and control their deeply personal and often emotionally difficult involvement in it.

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