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The role of ex-paramilitaries and former prisoners in political tourism

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ABSTRACT

Northern Ireland has a turbulent history, enduring 30 years of violence known as 'The Troubles'. Streets in Belfast that were once 'no-go' areas are now popular tourist attractions. They are the sites of assassinations, attempted murders and memorials to the dead - both those killed and those who killed. This article reports back on interviews and focus groups with ex-prisoners and ethnographic walks, participating in guided tours of streets, memorial sites and cemeteries, led by former paramilitaries turned tour guides. These local, sometimes controversial, figures play a key role in Belfast's tourist industry, letting those at the very centre of the conflict present and represent the city's dark and contentious history. In this article, we argue that 'Troubles tourism' is not about glorifying or commodifying violence, as its critics have suggested (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2008; O'Doherty, 2016; Tinney, 2017), but rather, it enables the contested nature of the conflict to be understood by allowing competing discourses to co-exist and divergent positions to be tolerated, which is politically important for peace. As such, post-conflict tourism requires a different analytical approach than that currently offered in the 'dark tourism' literature, which often focuses on visitors' motivations and expectations, and the commodification of history. Instead, we suggest that increased attention be dedicated to the voices of those with previous experience of violence, and the potential of this to understand current ongoing struggle, as well as consider how tourism might contribute to community transition in a post-conflict context.

1. Introduction

Lonely Planet recently voted Belfast and the Causeway coast tourist destination of the year (McDonald, 2017). The appeal of the latter is obvious. Famous for its cliff-top walks, it is home to the Giant's Causeway, a natural geological wonder and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its forests, mountains and moorlands form the rugged backdrop for the fantasy television series *Game of Thrones*. However, Belfast is a curious choice. After decades of violent conflict, streets that were once the sites of kidnappings, bombings and shootings are now tourist attractions.

This article examines two weeks of fieldwork in Belfast, engaging in 'Troubles Tourism'. We undertook ethnographic walks, participated in guided tours of memorial sites, gardens and cemeteries; and conducted focus groups and interviews with tour guides from former paramilitary and ex-prisoner communities. The aim of the research was to explore how our interviewees understood and practiced their roles. We were interested in the way in which political dynamics played out on the ground and within the context of tourism.

'The Troubles' is an ambiguous term referring to the violent ethno-nationalist struggles over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. On one side, there are those born in Northern Ireland who identify as British and feel loyalty towards the British state. They believe their interests are best served by membership of the UK and oppose being ruled by a parliament in Dublin. There are others born in Northern Ireland who identify as Irish and believe in a sovereign state uniting the North with the Republic of Ireland. This disputed claim to sovereignty was at the centre of The Troubles, which killed 3,739 people and injured over 80,000 (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). The two opposing positions are referred to as Unionism and Nationalism, and, respectively, Loyalism and Republicanism at their most militant (dissident, hard-line and paramilitary). Republicans saw The Troubles as a war of liberation, whilst Loyalists viewed it as domestic terrorism. The conflict was not about religion *per se* but had a sectarian dimension, as Nationalists and Republicans tended to be Catholic, whilst Unionists and Loyalists were mostly Protestant.

The Troubles ran from the late 1960s to the late 1990s and has a long and complex history. There remains a lack of consensus around the historical and contemporary narrative, which can be observed through many different interpretations. Rather than providing an account of

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Ireland's deep past here and attempting to capture this multitude of viewpoints, re-treading ground that has already been expertly covered, we signpost the reader to a selection of resources.[1] We begin our history in the second half of the 20th century, a time characterised by gerrymandering, discrimination and sectarian clashes, as Catholics continued to be denied adequate housing, employment and education. Partly inspired by the civil rights movements in the USA and South Africa, protestors took to the streets in 1967 to campaign for the rights of the minority Catholic population. They were met with violence from the police and non-Catholic communities, resulting in rioting (Hennessy, 1997). The British army was brought in to quell the violence, but the occupation became hostile and stoked conflict. Paramilitary groups were galvanised and new factions emerged, as both communities felt that the State was incapable of protecting them (Dowler, 2013). They formed armed opposition groups and a 30-year war ensued. The Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement, 1998) resulted in ceasefires from the majority of paramilitary organisations, however, some groups still exist and hold weaponry (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009), and new dissident factions emerge (Hoey, 2019). There are simmering tensions in the region with low-level disorder and sectarian rioting (Carroll, 2019).

'Troubles Tourism' is a geographically specific variant of 'political tourism' or 'conflict tourism', part of the broader phenomenon of 'dark tourism', where sites of death, destruction and atrocity are turned into cultural attractions (Lennon & Foley, 2000). With a loose remit covering all types of death and suffering, critics have pointed to a lack of justification for grouping very different sites, experiences and motivations under one banner, leading Isaac and Platenkamp (2018) to call for an end to its use altogether. Indeed, this literature does not provide a useful framework for the examination of our experience of engaging with the political geography of Belfast as encountered on Troubles Tours. Firstly, an emphasis on visitors' motivations and expectations – a key 'sub-discipline' of dark tourism scholarship (Korstanje & George, 2018) – fails to account for those of guides and facilitators. As guides frequently mediate visitors' post-conflict experiences, their perspectives are valuable both to understand their participation in the industry as well as gain a fuller picture of the complex dynamics of tourist/guide interactions. Secondly, dark tourism literature has been dominated by discussions of commodified histories and associated ethics (Reynolds, 2018). Whilst related questions have been raised about Troubles Tourism, as will be addressed here, the conflict remains politically and culturally contested. As such, whilst it concerns the past, Troubles Tourism does not treat history as a commodity but as a violent phase of an ongoing struggle that continues in the present through, for the most part, non-violent means. As guides walk visitors through the landscape, the past continues to be negotiated. We suggest that such contexts require a more nuanced approach to recent conflict sites than is currently found in dark tourism literature, which offers an approach more suited to places where 'the past' is more firmly 'past', at least according to popular consensus.

Correspondingly, tourism at post-conflict sites is a fairly new area of enquiry both within and beyond dark tourism scholarship (Light, 2017), and again research has tended to focus on tourists' experiences, rather than on those who deliver them. Conflict tourism in Northern Ireland is under-researched (with exceptions: Simone-Charteris, Boyd, & Burns, 2013; Dowler, 2013; Skinner, 2016; Gould, 2011; Boyd, 2000, 2013; Leonard, 2011; Wiedenhoft Murphy, 2010; and McDowell, 2008), particularly from the perspective of former paramilitaries. We argue that further attention to the voices of those actively involved in the conflict may enable both a better understanding of their struggle and the potential of tourism to contribute to post-conflict transition.

Beyond these suggestions for new perspectives within dark tourism, this research further contributes to several current debates in dark and broader tourism geography discourses. Whilst we do not focus on visitor motivation, our results shed light on how the guides' own priorities and, in this case, their ongoing struggles, inform the experiences they offer tourists and the impressions and understanding that visitors gain. This chimes with the desire for firsthand accounts of violence, which are viewed as educational and authentic (Frochot & Batat, 2013). 'Community-based tourism' has been established as a growing phenomenon in recent decades. Grounded in local participation, such activities aim to contribute to local economies and social regeneration, and are designed to protect specific identities and environments (Russell, 2000). Increased attention to issues of responsibility and ethics is also apparent in recent literature. Our research speaks to these concerns, primarily in cultural terms. The case study offers further empirical examples of local participation from a marginalised and traumatised group that holds a controversial status outside of its own local community. Tourism, in this case, aims to contribute to the local economy, provide employment and protect local identities, suggesting that this example furthers current debate in these areas.

2. Tourism in Belfast

Early tourism initiatives glossed over The Troubles, romanticising Ireland's magical landscapes and people (Rolston, 1995), in contrast to media images of war-torn Belfast (Lisle, 2000). Today, Northern Ireland is billed as somewhere for the 'culturally curious' (Schultz, 2017), with Belfast marketed as a city break destination, for shopping, restaurants and cultural attractions. Yet 'Troubles Tourism' is extremely popular with visitors. Tripadvisor's Travel Trend Report (2018) ranks three Troubles themed tours amongst the ten most popular attractions in Northern Ireland, and Belfast City Sightseeing Tours revealed that 75 per cent of visitors wanted to explore Troubles sites (McNeil, 2013). Despite this, it does not feature on the city's official tourism website, although niche interests are promoted ('theatrical history tours' and the 'George Best trail'), continuing a trend that overlooks The Troubles (Rolston, 1995).

Instead, the city's tourism offer is dominated by the Titanic Experience, a £100 million visitor attraction at the site of the shipyard where the fateful vessel was built in 1912. This area was derelict following the decline of the shipbuilding trade, but has been regenerated as part of a £7 billion development. In 2016, the Titanic Experience beat Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, Machu Picchu and the Las Vegas strip to be crowned the 'World's Leading Tourist Attraction' at the World Travel Awards (Conghaile, 2016). The Troubles death toll eclipses that of the maritime disaster, yet there is no state sanctioned museum, educational facility or official memorial in the city centre,[2] as The Troubles has not been fully consigned to history, despite the inception of the peace process. People don't agree how to mark the dead or whether they should be honoured at all, and not everybody agrees that the conflict is over. In contrast, the sinking of the Titanic on its maiden voyage and the death of over 1,500 passengers and crew was tragic, but it sits firmly in the past and is not politically sensitive or contentious. Although the Titanic Experience commemorates a catastrophe, it proudly reminds visitors of a time when Belfast was known throughout the world for its industrial prowess, luxury and decadence, engineering and innovation, and economic growth. This boom-time Belfast story is easy to package and sell, neatly sidestepping difficult questions about poverty, class and religious

[1] For useful starting points, see Dawson, 2007; English, 2012; Hennessy, 1997; McAuley, 2015; McKittrick & McVea, 2012; Mulholland, 2002 and Robinson, 2017.

[2] There are smaller organisations outside the centre that tell the story of Republican struggle (Conway Mill and the Roddy McCorley Republican Museum), Protestant history (The Museum of Orange Heritage) and Loyalist conflict (Andy Tyrie Interpretation Centre). None of these offer diverse or contested narratives. Ulster Museum's newly opened permanent Troubles exhibition worked with the local community and offers multiple perspectives in a shared space, as opposed to the previous presentation, which lacked alternative viewpoints.

discrimination, although the Belfast shipyard was highly politicized. Its owners and managers were hostile to Irish independence (Moss & Hume, 1986), fearing it would threaten industry (Crossland & Moore, 2003) as the shipbuilding trade was dependent on the free markets of the British empire. Most of its 35,000 workforce were Protestant and the minority of Catholics faced intolerance (Moss & Hume, 1986). Despite this, the story of the Titanic is celebratory compared to the more recent, raw and contested narrative of The Troubles. It is understandable that a post-conflict region would prefer to officially promote positive histories at a time when society remains divided, peace fragile, and the re-building of identities paramount.

Although it is not officially promoted, visitors to Belfast take guided tours around Troubles sites, including memorials, gardens, cemeteries, and other significant locations, from political murals to the 'peace lines' (walls that segregate Catholic and Protestant communities). As well as hop on/hop off bus tours, there are taxi and coach tour companies whose drivers were not involved in the conflict, do not live locally and have no paramilitary links. Other organisations have grown out of the paramilitary groups such as the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre (Epic) and Coiste Na n-Iarchimí (henceforth Coiste). Epic is a Loyalist network of ex-combatants providing employment to former paramilitaries to enable reintegration. Coiste supports the rights of former Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners. In 2002, it launched a 'political tours' initiative, with ex-combatants guiding visitors around Catholic areas. It began collaborating with Epic so that tours of Protestant areas could be offered. This access to lived experience is a major draw for tourists, providing them with a better understanding (Frochot & Batat, 2013). This raises questions around who should speak for these communities and how victims' voices should be represented, not to mention issues of employment (it remains legal for employers to discriminate on the basis of conflict-related convictions). As social deprivation is a potential recruitment tool for dissident groups, barriers to employment are dangerous. Coiste and Epic are social enterprises that significantly under-charge for what they offer, thus well-worn critiques that dark tourism commodifies suffering (Lennon & Foley, 2000) and cashes in (O'Doherty, 2016) to exploit the deceased (Stone, 2012) seem less relevant in this case.

Conflict tourism draws attention to how these sites are managed, and questions whether to preserve the reminders of violence. Some claim that the political murals prevent business investment (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2008; Hall, 2006) and reify division by presenting singular narratives of the past (McAtackney, 2018).They do not inspire integration; their purpose is to mark territory, protest, issue warnings and pay tribute, not appease. Their removal is contentious as they are important for community identity and memory. Whilst the tangible features of dark histories are important for reflection and commemoration, this does not take into account political sensitivity. What is offensive and intimidating to one may be a source of pride, an expression of identity or means of belonging to another. Belfast's council and tourism agencies must tread carefully; it is unsurprising that resources are ploughed into the Titanic Experience.

Some assert that these tangible manifestations of violence and the tourist industry surrounding them reproduces conflict (Skinner, 2016), fuels separation and exacerbates division (McDowell, 2008). Relatives of victims accuse tour companies of glorifying murder (Tinney, 2017). For example, campaigner Raymond McCord argued:

> 'I would never pay to go on a tour like that, and don't understand anyone who would, especially not if it was hosted by ex-terrorists … profiting from misery and death … Those involved … are murderers and thugs' (Tinney, 2017:online)

Troubles Tourism in Belfast has been contentious since the outset. The Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) archives show politicians split along party lines in their support for/opposition to conflict tourism in the early days. For the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), it was an issue of distaste:

> 'Will the tourist experience mock kneecappings? Maybe even the recorded screams of the supposed victims? What about dummy bomb runs? … Political beatings? … With a bit of blindfolding and torture, the tourist could relive the experience of the terror victim' (NIA, 2008)

The DUP accepted that visitors wanted to see the political murals, but argued that local people wanted to 'move on' from their 'bloody past' (NIA, 2008), accusing the tours of 'glorifying terrorism' (NIA, 2008) and warning they would result in 'unsafe and uncomfortable' experiences for visitors, keep local communities locked in the past, and disrespect victims and their families (NIA, 2008). There was no recognition by the Unionists of the educative potential of political tourism, echoing the early dark tourism debates that saw it as macabre and morbid (Lennon & Foley, 2000), focusing on the ethics of visitor motivation.

In contrast, Nationalist politicians were welcoming of conflict tourism and expressed similar views to those emerging from more recent research, suggesting that tourists are not primarily driven by ghoulish voyeurism but are informed, respectful and eager to learn (Clark, 2014; Isaac & Çakmak, 2014; Sather-Wagstaff, 2011; Tinson, Saren, & Roth, 2015). For example, for Sinn Féin politicians:

> 'People … from all over the world are interested … We should not talk about glorifying these things … because we make them available … we should make people welcome. That is the job of the tourism industry' (NIA, 2008)

Nationalist politicians argued that conflict tourism should benefit parts of the city that are in social need, such as divided West Belfast, where many of the most visited Troubles sites are located. As social deprivation was a driving force in the conflict, the working classes were particularly affected by it and many still live in this area that remains untouched by large-scale investment in tourism (Skinner, 2016):

> 'Political tourism attracts many visitors, whether people like it or not … Belfast City Council has carried out several tourist surveys … visitors would rather see attractions that relate to The Troubles than … the Titanic … People are … curious about the North's history. They want to be told … by the people who have lived through it … Political tourism … has the potential to lift those communities … into areas that have great employment and socioeconomic opportunities … The Assembly must ensure that tourism benefits everyone' (NIA, 2008)

West Belfast is the most deprived constituency in Northern Ireland (NIA, 2016) with the lowest employment rate in the UK (Press Association, 2018). Since visitors to Belfast generate over £926 million each year (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 2017) and Troubles Tourism is a key attraction, it is reasonable for some of this income to go to post-conflict areas. More than this though, McEvoy and Shirlow (2009) argue that expecting ex-prisoners to disengage with their former lives and reintegrate into civilian life without addressing structural need is not going to achieve stability.

Any experience of tourism is interconnected with, and cannot be isolated from, built heritage. In Belfast, The Troubles continue to shape the urban environment (Crooke, 2016). The city's memory landscape is rich in community-based, vernacular markings: flags, murals, graffiti, volunteer-run gardens, memorials and plaques. Whilst this 'unofficial heritage' (McAtackney, 2015, p. 116) is at odds with the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (Smith, 2006), it is a way for those impacted by The Troubles to honour and memorialise the past. It is a material reminder that much of the violence took place in everyday urban locations. Yet Belfast is not a stable, fixed site of memory that crystallizes national memory to prevent forgetting (Rapson, 2012). It is a place where lives lived are 'still felt as physically manifest, shaping what is remembered beyond the discourses of architects, developers, preservationists and

planners' (Crinson, 2005:xii). The material infrastructure of the conflict and its aftermath such as peace walls remain in place and are important for safety and security (Byrne, Gormley Heenen, & Robinson, (2012), as well as commemoration.

However, these aspects of the urban landscape are not just about physical barriers or memorialisation. Areas like West Belfast are dynamic, socially mediated environments, continuously evolving. Space is an 'interplay between the physical and psychological, neither of which can be understood in the absence of the other' (Komarova & Bryan, 2014, p. 429; it shapes identity making and constructs a sense of place (Crooke, 2005). Space controls the narrative of the past, maintains segregation and division (McAtackney, 2018), and reinforces 'narratives of the past onto … contested streetscapes' to promote community cohesion, claim victimhood and ensure the transfer of tribal politics to the next generation (McDowell, Braniff, & Murphy, 2017, p. 198).

3. Methodology

We spent two weeks in Belfast: one week in autumn (2017) and another in late spring (2018). The former was spent on tours, which enabled us to build up contacts, and the latter undertaking interviews. These separate trips allowed us to note the changes in the landscape, such as the replacement of murals and marching season preparations. We undertook seven guided tours with paramilitaries including Loyalist tours of Shankill Road, Sandy Row and Newtownards Road; and Republican tours of Falls Road and Milltown Cemetery and a 'Conflicting Stories' tour with guides from both communities. We did three 'conflict tours' with a taxi driver, a Sinn Féin councillor, and a former conflict mediator.

We spent time independently walking around working-class Belfast areas, including Falls Road and Shankill Road, visiting community hubs, cafes and memorials. These are the most popular tourism sites as they are the interface areas and during the conflict, were under the political control of the paramilitaries. These streets demonstrate how those involved in the conflict utilise the urban landscape, not only as physical territory but to construct identity, delineate difference (Gallaher & Shirlow, 2006; Jarman, 1996) and demarcate space (Bryan, 2018). They have material, discursive and physical value (McDowell et al., 2017) in making ethnosectarian politics visible (Graham & Whelan, 2007). The continued separation articulates inclusion and exclusion (Graham & Whelan, 2007; McDowell et al., 2017), and reflects the endurance of spatialised segregation (Herrault & Murtagh, 2019) through its materialisation, reproduction and normalisation via peace lines (McAtackney, 2015), flag-flying (Bryan, 2018) and murals (McCormick & Jarman, 2005; Rolston, 2010), as well as annual activities such as Unionist parades and bonfires, the Somme and Easter Rising anniversaries and the Féile an Phobail festival. These events not only unify, but under the guise of civil liberties, tradition and culture, they are used as a political weapon (Jarman, 1997).

We also visited the Ulster Museum, Republican History Museum, Andy Tyrie Interpretative Centre, Roddy McCorley Republican Museum, Crumlin Road Gaol, Orange Heritage Museum and the Titanic Experience, documenting these activities through field notes and photographs. Whilst the walking and driving tours were a curated experience, participating independently in the everyday life of these places provided an embodied experience, connecting us to our topic and location. Observational walking provided interpretative insights, enhanced local literacy and added rigour (Pierce & Lawhon, 2015). Whilst we did not undertake a long-term ethnographic study, our fieldwork facilitated intensive immersion in scripted and unscripted tourist environments, providing a good impression of how visitors encounter the city.

We conducted three interviews with former IRA guides, four with ex-Loyalist guides from the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), and a focus group with four former IRA guides. The data was captured as audio files, photographs and notes, and analysed using discourse (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second half of the paper is structured around the common themes that derived from our analysis. The focus group took place at Coiste, and the interviews were conducted at Epic, on the tours themselves, in pubs, and at the Andy Tyrie Interpretive Centre. We avoided adjudicating on who was 'telling the truth', as we recognise the existence of many truths. Our aim was to understand how our participants constructed their worlds and presented their narratives with Belfast's geography, how those at the centre of the conflict contribute to the stories that are told, and what role tourism plays.

We used snowball sampling, with ex-combatant guides as gatekeepers. Republicans were receptive from the outset, responding with enthusiasm when they found out that we were researchers. In contrast, we struggled to secure interviews with Loyalists. It was difficult to get Epic to commit and guides were not keen to participate. Despite the eagerness of our Republican interviewees, those participating in the focus group seemed uncomfortable with the formalities and protocols (for example, signing consent forms). There may be reasons for this discomfort and reluctance, such as a suspicion of official institutions; betrayal and distrust were significant themes in their accounts. Past negative experiences may play a role. For example, Loyalists were understandably irritated by the frequent misrepresentation of their communities by outsiders and academics who had failed to share their findings.

Republicans take strong ownership of local spaces. The geography of the city is a part of the stories, not a mere backdrop. Guides perform these stories to an audience, which is a different context and dynamic to a focus group. The Republicans invited us to local talks on Nationalist history and music nights at the pub, where we met friends and families. These occasions provided opportunities to delve deeper into conversations that yielded richer insights. As we responded to the hospitality of our participants, we noticed the boundaries of the research blurring and the impact on the data collection and interpretation. In returning to the relaxed spaces these people occupy in their daily lives, we found an increased willingness to open up, in what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz referred to as 'deep hanging out' (1998, p. 69). As our conversations developed, they became personal and emotion-laden. Interviewing and spending time with the victims and perpetrators of violence, and engaging emotionally in challenging conversations requires an ability to listen and a willingness to understand and learn. Whilst we found it difficult to maintain a critical distance, geographer Chih Yuan Woon (2013) explains that the 'emotionality' produced in response to accounts of violence:

> 'results in a collapse of distance between the researcher and his/her respondents … it is through this process that more expansive and nuanced knowledges of violence and terror can be generated' (2013:34)

For Woon, emotionality is not an obstacle to scientific inquiry. It draws attention to the unpredictability of research as a practice, yields revelations into the diverse and fluid subjectivities of researchers, and grounds knowledge production in lived experience and embodiment. Emotions orientate and mediate interactions. They are invaluable for reflexivity and critical engagement, helping researchers to know themselves and their subjects (Lund, 2012), generating empathy and establishing trust (Jones & Ficklin, 2012). Our project required us to *think and feel*. It was essential to think critically about the role of emotions within our research and these shaped our data collection and analysis. We used reflective discussion and writing to explore this messiness, documenting the challenges posed by the research process, relationships to participants and how all of this made us feel, especially during moments of unease or contradiction.

Care and ethical attention was needed as we were asking our participants to re-live difficult, traumatic and painful pasts. We were also negotiating our position as privileged outsiders and British citizens; as colonisers in a space of contested sovereignty being educated about our

participants' experiences and perspectives. This had consequences for the dynamics of our encounters, compounded by our identity as younger female scholars in what is an almost entirely male and masculine, in some cases, hypermasculine, milieu. Our interviewees reflected the predominant demographic profile of paramilitary members in Northern Ireland (Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2008) in that they were male, first committed acts of violence between the ages of 15–25, had families who supported and/or were involved in paramilitary activity, lived in communities sympathetic to political violence, and had access to armed groups that were welcoming of their involvement. They had experienced violent incidents which had prompted them to act, so joining a paramilitary group was not just the precursor to violence but the result of it. Furthermore, our participants were entirely white, from working-class families, with limited education when they joined a group. Two of our eleven participants differed in that they were from a younger generation of Loyalists. Whilst they fit the characteristics above, they were active in the 1990s, rather than the 1980s.

We also had to reflect on our use of language. 'The Troubles' is vague enough to avoid the contested allocation of blame, but can offend those who identify as having fought a civil war or as victims of domestic terrorism. Whilst recognising its limitations and attendant controversies, we use the term as that which is most prominent, and geopolitically specific used in vernacular and academic discourses. During our conversations, our Republican participants challenged us on our use of 'paramilitary', which was rejected by those who saw themselves as members of an army that was commensurate with the British military. To speak of 'Northern Ireland' is not acceptable for those who deny its legality as a nation. We use such terms in the interests of clarity and consistency, whilst acknowledging their contested nature and respecting the deeply felt reasons behind that contestation.

4. Authenticity and storytelling

We began our focus group by asking our Republican participants about their motivations for becoming tour guides. They were irritated by the bus and taxi tour guides who were not from the local area or involved in the conflict. They felt that these tours were inaccurate and voyeuristic, and that other people were profiting from their plight:

> 'The taxi driver jumps out and starts telling a story and it's clearly a script that has no bearing on the actual experience of prisoners … They don't even get the factual information correct' (interviewee 3)

> 'You see these hop on/hop off buses … and there is someone … going 'blah, blah, blah' … Local people resent that … there's a sense of anger … people coming here and treating us like goldfish in a bowl' (interviewee 1)

> 'You see a taxi pull up and in two minutes they are away. It takes me 10–15 minutes to explain the blanket protest and hunger strike … how can people explain Bobby Sands in two minutes? … The taxi tours are complete and utter nonsense … People are paying £30-£40 to be told nonsense … Some of the guides walk away when they see us!' (interviewee 5)

> 'The bus tours are simply money-making exercises … It isn't a political tour' (interviewee 4)

Disliking outsider interpretations may also relate to the need to control the narratives of what visitors are told. Our taxi tour guide informed us that he was doing it purely for the money. His tour was scripted and well-rehearsed, which lessened its impact. Leonard's (2011) account of Belfast City Sightseeing Tours revealed how guides with little knowledge used awkward jokes and factually inaccurate information to discuss the conflict. These quotations reveal the tensions that result from the competitive nature of tourism, which is relevant in relation to the discrimination ex-prisoners face around employment. However, this is not (or not just) a commodification of suffering (Stone, 2012) but functions to give voice to marginalised groups. For Republicans, tourism provided a crucial means of storytelling:

> 'I had a realisation that people wanted to hear *our* story from *our* mouths … Our stories weren't getting told … Stories were being told by people who had never experienced the conflict … We needed to get our story out. Everyone else was telling *our* story' (interviewee 1, emphasis in original)

> 'For 800 years, Irish people weren't allowed to tell our story … We have a voice now. In prison, we didn't have a voice … it's only these last few years that we've had a voice, and people are listening … We don't need another war … We don't need guns … We have education … We are seanchaí [Gaeilge: storyteller/historian]. These are stories you don't read in books … about what happened, why people joined these movements. We were never Republican. We were *forced* into this. People think jail was the end. Jail was the *start*' (Emphasis in original)' (interviewee 3)

> 'Tourism provides a platform for us to tell our story … It's a very important vehicle for us to tell our history, our politics and our experiences' (interviewee 4)

Republican tours were dense with historical detail, in which skilled storytellers covered centuries of Irish oppression through wars, imperialism and genocide. They took a long view of the conflict, starting in the Middle Ages, and weaving a complex set of events into a comprehensive chronological narrative of struggle against social injustice. The Loyalist story was more individual, less coherent and swiftly moved from one topic to the next, echoing a lack of coherence in Loyalist ideology (Graham, 2004): the Titanic shipyard, British monarchy, brutality of the Magdalene Laundries, Battle of the Somme, paedophilia in the Catholic church and World War II were interspersed with reports of IRA sectarianism and murders of Protestants. There was no prehistory or recognition of centuries of Irish struggle. It was not chronological or themed, and had a less saleable narrative; it was easier to sympathise with the idea of a discriminated minority. In Republican accounts every name, date and time was etched onto the guides' minds. Points were brought to life by compelling anecdotes and the landscape was utilised to great effect. For example, some tours began at a derelict primary school. Its crumbling façade was pock-marked with bullet holes, reportedly from gun battles in the 1970s. This relic added authenticity and facilitated a discussion about discrimination in schools, the removal of Irish history from the curriculum and the 19th century wooden 'tally stick' that denoted the number of beatings children would receive if they spoke Gaeilge. This, inevitably, stirred the emotions.

Loyalist guides also utilised significant locations during their tours. For example, the site of Frizzel's Fish Shop, now a credit union building, where the infamous Shankill Road Bombing took place in 1993. However, these landmarks were not integrated into one story and in some cases, they disrupted the narrative. In the case of Loyalists, body-language, tone and demeanour were more significant in producing authenticity, such as the reflections on what the lives of these men might have been if circumstances were different and the insistence of one interviewee to vigilantly have his back to the wall and to face the door.

5. Politics and propaganda

Republican narratives were underpinned by accepted historical facts and Marxist political theory. This was a community of serious political thinkers and the guides clearly enjoyed intellectual sparring. We learnt how ex-combatants turned their prison cells into teaching spaces: 'we were reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and liberation theology'; the IRA had 'brains *and* courage!' (interviewee 2, emphasis in original)

Loyalist guides were aware of the coherence, saleability and persuasiveness of the Republican narrative. They recognised its efficacy

and saw this, pejoratively, as a 'slickness'. Loyalists struggle to make their politics palatable as they are viewed from the outside as the last vestige of colonialism. This hinders them in finding a voice and gaining political legitimacy (Mitchell, 2017). They noted their own 'image problem' (Hall, 2006) and the need to restore their reputation (Gallaher & Shirlow, 2006). Two younger Loyalists referred to peoples' 'pre--conceptions' of them as 'skin-headed', 'tattooed', 'hooligans with guns' whilst pointing to their own shaved heads, body art and museum weapons displays. Several referred to the perception that Republicans educated themselves in prison, whilst Loyalists bulked up in the exercise yard. We met reflexive Loyalists, including those who had attained degrees in prison or following release, but they lacked confidence and felt 'left behind' by Republicans, 'big house' Unionists and the British government. They lacked the critical mass and solidarity of the Republicans, and did not have the same level of focus (Mitchell, 2017), as indicated by the failure to successfully decommission (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009), the ongoing feuds (Steenkamp, 2008), political isolation (Graham, 2004) and the lack of a voice (Hall, 2006).

For Republicans, tourism was part of an educational awareness raising campaign. The guides saw themselves as activists involved in a live struggle:

> 'We are educators. We want to make people politically aware of … how the State works and how it can assassinate its own citizens' (interviewee 5)

> 'The tours are a continuation of the activism work I was doing before [prison]. People say 'pre-peace process' and 'post-peace process' as if there are two parallel tracks, as opposed to a straight line through it all. It's just different contexts, different tactics, different strategies. The politics are the same' (interviewee 1)

> '[T]ourism has made massive gains for our struggle and how people see it … The tours are an extension of our commitment to what we believe in … they give us the opportunity to go out and tell people' (interviewee 4)

Loyalist tours were less organised and resourced, but were still, for some an important way to counter perceived IRA propaganda:

> 'The thing for me is to counter Republican propaganda. That's my main thrust … Republicans are rewriting the history of what happened. The sectarian violence on Shankill Road is very rarely spoken about by Republican guides … They won't admit it … they carried out the atrocities on this road that led us to retaliate … It's important for me that people know the facts … that's my motivation' (interviewee 7)

> 'We want to expose the lies of Sinn Féin and the IRA and we do it as *graphically* as we can. It was murder and mayhem. Republicans have a romanticised idea of conflict … They are very good at propaganda' (interviewee 9, emphasis in original)

One Loyalist participant confessed: 'we are 10–15 years behind in the propaganda campaign', whilst Republicans acknowledged 'the battle of the narratives' as 'a continuation of the conflict by other means … a different type of battle' (Engle, 2018).

Republican guides seemed comfortable with contradictory accounts, reaching out to Epic to collaborate on political tours:

> 'We engaged Loyalist prisoners because we're in a peace process, whether we like them or not, irrespective of what they've done to our community, our friends, our families. We have to move forward' (interviewee 4)

This led to the 'Conflicting Stories' tours, during which Republican and Loyalist guide sometimes shake hands as visitors cross from one 'side' to another. This signifies a level of unprecedented cooperation through self-developed tourism initiatives. Importantly, the tour enables, nay encourages, discordant interpretations. When we spoke of the different narratives, a Republican interviewee explained:

> 'We don't contradict Loyalists. We just tell our own story. Sometimes tourists tell you stuff that they've said. I just say: "well, that's his version of events". I don't challenge anything … There's objective information out there' (interviewee 5)

This is different to the Loyalists' motivations to counter 'IRA propaganda', 'correct' the narrative and 'expose' the 'yarns'. At the same time, throughout the tours, there was a refusal on both sides to recognise the perspective of the other. There was little effort or desire for impartiality, objectivity or balance, but why would there be? These are people who have fought, killed and been prepared to die for what they believe in. For many, the struggle continues, as the issue at the heart of the conflict persists. Yet there is an assumption in some of the literature that these tours should be neutral, for example, Republican guides have been accused of 'territorial politics', using tourism as a political tool to elicit support and sympathy, 'a war by other means' (McDowell, 2008, p. 407).

Political messages also came through the urban landscape, such as the murals and memorial sites on Falls, Shankill and Newtownards Roads, Sandy Row, and on nearby housing estates. The Falls Road 'International Wall', a series of murals referencing global political struggle is an optimistic sight, demonstrating cosmopolitan values of solidarity and situating the Nationalist struggle within a global resistance movement. This clever strategy raises international awareness, galvanises support and evokes sympathy (Crooke, 2016). By locating the IRA hunger strikers and the blanket protestors amidst the giants of global civil rights - Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, Stephen Biko, Nelson Mandela, and Angela Davis - the murals earn crucial legitimacy and maintain the relevance and vibrancy of Republican struggle. The wall is regularly repainted to reflect contemporary conflicts, ensuring that unification remains topical. Visibility is paramount, hence it is situated on a major arterial route (McCormick & Jarman, 2005).

Some of the Nationalist murals have religious overtones, with long-haired, bare-chested and barefoot blanket protestors and the self-sacrifice of the hunger strikers almost Christ-like. This is despite our participants renouncing religion: 'we went to prison as Catholics and came out as atheists!' (interviewee 11) There is a tradition of institutionalised fasting in Nationalist struggle and hunger-striking is an established practice of Republican martyrdom (Byrne, 2016). The focus on a small group of brave individuals puts a human face to the resistance. They are the 'unequivocal victims of aggression' (McAtackney, 2018, p. 55), heroic rather than horrifying. Republican tours centre on oppressed people surviving brutality, and the triumph of enduring human spirit. Further along is a mural dedicated to the iconic Bobby Sands, who is similarly celebrated, martyred and heroised (Graham & Whelan, 2007), but more than that, he is deified.

Whilst noting who is represented, we also reflected on who is absent. Civilians with no political affiliation represent 53 per cent of those killed during The Troubles and Republicans were responsible for 59 per cent of these deaths (Ferguson et al., 2008). Whilst what is represented visually and verbally comes from community activism, it is an incomplete and carefully curated experience for visitors. Controversial and less comfortable aspects of these histories - civilian casualties, the 'disappeared', alleged informers - are erased. These material features of the landscape are selective attempts (McAtackney, 2018) to present history in singular, hierarchical and bounded narratives for easy consumption (Lisle, 2000). This is significant as Republicans overtly align themselves with principles of non-violence, human rights, inclusiveness and tolerance (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009). The murals reflect a broad set of interests within the movement, from feminism and socialism to trade unionism and anti-colonialism. They act as social commentary, with the objective of mobilisation. Despite the media continuing to downgrade and dismiss the murals as anachronistic relics (see Burley, 2018), we

recognised their purpose as 'instruments in an ideological struggle' (McCormick & Jarman, 2005, p. 50).

6. Fragmentation and isolation

In contrast, the heavily militarised wall paintings of the Loyalists speak of a different kind of sacrifice. Our conversations revealed that Loyalists feared a Republican uprising, which is compounded by what they perceived as a betrayal by the State. Loyalist murals often combine aggression and fearlessness with vulnerability and insecurity. Many depict hooded men looking down the barrel of a gun pointed at the viewer. When you move, the gun follows. These have a menacing and panoptical quality, which is intimidating to outsiders. In the words of our participants: 'these act as a warning, not a welcome' (interviewee 10) and 'these murals say to Catholics, "if you come into our area, all you'll find is death"' (interviewee 9).

Many of the most hardline murals were replaced as part of the £3.3 million 'Reimaging Programme', funded by the British government. Republicans removed gunmen from their murals during the peace process talks, so this has largely affected Loyalist communities. It was controversial due to political sensitivity, enduring local support and commitment to paramilitarism and tourism. Guns and balaclavas have been replaced by fairies, flowers and archival photographs, heavily nostalgic for the good old days of poverty and happiness. Nonetheless, we also saw new paintings depicting masked gunmen, acting as territorial markers of Loyalist power and presence, reminding us that we were within a site of ongoing political struggle and sectarian division (McCormick & Jarman, 2005).

Loyalist murals are notorious for showcasing their credentials as assassins. For example, the tribute to Stevie McKeag, a well-known UDA figure who predominantly murdered civilian Catholics, hence this mural pays homage to sectarian violence. We observed McKeag's head in the clouds, heaven-like, amongst the Union Jack, the crown and silhouetted saluting soldiers. References to the military and monarchy legitimate his status as a hero. He is, unquestionably, a soldier, with military-style beret and ribbed jumper with epaulettes. The painting is indicative of the way that Loyalists imitate the imagery and discourse of the British military. Loyalist areas are littered with Latin slogans: the UDA appropriated the SAS motto 'Who Dares Wins' (Rolston, 2012); the UDA motto 'Quis Separabit' ('Who Will Separate') is borrowed from the British army; and the Ulster Freedom Fighters adopted 'Feriens Tego', ('Striking, I will defend'). Loyalist memorials mimic cenotaph displays and feature familiar captions: 'lest we forget' and 'at the going down of the sun, we will remember'. Imagery of bowed heads and downturned rifles echo the respect and honour given to veterans. This idea of 'service' is a repeated leitmotif with a literal meaning, as UVF members fought in the First World War and were slaughtered at the Battle of the Somme. Tours present this in a celebratory fashion, as the 36th (Ulster) Division of the British Army, comprised mainly of the UVF, was the only unit to achieve its objectives on the opening day of the battle, capturing a section of the German front line. Narratives of courage, loyalty and sacrifice permeate murals and memorials, which are dominated by the red poppy of remembrance, regardless of whether the deaths they commemorate were connected to formal duties.

The McKeag mural is metres from a primary school and our guide argued that this exemplifies radicalisation. He may be correct, and McKeag himself may have been a victim, as he was typical of second-generation working-class Protestants who 'emerged from Loyalist ghettos' (McDonald, 2000:online). One Loyalist guide described sectarianism as 'handed down by parents to their children' and that youngsters aspired to be paramilitaries 'because they have little prospect of meaningful futures' (interviewee 9). Another interviewee told us about his upbringing in a Protestant Unionist working-class household. His uncle was in the Orange Order and regularly took him to Reverend Ian Paisley's sermons espousing Protestant superiority whilst inciting hatred against Catholics through thunderous rhetoric of devils and anti-christs. Our guide was 'indoctrinated into Loyalism' with paramilitaries 'incited by the clergy and armed by the military' (interviewee 6). After a childhood immersion in the demagogy of Paisley, our guide joined the youth wing of the UVF and quickly became a military commander, with multiple life sentences for several murders. In prison, he had a realisation:

> 'What we were doing as Loyalists wasn't making me any more British. What the Republicans were doing was not bringing them independence. All it was doing was making the prisons overcrowded and the graveyards full … Violence is futile. Dialogue is the only way' (interviewee 6)

The tours were personal in that they offered individual perspectives. Republicans drew on their prison experience but there was an overall narrative that the Loyalist tours didn't have. Instead, they stressed that they were speaking only for themselves, emphasising divisions within Loyalism. There wasn't the same solidarity from Loyalist interviewees, in contrast to the Republican's convivial comradeship. They felt misunderstood:

> 'My motivation is to try to portray The Troubles as ordinary young men and women caught up in a circumstance that wasn't of their making' (interviewee 8)

> 'It's about saying "we weren't monsters. These were monstrous things but … it was unavoidable because of the circumstances" … it was wrong … but *it happened*' (interviewee 6, emphasis in original)

> 'I want to let people know that we are not bad people. Shankill Road … has had a bad press. It's time to show the human side' (interviewee 7)

Loyalist interviewees felt that politicians and the media had demonised and criminalised their communities, a point supported by the literature (see Gallaher & Shirlow, 2006). None of our participants expressed solidarity or association with Unionist parties, and there was resentment towards the DUP for its failure to represent their interests:

> 'We were blatantly used by this middle-class party, carried to victory every time by a working-class electorate who couldn't tell you what the benefit was and probably hadn't read the manifesto' (interviewee 9)

> 'The DUP were elected here for years on a manifesto that was "smash Sinn Féin". When they come to your door and say "can I rely on your vote?", I say "what is smashing Sinn Féin going to do for me? Is it going to get my daughter into a better school? Is it going to keep the accident and emergency unit open 24/7 instead of shutting at 5pm?"' (interviewee 6)

Whilst segregated cities are easily exploited for votes (Herrault & Murtagh, 2019), Loyalist interviewees felt distanced from political Unionism, underlining their isolation. They believed they had not benefitted from the peace process, nor had their loyalty been appreciated, which compounded their sense of abandonment and betrayal:

> 'I've been wracking my brains for years why we are so loyal to the queen and crown because they tried to ditch us' (interviewee 6)

> 'We took the crown off our flag … when we realised … the British state was against us' (interviewee 7)

This intensifies the perception that they can only trust those in their community or paramilitary faction, reinforcing the insularity they are criticised for.

For one Loyalist participant (interviewee 6), tours helped in coming to terms with his actions. The interview was reflective, almost confessional, touching upon themes of reparation, justice, forgiveness and restoration: 'tourism is not about simply saying sorry. Saying sorry isn't

enough. You can only say it so many times'. Another set up the Andy Tyrie Interpretive Centre to house his collection of paramilitary artefacts and prison artworks. This was a personal, deeply felt project, which he referred to as 'therapy' and a space for ex-prisoners:

> 'to reflect on what actually happened. We were going at it so ferociously we didn't have time to think about what we were doing and the repercussions … It's a way of dealing with the past' (interviewee 8)

Since Northern Ireland has the world's highest rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Ferry et al., 2012), prevalence of suicide (O'Neill, 2018) and mental illness (O'Neill & Rooney, 2018) in the UK, setting up museums and tours may be important for reflection. This is significant in the context of the collapse and absence of Stormont,[3] which has resulted in mental health services being restricted, strategies not being implemented and key decisions put on hold (O'Neill & Rooney, 2018).

Whilst Loyalists seemed lost, Republicans are actively involved in Sinn Féin as grassroots activists and in paid roles, having strategically enmeshed themselves into the apparatus of the State. This exemplifies the sophistication of the Republican campaign, which was evident throughout the fieldwork and acknowledged by a Loyalist guide: 'Republicanism is based on a 5/10/15/20 year political strategy' (interviewee 9). Loyalism, in comparison, appeared rudderless.

7. Conclusions

This research presents a picture of how former paramilitaries understand and undertake their roles as tour guides. Tourism enables ex-prisoners to take an active role in their communities in a city with a legacy of deprivation, discrimination and unemployment. It raises awareness of historic and ongoing class politics, whilst allowing marginalised individuals to represent themselves, share their personal experiences and have the right to be heard. Both parties tell heartfelt stories of heroism, bravery and courage; of victory over adversity; and of enduring suffering and sacrifice, further dramatized by the landscape, with its physical remnants of the conflict and its everyday territorialisation, often via commemoration.

Loyalists are defenders of sovereignty, 'more British than the British', and whilst they have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their loyalty, do not feel adequately rewarded. Stepping up during The Troubles was a matter of civic responsibility to the community and paramilitary factions. For Republicans, the IRA was a minority of a minority, fighting oppression and imperialism. Their struggle was represented in humanitarian terms, via the lens of civil rights and hence have a more saleable narrative. They locate their struggle in a linear and comprehensive (Graham, 2004) timeline of centuries of persecution, framed by the contemporary discourse of decolonisation. This has international traction, as we turn away from colonialism and recognise the right of indigenous peoples to regain their land and protect their cultures (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Republican guides identify as political activists, with tourism an important non-violent, legitimate means of campaigning. They promote a Nationalist, Socialist and Internationalist ideology. In contrast, Loyalists struggle to make sense of their position, feeling increasingly isolated and under siege: 'the whole world, at best, not understanding them and at worst, despising them' (Spencer, 2015). Their tours serve more individual purposes, from self-reflection and sense-making, to rebutting Republican propaganda and resisting unification. Whilst the tours are primarily personal, the personal is politically inflected. At a time when many feel politically, economically and socially disenfranchised, tourism provides an opportunity to process their actions and critique their opponents as well as those claiming to represent them. Due to these different motivations, Loyalist tours lack the consistent message of the Republicans, who are more effective because there remains an unwavering commitment to the original cause. However, Loyalists' sense of their 'loyalism', as one participant put it, as 'evolving and changing … in flux', lent pathos to their narratives and created an empathic response. Tourism, for both sides, presents a political and personal opportunity to those who have lost legitimacy in other spheres.

Tours also provide spaces to discuss the past in an uncensored fashion, to remember the deceased and to learn about the conflict. Crucially, Troubles Tourism enables competing discourses to co-exist and first-hand narratives to be shared in a palatable and non-confrontational way. The memorials, flags, murals and other vernacular additions to the urban landscape are ways in which competing and contested ideologies are 'concretized as material realities' (Graham & Whelan, 2007, p. 493) in segregated places. The violence of the past is evident in the everyday, with tourists forming 'multiple and unstable subject positions' (Lisle, 2000, p. 104) from these messy competing narratives. This enables divergent positions to be tolerated, which is politically important for peace, whilst, simultaneously, allowing the conflict to remain present (McDowell et al., 2017).

These differing narratives are essential for these two groups to work together, suggesting that whilst reconciliation is yet to be realised, there is the potential for tourism to contribute to a more stable post-conflict community. This conclusion follows a range of projects where ex-paramilitaries have been shown to lead peace-building and cooperation, and are perfectly placed to do so precisely because they understand violence (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009). Whilst this article sheds light on the experiences and motivations of the former prisoners, more data is required to understand how Troubles Tourism intersects with other activities, especially around conflict transformation, and how it can be harnessed with a view to post-conflict transition. At the same time, whilst the tours facilitate competing interpretations and narratives, and enable the contested nature of the conflict to be understood more widely, they raise questions of how genuine peace can ever be established whilst they continue to propagate sectarian interests and reassert hierarchies of victimhood. These issues are not addressed in detail in existing discussions of dark tourism. In moving the focus from the experience of the visitor to that of the guide, and in understanding the Troubles as an ongoing past in the present, rather than a commodified history, we advocate for a more varied and nuanced approach to post-conflict tourism in and beyond the Northern Irish context. For example, through mobilising local communities, providing employment, contributing to the local economy, and protecting specific local identities, Troubles Tourism can be understood as a form of community-based tourism. We suggest that other examples of post-conflict tourism may also be fruitfully analysed through this lens.

The persistence of singular versions of a complex history (McAtackney, 2015) is understandable in what, for many, is a live issue. The struggle did not end with the Good Friday Agreement. It continues for those who refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the British State and those who seek to preserve British sovereignty. Our participants believed that it was a matter of time before the UK relinquishes Northern Ireland. This vision of the future is not farfetched. The peace deal that led to the ceasefire recognised the wish of the majority to remain part of the UK, but acknowledged the legitimacy of the desire for unification. It declared that the latter can only be achieved if it is subject to the agreement and consent of a majority. As the Catholic birthrate outnumbers that of Protestants, a referendum on a united Ireland, as legislated for, is perhaps to be expected and has potentially been fast-tracked by the implementation of Brexit,[4] the recent political

[3] The devolved Northern Irish Assembly collapsed in 2017 after disagreements in the power-sharing leadership between the Unionists and Nationalists. At the time of writing and after a three-year hiatus, the British and Irish governments agreed on a deal to restore the NIA.

[4] The consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland are unclear at the time of writing, as arrangements depend on forthcoming negotiations that will take place in the transition period up to 31 December 2020.

earthquakes of same-sex marriage and abortion reform in the Republic of Ireland, and the forthcoming reinstatement of Stormont.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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