The cycle of insecurity: reassessing the security dilemma as a conflict analysis tool

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This article critically reassesses one of the classic ideas in International Relations, the security dilemma. It argues that the key insight of security dilemma theory has been obscured – by reductionist debates on single causes of conflict, inconclusive applications, and definitional disputes – and that the security dilemma's enduring utility is as a model of the relational dynamic inherent in all conflict, the cycle of insecurity. Through a reappraisal of the literature, the article elucidates three essential dimensions of the cycle: an environment of structural uncertainty; interdependent collective identities; and an escalating and self-perpetuating dynamic. The power and validity of this threefold framework is then demonstrated by an analysis of the conflict in Northern Ireland, a hitherto unexplored case study in the security dilemma literature. The article shows how this construction of the security dilemma offers a convincing, comprehensive and flexible conflict analysis tool which is of both scholarly and practical utility.

He who lives for the sake of combating an enemy has an interest in seeing that his enemy stays alive.

(Nietzsche, 1996, p. 183)

The security dilemma began as a simple but penetrating observation which appeared to capture the dynamics of the dominant international security issue of its day, the Cold War. The concept, as generally understood, referred to how opposing actors – each regarding its own moves as defensive but the other's moves as offensive – could mutually produce a spiral of escalating tension such as an arms race (Knutsen, 2014). Accordingly, from the 1950s, the security dilemma occupied a central place within (Realist-dominated) International Relations. In the 1990s, as scholarly and policy focus shifted to intra-state conflict, many analysts found the security dilemma to also be a satisfying explanation of civil strife (Posen, 1993; Walter and

Snyder, 1999). An expansive literature explored why the security dilemma emerges at the intra-state level, how it unfolds, and how it may be overcome.

But instead of increasing clarity, there is widespread confusion. For example, Booth and Wheeler (2008, p. 9) contend that most writers have used the term 'security dilemma' incorrectly. Visser and Duyvesteyn (2014, p. 65) conclude that the security dilemma is 'irrelevant' to intra-state conflict, despite numerous such applications over the previous twenty years. Bilgic (2013, p. 185) describes what many regard as the means of identifying a security dilemma – classifying actor intentions as malign or benign – as 'inconsequential'. Meanwhile, according to Tang (2011), some of the most cited analyses of the security dilemma are 'misguided' (p. 518) and contain an 'array of errors' (p. 527).

In light of such fundamental disagreements, these debates require critical reassessment with a view to salvaging and spotlighting what is of greatest analytical significance in security dilemma theory. This article provides a new analysis of the security dilemma and argues that much scholarly attention – trained on reductionist debates on single causes of conflict, inconclusive applications, and definitional disputes – has underappreciated and obscured its key insight. The security dilemma is presented, not as a variety of conflict, but a model of the relational dynamic inherent in all conflict, what may be called the cycle of insecurity. Illuminating the nature of this cycle, which is constituted by rival actors' mutually reinforcing identities and postures, and the cyclical and self-defeating quality of actors' quests for exclusively defined conceptions of security, is the most significant contribution of security dilemma theory.

Through a reappraisal of the literature, the article elucidates three essential and interlocking dimensions of the cycle: an environment of structural uncertainty; interdependent collective identities; and an escalating and self-perpetuating dynamic. The power and validity of this threefold framework is then demonstrated by an analysis of the conflict in Northern

Ireland, a hitherto unexplored case study in the security dilemma literature. The article shows how the cycle of insecurity constitutes a comprehensive and flexible conflict analysis tool which is of both scholarly and practical utility.

At the outset, two points of clarification should be made. First, Tang (2009, p. 587) makes a useful demarcation which I follow here. The 'security dilemma' is 'a concept for labelling a particular situation' while 'security dilemma theory' is 'the body of knowledge that seeks to understand the underlying causes, regulations and implications of the security dilemma'. Second, the cycle of insecurity argument is applicable to conflict generally, yet the present concern is with exploring its conditions and unfolding in what is the most common type of contemporary violent conflict. This, in terms of some key conceptualisations, has been called 'protracted social conflict' (Azar, 1990), 'new war' (Kaldor, 2012), or 'transnational conflict' (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2016). These conflicts possess external dimensions but state weakness or failure is at their core. Thus the majority of literature with which the discussion engages examines the security dilemma in civil conflict and key themes therein: emerging state weakness and imperial collapse; rival identity groups living in close proximity; nationalist mobilisation; and the threat and spread of small arms.

The security dilemma

The security dilemma is an 'essentially contested concept' (Roe, 2005, p. 8). The source material in which many writers have searched for the 'authentic' security dilemma has been the work of three widely acknowledged pioneers of the concept, John Herz (1950), Herbert Butterfield (1951), and Robert Jervis (1978), although the idea had been anticipated in much earlier political writings (e.g. Montesquieu, 2001, p. 241; Tolstoy, 2010, p. 75). But as Tang

(2009, pp. 592-93) points out, none of the three pioneers 'provided a rigorous and coherent definition of the security dilemma in one place'. Tang (2009; 2011) claims to bring that missing rigour and coherence, setting out a composite of the work of Butterfield, Herz and Jervis, and then declaring invalid any understanding of the security dilemma which deviates from this. Yet given what Tang admits are the inconsistencies in the pioneer writings, there is in truth no 'real' security dilemma to be uncovered. The present purpose is not to suggest a new definition but to identify and synthesize the most credible and effective ways in which the 'security dilemma' has been used to understand the nature of conflict.

To clear the ground for the subsequent argument, two unsatisfactory deployments of the security dilemma will be considered.

The security dilemma as a conflict caused by benign intentions

For many writers, a security dilemma is defined by the intentions of the actors involved. It is a situation in which actors come into conflict due only to their intention to protect themselves – neither side desires confrontation (Visser and Duyvesteyn, 2014; Tang, 2009; Collins, 2004; Roe, 1999). The defensive behaviour of Actor A is interpreted by Actor B as offensive, Actor B increases its defences but in doing so confirms the fears of Actor A, and an action-reaction spiral of escalation ensues which may lead to war. If one or more actors have malign, expansionist intentions then the situation is not a security dilemma according to this understanding. It is, rather, a security or strategic threat (Visser and Duyvesteyn, 2014).

The absence of malign intentions is the 'tragic element' of conflict noted by Butterfield: 'The greatest war in history,' he wrote, 'could be produced without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm in the world. It could be produced between

two Powers both of which were desperately anxious to avoid a conflict of any sort' (Butterfield, 1951, p. 19-20). While Butterfield emphasized human fallibility as a cause of the security dilemma, Herz (1950) stressed what is known in International Relations theory as the 'anarchy' of the international system: the absence of a security-guaranteeing sovereign. This, it is argued, forces actors to assume the worst regarding others' intentions and prepare accordingly.

This security dilemma of benign intentions constitutes a kind of orthodoxy, promoted by some writers as being the core of the pioneer formulations. But it also has been shown to have dubious value, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, constructivists have rejected the neo-Realist assumptions of this security dilemma, emphasising that threats are socially constructed by groups, not given by nature or dictated by structure. Thus, Bilgic (2013) and Kaufman (2006), following Wendt (1992), are less interested in *whether* actors think they are seeking their own security (they invariably do) but *how* they pursue and understand their own security: 'Chauvinist leaders always claim to be driven by security motives, but what makes them chauvinists is that they define their group's security as requiring dominance over rival groups which is, naturally, threatening to the others' (Kaufman, 2006, p. 54).

Empirically, it is unlikely that such a situation as the security dilemma of benign intentions has ever actually occurred. Actors never have *purely* benign, defensive motivations; in addition to rational self-protection, social-psychological factors – grievance, resentment and a prejudiced image of the other group – shape a group's response to its insecurity (Snyder and Jervis, 1999). Moreover, security fears may be deliberately inflamed by political leaders, making it unclear what is and is not a 'genuine' security fear. These factors cloud the distinctions between security and greed, malign and benign intentions.

In any case, it is a difficult and highly subjective task for analysts to assess the motives and intentions of political actors (Bilgic, 2013), and attempts to apply this understanding of the security dilemma in real cases have been fraught. Tang (2009), despite arguing that the security

dilemma of benign intentions is a very useful concept, offers no examples of it apart from, possibly, periods of the Cold War (p. 620). In other work, he suggests the intra-state examples of Moldova, Ukraine and Czechoslovakia in 1989-90 and Rwanda in 1994 (Tang, 2011, p. 531). Yet these security dilemmas appear to simply be fleeting periods of state weakness in which (Tang judges) neither side had malign intentions, and which, as he describes, quickly dissipated to become either hot conflicts, or stabilized. Meanwhile, Roe's (2005) application to the Serb-Croat conflict is sharply disputed by Tang (2011, p. 526-27), rather demonstrating the subjectivity of assessing intentions.

Remarkably, these debates have not taken account of the fact that Butterfield (1951) himself – who is credited as establishing that 'tragic', inadvertent emphasis of the concept – acknowledges that a security of dilemma of benign intentions may never happen in reality. Despite his comment above regarding conflict caused 'without any great criminals', he also states that such a situation may never exist because actors are never solely benign:

> In the complicated realm of historical events, no pattern ever appears in a pure and unadulterated form – and certainly, when a diplomatic issue is presented to us for resolution, we can never say that both sides are exactly balanced in point of morality, exactly equal in the virtues of their leading statesmen. The original issue may be aggravated and greatly intensified by the aggressiveness of a politician in one country or the barbarianism of a regime in another country (pp. 27-28).

In describing the security dilemma, he calls it an 'imaginary specimen case' (p. 17), 'hypothetical' (p. 20), and presented in its 'optimum setting' (p. 19). This important qualification appears to have been overlooked by writers who have believed themselves to be remaining faithful to Butterfield's supposed version of the security dilemma.

Thus, the security dilemma, defined as a set of circumstances in which actors stumble innocently into confrontation due to misinterpretation of each other's intentions, is inapplicable and unworkable as an account of conflict. Visser and Duyvesteyn are correct in their stark

conclusion regarding the 'irrelevance' of that formulation. Like Tang, they are sharply critical of those who have departed from the security dilemma of benign intentions and used the term in more expansive ways. But these critics overstate the 'purity' of the original formulation, and undervalue what the expansions and developments have sought to reveal about conflict.

The security dilemma as a 'moment' or first cause

Aside from the debate surrounding intentions, another definitional question, again permitted by looseness in the pioneer writings, attends to whether the security dilemma is a spiral of escalation, or solely a predicament – a dilemma. Tang (2009) rejects versions of the concept which include the spiral. The spiral, in his view, should be regarded as one possible outcome of the dilemma: 'a security dilemma can be transformed into a spiral when one or both sides become malign' (pp. 617-18). But the difficulties with defining how, and assessing when, an actor 'becomes malign' are clear from the discussion above. Furthermore, in Tang's own work, he is unable to maintain a clear distinction between the dilemma and the spiral. Later he states that a 'benign' security dilemma can be 'exacerbated into a vicious or deep security dilemma ... by the self-reinforcing cycle of action and counteraction' (p. 618) – suggesting a spiral has already begun and is part of the security dilemma. In a footnote, he admits that 'there is a gray area between a "deep" security dilemma and a spiral, and this may make it difficult to differentiate the two in practice' (p. 618). Confusingly, included in his initial definition of the

security dilemma is 'a vicious cycle' and a 'self-reinforcing or positive feedback mechanism' (p. 594).

Booth and Wheeler (2008) also wish to assert the distinction between the dilemma and spiral. In a departure from most other writers, they argue that the 'security dilemma' should be viewed, not as a conflict caused despite benign intentions, but as the universal strategic predicament faced by actors regarding the unknowable intentions of others under conditions of anarchy. The security dilemma, they say, must be a *dilemma*. A spiral of hostility may be an unintended result from how actors answer that dilemma, but that spiral is different to the original predicament. To make clear the difference, Booth and Wheeler call the spiral a 'security paradox' (p. 9).

This is a coherent distinction but, in any case, most other writers use 'security dilemma' differently – as Booth and Wheeler clearly show. They quote a sample of seven works which describe the security dilemma as synonymous with the action-reaction dynamic, driven by moves intended to increase security but which have the opposite effect (p. 9). We may add Kaufman (1996, p. 117) who fully elides the security dilemma and spiral, referring to a 'security dilemma spiral', and Woodward (1999, p. 80) who writes of the 'security dilemma and its spiralling behaviour'.

The significance of this debate is twofold. First, the considerable number of scholars who use the security dilemma in a way that encompasses or is synonymous with the spiral suggests that it is this capacity to capture the dynamic of reciprocity which is most distinctive in analysing conflict, regardless of whether this use is strictly consistent with the meaning of the word 'dilemma'. Second, this debate impinges on what the security dilemma can do: is it explanatory – a cause of conflict – or merely descriptive of how conflict proceeds? Visser and Duyvesteyn (2014, p. 72) argue that the 'original theory stipulates that it should be applied to the period preceding conflict to claim explanatory value'. For this reason, they criticize

Kaufman (1996), and Snyder and Jervis (1999), for suggesting that violence/hatred/manipulation can initiate a security dilemma; the security dilemma, used properly, should be the cause of violence and hostility.

However, as Visser and Duyvesteyn further note, the idea of a pure, causal and explanatory security dilemma 'moment' in intra-state conflict, straight after state collapse (suggested especially in the work of Tang and mentioned above– see Tang, 2011, p. 530) involving uncertainty and innocent actor intentions, is not credible. State collapse will at least in part be the result of enmity, not something which is exogenous to group competition. Ethnic conflicts have long histories of multiple phases which 'render it difficult to determine the exact moment of anarchy and the main outburst of violence the security dilemma is supposed to explain' (Visser and Duyvesteyn, 2014, p. 81). As discussed above, groups construe others' intentions based on hostile mutual pasts, meaning that there is little likelihood of a period, however short, after state collapse in which actors hold solely defensive and benign intentions.

But there is another point about causation to be made, unacknowledged by Visser and Duyevstyn and Tang. The action-reaction spiral does help *explain* the actions of actors who are in that situation, and how conflicts escalate. Each actor's move is partly caused by – is a response to – the action of the other, and each actor's move is a quest for some conception of security. All actions are, to some degree, *re*actions. As the next section elaborates, this is the most powerful insight of the security dilemma.

The security dilemma as a cycle of insecurity

In summary, a strict definition of the security dilemma which gives a causal role for anarchy/uncertainty and benign intentions in conflict is not viable. Furthermore, the spiral has

remained central to many understandings of the security dilemma and has considerable descriptive and explanatory value. This points towards the most compelling construction of the security dilemma: as an illustration of the mutuality, intersubjectivity and reciprocity of conflict. The security dilemma models the relational dynamic inherent in all conflict – the cycle of insecurity. In this dynamic, rival actors' identities and postures are mutually reinforcing and their quests for exclusively defined conceptions of security are cyclical and self-defeating. Indeed, exposing this dynamic is the clear purpose of Butterfield's original reflection on the dilemma – showing how international actors can fail to see how their own actions shape the apparent belligerence of others. This is why he likens the predicament of international actors to a 'Chinese finger puzzle', a small bamboo cylinder which, when placed on a finger from each hand, only gets tighter as the hands try to pull out. Entrapment is caused by the opposing but interdependent activity of *both* parties (Butterfield, 1951, p. 21).

Through a reappraisal of the security dilemma literature, supplemented with scholarship from outside International Relations, the cycle of insecurity which characterizes conflict may be brought into focus according to three interlocking elements: an environment of structural uncertainty; the interdependence of group identities; and the escalating and self-perpetuating mechanisms of the cycle.

Uncertainty

First, despite disagreements, the security dilemma and surrounding debate has highlighted the central role of structural uncertainty in conflict. The structural anarchy of the international state system has been regarded as the main enabling condition of the security dilemma (Knutsen, 2014; Herz, 1950). The uncertainty generated by the absence of a sovereign is compounded by

the inherent ambiguity of weapons, useable for both defence or attack, or indeed, both, if offence is judged as the best defence. Arms are 'the violent materiality of the existential condition of uncertainty' (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 42). Even if an actor is sure of the other's benign intentions in the present, this does not necessarily remove insecurity since 'no matter how much decision makers are committed to the status quo, they cannot bind themselves and their successors to the same path' (Jervis, 1978, p. 168). Posen (1993) shifted this analysis to the intra-state level. He argued that the demise of a strong state can create an anarchic, sovereign-less situation analogous to the anarchy of the state system, making likely the same patterns of confusion and confrontation witnessed in the international system. Without central authority, groups are unable to credibly commit that they will not exploit each other, and mutual fear drives them towards provocative preparations for war (Lake and Rothchild, 1998; Fearon, 1998).

We have seen the problems with ascribing the *primary* cause of conflict to anarchy/state collapse. The crucial roles of social-psychological dynamics, cultural narratives and individual emotions in inter-group conflict have now been considerably explored (*inter alia*, Volkan, 1997; Kaufman, 2001; Petersen, 2002; Ross, 2007). But Posen was clearly making a valuable contribution when he invoked the security dilemma to highlight the real and powerful gravitational pull exerted by environmental uncertainty on actors' behaviour, one which had so recently and vividly been exemplified in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, one of his case studies. Even Kaufman (1996, p. 112), who in the main focuses on 'symbolic politics' and social-psychological factors, acknowledges the important permissive role of an uncertain environment for what he calls an 'ethnic security dilemma': 'structural conditions do matter ... there must, among other things, be a *de facto* situation of anarchy'. It should be added that environmental uncertainty need not manifest itself in total state collapse. State weakness is sufficient to drive people to seek security within the in-group (Roe, 2005, p. 66).

The cycle of insecurity, therefore, both contributes to and is facilitated by, an anarchic environment, and is driven at least in part from groups' fears – both real and imagined – for safety and their self-interested calculations that they must take their security into their own hands in the absence of a strong state. Insecurity, and the emotions, cultural stories and symbols that interpret that insecurity, exist in a circular relationship: insecurity makes oppositional cultural understandings salient, while behaviour based on oppositional cultural interpretations of insecurity deepens or hastens the reality of insecurity.

The interdependence of group identities

Secondly, the security dilemma spiral cogently expresses how conflicts are not only shaped by group identity, but shape group identity, in the direction of strong in-group solidarity, exclusivity and polarisation. For instance, Mitzen (2006, p. 341) writes of an 'ontological security dilemma'. Smith (2006) points to the desire to protect 'cultural security' while Posen (1993, p. 31) refers to how 'arming ideologically' can threaten another group and trigger a response. The most comprehensive account is Roe's (2005) 'inter-societal security dilemma'. He outlines how groups get locked in a spiral of mutual provocation in search of, not primarily military superiority, but of identity security, or 'societal security' (on this see Waever, 1993, p. 23). Challenges to societal security include military threats but may also take the form of demographic decline, cultural stagnation, or revivals and assertions of a rival culture. Responses to those threats are likely to consist of cultural or ethnic nationalist mobilisation, thus setting in train an action-reaction dynamic which may lead to violence. Roe (2005, p. 69) writes, 'For the societal security dilemma, the action-reaction process can therefore be conceived in terms of *escalating nationalisms*' (emphasis added).

Such identity polarisation has grounding in constructivist sociology which understands self-concepts as evolving through interaction and relationship (Wendt, 1992). Cognately, the escalation of group identities is explained by social identity theory's insights on how individual self-esteem is dependent on perceived relative group worth (Tajfel, 1982). In the zero-sum identity game, the only way for 'us' to be ourselves is to make it harder for 'them' to be themselves, and the offence/defence distinction is fully blurred. Deindividuation and dehumanisation deepen through negative interaction, and 'hostile perceptions and goals are accentuated by group discussion and tend to become group norms' (Rubin, Pruitt and Kim, 1994, p. 90). Other foundations for this kind of rivalry are found in psychoanalytic ideas, including Freud's 'narcissism of minor differences' (Ignatieff, 1996, p. 49; Volkan, 1997, p. 108) and Girard's theories of mimetic, imitative desire and scapegoating (Girard, 1988).

At times of imminent threat, identity differentiation is accelerated. This is what Kuran (1998, p. 35) calls 'ethnic dissimilation'. In the midst of spiralling insecurity, solidarity with the collective and rejection of the out-group come to be regarded as the surest ways to preserve safety, while at the same time identity is deliberately securitized by leaders who offer themselves as the best defenders of the group. Like the Chinese finger puzzle, identities become locked in mutually reinforcing enmity. In fact, as is captured succinctly in Nietzsche's aphorism quoted as the epigraph of this article, actors become attached to that competitive relationship because of the clarity of purpose and identity it affords. Part of this is the appeal of war in satisfying cultural constructions of ideal masculinity (Sjoberg, 2014). Overall, the familiarity of conflict and an antagonistic relationship is preferred to the crisis of identity – the 'ontological insecurity' and 'peace anxieties' (Rumelili, 2015) – that would result from forming a new relationship.

The self-perpetuation dynamic

Thirdly, the security dilemma spiral captures the in-built self-perpetuating capacity of conflict. Snyder and Jervis (1999, p. 23) write that when the expectation that others will defect takes hold, 'the security dilemma can take on *a life of its own*, trapping both predators and prey in rivalries' (emphasis added). Pessimistic constructions of others' intentions in an uncertain environment simply recreate insecurity in a self-reinforcing loop. Relevant here is Bilgic's (2013) use of Booth and Wheeler's (2008, p. 10) three *a priori* 'logics of insecurity', or ways of thinking about the uncertainty of international politics. These are fatalist ('the idea that insecurity can never be escaped in international politics'), mitigator ('the idea that insecurity can be ameliorated for a time, but not eliminated') and transcender ('the idea that human society on a global scale can become what it wants to be and is not determined'). A fatalist orientation to an uncertain political environment will reproduce and perpetuate that very environment, manifesting itself in security policies that disregard and demonize the other group, heightening the threat and uncertainty faced by all (Bilgic, 2013, p. 197). As Booth and Wheeler (2008, p. 170) comment of 'offensive Realism', the fatalist strategy *par excellence*, it is 'a self-fulfilling prophecy, a self-replicating prescription and a self-confirming theory'.

Social psychologists have identified a number of self-confirmatory mechanisms which characterize such fatalist mindsets and sustain conflictual cycles of interaction between individuals and between groups. These include 'rationalisation', 'selective perception' and 'attributional distortion' (see Rubin, Pruitt and Kim, 1994, pp. 100-116). Simply, 'negative beliefs validate negative feelings, and negative feelings make negative beliefs seem right' (p. 100). At the same time, spirals of contentious behaviour lead to 'entrapment' in which fighting becomes justified by past effort invested, rather than a realistic assessment of the chances of success (p. 112). A further self-propulsion force in conflict is the fact that the progress of

violence generates additional contests and grievances, or 'derivative issues', related to the conduct of the disputants in the conflict as opposed to the original issues at stake (Oberschall, 2007, p. 30). Issue accumulation multiplies grievances and intensifies the parties' resolve to continue war. None of this is to suggest that actors in conflict do not possess agency; as Biglic (2013) emphasizes, actors may also choose to pursue their security according to the 'mitigator' or 'transcender' logics which can deescalate conflict. The point is to recognize the intense pressures exerted on actors to maintain conflictual patterns of behaviour.

This analysis shows how security dilemma theory can elucidate, in a vivid and comprehensive manner, a central dynamic and characteristic of conflict: the cycle of insecurity. The cycle is enabled by structural uncertainty. At the inter-state level, this is caused by the anarchy of the international system and at the intra-state level, by state weakness or failure; given that contemporary conflicts tend to have both civil and transnational dimensions, some combination of both will be in play. The cycle of insecurity shapes, and is shaped by, interdependent and antagonistic group/actor identities. The cycle also possesses mechanisms – strategic rationales and psychological tendencies – which allow it to self-perpetuate, long after conflict has ceased to appear to be in the rational interests of the conflict parties. The next section demonstrates the form and relevance of this framework as a conflict analysis tool in a real conflict arena.

The case of Northern Ireland

The conflict in Northern Ireland, known as 'the Troubles', comprised a thirty-year period of low intensity anti-state and inter-communal violence centring on both the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the treatment of the main minority identity group. Much of the violence

took place along a social–identity fault-line between majority pro-British and mainly Protestant 'unionists' and minority pro-Irish and mainly Roman Catholic 'nationalists' or 'republicans'. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought an armed insurgency against the state security forces aimed at forcing Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom, while unionist paramilitary groups sought to counter the IRA. A peace process in the 1990s brought violence largely to an end and instituted a power-sharing government (see Cochrane, 2013). While a variety of interpretations of the conflict existed (e.g. placing the blame on British colonialism or Irish insurgency), the view that the conflict was foremost a clash of ethno-national identities within Northern Ireland, albeit with transnational elements, became dominant in academic and policy circles during 'the Troubles' (Whyte, 1991).

The conflict will be analysed according to the three elements of the cycle of insecurity – uncertainty, interdependent identities and self-perpetuation. The purpose here is to illustrate the dimensions of the cycle of insecurity, as well as show the difficulties with much of the security dilemma literature which purports the existence of purely security-driven behaviour and of 'first causes'. A further goal is to show the fruitfulness of a cycle of insecurity-guided analysis. Highly developed analytical approaches to the Northern Ireland conflict exist, including Wright's (1987) 'ethnic frontier' characterisation, McGarry and O'Leary's (1995) synthesis of 'exogenous' and 'endogenous' factors, and Ruane and Todd's (1996) 'system of relationships' theory. The approach below is in many ways complementary to these. However, there are two key virtues of the cycle of insecurity lens. One is that it highlights, not only structure, issues, or actors, but the *dynamic progress and persistence* of conflict, both in terms of everyday conflictual interactions and the long-term pattern of antagonism. The other is its comprehensive nature and ability to encompass multiple causes – structural and environmental, social psychological, and self-generating factors.

The importance of structural uncertainty and state collapse in much security dilemma theorising may explain why the case of Northern Ireland is virtually absent from the security dilemma literature. There was no wholesale breakdown in law and order during 'the Troubles'. Violence was mostly contained to working-class districts, border areas, and the state security sector. Nevertheless, as noted above, state weakness is enough to drive identity groups to 'self-help' in search of security, and a catalytic decline in state strength occurred at the beginning of 'the Troubles' in the late 1960s (White, Owsiak and Clarke, 2013, p. 233). This partly stemmed from the rising demographic, educational and economic strength of the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland, a minority traditionally alienated from that political entity which had been created in 1920 by the British to secure unionist ascendancy. This fed in to nationalists' campaign for civil rights which was interpreted by the dominant unionist community as a threat to the state.

In the spiralling unrest, Catholics did not trust the unionist government or British state to advance their civil rights, and later, to maintain their physical security in the face of state violence such as Bloody Sunday (when the British Army killed 13 unarmed people in Derry during protests in 1972) or unionist paramilitary attacks (Adams, 2003, p. xxxii). Similarly, 'For loyalists [working-class unionists] the "failure" of the state to quell the republican assault signalled state "insufficiency"' – and justified their violent activism (Shirlow, 2012, p. 28). Thus, in the environment of state weakness, both unionists and nationalists moved towards 'self-help', expressed in communal mobilisation, protest and eventually armed action (Bew and Gillespie, 1999, p. 1–19).

Yet the Northern Ireland case clearly shows the invalidity of explaining civil conflict according to state collapse and rational security-seeking alone. As the discussion above made clear, state weakness creates permissive conditions for a cycle of insecurity, but that very weakness partly results from, is deepened by, and is interpreted through, the groups' collective

memories of past rivalry. Stewart (1977, p. 183) makes the point by noting that although the political crisis and civil unrest at the start of 'the Troubles' were caused by 'tangible pressures and problems of the contemporary world' (such as demographic changes and civil rights movements in the United States and Europe), nevertheless, once the crisis was in motion, communal memory took effect to shape how events unfolded and were understood: 'the civil population turned instinctively to the only source of wisdom applicable to such circumstances – the inherited folk-memory of what had been done in the past both good and bad' (p. 185). Unionist and nationalist communities were, and still are, characterized by vibrant cultures of commemoration which annually mark distant events (such as, for unionists, the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the Battle of the Somme in 1916; for nationalists, the 1798 rebellion and the Easter Rising of 1916) which constitute interpretive paradigms for present challenges (McDowell and Braniff, 2014). In sum, memories of enmity meant that there was not, nor was there any possibility of, a period in the midst of state weakness in which the parties held benign and security-seeking intentions, before which they became malign – the possibility suggested by some writers on the security dilemma.

Throughout 'the Troubles', violent combat cannot be meaningfully ascribed a solely security-seeking motive, or said to be driven by benign intentions, regardless of the self-justifications of armed actors. A defensive orientation to an oppressive colonial regime is at the centre of the republican self-image; republican leader Gerry Adams claimed to be fighting 'an apartheid system' (Adams, 2003, p. xxx). Yet a defensive rationale has not withstood careful analysis (see English, 2003; Shanahan, 2009) or gained much credence beyond the core republican constituency. Unionist paramilitary strategies during the conflict, including indiscriminately targeting Catholic civilians, could not be classed in any serious analysis as defensive. Despite their presence being officially justified in terms of maintaining public order, state forces at times pursued repressive actions and policies which convinced sections of the

nationalist minority that those forces' purpose was not defence but subjugation. In all cases, the security-greed, defence-offence distinctions are of no analytical use. Rather, what matters is the (fatalist) *means* by which these actors pursued security.

Regarding group identities, it was argued above that the security dilemma provokes consideration of them as constitutive of a relationship or system, rather than as distinct primordial entities – the view preferred by nationalists themselves (Ozimkirli, 2002, p. 67). In Northern Ireland, the identities of the main political blocs have been both mutually competitive and mutually defining – a fact rarely acknowledged by ethnic/nationalist entrepreneurs on either side. The zero-sum competition of Britishness and Irishness in Ireland is traceable to their emergence from Protestant and Catholic religious identities respectively, identities which were inherently conflictual (Elliott, 2009; Liechty and Clegg, 2001). These theological divisions were given political grounding in the clash between Protestant colonial settlers from Britain and the Catholic Irish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The victory of British Protestantism at the end of the seventeenth century:

> locked-in and partially fused a complex set of cultural oppositions (religious, ethnic, cultural, colonial) and created a situation where rational self-interest (for security or economic livelihood or influence) led individuals to band together as Protestants or as Catholics ... There were strong incentives for individuals to reproduce the pattern, and strong disincentives to step outside it (Ruane and Todd, 2007, pp. 448-49).

This set the mould for an 'inter-societal security dilemma' (Roe, 2005) as described earlier. Fixed into this system of relations, Catholic and Protestant identities came to be defined by suspicion, grievance and mutual, negative stereotyping: 'Irish Protestants' and Irish Catholics' sense of self was conditioned by their views of each other' (Elliott, 2009, p. 4). Centuries-old images (Catholics are subversive, disloyal, dishonest; Protestants are domineering, bigoted, oppressive) evolved in tandem, each supporting the other.

The dynamics of mutual polarisation and the mutually-sustaining nature of antagonistic identities are evident throughout modern Irish history and remain in contemporary politics. At the start of 'the Troubles', the outbreak of uncertainty, threat and violence, which was in part caused by historic inter-group enmity, led to a process of 'ethnic dissimilation' (Kuran, 1998) which included major movements of population from mixed to single-identity areas in search of safety (Browne and Asprooth-Jackson, 2019). Group identities took on an unprecedented salience as combatants chose targets based on those identities. One unionist paramilitary leader commented as follows on his organisation's reasoning in the early 1970s: 'The strategy was that if we killed enough Catholics, that would drive the IRA out ... it wasn't about religion in the first instance, but still we picked a religious group of people because the IRA claimed to represent them' (Brewer, Mitchell and Leavey, 2013, p. 61). The in-group became essential for security.

At the same time, threats were exaggerated and manipulated by fatalist ethnic entrepreneurs. Another unionist paramilitary recalls responding to the call to action of Ian Paisley, the fundamentalist Protestant preacher and unionist politician, in the early 1970s: 'Well the IRA had went mad, attacking, bombing, shooting ... and you've Paisley coming around Rathcoole where I grew up saying we need to defend ourselves and stand up, and he's a minister. So you don't need to coax a fifteen year-old, you understand? So you just say, "Well what do you want me to do? How do you join?"' (quoted in Brewer, Mitchell and Leavey, 2013, p. 64). Paisley dramatically exemplifies the self-fulfilling feedback of the cycle of insecurity. His virulent opposition to efforts to address nationalists' legitimate political grievances in the 1960s contributed to internecine violence and a radicalisation within the nationalist community that swelled the ranks of the IRA. For this reason, a biographer calls him a 'self-fulfilling prophet' and 'midwife' of the IRA, his own enemy (Moloney, 2007, p. 514-15).

All of this had a self-perpetuating dynamic – a further component of the cycle of insecurity as set out above. Indeed, although combatant groups continued to justify their fight in terms of their original political goals, the self-sustaining dynamic of violence was widely perceived, gaining expression in a collection of conflict clichés prevalent in political and popular discourse: 'tit-for-tat', 'retaliation', 'zero-sum conflict', and 'whataboutery', i.e. the deflection of responsibility by blaming similar actions by the other side (see Dunn and Dawson, 2000). Much of the violence was intended to avenge a previous attack, rather than further an overarching political strategy; one paramilitary leader called this approach 'returning the serve' (David Ervine quoted in Taylor, 1999, p. 126). Violence was reactive and belligerent responses to provocation were taken as evidence that the provocative approach was the correct one. Republican violence invited security force repression and confirmed unionist fears that the state was under existential threat; British state and unionist violence and intransigence demonstrated republican claims of unionist sectarianism and the 'failure' of the Northern Ireland state. Continued fighting was also justified on the basis of past sacrifices; republicans were particularly concerned with honoring their dead through continued struggle (Shanahan, 2009).

In the party political realm, the cycle of insecurity showed itself in 'ethnic outbidding' in which the most ardent advocates of each communal group mutually profited from fear of the other's political growth and vitality, and moderate parties struggled to advance (Horowitz, 2000, p. 346). Even in the post-Agreement era of cross-community power-sharing, in the identity-based party system, each side still depends on, and encourages, fear of traditional opponents in order to maintain its vote. For instance, launching her party's 2017 election manifesto, the leader of the largest unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party, warned unionists not to vote for the smaller unionist party, the Ulster Unionist Party, because 'every vote for another unionist party is a vote which is lost in the battle to make sure that Sinn Féin does not win this election' (Belfast Telegraph, 2017).

A full account the peace process that emerged is not possible here; the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, brokered jointly by the British and Irish governments, contained a range of political, identity and security measures designed to contain the cyclical dynamics of the conflict and permit the 'achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust' and the 'protection and vindication of the human rights of all' (Northern Ireland Office, 1998, p. 1). But it is worth noting that the cycle of insecurity survived the Agreement, manifested in numerous disputes concerning aspects of peace implementation. Notably, the most destabilising issue – paramilitary disarmament – led to what the British minister responsible for Northern Ireland called 'a Mexican standoff' (Peter Mandelson quoted in Godson, 2004, p. 593) of mutually sustaining positions. Unionists' slogan was 'no guns, no government' (i.e. no power-sharing before the IRA gave up its weapons), while republicans demanded power-sharing first, after which, they argued, the IRA would be more inclined to disarm (Mitchell, 2015, pp. 60-70).

This was a demonstration of Walter's (1999, p. 43) observation that a peace agreement's injunction to disarm can in fact perpetuate a spiral of mutual threat: what she calls a 'security dilemma in the reverse'. Indeed, the structural uncertainty which enables the cycle of insecurity is, when an agreement is signed, not ended but recreated since proposed institutions are untested, military and political defence mechanisms are in line for dismantling, and parties are yet to prove that they will keep faith with commitments. All of this is conducive to sustaining intense group insecurity (Paris, 2004, p. 173). In Northern Ireland, significantly, the challenges of implementation were not primarily caused by the institutional and constitutional issues (about which combatants were ostensibly fighting) but derivative security/legacy of violence issues (disarmament, prisoner releases, police reform, transitional justice) i.e. the relational grievances that accumulated during the conflict as a result of the violent strategies of actors.

While the weapons issue was largely resolved when the IRA destroyed its arsenal in 2005, Northern Ireland continues to be affected by the self-perpetuating dynamics of conflict in which both sides are unwilling to depart from longstanding, mutually-antagonising, positions. This is particularly evident in the failure to 'deal with the past' and implement transitional justice measures. Parties oppose any measure which may confer legitimacy on the past violence of their opponents. Two examples, current at the time of writing, are republicans' opposition to a 'statute of limitation' that would make British military personnel immune from prosecution for alleged crimes committed in Northern Ireland (Sinn Féin, 2019) and unionists' opposition to pensions for people injured during the conflict if the scheme includes paramilitary perpetrators (Democratic Unionist Party, 2018).

Conclusion

This article has shown how security dilemma theory can provide an inclusive and flexible analytical tool that reveals the cyclical nature of conflict, how the cycle is enabled and proceeds, and what is its impact. The article has challenged overly restrictive understandings of the security dilemma and contended that the most valuable construction of the concept is as a model of the cycle of insecurity, that is, the relational dynamic in conflict in which actors' coercive moves for security simply sustain their insecurity. Foregrounding the cycle of insecurity in the analysis of conflict has both scholarly and practice/policy significance.

For the analyst approaching a conflict, it highlights a number of crucial areas of enquiry: the nature of the insecure environment facing actors and how they have contributed to its creation; the reasons for actors' particular responses to insecurity (for instance, according to fatalist, mitigator and transcender logics); the ways in which actors' orientations to their

insecurity are a reaction to the behaviour of others; and how actors' strategies and identities are shaped by their relationship, rather than solely generated within a hermetically sealed group culture/history. Eschewing dichotomies between structural and individual explanations, or the objective and subjective, the cycle of insecurity approach integrates the environmental realities which enable the cycle and the social psychological factors which drive and are impacted by the cycle, as well as taking account of the self-perpetuating mechanisms which give conflict, as Snyder and Jervis put it, 'a life of its own'.

In terms of peace practice, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine in detail prescriptions for the cycle of insecurity, but the analysis here at least shows the scale and multidimensionality of the task. The Northern Ireland case contains both good ideas and cautionary tales. On the one hand, some astute and mostly effective means were employed to assuage genuine security fears and reduce the scope for group leaders to claim betrayal, unfair treatment, or that peace implementation threatened their security. These included referring difficult issues (such as police reform, disarmament, monitoring paramilitary activity, adjudicating on controversial cultural parades) to credible, independent commissions (see Walsh, 2017), creating equitable political institutions, and choreographing public concessions to convey the sense of balanced de-escalation (see Dixon, 2018). On the other hand, power-sharing has had mixed success, to some extent bearing out the warning of Snyder and Jervis (1999, p. 19) that it may reify the contending groups and 'perpetuates the mutual interdependencies and vulnerabilities that heighten the security dilemma'.

In any case, it may broadly be emphasized that this article's analysis shows the imperative of both tackling anarchy and uncertainty through building consensus-based political structures and social justice, *and* encouraging relational restoration between individuals and groups through reconciliation initiatives. Regarding the latter, the cycle of insecurity offers a valuable peace education and conflict analysis tool for political elites and grassroots since, by

framing conflict as a relational system, it draws attention to the role of Self in sustaining that system: through nurturing an identity defined by a conflictual relationship with an Other, and by pursuing policies which perpetuate the insecurity of others and justify their hostility. Awareness of the strictures of the cycle can help develop the agency to transcend them; this is what Booth and Wheeler (2008) call 'security dilemma sensibility' i.e. the ability to be self-aware, recognize how one may be contributing to opponents' fears, and act to assuage them. Those authors write that this sensibility 'is so fundamental to statecraft that it should be in the toolbox of all decision-makers and policy advisers; and it should be part of the educational project of everybody's survival research' (p. 296). A security dilemma perspective on the troubled Northern Ireland peace process, therefore, suggests that the failure to embed the ideals and principles of the 1998 Agreement is in part due to an insufficient level of this kind of peace agency.

Finally, an objection to foregrounding the cyclical, mutual nature of conflict may be that it draws an equivalence of culpability. Jervis (2001, p. 38) suggests that the security dilemma is a 'no fault' argument since if both sides merely seek defence, then neither is to blame. Does recognising the cycle of insecurity lead to a 'both fault' conclusion, which in essence amounts to 'no fault'? There is no reason why recognising the mutual and cyclical dynamics of conflict precludes also recognising asymmetry in power, or asymmetry in suffering, or that a sustainable peace may demand greater concessions from one side than the other. Nevertheless, in Butterfield's description of the security dilemma, his main target is clearly the mutually-sustaining hubris and self-righteousness of actors in conflict, mindsets which prevented them from entering 'the other man's counter fear' (Butterfield, 1951, p. 21). The capacity for a clear view of Self, to view the cycle from the other actor's vantage point, is not the only ingredient in the resolution of conflict, but it is a necessary one.

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