

Discourse, Denial and Dehumanisation: *Former Detainees' Experiences of Narrating State Violence in Northern Ireland*

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Abstract

Using a synthesis of documentary analysis and interviews involving former detainees, this article explores the sociology of denial in relation to narratives of state violence which emerged from the conflict in and around Northern Ireland. It argues that three interrelated levels of denial described by Cohen (2001) - literal, interpretive and implicative - can be observed within the 'official discourse' surrounding the conflict, and that these denials are experienced by former detainees in diverse and different ways. The article contributes to the literature on state violence within the discipline of criminology through its exploration of the lived consequences of state denial narratives alongside former detainees who have made their private experiences of victimhood part of a contested public history.

Key Words: Denial, victimhood, Northern Ireland, prisoners, conflict

Introduction

Throughout the period 1971-1985, the 'security forces' of Northern Ireland were accused of using state violence as part of their response to the perceived threat from paramilitary organisations (and also non-violent groups involved in civil unrest). Between 1975 and 1978, 7,538 recorded complaints were made against the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). One in five of these complaints concerned alleged assaults during interview (Bennett, 1979). The following article explores former detainees' experiences of 'official discourse' in relation to their public narratives about state violence.

Methodology

Using a triangulation of interview data and historical documentary analysis, the article examines the meaning and significance former detainees gave to the process by which their subjugated knowledges of state violence became part of a contested public history. Building on theoretical discussions of state violence by Coleman et al. (2009) and Green and Ward (2009), the study contributes to knowledge through an exploration of the lived reality of state violence, and in its discussion of detainees' experiences of official discourse.

Within official discourse, the hegemonic framework of denials represents - as Cohen (2001) suggests - the social, political and cultural operationalisation of Sykes and Matza's (1957) 'techniques of neutralisation' on a macro-scale. Thematic literature on 'official discourse', including Burton and Carlen (1979), Morgan (2000) and Gilligan and Pratt (2004), have assisted the exploration of what was utilised in exploring the texts of public inquiries, Hansard reports, press releases and public statements - as examples of 'official discourse' emerging from Northern Ireland during the conflict. In this paper the approach of Burton and Carlen (1979) was utilised in order to deconstruct the meaning of this discourse and its ideological construction of events. The documentary analysis of such texts indicate that an extensive and multiple-layered regime of denials operated during the conflict in order to grant (or alternatively, seek to restrict) the legitimacy of detainees and their narratives. These narratives were drawn from an extensive review of historical literature, including the vast newspaper archives, civil society pamphlets, television and media sources concerning the treatment of detainees, which is contained in the Linenhall Library in Belfast. Other narrative material could be found in the published memoirs of former detainees (e.g. McKeown, 2001; Campbell et al., 2006), or in texts containing interviews with former prisoners (e.g. Taylor, 1998; Coogan, 2000; English 2003). From these sources, available individuals were traced through a range of informal and formal networks. A number of early meetings took place with representatives from a range of former prisoner groups which had shown an interest in co-operating with the research, including Coiste na n-Iarchimí and EXPAC¹.

Alongside the researcher's own informal networks, these gatekeeper organisations assisted with access to the 'sample'. This was dependent on trust and good practice, and the complex workings of a series of inter-relationships both professional and personal. The study involved a small sample of ten men, with each having previously taken part in some form of public narration about state violence they alleged had taken place against them.

At the time of data collection, nine out of the ten volunteers defined themselves as 'republican' or as 'having a republican outlook on things'.

¹ Civil society organisations working with former Provisional IRA prisoners and non-aligned Republican prisoners respectively

This is not to collapse differences between the various strands of republicanism, but merely to reflect that most published accounts of state violence in detention are produced by republican former detainees².

As with all methods, there are problems with such data collection techniques as they may yield results which are biased towards a certain kind of ‘truth sharing’³ or a particular form of narrating violence. Equally, participants may have felt a sense of obligation to take part in the research as a result of their relationship with the gatekeepers. To try and limit this, interviews took place in a range of locations, including participants’ homes and places of work. Care was taken to ensure that participants remained as comfortable as possible and were free to set the boundaries of questions, take breaks at any time, and retained the right to withdraw at any point. Furthermore, a support sheet of local organisations able to offer assistance to former detainees was provided to all participants. Most of the participants felt this unnecessary (and many left the leaflets behind); yet it remains important, for as Jamieson and Grounds (2003:352) warn, “the research relationship ... [is] not to judge, persuade or act as proxy for a therapeutic relationship”.

It was felt that the outcome of the interview experience should be a positive feeling of empowerment, of “proclaiming aloud” (Herman, 2001) and being heard. Such ethical considerations should always form the basis of any research methodology, especially when working alongside those labelled as ‘vulnerable’, including survivors of violence. Although there was a risk that discussing their experiences of narrating violence may have been upsetting for former detainees, this appeared to be balanced by their overriding desire to tell their story. A number chose to share directly their experiences of violence - for example, “I just want you to know what it was like” (Interviewee ‘P’) - even though those details were already published, and not actively solicited during the project. To have denied participants this opportunity to talk about what they felt they had experienced may have impacted upon their sense of agency and their own understanding of what is/was important. Throughout their own research, Winkler and Hanke (1995) and Hollway and Jefferson (2000) both recall a similar sense of unburdening felt by some individuals in discussing their experiences of violence.

The synthesising of documentary analysis combined with interview data was particularly well suited to the aims of the project, which were to explore the motivations, meanings and significance of contested narratives alongside detainees. Discourse analysis allows for the deconstruction of language and an exploration of ways in which experiences are given

² Rare narratives from Loyalist victims of state violence can be seen in Crawford (1998) and Taylor (2000).

³ As an analytical concept, ‘truth sharing’ refers to the sense in which the public narrating of personal stories remains a collaborative process, involving both the narrator and the listener. It adapts the language of ‘truth telling’ found within transitional justice discourses in order to better reflect the significance of audience and their role in granting legitimacy to the narrative account.

meaning. In recognising the role of both interviewer and interviewee in producing knowledge, it allows participants to retain ownership both of their experience and their testimony. It enables the exploration of a diverse range of materials, which can be used to construct a detailed and nuanced analysis of the significance of official discourse for detainees.

Literal Denial

Cohen (2001) adapts Sykes and Matza's (1957) 'techniques of neutralisation' in order to construct a sociological framework of denial, which forms the theoretical basis of the present paper. Cohen invokes three main categories – literal, interpretive and implicatory denials. Literal denials assert that nothing happened, whilst interpretive denials might recognise that 'something' happened, but present a different interpretation of its meaning. Similarly, implicatory denials acknowledge harm, but deny its significance and seek to avoid moral censure. The boundaries between such categories are fluid and dynamic, and as Cohen (2001) implies, there may be a degree of overlap and osmosis between the different forms.

The framework however, remains a useful tool to assist in the deconstruction of official discourse offered by organisations against allegations of wrongdoing and/or criminality. This discourse may not be homogenous and monolithic, but is instead better understood as hegemonic. As Burton and Carlen (1979) recognise, like all other forms of discourse, official discourse may sometimes be fluid, temporal, conflicting and challenged. It offers a particular way of gazing at events at a particular time, and from a particular (yet powerful) perspective. Opportunities for counter-narratives exist within limited circumstances, as "the Other constantly obtrudes" (Burton and Carlen, 1979:138), but these may be subjected to a greater set of controls than the dominant narrative. In essence, it is the appearance of allowing dissenting voices which may grant legitimacy to the dominant, official discursive framework. Thus it remains important to understand that official discourse may not always represent the omnipresent silencing of alternative interpretations, but is instead the working through of a particular narrative into a position of primary definition.

In many incidences, denials of state violence communicated through official discourse may be 'literal' - that the event literally did not happen (Cohen, 2001). According to Interviewee F, the Royal Ulster Constabulary "declared untrue" his published narrative which detailed the violence he claimed to have experienced in detention, after "the RUC investigated it [within] themselves". Through the use of such mechanisms, the primary definers of the state and its agents may seek to shift the focus of an allegation back onto the alleged victim, in order to send out a powerful message that what (s)he says simply cannot be true. Within the internal inquiries and internal complaints procedures, allegations of state violence can be quickly disputed and their truth value destroyed.

Yet not all instances of denial are framed in clear and explicit terms. Existing in the shared spaces between forms of denial, the labelling of an allegation as 'propaganda' will transmit a similar message, as the pejorative power of that label becomes a euphemism for politically inspired lies. Interviewee PJ (who has always denied any relationship with paramilitary groups) argued that: "Some people would be completely disbelieving. Some people would have thought that I was some front for some terrorist groups just to blacken the security forces".

Thus the dominant pejorative meaning of 'propaganda' symbolises a challenge to the 'truth' of a detainee's assertions, and the label is difficult to shift, particularly when testimonies are deemed to have some kind of political purpose - so that any real discussion of the truth value of detainees' accounts become obfuscated. To label testimony as 'propaganda' is to employ a semantic 'gag', which attacks the detainee, their testimony and their perceived political motivations in 'going public'. Testimonies then become a discursive quicksand which ensures that any public re-interpretation of former detainees' narratives become difficult. The label can be communicated through official discourse. For instance, the Bennett Inquiry (1979:7 para.19) postulated that:

[Concerning assaults during interviews] we have seen...abundant evidence of a co-ordinated and extensive campaign to discredit the police...The propaganda is principally concerned with allegations of ill-treatment of prisoners in the course of their interrogation by the police.

Any rejection offered by former detainees of the possible value of testimonies to the republican movement (in this instance) also appears naïve, and within the official discourse such rejection instead adds further power to existing perceptions that their narratives are false or exaggerated. Although more subtle than other forms of denial, the labelling of testimony as propaganda can be understood as a form of literal denial that seeks to destroy the truth value of a detainee's allegation. The sense in which former detainees experienced this was commented upon by Interviewee PJ:

It doesn't matter to me... [but] my wife would get annoyed sometimes with peoples' reactions to what I would say. I would talk to her and say 'What are you getting annoyed about? What odds what they say? It does not matter'. You would know you were telling the truth. That is alright, people are entitled to not believe me - why should somebody believe me?

This apparent indifference of Interviewee PJ to the denials witnessed in parts of the official discourse is in sharp contrast to the perceptions of Interviewee J, who experienced conflict between his narrative testimony and that of the state, who he alleged had brutalised him. Interviewee J experienced state denials (surrounding the use of 'white

noise' during interrogations in this instance) as personally significant; particularly as he felt that the public would uncritically accept the narrative offered by the agents of the state, and that this would adversely impact upon the 'truth value' of his experience of state violence and its perception. Recalling these denials as part of the British government's response to the Ireland vs. United Kingdom case (involving 14 former detainees' allegations of state violence) at the European Court of Human Rights, Interviewee J argued that: "I suppose I was laughing about it, at the stupidity of it but at the same time being angry and frustrated about it".

Such literal denial represents the clearest conflict between two or more competing narratives. It can include the simplest of statements which declare that 'nothing has happened', or can further involve the labelling of an allegation as 'propaganda'. The intended consequences of literal denial are the silencing of alternative narratives, and the attempted shifting of a particular 'truth' into a position of primary definition and dominance.

Interpretative Denial

Thus the political control of truth operates at a number of levels and through a range of mechanisms. Another semantic framework through which official discourse can attempt to neutralise the power of allegations against the state is through the employment of 'interpretive denials', in which allegations are acknowledged to exist, and yet are given a different meaning (Cohen, 2001). Detainees may have indeed experienced harm, yet the interpretive denial communicated through official discourses contests the interpretation detainees gave to those experiences. Through the utilisation of semantic devices to manage and maintain the imagery which language can invoke, 'citizens' become 'suspected terrorists', and 'interrogations' become 'interviews'. It is this 'official discourse' which Burton and Carlen (1979) and Gilligan and Pratt (2004) argue becomes the dominant way in which events are (re)presented. Interpretive denials can thus take many forms, and may involve the shifting of responsibility within or between organisations. The denial of responsibility offered by the RUC in particular was often expressed in such a way as to avoid any state accountability for injuries to detainees. Instead, visible, recordable signs of violence were often re-imagined within the official discourse as being 'self inflicted'.

The suggestion from the RUC in general to all of this was that [any injuries] were self inflicted, which seemed so ridiculous... (Interviewee F).

For interviewee F, the RUC sought to contest and neutralise the power of his narrative by counterclaiming that his own injuries were self-inflicted. Such official discourse absolves the state of any clear responsibility, and could also impact upon the image of the wider

republican movement by presenting suspected members as - in interviewee F's words, "suffering from psychological problems". Such a label (particularly when framed within the stigmatising discourses of 'mental health' common at the time) firstly presented detainees as driven to self mutilation, irrational in thought and action, and as vulnerable and lacking in individual agency. Secondly, by re-classifying the physical signs of brutality as self inflicted, official discourse helped to subtly depict suspects as so fearful of an unmerciful IRA outside that they would self harm and make up allegations as self-preservation, or as an attempt to justify any 'breaking' during interrogation⁴. A third layer of neutralisation can be witnessed within the official discourse which presented injuries as self-inflicted, which shifts the gaze from the individual to the wider republican movement. The public discourses which suggested that 'calculating' IRA members were given awards and gifts for injuring themselves in detention sought not only to neutralise allegations of state violence, but also to puncture the romantic imagery of the principled, selfless Republican patriot.

Further interpretive denial can be seen in the Compton Inquiry (1971) which examined allegations of state violence arising from internment. In relation to so-called "intensive questioning", the Inquiry found that there was some evidence of 'ill-treatment', but that such treatment did not amount to torture, and that any resulting pain experienced was not intended by state forces and thus did not fall under the Inquiry's own definition of brutality. At the most basic of levels, official discourse enables and perpetuates powerful attempts at reordering and re-coding the narratives of detainees as something 'other' than state violence (Morgan, 2000). This re-ordering can be observed in the semantic battles between the signifiers of 'torture' and the lesser 'ill-treatment' which was noted by Interviewee LI:

The Brits didn't deny it. They didn't deny it. It went to the European Court of Human Rights and they went 'well, ok, we put hoods on peoples' heads but I mean, what's that?!' They omitted to say that they beat the shit out of us...during what they called 'interviews' - what we would call interrogations.

However, not all official discourse arising from allegations of state violence experienced during detention engages so identifiably with the regimes of interpretive denial described by Cohen (2001). The Bennett Inquiry (1979:55 para.163) concluded that:

⁴ Despite documented violence against suspected informers, the public history of the Provisional IRA (and the present interview data) contains conflicting accounts in relation to the extent of stigma or sympathy experienced by former detainees thought to have 'broken' under interrogation.

There can however, whatever the precise explanations, there can be no doubt that the injuries inflicted in this last class of cases were not self-inflicted and were sustained during the period of detention at a police office.

It would therefore be erroneous to suggest that Bennett's (1979) findings are in complete conflict with the accounts of former detainees, given this assertion that some detainees were injured by someone/something else during detention. This recognition still forms part of the official discourse and its power should not be underestimated. Yet even within this interpretation - which at first appears to be a strongly worded condemnation of the police - detainees' allegations of state harm slip into a semantic 'black hole'. The official discourse might suggest that, yes, something happened, but the responsibility for naming and labelling those occurrences shifts onto the audience. The loose language of 'injuries' refrains from depicting the occurrences as torture, ill-treatment, or brutality. Furthermore, Bennett (1979) avoids any explicit discussion of responsibility - the official discourse only implies that some individuals within the RUC offices could be responsible for a selected number of injuries, through the omission of other alternatives. By subtlety avoiding 'the precise explanations' which could describe how detainees were injured (and by whom), the narrative of Bennett (1979) is indicative of wider official discourses which utilise a range of denials.

Implicatory Denials

In his adaption of Sykes and Matza's (1957) study into youth 'delinquency', Cohen (2001) identifies a third technique of neutralisation through which violence can be reconceptualised. Implicatory denial shifts the gaze away from state offender, and can be understood as an attempted "rationalisation', deflection, justification" (Cohen, 2001:7-8). Such denials seek to avoid or deflect the moral censures central to the imagery of democracy, civilisation and justice.

The use of harsh interrogation techniques against those already defined as 'other' drifts into attempted justification through the primacy given to 'threats to national security' and their amplification - both real and imagined. As Rolston and Scraton (2005:549) argue, "constantly justified on the grounds of state security, the authoritarianism implied within the liberal state was always explicit in the state's intervention in the North of Ireland". These implicatory denials often sustain the perceptions of a risk society and attempt to justify state violence against suspects though a fog of utilitarian predictions. For example, the official discourse emerging from the conflict explicitly engages with this form of implicatory denial, describing the treatment of detainees as necessary to save lives (Compton, 1971). Such language games are central to the preservation of state power and its institutions. They represent an appeal to 'higher loyalties' (Sykes

and Matza, 1957) and assist in the depiction of state violence as necessary and just (Kauzlarich et al., 2001).

However such utilitarian excuses and justifications for violence against 'terrorist suspects' cannot be analysed in the same way as violence against incarcerated prisoner populations (Morgan, 2000). State violence within the prisons of Northern Ireland as narrated by male prisoners (and also by some female prisoners - see Cocoran, 2006) was not to collect information or to save lives, but rather it appears to be part of a disciplinary instrument being used to 'break' prisoners' resistance⁵. In addition to this, a synthesis of interpretive and implicatory denial creates myopic and exclusionary depictions of victimhood. The semantics of victim and offender are central to political conflict and a key way in which state violence is presented within official discourse (Stanley, 2005). The shift of condemnatory attention from the state and its agents towards those alleging state violence is itself a form of implicatory denial through which discourse becomes a way of maintaining a particular narrative, as the production of 'truth' is wrapped up within aspects of control (Rolston and Scraton, 2005).

Burton and Carlen (1979:112) argue that, "discourse seeks to neutralise these problems, to annihilate the 'Other' whilst simultaneously affirming that justice had been done"; and evidence for such arguments (and of the oversimplification of apparent partisan binaries of victimhood) can be seen within the political literature of the conflict. In a twelve page pamphlet entitled 'Self Inflicted: An Exposure of the H-Blocks Issue' - containing distressing images of the human remains of some of those killed by the IRA - Robinson (1981:4-6) argues that "the inmates of the H-Blocks are the perpetrators of some of the most heinous atrocities known to civilisation". The pamphlet asks the reader, "with whom is your sympathy? Their disgusting campaign has no moral appeal to anyone outside their own murder gangs" (Robinson 1981:8). It seeks to perpetuate a binary distinction between those it deems deserving of empathy, and those it feels require only retribution. Such apparent reductionism may lack sophistication, yet this re-ordering can be followed by layer upon layer of shifts in language, significance and meaning, which act to re-present the person seen in detainees' narratives as a mass-murdering 'evil terrorist', implying that they are apparently deserving of retributive punishment. The power of such arguments is further evidenced by the absence of public inquiries into conditions of H-Block prisoners (Rolston and Scraton, 2005). Some detainees recalled feeling hurt or frustrated by the way they and their allegations were represented within the official discourse. Interviewee J recalled:

⁵ The hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 represented a challenge to the official discourse - a challenge made manifest through the bodies of the condemned. The hunger strikes and preceding protests are symbolic of a spectacle, as an act of resistance to the bio power of imprisonment. Here, the prisoners 'chose' (if only within limited circumstances) to not be the object of punishment, but the creators of a new narrative of resistance.

[The Defence Minister] said that all the people involved in it were mass murderers and he could stand over it. I think he singled me out in particular and said ...that I 'had killed more people in Northern Ireland than anybody else at the time'. Something ridiculous like that. He said it ...and it just went down into history. That would still frustrate me now.

For Interviewee J, the Defence Minister Lord Carrington's reaction to his story was still experienced as problematic almost forty years after his original testimony in which had alleged violence against him. Carrington's statement is not unusual but characteristic of a wider framework of denial that sought to prevent detainees from acquiring the label of 'victim'. The greater the distance from perceived 'innocence' and 'passivity' the easier it becomes for the denial of detainees' victimhood. By seeking to shift the gaze from actions against detainees onto their apparent responsibility for violence, the official discourse places distance between the individual and the label of 'victim'. Through this gaze, Interviewee J becomes a 'mass murderer' a 'risky subject' within the dominant official discourse, and those like him are "denounced... as 'thugs and murderers' despite a lack of evidence" (Conroy 2000:4). Thus, not only can the state deny outright its own violence or recast that violence as something else, it can also deny 'offenders' the label of 'victim' (see Walklate, 2007).

This constructed distance and false dichotomy between the idealised images of the 'innocent victim' and the 'violent terrorist' feeds into the wider ease with which detainees (and prisoners in particular) can be excluded from discourses about victimhood through their depiction as dehumanised others (Scraton et al., 1991; Jewkes, 2004; Scraton and McCullagh, 2009). Perceived apathy towards prisoners in most external audiences was commented upon by another interviewee: "If a prisoner goes to the press and says 'this happened to me' how many people are going to believe them? They are just prisoners" (Interviewee F).

Through the denials communicated within official discourse, detainees were recast as deserving of violent treatment. Here, language games re-present state violence as retributive justice against non state actors and those who were alleged to have violated dominant norms of socially acceptable citizen behaviour⁶. Like Interviewee F, Interviewee T also suggested that some people may have viewed his experiences as 'just deserts' and the manifestation of warranted punishment: "Oddly enough, when I heard those who were suggesting 'well you deserved it' was a little bit more hurtful".

It was this denial - the suggestion that his experience happened, but happened as punishment for his perceived wrongdoing - which was experienced by Interviewee T as the most destructive. By depicting those

⁶For example, The United Nations Convention against Torture recognises the presence of torture as an instrument of punishment, not simply interrogation.

who alleged state violence as offenders who have excluded themselves from the dominant codes of behaviour, and are thus deserving of punishment, official discourses can seek to justify action taken against those individuals and deny them the label of 'victim'.

Subtle denials which deny victimhood can be seen within an official discourse which emphasises the violence of the 'other', and recasts the violence of the state as necessary, just and proportionate. The binary categorisations of modernity - of innocence or guilt, of good or evil are reflected in a polarising framework. The language of victimhood is highly symbolic, and through the official discourse, the police officers of the RUC are re-cast as noble, community orientated individuals, virtuous and well intentioned, in contrast to the representation of detainees. The nuanced depiction of the state and its agents can be observed within Bennett (1979:6 para.17) which - although it recognised in part some state violence - exceeded its own terms of reference to emotively suggest that:

Statistics do not fully convey the personal tragedies inflicted on the RUC. The extent of their sacrifice is brought home ...by accounts of such family tragedies as of father and daughter, both police officers, killed in separate incidents and of officers shot down in a most cowardly way in performing such routine work for the community as shepherding children across the street outside their school.

Within the conflict, state actors were undoubtedly also victims - 1,112 members of the RUC and British Army were killed by various paramilitary groupings between 1966 and 2001 (McKittrick et al., 2004) with some 29 prison officers killed between 1974 and 1993 respectively (McEvoy, 2001:114). However, within the official discourse of public inquiries, a hierarchy of victims becomes evident, as "power can work to render some people potential victims...at the same time protect those same perpetrators" (Walklate, 2007:49).

Furthermore, rather than gazing upon the victims and their possible disenfranchisement, the perpetrators and the legitimacy of their actions, or the wider justifications for actions taken against constructed threats, aspects of official discourse feature the 'condemnation of the condemners' (Sykes and Matza, 1957) shifting attention away from the allegations against the state and onto those who 'go public' with their disapproval. The Parker Inquiry (1972:2 para.8) into the legitimacy of interrogation techniques suggested that those who critiqued the techniques used against detainees felt that "it was better that servants of the State and innocent civilians should die than the information which could save them should ever be obtained by such methods". Father Denis Faul and Father Raymond Murray (1972; 1976; 1978) collected the statements of detainees and published extensive allegations of abuse and were labelled 'Provo Priests' in attempts designed to delegitimize their criticisms of the British state (Curtis, 1998).

When the RUC's own doctor, Dr Robert Irwin, identified and publicised evidence of state violence experienced by detainees (Taylor, 1980) he - and not just his narratives - were the subject of condemnation. Coogan (2000:440) argues that the "government's response was to orchestrate a campaign against him, using the fact that his wife had been raped [by members of the security forces], to belittle his witness" (see also Curtis, 1998). Interviewee LA found such a response particularly powerful:

It is probably a lesson to others not to come out... I thought it was particularly brutal, not really on him, but on his wife. But that was the argument; 'he's only saying this because he's disgruntled with the RUC who haven't been able to bring these British soldiers to account' (Interviewee LA).

This 'condemnation of the condemners' witnessed by Interviewee LA, attempts to ensure that contested narratives of state violence can become subjugated further. The power of official discourses may act as a deterrent to further challenges to the approved truth. Thus through techniques of neutralisation manifested in official discourse, testimonies of state violence become something else. Those who vocalize them become 'outsiders', those who support the testimonies become interlinked and stained by association, or are instead recast as individuals driven by personal vengeance. Within this framework, the testimonies themselves become lost and their truth value and its consequences are never directly explored. The integrity of the accuser becomes the subject of concern, and the notion of state violence drops from the discourse.

Conclusion

Most of the detainees interviewed during the study were indifferent to the possible personal impact of official discourse. State denials - whether communicated through literal, interpretive or implicative mechanisms - were perceived as inevitable. Their own understandings and monolithic, depersonalised constructions of the nature of the British state and its agents contributed to their perception that there was "no big shakes about it ... it happened, this is what states do" (Interviewee M). They recognised that they had been identified and labelled as the 'Other' and expected to be treated as such by all instruments of the 'criminal justice' system:

...while I would have been outraged to an extent about the hypocrisy of it all, on the other hand I had been engaged in an insurrection against the British state. So part of it wasn't entirely unexpected (Interviewee T).

In conclusion, the conflict in and around Northern Ireland was - and remains - a conflict involving testimony and truth, concerned with the

legitimacy of narratives and contested, binary notions of victimhood. Denials operate to re-frame the public memory of experiences, to disempower accounts, delegitimize depictions, and to avoid the possible moral censures. The conflict avoids the recognition of ‘unjust’ harms and is a form of reconstruction which seeks to maintain a particular image of state action, and/or those who challenge it.

Official discourse can be understood as the working through of a particular narrative into a position of dominance, though that working through may always remain incomplete. As Burton and Carlen (1979:48) acknowledge, “official discourse is a necessary requirement for political and ideological hegemony”, and plays a crucial role in the construction and preservation of legitimacy. This discourse is closely related to the “political and ideological circumstances in which ‘exceptional’ measures were granted legitimacy and the authority of powerful institutions had to be protected”, yet such discourses are not exclusive to the Northern Ireland conflict (Rolston and Scraton 2005:552).

The existence of public inquiries may give an appearance of some form of investigative ‘truth seeking’; yet they often function to “allay, suspend and close off popular doubt through an ideal and discursive appropriation of a material problem” (Burton and Carlen, 1979:13-14).

The control of knowledge (and its definition) remains a crucial aspect of the exercise of power. However, as the testimonies of former detainees suggest, no solitary interpretation of state violence is omnipotent and omnipresent, and these counter-narratives exist in the gaps created by localised experiences and recollections. Space exists for the alternative discourses of detainees to be studied, and for their experiences of truth in conflict to become part of a contested public history. In this way, the paper hopes to enrich discussions of state violence - and contribute to knowledge around mechanisms of denial which operate throughout the Criminal Justice system - by incorporating the words (and worlds) of those who may have directly experienced it.

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