Faith, Peace Building, and Intra-Community Dialogue in South Yorkshire, UK

Aims

The aim of this research was to advance understanding of extreme and radical right-wing (ERW) rise in South Yorkshire, and how to challenge it, through particular setting, interfaith community dialogue project.

Methodology

The research gained its insights through Community Dialogue Project (CDP), which was established in South Yorkshire by local faith leaders (from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist faiths) who wanted to challenge the divisive narratives of extreme and radical right-wing (ERW), and to empower the local communities in South Yorkshire to resist and challenge racist politics. They hoped to do so through: creation of safe space for people to talk freely about difficult issues; through encouraging interaction between groups of people that normally wouldn't mix; and through developing a way which would help community members deal with divisive narrative prevalent in media.

In collaboration with Community Dialogue Project (CDP) researchers based at the University of Leeds made use of 'action research' as methodology, which they believed could advance collaboration and establish trusting relationships.

The research took place in South Yorkshire between 2011-2012. The study included three parts:

1. Semi-structured interviews with 12 persons who were founders and management of CDP. Through these interviews they hoped to learn about the role faith had in CDP, as well as how and why the Sectoral Social Dialogue (SSD) concept was used;

2. Sectoral Social Dialogues took place in communities that were considered to have an active ERW presence and with higher than national levels of deprivation. In total 84 individuals participated in SSD. 10 of those were interviewed using semi-structured interviews, in order to better understand the connection between their individual daily experience and the dialogue process. This included 6 women and 4 men, all white British. 3 of them identified as atheists, while 7 had some connection to church. Due to anonymity that CDP was committed to, identifying 10 individuals who were prepared to be interviewed involved extensive networking. All the interviews were audio-recorded and then evaluated through framework analysis method;

3. Researchers attended meetings of dialogue facilitators. These meetings were seen as an opportunity to make most of action research. The meetings were recorded and transcribed and jointly analysed by researcher and facilitator.

Key Issues

The researchers were keen to examine the role faith and dialogue have in challenging extreme radical views. In line with findings by other studies, the authors suggest that industrial decline, which began with miners' strike, combined with a sense that they are ignored by current political leaders, has played a significant role in research participants' feelings of loss, sense of injustice and antagonism towards and fear of 'outsiders'. These feelings were recognized and exploited by ERW, as they allowed space to open up and talk about difficult issues. Informed by Azar's protracted social conflict theory, authors suggest that ERW use strategy by which they generate clear and hostile borders between 'out-groups' and 'in-groups', making the out-groups responsible for 'in-groups' misfortunes.

Researchers collaborated with community dialogue project in order to examine how dialogue can be used in order reduce racist politics. Although initially CDP hoped to create space where individuals from different ethnic and religious background would come together, eventually they focused on intra-community dialogue. The latter is identified as having two stages: The first stage involved work with individuals and groups while seeking an opportunity for dialogue; while the second stage involved several phases: **a.** introduction: listening about how life is in the community in question; **b**. dialogue: this phase begins when people feel ready to share their views of others. Facilitators approach should be non-judgmental yet challenging when necessary. It can involve role playing which involves some aspects of prejudice; **c.** reflection: where facilitators reflect on main topics that came up in dialogue phase; **d.** conclusion: paying attention to how participants feel about the whole dialogue process and whether attitudes have changed as a result.

*The authors address an article by Crisp and Turner on imagined contact, which can provide relevant information on how to use imagined interactions which as a strategy can be used in intra-community dialogue

Conclusion

The research concluded that:

1. Unlike many scholars who argue for inter-community approach to dialogue, where emphasis is placed on *contact* between members of different 'identity-groups', CDP focused on intra-community process, primarily because the former proved to be more difficult. Reasons for this were many, some were practical (e.g. communities that were involved in CDP were less ethnically diverse to begin with; they were also less mobile; furthermore, resources available for CDP were limited), others derived from 'the ground' (e.g. people were not ready to meet individuals from 'other' groups; or CDP has identified need for people to express their views freely, also on difficult matters – something that ERW enabled and in fact thrived on). Eventually, what mattered was an emphasis placed on the importance of listening in a non-judgmental way to opinions even if they are based on racist and negative views, which

would normally be seen as politically incorrect. Intra-community dialogue focuses on challenging negative views that encourage divisions, but in non-judgmental manner.

2. When working with groups on sensitive issues (e.g. racism), one needs to be aware of how participants may feel if they are being targeted as X group. For example, people would not necessarily be happy to be approached because their community is considered as 'one with prejudices'. According to authors this is an important learning lesson.

3. Exploring prejudices that research participants experience on daily basis in relation to their age, gender, class and so on, could be useful way to examine how people in general experience hostility because of their religion or ethnicity.

4. Faith values could be an important element when brought into politically tense and secular environment.

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