Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Consociation and Young People: The Case of Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement Generation

A thesis submitted to the University of Dublin, Trinity College in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

2023

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Declaration

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Summary

Employing a reflexive thematic analysis with qualitative semi structured interview data, this research explores the lived experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation; the first generation to be born after the Troubles ended, and to have come of age in a Northern Ireland governed by consociationalism. The rationale for this research is twofold: firstly, to expand our knowledge of consociational theory by exploring the possible impact it has on the society which it governs, in other words, the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism; and secondly, to provide a snapshot of contemporary Northern Ireland as experienced by members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. The research focuses on four domains of society that should be expected to be positively impacted by consociationalism, and that are relevant to the lives of young people in Northern Ireland, they are: cross community relations; economic opportunities; security; and governance. In exploring these four domains, the study has attempted to answer the research question from which the investigation originated: what is the possible societal impact of consociationalism, as experienced by members of the Good Friday Agreement generation? It is the position of this study that it would be inaccurate, if not impossible, to conclude one singular narrative when it comes to the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism. The lived experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation reveal the complicated, complex, and often contradictory realities of living in a society that continues to bear the scars of its recent violent history, as well as the complexities of the consociational model that governs it.

Chapter One beings the study by establishing that Northern Ireland's future generations were to be key beneficiaries of its consociational peace settlement, the Good Friday Agreement. Chapter Two provides an overview of the normative prescriptions of classical consociationalism, as well as structural and historical factors conducive to consociation, before turning to new consociationalism and the additional dimensions required to facilitate contemporary consociation. The heated debates in the literature are presented by outlining old and new complaints that make up anti-consociational arguments, accompanied simultaneously by relevant rebuttals from various advocates. The chapter then outlines the consociational nature of the Good Friday Agreement and presents a brief summary of the performance of consociation in Northern Ireland from 1998 to the present

day. The chapter finishes by identifying the research gaps in consociational literature and the relationship between consociationalism and young people, both of which are central to this study. Chapter Three details the methodology used to conduct the research, first by identifying the philosophical underpinning of the research, which dictated the methods adopted. The chapter explains the qualitative approach taken, including information on the dataset, data generation, and reflexive thematic analysis. Ethical issues relevant to the study are then outlined, as well as detailed reflection on the impact of the Covid-19. Chapter Four casts a light on young people and their experiences of and attitudes towards cross-community relations, including binary identities and labels, intercommunal relations, the past, and what reconciliation looks like in contemporary Northern Ireland. Chapter Five illustrates young people's exposure to economic opportunities, covering issues such as employment, career prospects and the brain drain. Chapter Six delves into the multifaceted topic of security, and explores how young people perceive the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), how they feel about paramilitaries, as well as reflections on their own personal safety. Chapter Seven explores questions surrounding governance, covering powersharing, the health of the Good Friday Agreement and the constitutional future of the island of Ireland. Chapter Eight concludes the research with a brief summation of the findings in each chapter as well as stating the key take aways from the study.

To my family and friends who have contributed to my life in the most meaningful and significant ways. Without you I would not be who I am or where I am today.

As special mention to Susan, Pete, Alice and Colm who are sadly no longer with us. I miss the stories, the chats, and the laughs.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the young people who are central to this work. Thank you for giving me your time during incredibly busy periods in your lives, for being so open, and for trusting me with your stories and experiences. I am eternally grateful to every single one of you who said yes to me, Tweeted me back, emailed me back, and signed on to Teams to talk with me at length. Thank you.

Thank you to Dr Etain Tannam for giving me the confidence to pursue my academic ambitions.

Thank you to Dr Browne and Dr Mitchell for taking me under your supervisory wings unexpectedly, for the intellectual guidance, and for showing me compassion and understanding over the years when life threw many curveballs.

To my parents, I could write another PhD (don't worry I won't) on how I could not have done this without you both. Your constant love, care, generosity, patience and belief has been my lifeline over these past years. This moment is as much yours as it is mine and that is no exaggeration. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Everything I am I owe to you both.

To my siblings Emma and Peter, you inspire me every day to be better, do better and never give up. The strength and resilience you have both shown in your own lives has inspired me endlessly and encouraged me to keep going when times were really tough. Thank you.

And to Stephen, for all the everyday things. It's the wee things as they say. Thank you for all the chocolate, hugs, pints, coffees, pastries, pep talks, drives, shoulders to cry on, somewhere to rant, and a safe space free of judgement. Most of all, thank you for the unconditional love, empathy, and company. Without you this journey would have been unimaginably lonely. You are one of a kind and my best friend.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

On 10 April 1998 the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the then Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Sinn Féin (SF), the Alliance Party (APNI), the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) signed the Good Friday Agreement concluding two year multi-party negotiations. It has been 25 years since the Troubles ostensibly came to an end, when 676,966 people (71.1%) in Northern Ireland declared their support for the Agreement at the polls (www.ark.ac.uk). When US Diplomat Senator George Mitchell returned to Northern Ireland in April 2018 to mark the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, he apprised his audience that his primary motivator in persevering as Chair of the Northern Ireland peace talks was the birth of his son ('Building Peace: 20 Years On' conference, Queen's University Belfast, 10 April 2018). When speaking in Dublin the previous day, Senator Mitchell recalled that when his son Andrew was born in 1997, he contemplated how many babies had been delivered in Northern Ireland on the same day; the answer was 61 (O'Brien, 2018). Senator Mitchell recited to his Dublin audience the question he had asked himself 21 years ago:

> Shouldn't those 61 children have the same chance in life that we want for our son? Could they get that if Northern Ireland reverted to sectarian strife?

There can be little doubt that Northern Ireland's future generations were to be key beneficiaries of the Good Friday Agreement. As the guardian of Northern Ireland's future, built first and foremost on a total rejection of all forms of political violence, the Agreement is intrinsically forward-looking in nature. The Declaration of Support on page one proposes a 'new beginning' and a 'fresh start' in order to secure a peaceful future for Northern Ireland and all of its people based on 'reconciliation', 'tolerance' and 'mutual trust' (Good Friday Agreement, Declaration of Support, 1998, p. 1). Considering this language and Senator Mitchell's regard for future generations, the Good Friday Agreement can be understood as a consensus intended not only to safeguard the futures of those who lived through and experienced Northern Ireland's Troubles first hand, but also the futures of those who did not.

Since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the babies that were at the forefront of Senator George Mitchell's mind in 1997 have come of age, and a new generation has grown up in Northern Ireland. This demographic has acquired many labels: the Good Friday Agreement generation, the peace generation, ceasefire babies, the new generation, and the transition generation to name but a few. They represent the first generation in Northern Ireland to have grown up in a post Troubles era characterised mostly by a 'negative peace', to use the terminology of peace theorists like John Galtung (1969) and John Paul Lederach (1997). In other words, direct and visible violence is absent, but the possibility of a return to violence remains because of lingering disagreements and tensions continuing to bubble beneath the surface. The characterisation of contemporary Northern Ireland as existing in a state of negative peace is not hotly contested, with various scholars (Coulter et al, 2021; Brewer, 2018; Senehi, 2015; Hamber 2013), commentators (Jones, 2021); and political figures expressing this view over the last two decades.

The nature of the political settlement that enabled this negative peace, that is the Good Friday Agreement, is also largely uncontested (albeit the same cannot be said for its merits which is discussed in Chapter 2). Since 1998, Northern Ireland has been governed by inclusive consociational arrangements that prioritise cooperation among political elites in a powersharing cross communal executive underpinned by principles of autonomy, proportionality and parity. Although Dixon (2005) argues that the Good Friday Agreement is not consociational, almost all other scholars agree with Taylor's sentiments that it 'shines as the brightest star in the new consociational universe' (2009, p. 7). Research on consociationalism in Northern Ireland exceeds research on other consociational cases, and scholars have debated for decades the philosophy underpinning consociational thought and the ethical, political and normative merits of its institutional structures in the region. However, 25 years since consociation was introduced in Northern Ireland as a means of creating political stability and a peaceful democracy, it is suggested here that there is a discernible omission in existing research; that is, how consociationalism affects the society which it governs. In other words, the 'sociology' of consociationalism. Furthermore, this study proposes that as the Good Friday Agreement generation have come of age, it is both timely and imperative that it is their social experience of consociationalism that is most interesting and deserving of attention.

The rationale for this study is therefore twofold: the first is to explore the social meaning of consociationalism, and the second is to provide empirical evidence-based insight into the lived experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation against the backdrop of consociational thought. The significance of this research is therefore both theoretical and substantive; theoretically it will provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of consociational theory, and beyond academia it will reveal how young people have fared growing up in post-Troubles Northern Ireland and what governs their opinions on the place they call home. Recently Northern Ireland has been plunged into a political crisis that has resurrected sensitive issues surrounding the constitutional question and the longevity and sustainability of the Good Friday Agreement. With the uncertainties surrounding Brexit, challenging times defined by difficult crossroads can be forecast.

Acquiring a deeper and more nuanced understanding of consociational theory is important and relevant to the academy today because it continues to be a growing area of lively research. This study hopes to add to these ever evolving discussions and debates, with its own original and insightful contribution. In the relevant literature, some scholars have set out to 'test' consociationalism (Wilson, 2019; Hodžić, 2020), and whilst this is an admirable endeavour, it is not the purpose of this research for three reasons. The first is that it is questionable whether testing consociationalism, beyond its potential to reduce violence which can be verified by statistical evidence, is amenable to a decisive and definitive conclusion by empirical evidence (O'Leary, 2019, p. 29). Secondly, even if testing consociationalism was susceptible to empirical evidence, such an assessment would be beyond the scope of this research both in terms of resources and time, as it would require qualitative interviewing on a much larger scale. Thirdly, in the specific context of Northern Ireland, arguably testing consociationalism presently would result in a bleak evaluation of which it would not be solely deserving of. There are many *sui generis* factors impacting both governmental stability and societal tension in Northern Ireland, namely political scandal such as the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI), Brexit, and outstanding issues surrounding the Protocol. In other words, pinning Stormont's recent suspensions or the heightened intercommunal tension to consociational (bad) performance would be both insular and unfair. What this research seeks to do, is gain an insight into young people's experiences of and attitudes towards issues that are relevant to

consociational thought in order further our understanding of the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism.

Providing an empirical evidence-based snapshot of contemporary Northern Ireland, through the eyes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation is also relevant, not just because 25 years has passed since the peace accord, but because in that time period, what Coulter et al (2021, p. 23) refers to as 'the long peace', generalised assumptions about this demographic have come to the fore which require interrogation. Even the labels attached to this demographic identified above contain implicit assumptions; that they are all pacifists, that they are fully in support of the peace process, and that they are distinctly different from the generation before them in terms of how they perceive their neighbours. It is not uncommon for Northern Ireland's 'new' generation to be portrayed as a homogenous group with collective political and ideological ambitions, for example: 'Young people leaving past behind to class themselves as Northern Irish ' (Belfast Telegraph, 2022); 'We are the custodians of the peace deal' (BBC News, 2022); 'Northern Ireland's 'peace babies' hope and pray the violence goes away' (ABC News, 2021); and 'President Obama urges next generation of Northern Ireland leaders to forge 'new identity' (BBC News, 2016).

While there may be some degree of truth to the headlines, they do not tell the full story or paint the full picture. They illustrate a common tendency to overstate how forward thinking or progressive members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are. In a similar way that those who are invested in Northern Ireland know that the peace process was much more arduous, difficult and complex than international commentators allow (Coulter, 2021, p. 2), perhaps the same can be said for surface level characterisations of the Good Friday Agreement generation, that they too are more labyrinthine and nuanced than some would allow. As the future power holders and decision makers it is imperative to go beyond the intuitive assertions about young people and to provide empirically grounded evidence of their political attitudes and lived experiences. We need to dig deeper and peel back the layers if we are to truly engage with the realities of a generation who have come of age in a period of political and societal stability, upheaval and uncertainty. To borrow the sentiments of Coulter et al, we must pay attention to the 'intricate interplay of continuity and change' that defines a generation who have come of

age at a time when society is ‘still emerging from the shadow of its own turbulent recent history’ (2021, p. 23).

25 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland should now be at the stage of providing valuable evidence of how consociation affects the society which it governs. This research focuses on four domains of life that transpire from consociational thinking and are relevant to members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. They are cross community relations, economic opportunities, security and governance. Chapter Two provides an overview of the normative prescriptions of classical consociationalism, as well as structural and historical factors conducive to consociation, before turning to new consociationalism and the additional dimensions required to facilitate contemporary consociation. The heated debates in the literature are presented by outlining old and new complaints that make up anti-consociational arguments, accompanied simultaneously by relevant rebuttals from various advocates. The chapter then outlines the consociational nature of the Good Friday Agreement and presents a brief summary of the performance of consociation in Northern Ireland from 1998 to the present day. The chapter finishes by identifying the research gaps in consociational literature and the relationship between consociationalism and young people, both of which are central to this study. Chapter Three details the methodology used to conduct the research, first by identifying the philosophical underpinning of the research, which dictated the methods adopted. The chapter explains the qualitative approach taken, including information on the dataset, data generation, and reflexive thematic analysis. Ethical issues relevant to the study are then outlined, as well as detailed reflection on the impact of the Covid-19. Chapter Four casts a light on young people and their experiences of and attitudes towards cross community relations, including binary identities and labels, intercommunal relations, the past, and what reconciliation looks like in contemporary Northern Ireland. Chapter Five illustrates young people’s exposure to economic opportunities, covering issues such as employment, career prospects and the brain drain. Chapter Six delves into the multifaceted topic of security, exploring how young people perceive the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), how they feel about paramilitaries, as well as reflections on their own personal safety. Chapter Seven explores questions surrounding governance, covering powersharing, the health of the Good Friday Agreement and the constitutional future of the island of Ireland. Chapter 8 concludes the research with a brief summation of the findings in each chapter as well as stating the key take aways from the study.

Contribution to the discipline of Peace Studies

It interesting to think about this research within the wider context of the field of Peace Studies. The first point to note is that given the interdisciplinary nature of Peace Studies, the discipline offers a relevant and suitable academic arena within which research on consociationalism can take place. Certain core beliefs and values that underpin the Peace Studies discipline also form critical components of consociational thinking. The second point to note, however, is that based on the findings of this research, the interdisciplinary nature of Peace Studies can also offer consociationalism 'food for thought', specifically in the case of Northern Ireland as reform of the consociational powersharing institutions seems inevitable. These two points will be discussed in turn below.

At the most basic level, Peace Studies and consociationalism are both concerned with the causes of conflict and the conditions of peace. They share the aim of achieving peace in societies that are emerging from violent conflict. Some Peace Studies scholars from different schools of thought within the discipline including conflict transformation and agonistic politics, such as Lederach (1997, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2010), Maddison (2015, 2017), Schaap (2005), and Buchanan (2008, 2014) conceptualise conflict in a similar way to that of consociationalists. These various schools of thought understand conflict to be inevitable, not necessarily receptive to being ended, resolved or eradicated, and therefore 'conflict' must have a role in peacebuilding processes. For example, Sarah Maddison, a scholar in agonistic politics argues that deeply divided societies require political space that allows for 'contestation between opposing groups that may have been previously closed down by violence' (2017, p. 158). Furthermore, Schaap argues that it is essential to have politics between 'former enemies' rather than 'cover over' conflicts between them (2005, p. 21-2). It is for similar reasons that consociationalists like McGarry and O'Leary do not advocate for integration and assimilation of contending groups, but instead seek accommodation and autonomy. Therefore, both consociationalists and some other Peace Studies scholars emphasise the need for political spaces in which 'political enemies' can become political 'adversaries' (Mouffe, 2000, 2005, 2007). Related to this conceptualisation of conflict and its role in peacebuilding, consociationalists and some Peace Studies scholars also reject quick fixes or 'maximalist modes of reconciliation' (Maddison, 2017, p. 157) as futile and inherently dangerous as it runs the risk of driving

conflict 'underground from where it will inevitably surface in unpredictable and violent ways' (Maddison, 2017, p. 156).

As stated above, the four domains of life that are central to this research have transpired from consociational theory, however, it is also important to note that these domains are also of interest and relevant to the wider discipline of Peace Studies, evidenced most clearly by the interdisciplinary nature of the field. As will be outlined in the next chapter, it is true that consociationalism does not always explicitly outline the importance or role of cross community relations, economics, security, and governance in its peacebuilding endeavours, but an in-depth and extensive reading of the literature makes it possible to infer that these domains are too part of consociational thinking. Other schools of thought within Peace Studies, on the other hand, are much more explicit in the importance they assign to 'simultaneous effort across several socio-political levels' (Maddison, 2017, p. 155). This includes sustained and protracted progress and cooperation in, for example, areas such as economic structures and institutions, relational issues between citizens, and security related matters. Buchanan's application of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland is of note here (2008, 2014). Buchanan looks at conflict transformation in Northern Ireland through social and economic development and contends that 'peace money' from various sources including the European Union, and the resultant peace programmes, have helped communities overcome economic underdevelopment which historically have been caused by sectarian differences.

Whilst consociationalists do not deny the relevance of these interconnected issues in a post-conflict society, their commitment to elite political cooperation takes precedence. It is this prioritisation of elite level peacebuilding that scholars belonging to other schools of thought query. By focusing on socio-economic and other interconnected issues and not just the political or constitutional issues, some Peace Studies scholars would argue that elite-level political cooperation cannot in and of itself be the solution. Instead, the solution can only be found in unpicking the underlying causes of conflict and developing, nurturing, and sustaining long-term processes of change, both in human relationships and societies within which they exist. In practical terms, this involves participation from all levels of society. Lederach's concept of vertical interdependency is useful here. Vertical interdependency, by definition, is about creating channels of communication and

understanding between different types of people from different levels in society. It allows everyone, including those who are sceptical of change and the post-accord phase, to be part of the change process. Vertical interdependency is a means through which the public sphere can be rebuilt and the public's trust in institutions can be regained through respectful engagement. Therefore, everyone affected by the conflict, from the political decision maker (elites), to the academic, to the church leader, to the NGO (middle) and to the ordinary citizen (grassroots) can be involved in the critical change process.

Arguably, as the qualitative data in this research will show, one of most significant weaknesses of consociation in Northern Ireland is the lack of genuine ownership, participation, and commitment throughout all levels of society. According to Lederach, 'the challenge of our failures is that we have been unable to understand the interdependence of different sets of people … and recognise how they may interact constructively' (lecture given by Lederach at University of Notre Dame, 2010). Therefore, although the importance of the 'negative peace' achieved by consociational powersharing cannot be understated, perhaps consociationalists need to actively lean into the interdisciplinary nature of Peace Studies, to incorporate more actors and diverse strategies, as a means of preserving consociations that are oftentimes unstable and where peace frequently comes under threat. This seems apt given the crisis consociational powersharing faces in Northern Ireland in the present day. This will be returned to throughout the thesis.

Note on Contentious Terminology

In 1990, the late Professor John Whyte wrote in his seminal book *Interpreting Northern Ireland* that, 'One problem must be averted to in writing about Northern Ireland. This the question of what name to give to the various geographical entities' (1990, p. xi). The problem must be averted now just as much now as it did in 1990 because still these names can be controversial, with the 'choice often revealing one's political preferences' (Whyte, 1990, p. xi). Following the example of Whyte and many academic writers since, I will refer to the region as 'Northern Ireland', rather than the 'six counties' or 'Ulster' as nationalists and unionists respectively prefer. Northern Ireland's second city also causes difficulty, with unionists preferring the title 'Londonderry' and nationalists preferring 'Derry'. Mirroring the compromise of Professor Whyte, when referring to the city, I will use its indigenous name 'Derry' and when referring to the English creation of the county I

will use ‘Londonderry’. I will use ‘Britain’ when referring to England, Scotland and Wales and ‘Ireland’ when referring to the Republic of Ireland. Two final terminological clarifications remain: in accordance with most academic writing on Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant are not synonyms for nationalist and unionist and finally, adopting the position of McGarry and O’Leary, I will deliberately use the term ‘paramilitaries’ rather than ‘terrorist’ because as they state, ‘the former expression is more precise and less emotive’ (1993, p. 5-6).

The definition of young people/ youth, two terms that can be used interchangeably, varies with circumstances, including economic and socio-cultural settings and national and international discourse. This research accepts young people as those persons between the ages of 18-24. Across varying disciplines young people are most frequently considered those between the ages of 15 – 24 (UN Secretariat; UNESCO; International Labour Organisation), however given the aim of this research, it is appropriate to raise the minimum age limit to 18 to allow for voting preferences and patterns to be factored into the analysis. The age cohort 18 – 24 confines the target group to those who were born just after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

It is true that consociationalism in general, and Northern Ireland as a case study of conflict and peace, have been extensively researched in the academy for decades. However, consociationalism and its application in Northern Ireland in particular, is far from an exhausted research endeavour. The consociational research agenda remains a vibrant area of contemporary political research as 'the number of journal articles … has never been higher, the range of empirical cases never larger, and the topics covered never more diverse' (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 341). The consociational research boom began concomitantly with the 'wave of powersharing democracy' (Lijphart, 2002) that occurred in the early 2000s and interest in the consociational theme has continued to grow ever since. A prescription of consociation as means of managing deeply divided places has been studied through cases including but not limited to Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, India, Burundi, and Malaysia, but the attention given to the case of Northern Ireland is more pronounced than that of the rest. Themes and topics in the consociational literature are wide ranging including, but not limited to, consociational policies, parties and elections, case studies applying consociational theory, issues of identity politics, how consociations institutionalise four key principles, and the relationships between consociations and social movements and gender (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 346).

However, 50 years after the term consociationalism made its debut in the academy, and 25 years after the signing of Northern Ireland's consociational peace agreement, there remain complex and understudied facets left to uncover. This is true not least because of the unprecedented challenges facing the Good Friday Agreement as a result of Brexit, but also because of the on-going political crises that have defined Northern Ireland in the last five years. Therefore, the research agenda concerning consociationalism and Northern Ireland remains unfinished, everchanging and as relevant as ever. This chapter will provide an overview of classical and new consociationalism, including points of contention in the literature, before unpicking the consociational design of the Good Friday Agreement and discussing the performance of consociation in Northern Ireland

from 2007 to the present day. The chapter will finish by exploring what this study contends is an understudied aspect in the study of consociational governance and as such forms the central focus of the research: the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism, specifically, from the perspective of the Good Friday Agreement generation.

Classical consociationalism

Consociational thinking can be traced back to the sixteenth century, but its conceptualisation in political science is inescapably associated with the Dutch and American political scientist Arend Lijphart. Lijphart's goal was to understand how democratic stability could exist and be sustained in pluralist places where integration and cross-cutting social cleavages did not exist (Taylor, 2009, p. 3). Lijphart pointed to Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands as examples of such societies where 'fragmented but stable democracies' existed, and from empirical generalisations of these cases he formulated consociational theory in the widely cited 1969 article, 'Consociational Democracy' in *World Politics.* Here Lijphart defined consociational theory as 'government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy' (1969, p. 216). Lijphart's key observation was that for pluralist societies to establish and maintain stable democracies, political elites would be required to make 'deliberate efforts to counteract the immobilising and unstabilising effects of cultural fragmentation' (Lijphart, 1969, p. 212) by coming together in a powersharing executive built on institutional structures that guaranteed protection of minority rights.

Throughout the 1970s, Lijphart's work focused on exploring the prescriptive potential of consociational democracy and in 1977 he published *Democracy in Plural Societies* in which he argued that the strength of contending groups had to be acknowledged and used as 'basic building blocks' for designing a stable political system (p. 45, 88). In other words, accommodating the autonomy of contending groups represented a more realistic democratic solution for managing diversity, rather than integrating them and forcing people to move beyond ethnic group politics. The thinking that underpins this 'politics of accommodation' is that identities are inflexible and resilient, not malleable and transformable, and therefore, with the construction of a single identity being unattainable, the protection of 'the special interests, needs and fears of distinct groups' (McGarry and

O'Leary, 2009, p. 15-17) is a necessity so that they hold the state to be fit and appropriate for them. Based on the four western European cases mentioned above, Lijphart developed a consociational model of governance that would see executive, legislative and judicial powers shared across contending groups according to four principles:

1. Executive powersharing, that is the contending groups share in executive power involving meaningful, cross community and joint decision making, 'in an executive chosen in accordance with the principles of representative government' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, p. 44);
2. Segmental autonomy, that is contending groups are permitted self-administration where feasible, for example in matters of cultural concern usually relating to education, language and religion;
3. Proportionality, that is contending groups are 'represented proportionally in key public institutions' and are proportional beneficiaries of 'public resources and expenditures' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, p. 44) and;
4. Veto rights, that is contending groups are able to 'prevent changes that adversely affect their vital interests' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, p. 44).

In observing the four paradigmatic western European consociations, Lijphart (1968, 1969, 1977) also argued in his classical consociational theory that not only were the skills and motivations of political elites crucial for the formation and maintenance of consociations, but so too were various historical and structural factors. Lijphart identified the absence of a demographic and electoral majority group as essential to the facilitation of a consociational democracy because such a hegemonic group would have no obvious incentive to engage in a consociation with other minority groups (1989, p. 497-8). Related to this and also conducive to consociation according to Lijphart is what he terms 'multiple equal but few segments', in other words the equal stability of the communal cultures in a divided society (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995, p. 33), rather than 'a dual balance of power' (Lijphart, 1977, p. 55). This is because where there is a dual balance of power each group 'may hope to win a decisive majority' and therefore may 'have insufficient incentives to create a stable consociation' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 18). Lijphart also invoked the existence of a small sized polity as an additional variable facilitating consociation (1977, p. 65-70). He argued four possible effects of a small demographic

size: firstly, political elites are more likely to know one another and interact with one another therefore making negotiation easier; secondly, small states are more vulnerable to external threats and therefore are disposed towards internal accommodation; thirdly, smaller states are easier to govern; and fourthly, such states are of limited international importance therefore creating a lighter foreign policy load (McGarry, 2019, p. 25). A final dimension in Lijphart's classical consociational theory that he deemed crucial to consociation formation and maintenance is an existing tradition of pre-democratic accommodation (McGarry, 2019, p. 539), in other words, publics who value accommodation will reward political leaders and parties who cooperate to further this goal (O'Leary, 2019, p. 23).

The four prescriptive institutional pillars of Lijphart's classic consociationalism, together with the identified historical and structural factors, were relevant to the four classical consociations upon which Lijphart based his early work. Austria, Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands were all divided ideologically, linguistically, or religiously. They were peaceful democracies and after 1948 and 1950, all four were protected by NATO and emerging European cooperation, their armed forces, police and intelligence services were not contentious matters, and there was no dispute over their borders (McGarry, 2019, p. 539). However, examining more recent cases of consociation, such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, and understanding how consociation came to be and how it has been maintained or not, calls for the introduction and exploration of one or more of three additional facilitating factors that 'were not foregrounded in Lijphart's work' (McGarry, 2019, p. 539). Arguably two of the most prominent contemporary consociationalist thinkers are John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, and although they mostly agree with Lijphart's key theses (with some qualifications), they sought to 'devise a more feasible consociational arrangement than Lijphart envisaged' (1995, p. 326). To do this, and develop consociation's progressive research programme, they primarily used the case of Northern Ireland.

New consociationalism

One of the most significant and nuanced developments in consociational research was the examination of the nature of the cleavages in divided places and the relationship between them. According to O'Leary (2019, p. 20-21), Lijphart often presents all potential

antagonistic and divisive cleavages as being equally susceptible to consociational treatment. However, this is not always the case as some divisions may not be overcome by consociational engineering alone. Contemporary consociations including the aforementioned cases all involve the classical institutions of executive powersharing, proportionality, autonomy and veto rights; but they were also characterised by violence, national self-determination disputes, and international involvement in the negotiation and implementation of their peace settlements. Accordingly, critical or revisionist contemporary consociationalists emphasise three dimensions which they argue, in addition to Lijphart's traditional consociationalism, are necessary for the establishment and maintenance of consociational settlements in such cases. The three additional dimensions are consideration of pluri-national places, external intervention and security. Consociational settlements where these dimensions are important are categorised by McGarry and O'Leary as 'complex consociations' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009, O'Leary, 2019) and although they are infrequent and somewhat novel configurations, O'Leary suggests that they may indeed spread to future crisis zones if the relevant international norms such as the outlawing of genocide and ethnic expulsions, the right to 'self-determination', the 'politics of recognition in post-communist successor states' and systems of minority protection, continue to matter (2019, p. 27, 29).

Lijphart's work focused on accommodating contending groups within a state's central government, in other words, his consociational institutions were restricted to the state in question (1977, p. 25). However, several recent consociations (complex consociations) have been ethnonationally divided and have therefore required consociational settlements that address plurinationalism. McGarry and O'Leary define plurinational places as 'an entire state, a region within a state or a region that crosses sovereign state borders' (2009, p. 25), that has more than one mobilised national community. Given that consociational theory postulates that in certain circumstances divided identities are most likely to resist assimilation, the implication in a plurinational place is that the existing multiple identities will not in the near future assimilate into one common and shared identity. In such cases it is reasonable therefore that communities already mobilised as nations or parts of nations, with irredentist or secessionist ambitions, will be dissatisfied with a consociational settlement that leaves the existing definitions of state sovereignty intact. For minority groups unhappy with the existing state such consociational arrangements

can be interpreted as being territorially integrationist and therefore are likely to fall short of meeting their demands and desire for national self-government (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009, p. 26, 31). Instead they are likely to advocate for an arrangement that dilutes the sovereignty or unitary nature of the existing state (O'Leary, 2019, p. 21). Successful consociation in these cases therefore require architecture within which more than one people can durably co-exist including recognition of multiple nationalities, intergovernmental or cross border institutions that link 'divided nations', mechanisms to ratify or trigger referendums and often an emphasis on the two consociational principles of parity and proportionally among the contending ethnic groups (McGarry, 2019, p. 549, O'Leary 2019, p. 28).

Classical consociational theory did not anticipate the importance of external factors, that is regional and geopolitical dynamics, both in explaining the emergence of consociations and in their promotion in international politics (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009, p. 37). McGarry and O'Leary suggest the reason for this is possibly because Lijphart was developing consociationalism during the Cold War and such interventions were of course unusual (2009, p. 41). Based on his exploration of Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria, and reinforced by his work on Lebanon, Lijphart drew two conclusions about external intervention: firstly, that a perceived common external threat would increase internal solidarity among warring factions, and secondly, a one-sided intervention would antagonise internal inter-ethic relations (1975, p. 59 ff, 122 ff.). However, McGarry and O'Leary consider the role of a 'benign external political intervention' (2009, p. 38), that is a neutral arbitrator, to be valuable in 'the making, ratification, and maintenance of the relevant consociational' settlement (O'Leary, 2019, p. 29).

The final additional facilitative factor important in cases of complex consociation is the establishment of security institutions, which are overlooked in classical consociationalism because of its narrow emphasis on political institutions such as executives, legislatures and electoral systems, and its bias towards internal state arrangements (McGarry and O'Leary 2009, p. 45). In places of violent conflict or where the transition from war to peace has begun, the political institutional pillars of the consociational settlement must be intertwined with peace processes, including disarmament and demilitarisation mechanisms, reintegration of former combatants, and 'institutional and policy

transformations' intended to prevent further conflict and protect human rights (O'Leary, 2019, p. 28). So far the chapter has explored Lijphart's classical consociationalism and the additional dimensions of new consociationalism. In the literature, however, there is no consensus over such thinking, in fact much of the contemporary consociational literature is divided and quite critical (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 347).

Heated debates: no consensus over consociational thought

The growing literature and vehement debates surrounding consociationalism shows the continued influence of consociational thought and certainly debunks any claim that it is irrelevant or that the research agenda has reached saturation. In the literature there are two main axis of disagreement; there are normative debates over the political and ethical merits associated with consociation and empirical debates over how consociations are formed and maintained (O'Leary, 2019, p. 2). The focus here will be a broad summation of the former, as the latter will be incorporated into subsequent discussions regarding the performance of consociation in Northern Ireland from its inception to the present day. Critics of consociationalism hail from a variety of schools of thought including but not limited to conservativism, liberalism, socialism and feminism. The objections to consociationalism are just as diverse, ranging from accusations of being futile to patriarchal, exclusionary, undemocratic and perverse.

The accusation of futility, which according to O'Leary (2019, p. 5) is the weakest criticism, is twofold. The first is advanced by liberals, integrationalists, socialists, and feminists alike who argue that not only do consociations not solve conflicts, but that they in fact reproduce the very structures they aspire to transcend (Taylor, 2009, p. 320) because they consolidate and promote the divisions that are the key causes of conflict thereby organising and regulating a stalemate that encourages immobilisation and gridlock (O'Leary, 2019. p. 3). The second futility claim is made by conservatives who argue that that consociations are inapt to mitigate severely divided societies and will have no impact on intense conflicts. The argument is made, therefore, that consociations are only suited to moderately divided places where they are in fact the product of resolved struggles, rather than the measure to resolve struggles and to moderate cleavages (Horowitz, 2001/1985; 2002). This criticism likely originates from the fact that the four classical consociations were peaceful democracies, thus leading to the (erroneous)

assumption that peace was required before consociation could be established. However, contemporary consociations undermine this critique. Leaders in Northern Ireland, Kenya, Burundi and other countries subscribed to consociation prescription in order to stop violence and build trust among stakeholders, rather than being unable to do so because of the bloodshed and an absence of trust (Vandeginste 2017: 176). Some critics have therefore succumbed to the reality that consociations do have pacifying effects (McGarry, 2019, p. 544).

According to O'Leary (2019, p. 4), the strongest normative objection to consociation – 'the biggest bazooka' fired – is that it is undemocratic and that its advocates are not democrats. There are four main criticisms that are relevant to the undemocratic charge: misplaced emphasis on political elites at the expense of civil society; entrenches ethnic blocs and reinforces divisions; exclusion of certain groups; and leaves no room for competitive and adversarial politics. These four criticism are underpinned by the core belief that consociationalism is deficient in democratic values and therefore incompatible with democratic norms.. The four criticisms will be discussed in turn as well as relevant rebuttals from prominent advocates.

Consociationalism is accused of limiting deliberative and participatory democracy due to its focus on elite negotiation and governance and its pessimism towards the role of civil society in peacemaking and bringing about political transformation. (Taylor, 2001, 2006; Dixon, 1997, 2005). As consociational bargains are struck amongst the political elite, for the political elite, critics argue it creates a 'passive and demobilised population' (Dixon, 2005) because it removes wide-ranging deliberation in the public sphere and shuts down the space for civil society to question conventional understandings, think collectively and discuss pertinent issues with others. Therefore, for many opposed to consociationalism, the emphasis on elite negotiations and governance represents a lost opportunity for effective grassroots participation in the democratic process, which could have, for instance, highlighted genuinely consequential cross-cutting issues and challenged political elites on both sides, instead of the inevitable focus on party politics and divisive constitutional questions (Taylor, 2006, 2009). The consociational response to this critique is the argument that consociational arrangements are required to allow civil society to thrive, that is to enable effective bridging and flourishing of deeply conflictual places. In

other words, the same spirit of accommodation and cooperation that takes place at elite level, that is required to successfully agree a consociational settlement, will then be replicated at the grassroots level over time. One final point on this criticism which consociationalists like to make, and reinforced by Feargal Cochrane's study in 2001, is that civil society groups, such as peace and conflict resolution organisations, are limited in terms of the direct impact they have on peace processes.

Another objection to consociational arrangements is that they institutionalise and entrench ethnic blocs thereby reinforcing divisions in already deeply divided places. Three mechanisms are to blame for this according to critics. The first is the use of single transferable vote - proportional representation (STV-PR) electoral system which it is argued enables extremist parties to get elected too easily for two reasons: firstly because of low quotas candidates are required to secure only a minority of votes to get elected (Wilford and Wilson, 2003, p. 7) and secondly, the fact that in divided polities, voters are more likely to transfer first within their own ethnic bloc, including towards hardliners, before they consider giving lower order preferences to moderate candidates from other blocs (O'Leary, 2020, p. 55). In other words, the STV-PR electoral system does not work to encourage tactical voting across communal lines and as such transfers reward hardliners thus reinforcing polarisation and leading to intractable politics based on identities, rather than a politics based on cross cutting bread and butter issues. Consociationalists retort with a number of points. The first is that hardliners are only rewarded by moderates within their own blocs if they moderate their message (Mitchell et al., 2002, 2009; McGlinchey, 2019). Therefore consociations encourage radicals to become less extreme because it 'provides them with opportunities to have their concerns addressed constitutionally, and gives them a stake in the system' (McGarry and O'Leary 2006, p. 262). It is the consociational principle of proportionality that makes possible a cross community executive, and the argument is made that this inclusive executive, including hardliners, is necessary and better than alternatives such as sustained armed conflict. The second and third means through which consociational arrangements reinforce ethnic blocs is through the prioritisation of segmental autonomy which, it is argued, promotes societal segregation and the use of the mutual veto because it enables the ethnic divide to continue at elite level. As Roeder and Rothchild (2005, p. 5) put it, the bargaining room becomes the new battlefield.

Critics take issue with what they claim is the embedding of ethnic blocs and the reinforcement of identities because they believe in emancipation from conflictual identities (Ruane and Todd, 1992, 1996; Taylor, 2001; Wilford, 2009). Those with cosmopolitan, emancipatory or integrationist intentions argue that not only is transformation (not consociation) a prerequisite for sustainable political settlements, but that consociationalist thinkers downplay the opportunities for transforming identities as well as human capacity to do so. Their complaint is that consociationalists take people as they are and not as they might be, misconstruing ethnicity and identity as social facts (Taylor, 2001, p. 40) rather than accepting that they are susceptible to human freedom and therefore can be transformed. However for consociationalists, this is wishful thinking and they are wary of what they deem to be unfounded optimism about the capabilities and desires of regimes and people to dissolve and change their inherited identities in their lifetimes (O'Leary, 2019, p. 6). Consociationalists assert that collective identities, particularly those based on 'nationality, ethnicity, language and religion, are generally fairly durable once formed' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 5) but that they can engage in continuous politics of accommodation. Consociationalists do however concede that there are instances in which ethnic identities can be more fluid, where there has been no entrenchment of ethnic parties or civil war, and consequently centripetalist arrangements may work better than consociation (O'Leary 2020, p. 559).

There is an emerging body of literature focused on one of the more contemporary complaints made against consociationalism which is that more 'emancipatory' or 'progressive' identities such as those focused on ideas, class, gender and sexual orientation, as well as non-dominant communities like migrants, are left out of the consociational bargain both in terms of the negotiation and the aftermath in relation to representation and participation. In recent times more attention has been given to the relationship between women and consociational powersharing, with the general consensus being that such arrangements reinforce the patriarchy and subsequently women are excluded and side-lined. Hayes and McAllister (2012) write that 'women are frequently ill-served by consociational peace settlements, since gender equality is often sacrificed in an effort to resolve conflicts over national identity'. They acknowledge the efficacy of consociational settlements in terms of mitigating conflict based on ethno-

national identity, but their grievance is that such settlements privilege the source of the conflict (national identity) over other sources of division like class and gender. Hayes and McAllister found that this can have a detrimental effect in terms of the support for settlements among women.

An extension of this is the argument made by Brown and Ní Aoláin (2015) that consociational settlements may expedite particular consequences for women specifically regarding the identity politics of transitional justice. They argue that the nationalism at the centre of consociational settlements is often gendered, springing from 'masculinised memory, masculinised humiliations and masculinised hope' and this serves as an impediment to meaningful transition because it marginalises women by exalting the patriarchy and entrenches male privilege in the community trying to transition. Furthermore, Kennedy, Pierson and Thomson argue that 'consociationalism is a gender blind theory' (2016, p. 618) and this is highly problematic since gender is an integral factor in conflict, it should be integral to post-conflict governance (Kennedy et al., 2016). They argue that consociation impedes political representation of groups that fall outside of the contending blocs that consociation aims to accommodate and in particular, women. As a result women continue to be victims of injustice and their work in grassroots and civil society politics is often overlooked, at the expense of the emphasis placed on formal elite structures and masculine nationalism.

Nagle (2016) suggests that a correlative consequence of hardening ethnonational identities through consociational powersharing is to further marginalise groups outside the bounds of official inclusion. Little research has been done regarding the implications of powersharing for sexual minorities specifically, but Nagle found in his study of Northern Ireland that because of the focus on national identity, LGBT movements are often 'forced into a wider imbroglio of ethnonational contestation' (2016, p. 868). In other words, minority rights can become a source of continued and new conflict between ethnic blocs, with one bloc co-opting rights demands and the other blocking legislation pertaining to those rights. Agarin and McCulloch (2019) turn their focus to 'large and complex' states or regions in which there are many 'small ethnic minorities and categories of persons' including those that are territorially displaced as well as internally displaced persons and other migrant communities. They highlight that because these groups are too small in size to be organised demographically, electorally, or politically,

they face ‘major institutional constraints on their representation and participation’ in the consociational powersharing arrangements. They label this phenomenon as the ‘exclusion amid inclusion dilemma’, meaning for powersharing to successfully create stability and satisfy dominant groups, it must exclude non-dominant groups (Agarin and McCulloch, 2019).

These contemporary complaints against consociationalist are underpinned by concerns about political representation, or lack of. In response to this, consociationalists argue that they want *majorities* plural rather than just *one* majority to control or influence government (O’Leary, 2019, p. 9). By this standard consociationalism could claim to be inclusive because it promotes plurality in government. They point to the democratic electoral process, assuming elections are fair and free and people turn out to vote, and iterate that in consociations seats or political positions are not reserved for one group. Citizens can vote for any candidate or party, including non-ethnic parties who advance non-ethnic issues like gender equality, minority rights and so on. This means that in reality, if voters decide to put their support behind those who have historically been ‘left out’ of the consociational bargain, the dominance of ethnonational blocs could disappear (Nagle and Clancy, 2010). Therefore, according to McGarry and O’Leary (2009) the lack of support for or representation of class based or gender based parties for example cannot be explained by ‘undemocratic structural impediments’.

The final accusation made against consociationalism that will be discussed here is that it leaves no room for competitive or adversarial politics. This criticism calls into question the calibre of consociational arrangements by arguing that they are at best deficient in, and at worst incompatible with, democratic norms and values. Critics point to the requirement of a ‘grand’ or mandatory coalition and claim because everyone is to be included, there is no opposition in government and therefore ‘no opportunity to toss out radicals, or to shine a light in dark corners’ (Brass, 1991). In other words, there are no incentives to keep government honest and no means by which to hold them accountable. McGarry and O’Leary refute this claim by arguing that the language around this point is ‘loaded’ and ‘incorrect’ (2009, p. 80). In fact, they consider it to be a fallacy so widespread that they spend a considerable amount of time trying to resolve the misunderstanding. Firstly, they state that participation in any consociation is voluntary, that no party is required to be in government (2009, p. 80). Secondly, they assert that

many have understood the word ‘grand’ to mean all encompassing, that is, all the political leaders of all the significant ethnic segments must be included in the coalition. However, this is not the case; Lijphart and others reasonably count as consociational those executives in which not all political leaders of all significant segments are included because what matters in a consociational executive is meaningful, cross community powersharing and joint decision making (O’Leary, 2019, p. 10). Therefore, those who are not included in the executive can form an opposition, as was the case in Northern Ireland in 2015 and 2022 when the SDLP formed an official opposition in Stormont. Even if no official opposition is formed, backbenchers from other parties are still likely to hold the relevant minster to account through committees and various other checks and balances mechanisms to enforce accountability. The general position of consociationalists seems to be that holding political parties and leaders to account in coalition governments can be more difficult than in adversarial politics, however it is not an insurmountable problem (O’Leary, 2019, p. 189).

The opposing appraisals outlined above are unlikely to reach consensus. What is interesting though, is O’Leary’s (2019, p. 5) observation that some criticisms will have to give because all that is levelled against consociationalism cannot be true at once. He points out that consociation cannot be perverse by reinforcing ethnic antagonisms, jeopardise key democratic values, all whilst being futile i.e. make no difference at all. Advocates recognise that consociations usually involve sacrifice, compromise and cold bargains, and therefore they do not celebrate consociation or claim it to be morally superior. They do however maintain that it is an effective means of striking a productive and peaceful balance between self-rule and shared rule (O’Leary 2019, p. 9) amongst rival, even intractable, groups.

Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement and new consociationalism

Northern Ireland is the most prevalent case study in contemporary consociational literature. This began with the Good Friday Agreement signed on 10 April 1998 and, if anything, the focus on Northern Ireland is now more pronounced than ever (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 343). The Good Friday Agreement represents an association of communities – British unionists, Irish nationalists and others – and addresses the totality of relationships between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland (internal relations),

between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (cross border relations) and the Republic of Ireland and the UK (British Irish intergovernmental relations) (Mitchell et all, 2018, p. 284). The Agreement typifies the politics of accommodation, described by O'Leary as, 'neither a victory for nationalists, nor for unionists. Both can maintain their central aspirations, their core identities, and protect or express better their interests' (1999, p. 1651).

The Agreement prescribed consociation for Northern Ireland. It met all four of Lijphart's classic consociational principles: cross community executive powersharing; proportionality rules in government, elections, and policymaking; 'autonomy and equality in cultural life; and veto rights for minorities' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 178). The Agreement however was not just consociational as 'the parameters of classical consociation … were ill-fitting for a complex self-determination conflict like Northern Ireland' (Nagle, 2018, p. 397). Northern Ireland required a solution that would address the binational and bigovernmental elements of the conflict and therefore the Agreement also contains non-consociational components and can be classified as an example of complex consociationalism.

Executive power sharing

Strand One of the Good Friday Agreement contains provisions for the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland, including a devolved government and a power-sharing executive, which is central to any consociation. Strand One established two semi-presidential diarchic figures – First Minister and deputy First Minister – who are jointly elected to head the powersharing executive. They are elected together on a cross community basis, 'each representing the unionist and nationalist communities, with the largest two parties electorally taking first and deputy positions respectively' (Mitchell et al., 2018, p. 284). Each nomination requires either parallel consent, that is a majority of the members present and voting including a majority of the unionist and nationalist designations present and voting, or a weighted majority, that is 60% of members present and voting, including at least 40% of each designation (the Good Friday Agreement, 1998, p. 5). There was a key change made regarding the nomination of the co-premierships in the St Andrews Agreement 2006; the two largest parties 'to nominate not just ministers but also their respective co-premiers without explicitly endorsing the

nominees of the other parties, and thus allowed power sharing where trust was lacking' (McGarry and O'Leary 2009, p. 61-62).

Ministerial appointments to Executive departments are 'allocated to parties on the basis of the d'Hondt system by reference to the number of seats each party has in the Assembly' (the Good Friday Agreement, 1998, p. 7). In other words, parties get the right to nominate Ministers according to their respective strength in seats in the Assembly and get to choose, in order of their strength, their preferred ministries (O'Leary, 1998, p. 1633). McGarry and O'Leary argue that the inclusion in powersharing executives generated by the d'Hondt system increases the likelihood of successful consociations: they submit that it 'can make radicals less extreme because it provides them with opportunities to have their concerns addressed constitutionally'; it reduces 'transaction costs of bargaining over portfolios and promotes stability' through fairness and; it provides an incentive for parties to take up their ministerial entitlements because otherwise they will go to their 'ethnonational rivals or to rivals in their own bloc' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009, p. 60).

Proportionality

The Good Friday Agreement meets the proportionality requirement of consociationalism in three ways: the executive manner; elections to the Assembly and; in public sector positions. Elections to the Assembly are conducted under a proportional representation (PR) system, the single transferable vote (STV), in five (six at the time the Agreement was signed) member constituencies. STV is not Lijphart's preferred voting system, instead advocating a party list system of proportional representation. The reason for this is that Lijphart believes that party list systems 'help make party leaders more powerful and better able to sustain inter-ethnic consociational deals' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, p. 59).

However, McGarry and O'Leary argue that a party list electoral system in a consociation runs the risk of incentivising 'the formation of a wide variety of micro-parties'; they claim that hardliners would have every 'reason to form fresh parties, knowing that their disloyalty will penalise more moderate parties … without necessarily reducing the total vote and seat share of the relevant ethno-national bloc' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, p. 60). While STV does not guarantee party discipline, the higher effective thresholds than

exist under most forms of part-list PR, makes it 'more likely that parties will remain formally unified and therefore able to make and maintain consociational deals' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, p. 60). It is also the case that STV induced moderation within Northern Ireland's political parties because of the incentive to receive transfers, for example, after decommissioning Sinn Féin received an increase in transfers from the SDLP. Proportionality rules do not stop with the executive or the electoral system. The Good Friday Agreement also promotes 'equality of opportunity in both the public and private sectors' (1998, p. 17) and also envisages a representative police force (1998, p. 22-23).

Segmental autonomy

Consociational settlements do not seek to force contending groups to integrate, but instead, they seek to manage differences 'equally, justly, with civility and mutual tolerance' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 198). In line with consociational thinking, the Good Friday Agreement legitimises the two national communities and seeks to promote a form of politics that treats them as fixed, equally valid and autonomous (Taylor, 2006, p. 218). Perhaps most importantly, the Agreement treats both major communities as national communities, that is Irish and British, rather than Catholic and Protestant. O'Leary remarks that the biggest mistake when first trying to solve the Northern Irish conflict was the erroneous belief that stability and peace could be brought to the region while being either British or Irish (1998, p. 1639). Thus, the Good Friday Agreement makes Northern Ireland bi-national.

Veto rights

The fourth consociational principle is the protection of minorities through 'explicit or tacit veto rights' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 200). The Good Friday Agreement fulfils this criterion in the Assembly, in the courts, and through enabling political appeals to both the UK and Irish governments (O'Leary 1998-1999, p. 1639). The Assembly must adhere to cross-community procedures, including parallel consent, weighted majority, and the petition, which 'protects nationalists from unionist dominance and also protects a future unionist minority' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 200). The 'Others' are not as protected because they can be 'out-voted by a simple majority, or by any nationalist and unionist super-majority' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 200) and their numbers in the last Assembly made them unable to initiate the petition of concern. According to O'Leary, this arrangement makes

sense because the 'others' were not central to the conflict and therefore it is unsurprising that they were not at 'the heart of the pacts that brought violence to an end (O'Leary, 2019, p. 200).

Non consociational components

According to O'Leary, (2019, p. 201), 'the complexities of the settlement reached in 1998 are not exhausted by the preceding analysis of its consociational provisions'. Strands two and three of the Good Friday Agreement, focusing on cross-border relations and British-Irish intergovernmental relations respectively, and the additional matters addressed by the Agreement including rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity, decommissioning, security, policing and justice, and prisoners signal a departure from Lijphart's traditional consociationalism. It reflects the argument consistently made by McGarry and O'Leary (1989; 2006; 2009) that consociation, in Lijphart's terms, is not sufficient to stabilise segmented societies; principally because it fails to appreciate the complexity of pluri-national places, the importance of security arrangements in supporting political settlements and the influence of external actors. Hence consociation plus. The additional consociational features are of paramount importance to the Agreement because the British and Irish governments, like McGarry and O'Leary, diagnosed Northern Ireland as a place nationally divided. This diagnosis led to a clear solution that, in order to be adequate, necessitated going beyond a purely internal consociational arrangement by including mutual recognition of 'all national and other identities and institutionalised mechanisms that linked citizens to their preferred nation state' (Mitchell et al., 2009, p. 146) and arrangements that would underpin and support the political settlement.

Strand two: cross-border relations

Strand one reflects Lijphart's classical consociationalism, focusing on the internal arrangements of Northern Ireland. However, as O'Leary (1998-1999, p. 1641) points out, the Good Friday Agreement also has confederal and federal elements to it, that is its inclusion of arrangements promoting cross-border relations and British-Irish intergovernmental relations. Strand two addresses the all-island confederal relationship, creating the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). The NSMC was established to link northern nationalists to their preferred nation state, this was critical in securing nationalist support. It was tasked with managing various areas of cross-border

cooperation, including: agricultural policy, education, health, tourism and transport. Cross-border joint bodies were also set up to collaborate on six policy areas: Trade and Business Development (Intertrade Ireland), Waterways Ireland, Food Safety Body (Safefood), Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, The Language Body, and Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) (Mitchell et al, 2018, p. 284-85).

Strand three: British-Irish intergovernmental relations

Strand three of the Good Friday Agreement addresses British-Irish relations, creating the British-Irish Council (BIC). The BIC met unionists' concerns for 'reciprocity in linkages to preferred nation states' and provided a mechanism through which they could be linked to the UK if Northern Ireland were to join the Republic (O'Leary 2019, p. 210). The BIC also provided a forum for heads of the UK and Irish governments to 'discuss common economic interests with Welsh, Northern Irish, Scottish and Crown Dependencies executive heads' (Mitchell et al, 2018, p. 285).

Rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity

The Good Friday Agreement mandated the establishment of a new Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the incorporation of the Council of Europe's European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)into UK law. Additionally, the Irish government was required to establish a Human Rights Commission and enact equality legislation. (Mitchell, et al, 2018, p. 285).

Security

As a key component of 'consociation plus' the Agreement addressed security issues including the inclusion of decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, de-militarisation (including the removal of security installations (Mitchell et al., 2018, p. 286)), police reform, and prisoner release. The Agreement also pledged to devolve policing and justice issues to Northern Ireland and 'create an Independent Commission to make recommendations about future policing arrangements and review of the criminal justice system' (Mitchell et al, 2018, p. 286). Although McGarry and O'Leary (2006, 2009) stress the important role security arrangements must play in supporting consociational settlements, it is clear in the Agreement that, although there is recognition that these

issues are interlinked, 'they are not explicitly tied to the construction or timing of the political institutions' (O'Leary 1998-1999, p1651).

Bounty of Recognition

Joint authority between the British and Irish governments was not established under the Good Friday Agreement, but there was a 'bounty of recognition': Ireland recognised that Northern Ireland is part of the UK; the UK recognised the right of the people of Ireland to exercise their national self-determination; Ireland recognised unionists' British political identity; the UK recognised Northern nationalists as a national minority (not religious or cultural); unionists recognised nationalists as nationalists (not simply Catholics); nationalists recognised unionists as unionists (not just as Protestants) and; nationalists and unionists recognised others who are neither (O'Leary, 2019, p. 201). The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC), 'the successor to the Anglo-Irish Agreement' (O'Leary, 1998, p. 1649), was established to deal with non-devolved matters and was to be chaired by the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, The BIIGC was tasked with intensifying cooperation between the British and Irish governments on 'all-island or cross-border aspects of rights, justice, prison, and policing', unless and until these matters were devolved to the Northern Ireland executive (O'Leary, 1998, p. 1650).

In order to secure republican support for the Agreement, it was critical that the UK government recognised the self-determination of the people of the island of Ireland. McGarry and O'Leary comment that 'the consociation established by this ratification process is the first to be endorsed in referendums that required concurrent consent in jurisdictions in different states' (2009, p. 33). Furthermore, the principle of consent was key to securing 'ambivalent unionist' support as this reassured them that the status quo of Northern Ireland remaining in the Union would not change unless a majority of people in Northern Ireland expressed this desire. Therefore the Good Friday Agreement provided nationalists and unionists with 'sound reasons for their respective assessments of its merits', namely for 'believing that they are right about the long term future of Northern Ireland' (O'Leary 2019, p. 219). The desire to see their preferred future secured and be proved 'right' about Northern Ireland's future provides strong incentives for nationalists and unionists to work together and cooperate to share power. The Agreement also

includes a double protection model which ensures the same protection of rights on both sides of the border. According to O'Leary, this 'eased the pain for whoever gets it wrong about the future' (O'Leary 1998-1999, p. 1657). Furthermore, the existence of the NSMC, BIC and BIIGC reassures both national communities that they will remain tied to their preferred nation states whatever the future constitutional status of the island of Ireland.

The initial reaction to the Agreement among nationalists and others, North and South, was one of immense relief and elation. The wariness and discord that defined unionists during the negotiations continued after the Agreement was signed. According to O'Leary 'many presumed it was a house of cards, vulnerable to the slightest pressures' (2019, p. 214). An overview of the performance of consociation in Northern Ireland over the past 25 years proves these were valid concerns, both in the immediate years after 1998 and are still valid in the present day. For some, the Good Friday Agreement was a remarkable success, despite its institutional turbulence and its incomplete implementation (notably regarding a Bill of Rights) (O'Leary, 2019, p. 324). However, for others, whether the Good Friday Agreement has nurtured weak and sectarian governing structures or brought about enduring peace is still is still the subject of bitter debate (Nagle, 2018).

Performance of consociation in Northern Ireland since 1998

Consociational performance in Northern Ireland is mixed. It was 2007 before local governance was consolidated in Northern Ireland and the Assembly sat for the first time after a number of false starts. Soon after April 1998, it became clear that the signing of the Good Friday Agreement marked the beginning of a process rather than an end point (Doyle, 2018, p. 10). The 'constructive ambiguity' of the Agreement was the only way to get both nationalists and unionists on board because in theory it allowed both political blocs to concurrently advance their radically opposing ambitions. However, in reality, the practice of constructive ambiguity proved a much more difficult exercise. The years succeeding 1998 were consumed by attempts to tie up the loose ends of some of the more ambiguous aspects of the Agreement including decommissioning, reform of policing, human rights mechanisms, equality and issues relating to the legacy of the past (Doyle, 2018, p. 10).

Consociational instability defined the years between 1998-2007. Nineteen months after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the consociational institutions finally came into being in December 1999. However, they were 'suspended five times, including four times between 2000 and 2002, with the last of these extending from 2002-2007' (McGarry, 2019, p. 543, 545). Critics like Horowitz (2002) and Roche (2003) placed the blame solely on the consociational format of the political institutions. However, this reasoning is flawed because the political institutions, that were largely unchanged, performed well for a decade after 2007. O'Leary (2019, p. 204) argues that the early instability is not reflective of consociational performance, but rather due to the 'British government tilting back in a unionist direction' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009, p. 43) which exacerbated republican intransigence. For example the February 2000 suspension was a unilateral decision by the UK government based on lack of IRA decommissioning and resignation threats from the UUP leader David Trimble.

Between 2007 and 2017 consociational performance in Northern Ireland was broadly a success; it can certainly be considered its most successful phase to date, despite being tempered by 'episodic acts of brinksmanship' (Nagle, 2018, p. 407). By 2007 the British and Irish governments had successfully dealt with outstanding security issues (McGarry, 2019) including police reform, decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and army demilitarisation. Finding resolutions to these security issues had been (unavoidably) postponed during the preceding years, which in turn placed immense strain on powersharing. However when consensus was reached on how and in what order the agreed security provision should be implemented, it created the basis for the more stable, but still turbulent, powersharing that followed (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009). Powersharing resumed in 2007 entering somewhat of a honeymoon era, with the then First and Deputy First Ministers Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness being dubbed the 'Chuckle Brothers. However in 2012 the ambiguous and open ended nature of the Good Friday Agreement came back to haunt the powersharing institutions once again, this time the issue at hand was the legacy of the past. 2012-2013 brought a wave of security concerns and civil unrest characterised by rallies, marches, road blocks and pickets, some of which became violent with the 'burning of vehicles, rioting and stone throwing' (Nolan et al, 2014, p. 9-10). The unrest was triggered by a flag dispute following the Belfast City Council decision to restrict the flying of the Union flag at City Hall to 18

designated days. The Good Friday Agreement did not specifically mention flags, leaving the issues open to contrasting interpretations by both communities. The infamous 'flag dispute' opened a Pandora's box on unresolved issues from the peace settlement, including parades and matters relating to victims and survivors. Consociational performance was badly impacted as political compromise became impossible and relations grew cold. After what became known as the Haass-O'Sullivan talks in 2013 and one further year of negotiations, in December 2014 the five main political parties reached consensus on issues relating to flags, parades, and the past in the form of the Stormont House Agreement (SHA). Implementation of SHA quickly stalled due to issues surrounding austerity and the Welfare Reform Bill, official recognition by the PSNI of the continued existence of the IRA and a number of 'rolling resignations from the Executive by in the DUP' (Nagle, 2018, p. 407). In an attempt to save the powersharing institutions, 10 weeks of multiparty crisis talks took place resulting in the Fresh Start Agreement, which allowed consociationalism to limp on until it was faced with its next set of challenges.

The May 2016 Assembly elections saw the lowest turnout since the Assembly's inception, which O'Leary (2019, p. 294-5) suggests could be seen as evidence of Northern Ireland's normalisation. In terms of consociational performance, this was encouraging; it was impacting Northern Ireland's electorate in a way that was making them apathetic and depoliticised, like many of the 'peaceful, stable and duller European democracies' (Mair, 2013). However, everything changed after June 2016 when the UK voted to leave the European Union, otherwise known as 'Brexit'. Although Northern Ireland voted to remain by 56 to 44 percent, the political parties held 'diametrically opposed' views on the merits of EU membership (O'Leary, 2018, p. 229), a topic that would dominate political, economic and social discourse and divide political parties and citizens for the next seven years. The DUP backed the Leave campaign, the UUP were split on the issue, and Sinn Fein, the SDLP and Alliance backed Remain. The remainder of 2016 saw political relations in Northern Ireland, and among the British and Irish governments, grow fraught. Unionist insecurities were exacerbated by Sinn Fein's call for a border poll on Irish reunification and nationalism's increasingly frequent conversations on a hypothetical united Ireland (Kelly and Tannam, 2022, p. 2). Finally the political strife came to a head after failure to agree on legacy issues and matters relating to the

Irish language and the involvement of the then First Minister and leader of the DUP, Arlene Foster, in a financial scandal known as the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme led the late Martin McGuinness, who was the Deputy First Minister at the time, to resign and bring an end to a decade of unbroken consociation.

Consociation would remain suspended for three years, until a restoration deal was brokered in January 2020 called *New Decade, New Approach*. The deal contained a wide range of policy proposals to appease the competing priorities of the political parties, including language commissioners, steps towards a Bill of Rights, a Brexit subcommittee, and measures to address some of the problematic areas of the system of governance (*New Decade, New Approach,* January 2020). However the road to restoration, and indeed the period in the immediate aftermath, were remarkably arduous due to the fallout from Brexit, which was never to be solved by the agreement reached in January 2020. Brexit and its laborious negotiations exposed tremendous political strife amongst political parties, which came to a head the same month that consociational powersharing was restored, when the Withdrawal Agreement, which included the Northern Ireland protocol, was ratified. The Northern Ireland Protocol addresses the 'Irish dimension' of Brexit, that is the question over the nature of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which remains part of the EU, and Britain, which does not. Initially under the Protocol, Northern Ireland was to remain in the EU customs union and aspects of its single market of which the rest of the United Kingdom was no longer apart (Stojanovic, 2020). However, unionists have consistently argued that this undermines Northern Ireland's constitutional place in the UK (Trimble, 2021).

Eventually in February 2022, a mere 13 months after consociation was restored, the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended once more, with the DUP resigning in protest over the Protocol. One year later, in February 2023, the UK and the EU announced a new Brexit deal for Northern Ireland which aims to reduce the number of checks on goods travelling from Britain to Northern Ireland, lifts previous bans on certain products, and renounces Northern Ireland's adherence to certain EU rules such as those pertaining VAT and alcohol duties. and previous bans on certain products, like sausages, were removed (*Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland,* 27 February 2023). Significantly, the new deal introduces a 'Stormont brake' which allows the Northern Ireland Assembly to object

to new EU rules if 30 or more politicians from two or more parties sign a petition (Edgington, 2023). This iterates a key principle of consociational thinking, namely veto rights, however the argument has been made that this will only serve to exacerbate an already dysfunctional political situation (Tolhurst, 2023). It is unnecessary here to divulge more of the Brexit/protocol saga; it will be returned to in Chapter 7. For now, suffice to say the peaceful cooperation that had been established by consociation has been seriously destabilised in recent years; whether that is a result of Brexit itself, or the Protocol (not the Brexit that was voted for according to Leave supporters) remains subject to heated debate. The point here however, is that the performance of consociation in Northern Ireland is highly affected by external developments including decisions made by foreign governments and supranational political and economic organisations. At the time of writing it is unknown if the proposed reforms to the protocol are sufficient to bring back consociational powersharing. What is known however, to borrow O'Leary's sentiments from previous consociational collapse in Northern Ireland, is that this story, like the general story of consociations, is far from over (2019, p. 571).

Consociational performance in Northern Ireland since 1998 has been mixed in many regards. There are those who argue that the Good Friday Agreement was a great achievement and defend its prescribed structures as simply reflecting the savage realities of a place where ethno-national preference is inextricably linked to political ambitions and exercise and where there is no alternative to powersharing (McCrudden et al, 2014). Others claim consociation has condemned Northern Irish political life to the 'limbo of perennial sectarian stasis' defined by dysfunction and endemic incompetence (Coutler et al, 2021, p. 17). In the last five years, a narrative has developed regarding the sustainability and longevity of the Good Friday Agreement and Northern Ireland's consociational arrangements, with calls for reform coming from various quarters. This narrative has intensified over the last year and will be returned to in Chapter 7.

Research gap

When the Good Friday Agreement was signed in April 1998, the most remarkable feat was that it signalled the end of violence, that peace had been brokered in what was often thought of as an intractable conflict. In 2008, at events marking the 10th anniversary of its signing, politicians and dignitaries continued to laud the achievement of peace as the

Agreement's most important accomplishment, remarking that the "field of slaughter is now a meeting place of mutual understanding" (Bertie Ahern, address to a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress, 30 April 2008). In 2023, for the majority of people in Northern Ireland peace, that is the absence of armed conflict, continues to be a celebrated and cherished feature of life. However given the political crises that have come to define Northern Ireland for the past seven years and the resultant heightened tensions, as the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaches, it is no longer sufficient to simply celebrate the peace brokered in 1998. As O'Leary wrote in 2018/19, the question is now '… whether peace [can] endure and whether other domains of life [can] improve, including the running of political institutions' (O'Leary 2019, p. 307). Based on this statement, as Northern Ireland prepares to mark 25 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, there are three components that are deserving of attention and discussion; the status of peace, the health of the political institutions, and 'other domains of life'. It is this concept, that of 'other domains of life', that inspires this research.

In his book O'Leary continues by addressing the nature of peace and the health of the political institutions in Northern Ireland. He concludes that Northern Ireland has issued in a peace that is the absence of war, where the civilian death toll flowing from violence in and over Northern Ireland has radically diminished, but not justice, harmony, reconciliation, emancipation, integration or transcendence (2019, p. 307). He diagnoses powersharing as viable but fragile, recognising that the political institutions are intermittently operative and that the consociational institutions have been subject to periodic breakdown (2019, p. 307-8). O'Leary does not, however, develop or discuss the concept of 'other domains of life'. This is not unsurprising; as a devoted consociationalist such a discussion was perhaps beyond the remit of his book entitled *Consociation and Confederation*. Yet, that is not to say that it is not a valid and interesting concept worth exploring elsewhere. This study therefore embarks on this endeavour. Using a consociational lens, the research identifies four domains of life significant in the afterlife of violent political conflict, which will be explored through the experiences and perspectives of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. The domains that will be highlighted are cross community relations, economic opportunities, security, and governance. Understanding the relevance of these domains to consociational theory and why members of the Good Friday Agreement generation were chosen as the research

subjects requires detailed explanation. First we will look at the relationship between consociationalism and the Good Friday Agreement generation, before turning to the theoretical relevance of the four identified domains of life.

Consociationalism and the Good Friday Agreement generation

To understand the relevance of the Good Friday Agreement generation to consociationalism, the discussion must be opened up to consider the broader relationship between consociationalism and civil society. It is the case that 'consociationalism is, at its very heart, about powersharing between political elites' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 342), hence why the literature is heavily focused on top level leadership and institutions. However, every so often, although noticeably scant, the literature provides a brief insight into how consociational arrangements should or could impact civil society. It may be primarily an elite based theory, but given that consociationalism also places a high premium on the inclusion of communities and individuals (McGarry, 2019, p. 552), it seems reasonable to contend that the emphasis on, and purpose of, elites cooperating on a cross community basis is to enable them to effectively and appropriately govern society. It has already been stated that consociationalists are sceptical about civil society as a vehicle for peacebuilding and political transformation because in divided places there is often 'more than one society and their relations may be far from civil' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 8). The argument is therefore made that only when well-crafted and inclusive consociational arrangements are in place will civil society begin to thrive and progress.

Exactly how this happens is not obvious in the literature, but some suggestions have been made. Wilford (2009) claims that once mutual trust and confidence is established among the relevant elites it '*certeris paribus* descends to envelop contending communities. In this respect, one may perhaps depict consociationalism as trickle-down politics'. Nagle (2018, p. 410) expresses a similar understanding claiming that, 'the logic of consociational proponents is that the building of trust at the elite level would gradually descend to envelop contending communities, thereby leading to the erosion of ethnic cleavages'. Additional 'side effects' of successful consociation on civil society can be inferred from other contributions in the literature, for example: Nagle (2018, p. 410) talks about the progressive and emancipatory potential of consociationalism; Coakley (2009, p. 145) makes reference to the erosion of difference being a core hope; McGarry (2019)

refers to social transformation as a possible performance indicator; and O'Leary (2019, p. 294) writes that low voter turnout and certain voting trends could be taken as light evidence of the calming, apathy, depoliticization and normalisation 'occasionally attributed to consociations'.

Having expansively explored the literature, this study contends that the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism is a curiously understudied area of research. Most political scientists are embroiled in heated debates that centre on the institutionalisation of consociation, that is, the rules and procedures that govern consociations, their formation and make up, and the necessary structural and historical facilitative factors that help maintain the arrangements and prevent breakdown. There is a gap in the literature linking our theoretical understanding of consociationalism to the practical daily realities and lived experiences of ordinary people on the ground. It is proposed that this is a gap worth exploring in order to expand consociational thinking and its reach. Seeking to investigate the social meaning of consociation for civil society as a whole is too ambitious for this study. Therefore, the study focuses its attention on one specific group, that is members of the Good Friday Agreement generation.

The strongest and most direct link between consociationalism and the Good Friday Agreement generation is that the Good Friday Agreement is broadly considered to be a consociational success and it is implicit in the Agreement that young people are amongst its intended beneficiaries. Granted, the Agreement's ability to create a stable and functioning powersharing executive has been called into question recently, and at the time of writing the powersharing institutions are suspended in animation for the second time in five years. However, as discussed above, between 2007 – 2017 powersharing was a relative success in Northern Ireland for ten consecutive years which was nothing short of an amazing accomplishment. During these years, the Good Friday Agreement generation were growing up and coming of age in a supposedly 'new' post conflict Northern Ireland. By virtue of being born in or after 1998, this generation is unique in that consociational powersharing is the only model by which Northern Ireland has been meaningfully governed in their lifetime. Furthermore, when consociationalists make references to changes that may take place as a result of consociation, they are clear that it will take decades for any change to occur. Therefore as 25 years has passed since the Agreement's

signing, it is both timely and appropriate that its intended beneficiaries are the protagonists of this research.

It is reasonable to suggest that as the 25th anniversary of the Agreement has approached, there has been a heightened interest in the Good Friday Agreement generation. With that being said, a plethora of rich research on children and young people in Northern Ireland both during and after the Troubles has existed for quite some time. The research covers a range of issues including how young people are affected by conflict, growing up on an interface, intergeneration trauma, youth as peacebuilders, and much more. The body of literature pertaining to children and young people in Northern Ireland, involving both qualitative and quantitative research, is substantial and extensive and hence well beyond the scope of this study. However, to cite just a few examples: throughout the 1990s sectarianism amongst children and young people was extensively researched (Bell, 1990; Connolly and Maginn, 1999). In the early noughties research was carried out on teenagers telling sectarian stories (Leonard, 2006) and adolescent's views on religion, ethnicity and group identity (McLaughlin and Muldoon, 2006). More recently in 2014 Browne and Dwyer examined the impact that 'inter community violence', 'residential segregation' and 'exposure to paramilitarism' had on young people 'growing up on the sharp edge of transition'. Young people have also been the focus of many significant quantitative studies carried out by academics such as Professor Shirlow and Professor Tonge at the University of Liverpool, as well as Professor John Garry at Queen's University Belfast, covering wide ranging issues from identity, Brexit and the constitutional future of the island of Ireland. This study hopes to add to this growing body of research by presenting a vivid snapshot of the attitudes and lived experiences of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation living in a society governed by consociationalism.

Consociational thinking in four domains

The exploration of the attitudes and lived experiences of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation takes place within a consociational framework. The four domains of society in which consociationalism's possible influence will be examined – cross community relations, economic opportunities, security and governance – have been extrapolated from the consociational literature. So not only are the four domains relevant to the lives of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, but they are also

directly linked to consociational thinking and values. The domains can be conceptualised in a variety of different ways such as being significant in the afterlife of violent political conflict, incentives behind consociational arrangements, performance indicators of successful consociation, inferred or implied benefits that come from consociation, and part of the promises of the Good Friday Agreement which of course is consociational in nature. Attributing these domains to consociational thought requires thinking about consociationalism in broad terms, as a versatile and multifaceted concept. This is appropriate in this study given that Northern Ireland is described as a complex consociation that is not just about powersharing but involves policies, institutions and constitutional restructuring to address an antagonistic self-determination dispute, incorporates a peace process, contains multiple conflict regulating strategies, and involves external powers in the making, implementation and maintenance of its consociational settlement (O'Leary, 2019, p. 29). Therefore, consociation in Northern Ireland, specifically the Good Friday Agreement, is not rigid or narrow but multi-layered, encompassing consociational and non-consociational components. The four domains will now be discussed in turn outlining their relevance to consociational theory.

Cross-community relations

Cross community relations underpin a lot of consociational thinking. The rationale behind the four classical consociational principles is to enable antagonistic communities to coexist, to allow for cross community relations to exist. But what does it mean to coexist from a consociational perspective? When discussing that critics of consociationalism (specifically Wilford and Wilson in Taylor, 2009) long for a shared society rather than coexistence, it is O'Leary's viewpoint that they are defining peace by near impossible standards that usually involve wholesale transformation of local identities (2019, p. 306). From this it is reasonable to contend therefore that wholesale transformation of local identities is not what consociation aspires to achieve in the context of coexistence and community relations. We know that consociationalists believe that 'certain collective identities especially those based on nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion are generally fairly durable once formed' and rarely thoroughly transformed (O'Leary, 2019, p. 4-5). That is why consociationalists maintain that accommodation and autonomy, rather than transformation and integration, is required to facilitate 'sensible intercommunity cooperation' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 9). As to be expected with

consociational writing, the reference to sensible intercommunity cooperation is made regarding relations at elite level. However, if we apply the trickle down logic, we can reasonably assume that in a consociation cross community relations at civil society level could also be characterised by sensible intercommunity cooperation. Chapter 4 will explore issues related to cross community relations amongst members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, covering issues of identity, intercommunity friendship, and reconciliation.

Economic opportunities

The relationship between consociationalism and economic opportunity is the least obvious of the four domains. It is covered by Lijphart in some detail in his book *Patterns of Democracy* in which he reveals the economic incentive behind consociational government is to forge a link between 'macroeconomic management (such as economic growth and the control of inflation and unemployment) and the control of violence' (2012, Chapter 15). This is particularly relevant to Northern Ireland considering that what sparked the conflict initially was the vast economic inequalities and disadvantages faced by the nationalist community and their status as second class citizens in relation to the allocation of resources such a jobs and houses. A number of influential figures emphasised at the outset that the Northern Irish economy would experience a major upturn if political violence was to cease permanently (Coulter, 2014). On one of his visits to Belfast in 1998, Prime Minister Tony Blair said, "there is a well of economic goodwill and potential inward investment out there just waiting for the right opportunity".

More recently, at events marking the 20th anniversary of the Agreement, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern remarked that progress was about letting people live their lives in a normal way, seeing employment and seeing their cities develop then "you feel that you're getting somewhere" (Ahern, 2018). At the same event, President Bill Clinton commented that for peaceful democracy to work there needs to be "prosperity and growth reasonably distributed" in which everyone has a role to play (Clinton, 2018). The Good Friday Agreement addressed fair employment by endorsing past and future measures to promote it in the public sector (O'Leary, 2019, p. 192) and one of the reasons nationalists endorsed the Agreement was because it promised them economic equality. However, despite there being good reason for consociationalism's economic imperatives, nothing in

the Good Friday Agreement explicitly reinforced the economic ambitions expressed by many. That being said, the economic disparities that were previously a defining characteristic of the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland have almost completely disappeared, although those associated with social class, according to some, have become more pronounced (Coulter et al, 2021, p. 12). Chapter 5 reveals how members of the Good Friday Agreement generation feel about their economic opportunities in Northern Ireland. Issues that are discussed include employment, university and careers, and the 'brain drain', that is, the idea that young people want or plan to (because they feel they have no choice) leave Northern Ireland to work and live elsewhere.

Security

Although not originally included in Lijphart's classic consociationalism, security matters were one of three significant additions in new consociational thinking. Despite critics predicting that consociations could not be negotiated because of violence, consociations have been agreed in violently divided places to stop violence, with some critics now conceding that they have a pacifying effect, especially when 'combined with the proper management of security issues' (McGarry, 2019, p. 552). Therefore improved security can be said to be one of the overriding, if not the overriding, impacts of consociational arrangements. The literature on the security dimension reveals three key points outlining the relationship between consociation and security: the ultimate goals are combatant buy-in and peace, that is, the end of armed conflict; secondly, the majority of the time violence refers to a physical action that is politically motivated (sectarianism is included here); and thirdly that consociations have to be combined with the proper management of security issues for example demilitarisation, disarmament, police and intelligence services reform, and reintegration of former combatants to facilitate consociational maintenance and stability in general.

It has been well established and accepted that since the Good Friday Agreement physical violence in Northern Ireland has declined significantly. According to McGarry (2019, p. 545), 'there was a precipitous decline in violence, particularly inter-ethnic lethal violence, after the Good Friday Agreement to the point today where the current death rate is less than three persons per annum'. It is the case however, that some past modes of violence have persisted into the present mostly due to the fact that the structures of paramilitary

organisations mostly remain intact (Coulter et al, 2021). Dissident republicans and loyalist groupings continue to engage in paramilitary violence, from the murders of Ian Ogle and Lyra McKee, to 'punishment shootings, and arson attacks and street riots'. Other modes of violence, often overshadowed by the preoccupation of ethno-national tensions, have also become a deplorable feature of everyday life in Northern Ireland, such as violence against women, racism and homophobia. Therefore, this research adopts a much broader and nuanced view of security than was perhaps intended by consociational thinkers, including a psychological element, by tapping into the relational dynamics of security on the ground. Chapter 6 explores young people's thoughts on who are the legitimate arbiters of security in communities, questions of respect for authority, how the PSNI and paramilitaries are perceived and reflections on personal safety in public places in Northern Ireland.

Governance

The final domain explored in this research is governance, of which the relationship to consociation is glaringly obvious. Consociation is in essence about governance, it is a political system used to share governmental power proportionally between divided peoples (O'Leary, 2019, *Abbreviations and Glossary*) and executive powersharing is one of Lijphart's original consociational principles. In recent years, due to Brexit, political scandal, and sustained suspensions, Northern Ireland's powersharing institutions have come under immense pressure, to the extent that their very existence faces unprecedented challenges. Chapter 7 looks at young people's attitudes to consociational powersharing in Northern Ireland, including their thoughts on the Good Friday Agreement and the constitutional future of the island of Ireland, all of which have significant ramifications for the future of consociation in Northern Ireland.

Research Question

The relationship between consociationalism and civil society, in particular the Good Friday Agreement generation, has been outlined above, as well as the relevance to consociational theory of the four identified domains of society that will be explored in this study. At this stage it may be helpful, as a point of clarification, to state what this research is not. This research does not seek to make a decisive or definitive assessment of consociation in Northern Ireland; this is not a test of consociationalism. Such ambitions

would require a much more expansive and full-bodied evaluation of consociation beyond experiences of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation and the four domains of life that are central to this research. This research seeks instead to offer an insight into the social meaning of living in a society governed by complex consociationalism, the 'sociology' of consociationalism if you will. Consociationalism provides the theoretical framework used to identify four domains of life which are significant in the afterlife of violent conflict and relevant to the lives of the Good Friday Agreement generation. The intention is to link the theory of consociationalism to the practical lived experience on the ground. The research questions is therefore:

1. What is the possible societal impact of consociationalism, as experienced by members of the Good Friday Agreement generation?

Summary

This chapter has provided a review of the existing consociationalism literature including Lijphart's normative prescription of consociationalism and O'Leary's 'consociation plus'. The genesis of consociations, that is why and what allows them to be formed, including structural and historical factors, were discussed before turning to the heated debates over consociational thinking. Classic complaints were discussed such as the accusation that consociationalism entrenches division and pigeonholes different identities, preventing or at least making it more difficult, for them to assimilate and transform. 'Newer' criticisms were then discussed including the charge made that because of consociationalism's preoccupation with ethno-national identities, women, and other social groups such as migrants and members of the LGBTQ+ community can be left on the periphery of the consociational bargain and as a result are often underrepresented and their concerns are side-lined or disregarded. Throughout the summation of anti-consociational arguments, the rebuttals of its advocates were set out, including O'Leary's overarching contention that all the criticisms cannot be true all at once, and although consociation often includes cold bargains, it is the case that they are better than the alternative of war.

The consociational design of the Good Friday Agreement was then outlined, followed by an overview of consociational performance in Northern Ireland from it the first time the Assembly sat in 1999 to the present day. The chapter then turned its attention to gaps in

the consociational literature and in turn presented the central focus of the research. It is argued that the 'trickle down' politics of consociationalism, that is how it impacts or influences the society which is governs, is an understudied facet of consociational research. In addition to this, it is also proposed that members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, that is young people born just before or just after the signing of the Agreement, are an understudied demographic in Northern Ireland. A brief overview of the existing research on children and young people in Northern Ireland was given, including quantitative studies. Yet, contemporary qualitative research focusing specifically on young people in the age cohort 18-24 is scant, however it is growing as reflections and interests in the experiences and attitudes of the 'peace babies' become more popular. Based on these two observations, the goal of this research is explore the experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation through the lens of consociationalism in order to broaden the conversation around consociationalism to consider its possible impact or influence on people's everyday lives. The chapter identified four domains of society that form the pillars of the research and they derive from a combination of consociational thinking but also their relevance to the lives of young people. They are cross-community relations, economic opportunities, security and governance. The following chapter sets out the philosophical orientation of this research, including the related methodologies employed in order to answer the research question stated above.

Chapter Three

Methodology

In order to illustrate the formulation of the methodological approach of this thesis, this chapter will provide an overview of the philosophical orientation of the research design and outline the specific research methods that were executed. After briefly revisiting the aims, purpose, and research question at the centre of this study, the first section will discuss the conceptual and intangible aspects of the research design, that is, the research paradigm. The research paradigm adopted here is interpretivism. The first section will outline the ontological and epistemological assumptions, aims, procedures and criteria of the interpretivist approach, as well as criticisms that exist in the literature. The second section of this chapter will address the practical components of the research design, that is, the research methods. The research methods refer to the techniques and procedures employed to gather and analyse the necessary qualitative data, including the data collection method, the sample strategy, and the data analysis method. This section will also address methodological limitations of the study, before concluding with a chapter summary.

Restatement of the aims, purpose, and research question

Before outlining the methodological approach of this thesis, revisiting the research question is helpful because it is this question which forms the basis of the research design. More specifically, the research question informs the chosen research paradigm which is the foundation of the study as it describes the set of beliefs the research is built upon and 'sets down the intent, motivation, and expectations for the research' (MacKenzie, Knipe, 2006, p. 2). Furthermore, the research paradigm in turn has implications for decisions made about the research methods, that is, it will influence the way data about the relevant phenomenon is gathered, analysed, and used.

As outlined in the preceding chapter, this research is about young people from the age cohort 18 - 24, who were born in Northern Ireland between 1996 – 2003, that is, just before or after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and their experience of growing up and living in a society governed by consociationalism. The aim of this

research is twofold: the first aim is to better understand the practical outworking of consociational theory, specifically, how it might impact the society which it governs, and the second aim, which is directly linked to the first, is to gain an understanding of how living in a society governed by consociationalism has impacted members of the Good Friday Agreement generation in terms of their socio-political attitudes and lived experiences. In short, the research aims to explore the social meaning of living in a consociational society.

One purpose of this research is to make a unique and comprehensive contribution to the knowledge and understanding of young people belonging to the Good Friday Agreement generation, of which there is an increased interest in and a growing body of literature. Another purpose of this research is linked to the current situation in Northern Ireland, where persistent political instability makes the forming of an Executive seem impossible and consequently the effectiveness of the Good Friday Agreement and the functionality of its structures are coming under earnest scrutiny. The demographic at the centre of this research are the future power holders and decision makers and therefore it is imperative to go beyond intuitive assertions about young people and instead provide empirically grounded evidence of their socio-political attitudes and experiences that may determine, or at least influence, the future of not only the Good Friday Agreement, but also the future of these islands. From the stated aims and purpose of this research, the research question that arises is:

1. What is the possible societal influence of consociationalism, as experienced by members of the Good Friday Agreement generation?

To answer this question, the research is situated in the interpretivist paradigm and subsequently adopts a qualitative approach, namely semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, to collect and analyse the relevant data. The following sections explore the interpretivist paradigm and the complementary qualitative research methods employed and set out why both are appropriate for this research.

Research Paradigm

The term paradigm is defined by Maxwell (2009, p. 22) as a set of 'general philosophical assumptions about the nature of the world (ontology) and how we can understand it

(epistemology)'. Before discussing the ontological and epistemological nature of the interpretivist/social constructivist paradigm from which this research will draw from, it is useful to first expand on what is meant by these viewpoints more generally. Questions of ontology are concerned with 'being', that is, whether or not you believe there is a social reality and what the nature of it is, for example, does reality exist as a single objective thing, or is it different for each social entity? Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with 'knowing', that is, knowledge, specifically how we obtain knowledge and what the limits of this knowledge are, for example, is there such a thing as a perspective-independent fact, or are all "facts" the product of interpretations and assumptions? Below details the historico-philosophical roots of interpretivism, followed by a detailed discussion of the ontological and epistemological assumptions, aims, procedures and criteria of the interpretivist approach, followed by a discussion surrounding the criticisms that exist in the literature.

Interpretivism

Given the very nature of interpretation, it is perhaps unsurprising that 'interpretivism' is neither a precise nor an agreed term. Those who regard themselves as interpretivists often differ on what counts as an interpretation and how one should go about it (Kincaid, 1996, p. 205-10). In short, the meaning of interpretivism is shaped by the intent of the user. In its most simple form, interpretivism is what the name implies; it involves interpreting 'the meanings and actions of actors according to their own subjective frame of reference' (Williams, 2000, p. 210). What is agreed, is that interpretivism can boast strong historico-philosophical lineage. In understanding the social world, the subjective component of human action has been a central consideration since the time of the Greek philosopher Epictetus (*The Encheiridion* [c. 110 A.D.] 1926-28: II, 487, §5) who, in short, proclaimed human beings to be disturbed not by actions but by their 'opinions and fancies' of them. To rephrase, human beings feel a certain way about *x* because of how they view *x*, not because of what *x* objectively is. This theorem is a key tenet of the research paradigm of interpretivism which at its core is concerned with the social world and the subjective and shared meanings that exist within it.

To reference more recent influences than that of Epictetus, interpretivist thinking is also layered with ideas from the intellectual traditions of hermeneutics and *Verstehen.* The origins of hermeneutics and the 'Father' of the philosophy is disputed in the literature, but

it is sufficient for this study to acknowledge that hermeneutics is the 'theory that everything is a matter of interpretation' (Caputo, 2018, p. 3-4) and accordingly, interpretivism is considered a hermeneutic instrument, that is, an instrument for understanding and explanation (van der Walt, 2020, p. 60). Hermeneutics is the theory and interpretivism is the art. The German phrase *verstehen* means to 'understand, perceive, know, and comprehend the nature and significance of a phenomenon' (Elwell, 1996). Therefore, *verstehen* is a subjective process that interpretivists use to construct knowledge by understanding the meaning intended or expressed by people. In other words, knowledge is not a discovered product that exists independent of the knower, but an activity or process in which it is created or constructed.

Interpretivism grew from a desire to distinguish between the social and natural sciences, highlighting their fundamentally different characteristics and functions. Early interpretivists refuted the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences; they claimed 'the goal of the natural sciences was scientific explanation, whereas the goal of the social sciences was the grasping or understanding *(verstehen)* of the 'meaning' of social phenomena' (Schwandt, 1998, p. 223). Max Weber, who is often cited as being the central influence in interpretivist thinking, highlighted the dominance of interpretivism in researching the social world through his 19th century study of Protestant ethics (1904). Weber believed that quantitative practices were not suited to the goal of social science, that they could not attach meaning to the social world and social actions that constitute it. For Weber this endeavour instead required *verstehen* (understanding).

According to Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) interpretivism by its nature advances the 'value of qualitative data in the pursuit of knowledge' and contextual depth (Myers, 1997). Subsequently, the research that informs this study is of a qualitative nature. According to Lofland and Lofland (1995) qualitative methods are appropriate when the research seeks to uncover elements of the social world which may otherwise be concealed if strict and inflexible quantitative methods were to be used. Therefore, given that the focus of this research is young people from the Good Friday Agreement generation and their subjective experiences of living in a society governed by consociationalism, it is argued that applying methods derived from the qualitative tradition, namely one-to-one semi-structured interviews with members of the relevant cohort, is most likely to generate the data required to answer the research question which is at the very heart of this study.

Understanding why it is appropriate to situate the research that informs this study in the interpretivist paradigm requires an exploration of interpretivisms' ontological and epistemological viewpoints. Interpretivism is in essence an epistemological issue given it is primarily concerned with knowledge construction rather than the nature of reality. The epistemological commitment of interpretivism is that knowledge is not natural and objective, but subjective and actively constructed in the minds of individuals. Therefore, knowledge is created not discovered. This epistemological position contrasts directly to that of the positivist paradigm which asserts that knowledge is objective and tangible (Heath and Devine, 1999). The process of interpretation, therefore, can be considered in essence an epistemic task, which in the context of this research, is to understand the social reality of living in a society governed by consociationalism in Northern Ireland through the eyes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation.

Neopositivist critics of interpretivism such as Abel (1948) and Rudner (1966) take issue with *verstehen* and argue it is an epistemological problem; they question how *verstehen* can be used to generate a scientific objective interpretation of human experience given its subjective nature (Schwandt, 1998, p. 226). The argument proposed is that the interpretivist researcher could only hazard a guess as to the meaning of an actor's behaviour and therefore knowledge based on a subjective interpreted guess is error-prone and cannot be proved with certainty. Interpretivists defend the process of *verstehen* by arguing it is less about individual minds and cognitive processes, than it is a matter of recognising and understanding intersubjective meanings and activities that are constitutive of the social world (Schwandt, 1998, p. 226).

Furthermore, in defending their epistemological commitments, interpretivists revert back to the distinction between the natural and social sciences, both in terms of their aims and methods. They argue that human beings are different to physical phenomena and therefore cannot be explored in a similar way. As such, interpretivists do not seek explanation but rather understanding of the meaning of social phenomena. They are therefore concerned with rich and in-depth insights into how people in a specific circumstance experience, conceptualise and perceive this circumstance, rather than attempting to provide conclusive, proven, and germane findings (Myers, 2008; Saunders et al., 2012; Bhattacherjee, 2012). There is an acceptance in interpretivism of

epistemological fallibilism, that is, the principle that assertions based on empirical knowledge can be accepted even though they cannot be proved with certainty (Schwandt, 1998, p. 237). Epistemological fallibilism is not considered problematic *per se* because the activity of interpretation is not simply a methodological option for the social scientist to choose, but rather the very condition of human inquiry itself (Rainbow and William, 1987, p. 20). Furthermore, on the point of epistemological fallibilism, Strike (1987, p. 483) claims that this is uninteresting because no one, beyond a few 'aberrant behaviourists', denies that knowledge is created and therefore error prone.

In their defence of *verstehen* as the process by which we interpret the everyday world, interpretivists reject the separation of the researcher and the researched (Barrett, 2009, p. 168, 179), which also speaks to the distinction made by interpretivists between the natural and social sciences. Not only does the researcher play an active role in the study by interpreting the views expressed by participants, in this case the views of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation about living in a society governed by consociationalism, but the interpretivist also recognises the that the research is not shielded from their own assumptions and experiences. Interpretivism assumes that the researcher is part of the research on two counts. Firstly, the researcher may interact with participants when collecting the data to, for example, clarify meanings that may be concealed or implicit, and in doing so the researcher (unintentionally) may project their own values and beliefs onto the participants. Secondly, the researcher interprets the data which is influenced by their own unique constructions and observation of the world around them. As Thanh and Thanh put it, the researcher listens to many voices: first are the voices of the research participants, second is the researcher's own voice as describer, analyst, and interpreter, and third are those of the readers of the final report (2015, p. 24). Barrett explains that the interpretivist researcher does not see the readers as passive but active in creating their own unique interpretation of the text (2009, p. 155-56). The role of the researcher in interpretivism has been used to critique the paradigm, particularly in the context of bias and the generalisability of the research produced. Both lines of criticism will be addressed in more detail below.

Given interpretivism's concern with how knowledge is constructed and understood, arguably it does not have an inherent ontological perspective. However, most advocates do take an ontological stance on the basis that ontology and epistemology are intertwined

because to develop an ontological viewpoint on the nature of reality, knowledge is essential (Göran, 2012). Interpretivists that take such a stance are dependent on the constructivist paradigm, which is acknowledged by some to be a similar notion to interpretivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 143), and by others to be a variant of it (Butler, 1998). Interpretivists and constructivists place individuals at the centre of their enquiry as they base their knowledge of the social world on the experiences of the individuals who live in it. They share the epistemological belief that knowledge is constructed by human beings and that these constructions are continually tested and modified in light of new experiences (Schwandt, 1998, p. 236). Accordingly, interpretivists and constructivists are focused on the processes by which this happens.

The constructivist ontology, which is adopted by some interpretivists, claims that elements of the social world are not 'given', that they are created and re-created through the actions and interactions of individuals (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 4). When adopted by interpretivism, the interpretivist ontology then becomes the belief that, 'reality is perceived through intersubjectivity through consideration of meanings as well as understandings of social and experiential aspects' (Saunders *et al*., 2012). This view of the nature of social reality is in stark contrast to those who support empiricist social science frameworks that make use of social facts thought to be brute data, which are identifiable and verifiable and therefore not subject to interpretation (Schwandt, 1998, p. 225).

It is important to note, however, that not every interpretivist subscribes to a specific ontology. That is not to say that they deny the existence of an ontological reality but argue that we cannot in any sense know a 'real' world, that is, a world that stands apart from our experience of it. Therefore, according to this understanding the ontological nature of interpretivism is that reality is unknowable. Von Glaserfeld (1991, p. 17) offers this succinct explanation, 'I claim that we cannot even imagine what … 'to exist' might mean in an ontological context, because we cannot conceive of 'being' without the notions of space and time, and these notions are among the first of our conceptual constructs'. In other words, if reality is the result of a social process that is constructed in the minds of individuals and therefore relative and subjective to them, then it seems unwise, if not erroneous, to commit to an ontology from an interpretivist perspective. The scholar Goodman (1984) echoes this assertion, arguing that ontology is evanescent, that it

is melting away or diminishing. Goodman argues that we create many versions of the world in the sciences, the arts, and the humanities, and therefore the process of interpretive or constructivist inquiry is not about the ready-made world, but the 'remaking' of the worlds already on hand.

One problem that arises for interpretivism from the epistemological and ontological viewpoints described above, is the status of facts and how to account for the 'fact' of knowledge, for example, if knowledge is specific to each individual, how can knowledge be shared and agreed upon? There are two schools of thought within interpretivism regarding the status of facts. The first claims that nothing can be considered 'fact of the matter' (Caputo, 2018, p. 3; Blackburn, 2009, p. 24). Every 'fact' is the result of interpretations and assumptions, and not only will different individuals have different interpretations and assumptions about the same thing, but the same individuals may also make different interpretations and assumptions about the same thing at a different time. The second group of interpretivists agree with the first that there are no raw or natural facts, however they maintain that facts do exist. They argue that 'the status of a fact depends on the validity' of the interpretations that produced it (van der Walt, 2020, p. 62). If there is no consensus about a statement that is presented as a fact Baggini maintains, 'we should accept that we have insufficient grounds to insist on the truth of one conclusion and so do what we can to accommodate reasonable different ones, even if we believe only one of them to be the sole truth' (2017, p. 217). Where there is common consensus at a given time about a statement that is presented as a fact, the fact holds as a 'matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Illustrating the close association between interpretivism and constructivism, this school of thought emphasises the *social* construction of a fact in an attempt to counter what some say is irreconcilable with the interpretivist paradigm.

Given the aim of this research is to understand and make sense of the lived experience of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, this study has adopted several interpretivist and social constructivist qualities. It should be noted that for the purpose of this research, rigid distinctions between interpretivism and social constructivism are deemed unhelpful and as such for the remainder of the thesis this dichotomous thinking is rejected on pragmatic grounds. Interpretivism has been applied in this study as a tool for exploring how consociationalism has impacted the lives of members of the Good Friday

Agreement generation. The aim of this study is not to reach a definitive and objective conclusion, but to understand the social meaning of the subjective lived experiences of members of the 18-24 age cohort. Many contributions that were relevant to the research question were accumulated through semi structured personal interviews in order to gain in-depth insight into the extent to which young adults can be considered beneficiaries of consociationalism.

The interpretivist phase of the study can be considered in two parts, or as 'two-directional activity' as Van Huyssteen (2006) put it. The first part, 'all the way up', is central to the interpretivist approach as it involves extracting meaning from the data collected in order to construct new knowledge. In other words, I use the interpretive experience to construct my understanding of the gathered data, that is, the semi-structured personal interviews (Thanh and Thanh, 2015, p. 24). My perception of this data and the meanings contained therein are subjective constructions, rather than expressions of an objective world. The second part, 'all the way down' (Caputo, 2018, p. 5), involves the termination of the interpretive process and concludes in what Van Huyssteen (2006, p. 460) refers to as the researchers 'last stand' or simply put, their findings. The 'downwards' interpretive process sees the researcher making judgement calls on the authenticity and acceptability of statements presented as facts. Although I try to include as many views and statements presented as facts as possible, this accommodation could not continue infinitely as it could result in what Baggini refers to as an 'anything-goes, laissez-faire relativism' (2017, p. 73, 217). Therefore, in order to ensure the end of the interpretive process I considered the relevance of every 'fact' and view presented in the data, in order to ascertain what to include and what to omit. As van der Walt (2020, p. 63) suggests, I asked myself: 'What piece of evidence provides the bedrock for this study, and why should this be so?'

It is clear from detailing how this research will apply the interpretivist approach that behind my interpretation of the data lies another interpretation (belonging to the participants). In other words, I am interpreting and understanding what are already in themselves interpretations. Therefore, this research cannot produce raw, uninterpreted facts of the matter about how consociationalism has impacted members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, but it will provide in-depth insight and knowledge that will help us better understand this demographic. It may even be the case that my subjective

constructions of knowledge are subject to alternative claims by scholars following different approaches. In this instance I wish to make clear that I do not consider myself a distinguished or final arbiter of understanding the lived experiences of the Good Friday Agreement generation. This research offers a snapshot of a moment in time that I hope will contribute to the wider field of social enquiry, and in particular to those enquiries related to contemporary Northern Ireland.

Qualitative paradigm and reflexive thematic analysis

Part two of this chapter focuses on the practicalities of the research process and explains the choices made regarding specific techniques and procedures, as well as ethical issues dealt with throughout the study. The philosophical orientation and interpretivist commitments that underpin this study necessitate the use of qualitative methods of data generation and data analysis to answer the research questions at the heart of the inquiry. In its purest form, qualitative research methods rely on the collection of non-numerical data such as the spoken word, text, and visuals, and are concerned with the interpretation of social phenomena, entities, or events (Lamont, 2021). Beyond this basic understanding, Mason (2018, *Preface*) submits that a definition of qualitative research is in fact unnecessary because of what they state to be the existing 'plethora of inventive and empathetic research approaches to getting to grips with how life is experienced and why and how things matter'. Arguably the subjective nature of qualitative approaches, and the diversity amongst not only qualitative researchers themselves but also the phenomena that intrigues them, permits some resistance to a detailed and settled definition. In some quarters the need for a rigid definition of qualitative methods is being replaced by an enthusiasm for unique and creative qualitative imagination. According to Mason (2018) there is '… an increasing interest in embracing the creative energy and expanding the kinds of sensibilities we use to understand the world beyond those that are measured against the yardstick of a staid version of the scientific method'. Perhaps this rings even truer now, given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on qualitative research in general.

A degree of knowingness about the paradigmatic and theoretical assumptions that inform this study is important because these assumptions guide every decision throughout the research process. In other words, the practical side of research is always paradigmatically and theoretically informed. So far it has been established that this research falls into the

qualitative paradigm and is informed by ontological assumptions of relativism and epistemological assumptions of interpretivism. Thinking about these assumptions in a practical sense, and the research method that would not only be compatible with these assumptions, but that would also be most suited to answering the research questions at the centre of this study, led to adopting a thematic analysis approach, specifically reflexive thematic analysis as spearheaded by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013; 2016; 2019; 2020; 2021). At the most basic and broad level, thematic analysis is about finding patterns of meaning in things. Problematically, it is often discussed as a homogenous singular method in methodology literature, which fails to recognise the plurality that exists within thematic analysis methods and the complexities and nuances therein. Braun and Clarke (2019) identify 3 main schools of thematic analysis that rely on different conceptualisations of qualitative research, that is, they are guided by different philosophies and techniques. A brief discussion of each is helpful in demonstrating why *reflexive* thematic analysis is consistent with the paradigmatic and theoretical assumptions and values of this research.

The first type of thematic analysis to be considered is coding reliability, often used in data saturation experiments, which relies on qualitative techniques and has an underlying positivist philosophy, meaning it is concerned with values typically associated with quantitative research such as reliability, replicability, and objective observations. In this approach themes are analytic inputs, that is, they are developed before the analytic process and are conceptualised as domain summaries (Braun and Clarke, 2018; 2019), meaning that the researcher identifies an area or domain of the data, often reflective of the data collection questions, and labels it as a theme. Codes, which are predetermined and fixed, are then used to identify the material from the dataset that is relevant to each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2019: p. 594). The result, according to Braun and Clarke (2018; 2019) is an overview of statements, a summary of what participants said in relation to each domain, reported as a theme, with no concept or central idea that unifies these observations. The second type of thematic analysis that requires consideration is codebook thematic analysis, which is often used in applied research to solve practical problems. This approach is qualitative in both its techniques and philosophy; however, it too employs a structed coding process in which codes and themes are predetermined before analysis and then applied to the entire dataset. A key difference here between coding reliability and codebook thematic analysis is that the latter does allow for some

degree of flexibility and fluidity in that themes can shift, change, and develop throughout the coding process. Despite this difference, Braun and Clarke (2018; 2019) argue that both coding reliability and codebook thematic analysis are too structured and constrained, and consequently both offer an 'impoverished' version of what qualitative research can be.

To capture what Braun and Clarke consider to be truly rich and unique about qualitative research, they developed a reflexive approach to thematic analysis that is qualitative in both its philosophy and techniques. Reflexive thematic analysis does not prioritise procedure and rigid concrete rules; it is recursive, messy, explorative, interpretive, and interrogative (Braun and Clarke, 2018; 2021) and as such it emphasises, even promotes, the subjectivity and reflexivity of the researcher in an open-ended, organic, and complex research process. When thinking about thematic analysis in this way, the conceptualisation of codes, themes and meaning significantly differ from that of the previous two types. In reflexive thematic analysis coding is fluid and flexible, they can and should evolve and change over multiple recursive coding sweeps. This reflects the researcher's active involvement in interpreting the data and knowledge production through their own lens which is replete with their own cultural membership, social positionings, theoretical and ideological assumptions, as well as their scholarly knowledge (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This immersive process serves to deepen the researcher's engagement with, and understanding of, the data. Therefore, the quality of coding is not demonstrated by objective agreement, but by depth of engagement and interpretation.

In reflexive thematic analysis the coding process is integral to theme development in the sense that themes are generated through coding (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 5). Before discussing the conceptualisation of themes in reflexive thematic analysis, a note on language is important here. Braun and Clarke are steadfast in their position that themes do not *emerge* from the data, they are not pre-made waiting to be discovered, but rather they are actively *generated* or *developed* through the researcher's interpretative engagement with the data (2012; 2013; 2020). Themes are therefore 'analytic outputs', they are developed from coding and are the result of in-depth, insightful, interpretive, and interrogative analysis that goes beyond domain summaries. 'Fully realised themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2019) are abstract and they get to the underlying and implicit

explanations, assumptions, and ideas that enable the surface level meaning captured by domain summaries to make sense. This is done by bringing together data from multiple contexts that at first might seem disparate, but that offer 'patterns of shared meaning,' underpinned by a 'central concept or idea' that unifies the theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2020). In other words, each fully realised theme will tell a 'compelling, coherent, and useful story in relation to the research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012).

In terms of the practical execution of reflexive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) offer six phases that are not to be thought of as strict procedural steps, but as facilitating access to the necessary tools that will enable good reflexive thematic analysis. They are familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing potential themes, naming and defining themes and producing the report. Utilising these six phases, combined with knowingly implementing the assumptions and values that underpin this study, led to certain procedural choices throughout the research process relating to the dataset, data generation, and of course data analysis. Before discussing each of these in turn, an additional note on language is important. The language adopted in outlining the research process and procedures of this study are in line with that proposed by Braun and Clarke throughout their writings on reflexive thematic analysis. Firstly, they do not use the word 'sample' because of what they claim is its inherent link to the notion of sampling from a population for the purposes of statistical generalisability. Therefore, 'dataset' replaces 'sample'. Secondly, data is not 'collected' because this implies that researchers gather already existing data, which is inconsistent with the reflexive thematic analysis point of view position that it is the researcher that creates the data and interprets it. Therefore, 'data collection' is replaced by 'data generation'.

Conducting qualitative research during the Covid-19 pandemic

Before setting out the research process in detail, it would be remiss not to acknowledge at this stage the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on this research. In 1995 Lofland and Lofland wrote about the ever-evolving and emergent nature of fieldwork and how this leads to dilemmas and changes to the research experience, which in turn necessitates flexibility on behalf of the researcher. Although they were not talking about executing qualitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic, their sentiments may resonate with qualitative researchers and their experiences over the last two years. Every aspect of

human life was impacted by the pandemic, and research methods was no exception. Humanity has faced pandemics before, but the nature of Covid-19 and the laws and regulations implemented on a global scale to mitigate the spread of the virus were unprecedented.

The proposed start date for in-person qualitative data generation for this research was March 2020, which also marked the declaration of the global pandemic and the beginning of what would be multiple and severe national lockdowns. The Government of Ireland's restrictions on social distancing and the civic duty and legal requirement to stay at home, required methodological reflection and adaption to allow for remote data generation in order to prevent research stagnation as much as possible, while also ensuring the safety of those involved. Therefore, the nature of the qualitative data generation pivoted from an in-person method to a virtual "socially distant" method, namely online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams which were simultaneously audio recorded using an inbuilt feature and saved for the purposes of transcribing.

Compiling the dataset

At its core, compiling a dataset involves selecting from and representing a 'population' to create data that is relevant to the research questions. In other words, the sources chosen for the dataset must be 'suitably generative of the kind of knowledge you want to develop' (Mason, 2018, p. 54). The need for a dataset in this study, and in most qualitative studies in general, is twofold. The first is for the practical reason that it would be impossible to interview every young person in Northern Ireland. The second reason for a dataset relates to issues of focus and quality; specifically in this study, targeting young people in the age cohort 18-24 will help produce a more nuanced and in-depth piece of research about the Good Friday Agreement generation, rather than focusing more generally on young people in Northern Ireland. The following section outlines the sources of the dataset used in this research, the compilation strategy, and reflections on issues of dataset size, representation, and saturation.

A dataset that would enable the generation of rich codes, themes and meanings needed to address the research questions required individual young people, more specifically, young people born between 1996/1997 - 2002/2003. Given the birth years, these young people have been culturally labelled as the Good Friday Agreement generation, and at the time of

this study they ranged between the ages 18-24. The data generation technique used in the research was a combination of purposive 'sampling' and snowball 'sampling'. Purposive sampling, in its most basic form, entails targeting people based on their relevance to the research questions (Mason, 2018, p. 59). It therefore involves a manipulation of the dataset which depends on the subjective judgement of the researcher. In this study, two characteristics deemed individuals to be relevant; the first was belonging to the age cohort 18-24; and the second was having the experience of living in and growing up in Northern Ireland. Snowball sampling was also used, that is, participant referrals led to the recruitment of new participants. This strategy was particularly helpful in gaining access to disengaged young people often considered 'hard-to-reach', such as young male and female loyalists. Both strategies allowed for dataset reviews and modifications to take place throughout the study, for example, stocktaking exercises were undertaken at the end of every week and when the dataset or analysis appeared to be one-sided or one directional, certain types of individuals were deliberately targeted. In practical terms, initial participant recruitment took place online, mainly via social media. This was appropriate not only because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because of young people's presence on social media platforms. In this context, Twitter was the most useful social media platform, and potential participants were targeted based on their active online discussions about topics that were relevant to this research. Furthermore, extensive research was carried out to identify youth wings of all political parties, as well as grassroots youth organisations, and each were contacted via the email address that was displayed on their respective websites. Young people who expressed an interest in, or a willingness to, take part in the research were sent the 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Consent Form' (see Appendix). Prospective participants were encouraged to ask questions about the research based on the information sheet, and completed consent forms from all of those who decided to participate were received before interviews took place.

Determining the dataset size in this study was a pragmatic exercise 'shaped and constrained by time and resources available' (Braun and Clarke, 2019); it consisted of 27 young people, which was smaller than originally intended, mostly due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the problem of non-response. The majority of those who did reply to the recruitment email but chose not to participate (7.8%), cited pandemic related stress and preoccupation with other priorities given the changes to daily life and routine necessitated by the national lockdowns. The problem of non-response was felt too, with 19 out of 51

(37%) recruitment emails going unanswered. Perhaps this high rate of non-response could also be attributed to the pandemic and people's priorities being somewhere other than participating in research, however this can never be fully known. The advantage of the final dataset size was that it allowed for longer and more in-depth discussions with those who did participate, with interviews lasting between 45 – 75 minutes each. Table 1 illustrates the aggregate dataset used in this study and Table 2 provides background details of each participant included in the dataset. To anonymise the data and protect confidentiality, straightforward unique identifiers were applied to each participant for referencing purposes (Archibald et al., 2019), for example, *interview 1, interview 2, interview 3,* and so on.

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	Tally
Male	12
Female	15
Irish	14
British	7
Northern Irish	5
Non-aligned	1
Nationalist	8
Republican	3
Unionist	5
Loyalist	4
Other/Non-aligned	6
Catholic	7
Protestant	8
Atheist	10
Other (Christian)	2

Table 1

Interview number	**Gender**	**Age**	**Religion**	**Nationality**	**Political position**	**Region**
1	Male	23	Atheist	Non-aligned	Socialist	Strabane
2	Female	23	Catholic	Irish	Republican	Derry
3	Female	22	Atheist	Irish	Non-aligned	Derry
4	Male	24	Atheist	British	Unionist	Newtownards
5	Male	22	Protestant	Northern Irish	Unionist	Omagh
6	Female	23	Atheist	Irish	Non-aligned	Derry

7	Female	18	Christian	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
8	Female	24	Atheist	Irish	Republican	Strabane
9	Female	24	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
10	Female	18	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
11	Female	18	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
12	Female	19	Protestant	British	Loyalist	Portadown
13	Male	20	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
14	Male	20	Christian	British	Loyalist	East Belfast
15	Female	24	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
16	Female	18	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Eglinton
17	Female	18	Atheist	Irish	Non-aligned	Downpatrick
18	Male	18	Atheist	Irish	Republican	South Armagh
19	Male	18	Protestant	Northern Irish	Unionist	South Belfast
20	Male	19	Atheist	Northern Irish	Non-aligned	East Belfast
21	Male	22	Protestant	British	Unionist	Ballymoney
22	Female	19	Atheist	British	Non-aligned	Londonderry
23	Male	20	Protestant	Northern Irish	Unionist	Londonderry
24	Female	20	Atheist	Northern Irish	Loyalist	Londonderry
25	Male	21	Catholic	Irish	Nationalist	Derry
26	Male	22	Protestant	British	Unionist	Coleraine
27	Female	24	Atheist	British	Loyalist	East Belfast

Table 2

Thinking about dataset size provokes reflections on representation and the concept of data saturation, both of which are explicitly linked to desires for reliability and validity. Data saturation was defined broadly by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as ‘information redundancy’ and is largely accepted to signify the point at which there will be no new theoretical insights indicating that ‘the researcher has reached a sufficient or adequate’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019) level of understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The saturation concept has become normalised as implicit evidence of good practice for qualitative researching and is often used to determine what is an appropriate dataset size (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 203). However, data saturation is not an ‘atheoretical research tool’ that can be applied to any qualitative research design (Braun and Clarke, 2019); its underlying assumptions and research values are consistent with neo-positivist, discovery orientated, coding reliability types of thematic analysis where codes and themes are fixed ‘entities that pre-exist analysis’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019). It is suited to research that follows a structured approach, focusing on surface level concerns and obvious meaning, where the participants are relatively homogenous and recruited from familiar settings (2020, p. 206). This is inconsistent with the assumptions and values of reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke interrogate the relevance and appropriateness of the saturation concept to reflexive thematic analysis on this basis, arguing that ‘meaning is generated through interpretation, not excavated from data, and

therefore judgements about how many data items … are situational and subjective' (2020, p. 201). Both scholars refer to the concern with data saturation as a 'lingering presence of positivism' that produces unnecessary (and false) anxiety around dataset size; that big or probabilistic is best, and if neither then data saturation is the goal (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 210-11).

The position adopted in this research is that data saturation, as a means of determining if the size of the dataset is sufficient, is unhelpful and problematic. It is not compatible with the values and assumptions embedded in this research including the existence of multiple realities in which knowledge construction is never complete and where researcher subjectivity and reflexivity is emphasised rather than problematised. According to Braun and Clarke (2020, p. 2010), conceptualising research as a 'situated, reflexive, and theoretically embedded practice of knowledge generation … rather than discovery [means] there is always the potential for new understandings or insights'. In the context of this research then, data saturation is a logical fallacy. Therefore, in conjunction with practical constraints, the size of the dataset in this research was considered sufficient based on the breadth and focus of the research questions, the diversity within the participant group both in terms of identity and experiences and perspectives, and the potentiality of the dataset to facilitate adequate data generation to tell a rich, complex, and multifaceted story related to consociationalism and the Good Friday Agreement generation.

Since the Good Friday Agreement generation are not a homogenous group, the representativeness of the dataset is perhaps more relevant than data saturation, although arguably still not the most appropriate indicator of the quality of this research. Claiming a truly representative dataset would require a dataset that included every major attribute of the entire GFA generation in roughly the proportion and frequency with which those attributes occur in that larger population (Rich et al, 2018, p. 123). From a practical point, this was unrealistic. From a paradigmatic and theoretical point, this was unnecessary. The purpose of the dataset was not to be proportionally representative but to be '… generative of insight, or of understandings, that [are] likely to be vivid, potent or distinctive elements in the character of the phenomena you seek to understand' (Mason, 2018, p. 61). Therefore, the six classifying labels identified in Table 2 were chosen not for reasons of representativeness, but because they were deemed potentially meaningful in the

construction of nuanced knowledge during the analysis stage of the research. For example, in answering the research questions relating to community relations and the PSNI, it is a matter of great significance what community participants come from and what nationality they identify with. Prioritising a representative dataset was not going to advance the analytic goal of this research, which was to tell a relevant and rich story in relation to the research topic, not to give a complete, final, and absolute picture about it.

Data generation

When considering alternate fieldwork sites for this research, going virtual, that is the use of communication technologies such as videoconferencing, was deemed to be the most appropriate on three counts: firstly, it was going to enable me to generate the data needed to answer the research questions; secondly, it worked for members of the target age cohort 18-24 who were familiar with online communication both before but particularly since the pandemic; and thirdly, it worked for me as the researcher as I felt after familiarising myself with the technology, I would be able to conduct virtual interviews in a professional and engaging manner. The online interviews were carried out using Microsoft Teams, in accordance with TCD requirements. Microsoft Teams offers all the practical features required by this study, namely, video calls, file storage, and notes. Perhaps most importantly, Microsoft Teams has significant security settings, including host controls, invitation arrangements protected by passwords, and the option 'to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software' (Archibald et al., 2019). The platform can also be said to be accessible across many devices and operating systems, user friendly with participants able to join meetings with ease, and capable of performing in low-bandwidth situations (Marhefka et al., 2020, p. 1985).

In most of the recent literature, conducting qualitative research virtually has been presented as a pragmatic and adaptive response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Roberts et al, 2021; Newman et al, 2021; Lobe et al, 2020). While this is a fair observation, it has been accompanied by questionable undertones framing the digitalisation of qualitative research as a methodological compromise. The present position not only refutes this claim but argues that virtual qualitative research methods present unique advantages to the qualitative researcher and participant that outweigh any perceived compromise. Firstly, conducting interviews over Microsoft Teams allows for real-time interaction and synchronous exchange involving sound and video which enables the researcher and

interviewee to transmit and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues (Archibald et al, 2019, p. 2). It is this emulation of natural conversation and the replication of the in-person interview that supports the methodological legitimacy of virtual interviewing.

Secondly, virtual data generation presents advantages in terms of convenience, cost, and efficiency. Take this study for example, without using online methods, the data generation process would have entailed travelling to various locations in Northern Ireland, which would not only have been time consuming, but also expensive given the increased cost of fuel, not to mention it would have left a considerable carbon footprint. For participants, online interviewing may be more attractive because they can take part from the comfort of their own home (or a location of their choosing) and at no additional cost. The reliance on transport is significantly decreased, if not absent, by going online, and there is greater flexibility in choosing a preferred time for the interview because not having to travel means being able to fit interviews into tighter schedule gaps or working hours. It was also less disruptive when participants rescheduled because time had not been wasted travelling to an agreed location.

Having to pivot to online data generation did not require changing the datatype, that is, in-depth semi-structured interviews. There are multiple reasons why the semi structured interview was deemed appropriate for this research. The first reason relates to the ontological and epistemological viewpoints adopted; that people's views, understandings, and experiences make up social reality and, given that knowledge is socially constructed, a meaningful way to generate data about these properties is to interact with people and gain access to their world. It is the belief that these interactions produce socially constructed knowledge by allowing for depth, roundness, nuance, complexity, and discordance (Mason, 2018, p. 114), in a way that quantitative data does not, which upholds the decision to use semi-structured interviews in this research.

Specifically, using *semi-structured* interviews gives participants more freedom and control and as such is more likely to generate a fairer and fuller representation of their perspectives. As the target participants were aged between 18-24, the preference was to conduct the data generation in an informal conversational style, mimicking Burgee's sentiments of 'conversations with a purpose' (1984, p. 102). Arguably this would have been made more difficult with a structured interview approach. Some qualitative

researchers favour structured interviews with standardised questions as a means of reaching data saturation and minimising bias; however, thinking qualitatively from the ontological and epistemological position of this research, it is beneficial to engage with the complexities of social interaction, including bias, rather than to control it. The interpretivist understanding employed in this study does not demand one unequivocal unbiased truth, but rather a plurality of perspectives that will strengthen the richness of the interview research. From a reflexive thematic analysis point of view, Braun and Clarke (2013; 2020) submit that quality interview data is 'messy' and best 'produced in a context where the interviewer is responsive to the participant's developing account, rather than adhering strictly to a pre-determined interview guide'.

All 27 interviews for this study took place online between November 2021 and February 2022, lasting between 45-75 minutes each. There were four key topics to cover, and each topic had between four and six guiding questions rather than following a sequenced script. The interview questions were deliberately constructed to bring into focus lived experiences and perspectives relevant to the research questions and each participant received a copy of the topics and guiding questions prior to the interview. In some ways, each interview was tailor made on the spot because the dynamics of each interaction differed as cues were taken from the ongoing dialogue about what to ask next, rather than sticking to a pre-made script. This required a high level of intellectual and social skills, as well as a degree of flexibility and spontaneity. The challenge was to strike a balance between allowing participants to speak about what was relevant and important to them, while also efficiently extracting the insights that would yield relevant data. The key aim was to maximise the interviews' ability to produce contextual, situational, and interactional knowledge (Mason, 2018, p. 111) about participants' experiences and perspectives.

As well as unique ethical considerations (discussed below), conducting semi structured interviews online rather than in-person required additional practical preparation and arrangements. A contingency plan to overcome technological issues was established beforehand, for example, when faced with delayed, frozen, or bad connectivity issues such as bad audio or video quality, a five-minute grace period was given before reaching out to the participant involved to try and re-establish the connection. This only happened a handful of times, and each time the interview restarted without issue or major

disruption. Using Microsoft Teams with the cameras switched on required a neutral background to limit distraction or inadvertently offending participants and accordingly all private information or information that could be interpreted as controversial was removed.

In going virtual, extra consideration was given to how to build rapport and minimise awkwardness, as typically this has been thought to be best achieved by placing the researcher and the participants as close as possible (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Arguably, however, rapport is not just about physicality. Building good rapport with participants starts by being transparent with them and disclosing truthful and accurate information about the research and their rights during participation. Rapport is also about feeling connected and comfortable, which was fostered here by having informal and impromptu interactions with participants before the interview started, helping to promote a sense of familiarisation and 'bonding', as well as maintaining eye contact and displaying open and relaxed body language. Ultimately, the fact that this research was conducted in the unique context of a global pandemic, where participants had become reliant on communicative technologies for work, education, and socialising, building rapport virtually was an organic and natural part of the interview process.

Six phases in reflexive thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke first set out there six phases of their version of thematic analysis in 2006, and again in 2019 when they refined their approach and emphasised the importance of reflexivity, hence reflexive thematic analysis. In both pieces of work Braun and Clarke have been resolute in their stance that reflexive thematic analysis is not a codified practice, and that theoretical sensitivity, reflexivity, contextuality and fluidity are the crucial components of their approach, rather than rigid and concrete procedural rules. The analytic process of this research was guided by Braun and Clarke's six phases and their practical implementation will be discussed below.

Once interviews were complete, they were manually transcribed verbatim into electronic folders, aided by the audio recordings, and automated transcriptions provided by Microsoft Teams. After completion, there were over 250 pages of interview transcripts. The first phase of the analytic process involved becoming immersed in the data in its entirety, what Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) call 'familiarisation'. This phase was more

than passive reading, but actively reading the data line by line and annotating each data item with initial thoughts, ideas, and observations on what the participant has given, what is of interest and what leaps out. Each data unit was read twice which was time consuming but necessary in order to start the process of unpacking the data.

The second phase was coding the data, which was the first systematic part of the data analysis process and the initial interpretation of the data. Here codes were thought of as analytic entities, that is, labels that capture something interesting about the data that will later form the building blocks of themes. In the first coding sweep, codes were semantic in nature capturing obvious or surface level observations, examples include: fear of the other; desire to leave Northern Ireland; feelings of suspicion towards the PSNI; and lack of trust in MLAs. The subsequent coding sweeps saw more latent codes develop, the focus of which was to capture ideas and assumptions that were implicit in the data, in other words, codes that would allow what the participants were saying to make sense. Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) remark that as more latent coding unfolds, the researcher becomes a cultural commentator, reflecting on the cultural landscape and the social values and norms that govern both their lives and those of the participants. The coding phase saw codes constantly changing; they were evolving, joining together, being broken up, becoming more nuanced, and some were discarded altogether. This fluid and organic nature of coding is of course a unique trait of reflexive thematic analysis compared to coding reliability and codebook approaches. After numerous coding sweeps, when the codes were thought to be rich, nuanced, and complex enough to evoke the data, they were compiled into one document, styled as headings, and under each code the relevant data extracts were collated. For coding to be done well, there needed to be a good relationship between the codes and that data extracts that were applied to them.

The focus in the third phase of the analytic process was theme generation. Here the focus shifted from the interpretation of the data (coding) to ‘interpretation of aggregated meaning and meaningfulness across the dataset’ (Byrne, 2022, p. 1403). This entailed using the codes and their relevant data extracts to discover big patterns of shared meaning, that is, ideas, concepts, and meanings, that cut across the dataset and were related to, or could give answers to, the research questions. At the beginning of this phase, it was often the case that codes were becoming themes, and it is true that they can often bleed into each other (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019). However, for clarity of

thought, codes and themes were taken in this research to represent different levels of complexity and were distinguished in the following way: codes were smaller and more precise, and themes were broader and more abstract resulting from different codes being combined based on their shared meaning.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) conceptualisation of themes, it was critical that every theme had a unifying central concept, that is, a core idea that captured the meaning pattern within the relevant data extracts. Themes were not generated to represent a summary of everything the participants said about one particular topic. Time was spent going back and forth through the codes and the coded data to generate patterned meanings and ideas relating to the research questions, before embarking on a thematic mapping exercise. This involved visually mapping out the patterned meanings and ideas to see the relationships between different themes, and to highlight the relevance of the themes to the research question. Phase three of the analytic process was long; it was a creative process that required thinking about and rethinking what the aggregated data extracts were saying, how they were being interpreted and if they were communicating something meaningful that would help answer the research questions.

Phase four was a refinement phase and involved reviewing the themes based on their richness. To do this, the following questions, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 65), were addressed: is this a theme or a code; does this theme say something useful about the dataset and the research question; what does this theme include and exclude; is there enough meaningful data to support this theme; is the theme coherent, in other words, is the data too diverse and wide ranging? At this stage codes, as well as themes, were revised to ensure the most meaningful interpretation of the data. The goal at the end of this phase was to have generated themes that were distinctive (no other theme could provide the same account of the data) but that could tie together to tell a coherent story about the dataset that speaks to the research questions. There was no preconceived number of themes to be generated but care was given not to produce too many that the data became over fragmented, favouring instead a smaller number indicating a more in-depth, complex, and detailed discussion of each theme.

The fifth phase, defining and naming themes, required thinking through the nuance and specificity of what each theme is about and what the overall analysis of the relevant

aggregated data items is saying. The name of each theme captures the key idea, or the central unifying concept, that the theme is about. At this point, the data extracts to be used in the final analytical write up were identified on the basis that they illustrated clear and compelling examples of the central concept or idea contained within the respective themes (Byrne, 2022, p. 1407). They were also chosen from right across participants to demonstrate diversity, breadth, and cohesion. To name and define each theme appropriately, a deep analysis of the chosen data extracts took place which went beyond describing what participants said at surface level, to interrogating and interpreting the extract to create a narrative about what is interesting about it. This required contextualising the extracts in relation to the research question(s), relevant literature, and wider social and cultural contexts, in order to produce analytic commentary (as opposed to illustrative descriptions of each extract).

The 'final' phase of this qualitative research, phase six, was producing the report. However, as is often the case in qualitative research, the write up of the report was intertwined with the entire analytic process. Therefore, phase six can be seen pulling everything together to complete the final version of the report, starting with finalising the order in which the themes were to be presented. The primary goal here was to ensure that themes were reported in a way that would tell a rich and cogent story of the data. Although each theme reflects its own unique central concept and shared meaning, and as such is capable of telling its own 'narrative if isolated from other themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2012), where possible and helpful, themes were arranged in a logical order to allow for themes to build on those previously reported. Braun and Clarke (2020, p. 332) succinctly sum up the reflexive thematic analysis process when they wrote that it '… involves immersion in the data, reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning. It is far from mechanical and is a process that [requires] headspace and time'.

A note on generalisability

It is a common belief amongst academic scholars and practitioners that for research to be good, useful, and beneficial it must be generalisable. In quantitative research, statistical generalisability is a reasonable pursuit: a properly representative sample of participants can produce reliable results 'that can be applied to a wider population or different contexts' (Smith, 2017, p. 137). In qualitative research however, generalisability is a

more complex and nuanced endeavour; that is not to say that it is impossible or an inherent weakness of qualitative research, but that it requires a different approach than that typically illustrated by the post-positivist quantitative paradigm. Applying statistical generalisability to qualitative research is problematic on two counts: firstly, it is incoherent with the ontological and epistemological commitments that reality is multiple, and knowledge is subjectively constructed; and secondly, the overarching goal of qualitative research is to tell rich stories about people's lives which is best achieved through small datasets and in-depth knowledge.

Generalisability is addressed differently in different qualitative studies; some scholars claim their research *could* be generalisable, sometimes it is not mentioned at all, and others state that their research is not generalisable and (falsely) concede that this is a weakness and limitation of the research. Smith (2018, p. 139) argues that qualitative researchers should engage with the concept of generalisability in their work, not only because it is possible, but because it challenges the hierarchy of methods that sees quantitative methods as the most desirable and polices knowledge derived from qualitative methods based on generalisability. For Smith (2018) qualitative researchers do not have to sacrifice detailed and rich understandings to achieve generalisability and must therefore go beyond falsely conceding that it is a limitation or not relevant.

It is important therefore to think about the relationship this research has to generalisability. From the outset it has been established that relativist ontological and interpretivist epistemological principles have guided the process and product of this study, and on this basis, statistical-probabilistic generalisability is not applicable. This research, in time, may display naturalistic generalisability, which happens when the research 'bears familial resemblances to the readers' experiences, settings they move in, events they've observed or heard about, and people they have talked to' (Smith, 2018, p. 140). Arguably this research has provided, in enough detail, a rich and in-depth account of participant's lives that would allow for readers to reflect upon and make connections with. For example, readers, who did not take part in the research, who decided to leave Northern Ireland to attend university because they felt there were no opportunities at home, could read the research and feel as though it was about them as the story told in the analysis reverberates with their personal experience. It could also be the case that this research will invite transferability, meaning that 'a person or group in one setting

considers adopting something from another that the researcher has identified' (Smith, 2018, p. 140). Finally, this research could claim analytical generalisability if the themes generated have significance in other research. For example, if the themes are re-examined through a different methodology and in turn produce 'new conceptual and theoretical understandings of the topic' (Smith, 2018, p. 141). This would demonstrate the value of the themes generated in this study in other research. In this instance, analytical generalisability should be understood as fluid ideas (Atkinson, 2017) for 'making sense of the world and people's lives' (Smith, 2018, p.141), rather than authoritative assertions.

The problem with the three types of generalisability discussed above is twofold: they depend on the reader, or another researcher, to generalise, subsequently creating a situation in which it cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty if the research is generalisable. At this stage, only hypothetical generalisability can be offered. However, this does not diminish the merit or value of this research. The goal of this research is to present an in-depth and rich understanding about the experiences and perspectives of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation living in a society governed by consociationalism. The paradigmatic and theoretical values that underpin this research do not call for an obligatory quest for generalisability, and therefore it cannot be used to judge its value. Generalisability may come to fruition at a later date, but for now, the strength of this qualitative study lies in its subjective, reflexive, and interrogative nature, that enabled the construction of complex, nuanced and detailed knowledge about the research topic.

It is interesting to note, however, that whilst this study does not aim for generalisability, there are existing quantitative studies which complement and reinforce some of the empirical findings of this research. Two quantitative studies and their relevant findings are cited throughout the empirical chapters: Young Life and Times Survey (YLT) (2023) and *Pivotal* Public Policy Forum Northern Ireland survey entitled 'Youth voices: life, work and study in Northern Ireland' (2023). The Young Life and Times Survey, a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, has been running since 2003 and every year 16-year-olds across Northern Ireland are invited to take part. In the 2023 survey, 'everybody living in Northern Ireland who celebrated their 16th birthday between January and March 2023 was invited to take part in the survey' (YLT Survey,

2023, p. 2). A total of 2,065 16-year-olds from across Northern Ireland took part[1]. *Pivotal*, an independent public policy think tank composed of civil servants, academics, activists, journalists, and lawyers, launched their survey online during February and March 2023. The survey was shared through regional and local youth organisations and social media. In total, 259 young people aged 14-25[2] took part and every county in Northern Ireland was represented[3] (*Pivotal,* 2023, p.05).

A note on bias, reflexivity, and positionality

Questions about the quality of qualitative research and quality criteria can reveal two things: the first is the paradigmatic and theoretical priorities of those who pose the question and the second is, occasionally, a misunderstanding of, or lack of engagement with, the paradigmatic and theoretical commitments of the qualitative research being discussed. Concerns about bias and subjectivity in qualitative research that employs reflexive thematic analysis are misplaced. In reflexive thematic analysis 'the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation' (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p.330) are emphasised as highly valued tools that enable the construction of knowledge at the level of detail and nuance. It is not the case that the researcher undesirably impacts or influences the research, but that they are inescapably part of it. Rather than viewing subjectivity and reflexivity as a problem to be managed, the researcher plays an inevitable role in shaping knowledge and knowledge production.

Therefore, from a reflexive thematic analysis viewpoint, not only does bias not lead to distortion, but the very concept of pure unbiased knowledge is an illusion. As a 31-year-old from Northern Ireland, who grew up in a nationalist community in Derry City, I bring to the research a degree of bias underpinned by a set of personal values and assumptions that are the result of my own lived experience growing up in Northern Ireland. In the reflexive thematic analysis approach however, this is inescapable and nonproblematic. The overarching goal of this research was not to give a complete, final, and absolute picture of the research topic, but to tell a relevant, important, and rich story in relation to

[1] 20% of participants lived in a city or its outskirts, 42% were from a small city or town and 37% were from a village or in the countryside (YLT, 2023, p. 2).
[2] 60% of participants were aged 14-18 and 40% of participants were aged 19-25.
[3] 68.3% of participants came from County Antrim, 13.3% from County Down, 11.2% from County Londonderry, 3.6% from County Tyrone, 2.4% from County Armagh and 1.2% from County Fermanagh.

it. My underlying personal values and assumptions did not hinder the achievement of this but advanced it by helping to conceptualise the data in an informed and appropriate way, leading to a deep and rich interpretation of the meaning contained within it.

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in the context of formal ethical approval by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin. The ethical guidelines that inform this research are in line with the *Data Protection Act* (2018), the British Sociological Association, and Trinity College Dublin's *Policy on Good Research Practice* guide. In summary, these guidelines affirm that issues such as confidentiality, data protection, privacy, anonymity, integrity, consent, and safety should be considered at every stage of the research process. It is unlikely that any ethical debate will emerge from this research, however, given that human interaction is the primary source of data for this qualitative inquiry, a discussion about ethical principles and considerations is appropriate. As Markham and Buchanan (2012) noted, one must always bear in mind that 'there is always a "person" who may be affected by the research'.

When considering ethics in the context of conducting qualitative research, issues such as values, moral principles, rights, and welfare come to the fore. As the reach of qualitative research has grown and as methods of research and analysis have become more penetrating, the field of ethics in conducting social science research is complex and contested. The domain of ethics in social research comprises of competing interests and values pertaining to what is or is not ethical, and as Mason (2018, p. 84) argues, Ethics Committees do not have all the answers. Therefore, alongside the regulated ethical guidelines, ethical judgement as the researcher was exercised during the research project. The following section will discuss various ethical considerations at different stages in the research project, including unique ethical considerations deriving from the Covid-19 pandemic, and will demonstrate how the relevant ethical guidelines were implemented and adhered to and potential risks mitigated as best as possible.

Qualitative research, ethics and Covid-19

Although scant, methodological discussions about virtually generating qualitative data and its actual employment have existed long before the pandemic. From an ethical point of view, online methods of data collection are not necessarily inherently riskier than in-

person data collection, and some of the fundamental ethical issues surrounding online interviewing are the same as in-person contexts (Lobe et al, 2020, p. 5). Therefore, standard ethical issues associated with qualitative research still apply in the context of transitioning from in-person to virtual. This transition, however, does yield some unique ethical challenges that require 'thoughtful, reflexive, and deliberative approaches in order to identify and mitigate potential and dynamically evolving risks' (Newman, Guta and Black, 2021). The following section will explore the range of ethical issues that were confronted during this project, with a specific emphasis on the unique ethical considerations arising from conducting qualitative research during the Covid-19 pandemic and the necessary transition from in person to virtual data collection.

Topic and research question

When deciding on the research topic, in this case young people and consociationalism, and in formulating the relevant research questions, minor ethical issues were considered. In the interpretivist paradigm the ontological and epistemological propositions are that reality is intersubjectively created and perceived rather than given, and that knowledge is subjective and actively constructed in the minds of individuals. The practical implication of these propositions is a mutual process of constituting knowledge between the researcher and the participants (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The collaborative nature of knowledge construction through reciprocal exchanges and in turn giving voice to participants' experiences raises some ethical issues, although not those typically cited by ethical regulators such as harm and deception. Ethical issues associated with interpretivism focus more on issues of purpose, expectation, interpretation, and representation, because freely talking about experiences and opinions is unlikely to be harmful or deceitful in and of itself (Corbin and Morse, 2004). It was the case in this study, in fact, that many participants commented that taking part was beneficial as it enabled them to articulate their opinions and organise their thoughts on complex topics that affected them.

Choosing the research topic specifically cannot be said to be a neutral activity given my personal interest and desire to increase knowledge about it, however, the purpose of the research is pure. I will achieve a higher degree, but I will not gain promotion, social influence or standing in the discipline. It is also not my explicit intention to advance the interests of young people, nor to do I carry out the research with moral or political

purposes. In order to ensure the ethical integrity of interpretivism when formulating the research questions and specifically regarding implications for participants, the following steps were taken: to manage participant expectation it was stated that the research would be used for the completion of the doctoral degree and no suggestions or promises were made regarding publication or whether the research would be used to inform other studies because this is simply unknown; to ensure fair interpretation personal bias and blurring personal experiences and opinions with that of the participants was avoided as much as consciously possible; and finally to facilitate accurate representation participants were quoted precisely and always in the true context, with recordings and transcripts available to reinforce this. These practical steps provide assurance that the study meets ethical responsibilities regarding research quality in terms of validity, reliability and generalisability (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Mason, 2018).

The type of questions asked also raise two ethical issues: the first being those that refer to sensitive or illegal activity and the second being those about political orientation and activism. Again, the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data ensured the interviews were carried out in an ethically attuned way, however more than that, participants were made aware at the beginning of the interview that they were not obliged to answer every question and could move on to the next topic or terminate the interview at any given time. Furthermore, there were no trick questions or questions with hidden meanings, in fact most questions were open ended and broad to allow participants to feel comfortable and in control. If participants began to reveal too much, disclosing information that might be considered overly personal or more than they might in face-to-face situations, the interview was redirected back to the relevant subject being discussed.

Compiling the dataset

The likelihood that the dataset process in this research could give rise to ethical problems was low; all participants were 18 or older and most were approached via contact information that was publicly available online i.e., open direct messages or email addresses displayed on Twitter and Facebook profiles. Where this information was not public, contact details of perspective participants were passed on via a third party, such as a teacher, community leader, or friend, with their permission. Furthermore, the kinds of persons serving as research participants cannot be said to be vulnerable or at risk in the specific context of the study. However, Newman, Guta and Black (2021, p.4) make the

point that during the pandemic, all participants are potentially vulnerable due to its consequential negative psychological and social impacts. In this study, given that all participants were willing, some even enthusiastic, to participate in the research and all logged in on-time or within the agreed upon 10-minute grace period, each were taken to be fit to participate. Ethical issues were more likely to arise from the fact that the dataset recruitment process was entirely online, raising issues of accessibility and equity. This point will be discussed further below.

Virtual data generation

The use of semi-structured interviews was always the intended method of data generation for this study. Interviews have long been the cornerstone of qualitative research and conducting them in person has been considered the 'gold standard' (Roberts et al, 2021), while 'distanced interviewing' has been considered 'sub-optimal' (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). As qualitative research conducted during Covid-19 necessitated an alternate 'distanced' fieldwork site, in this case online, the challenge was to avoid the 'sub optimal' accusation, by ensuring not only methodological rigour, but also the collection and creation of high-quality data. This required careful and intentional planning to mitigate potential ethical issues that are unique to virtual methods, as well as adhering to ethical standards that were required pre-pandemic. Discussed below are three key ethical issues that arose during the virtual data generation process, specifically: informed consent; accessibility and logistical requirements, and privacy, confidentiality and security.

Informed consent is a globally recognised ethical requirement of all social and behavioural research, a requirement that remains unchanged in the Covid-19 era. It refers to an acknowledgment by participants that they have been advised of all the relevant aspects of the research, especially any potential risks to them (Newman et al., 2021). However, despite its longstanding requirement, considerable debate surrounds what constitutes adequate information, who can provide consent, and how consent should be obtained (Newman et al., 2021). Firstly, it is important to recognise that there are limits to how adequately you can inform participants about every, or at least the relevant, aspects of the research (Mason, 2018, p. 95). Gaining consent that is fully informed is difficult and not necessarily achieved simply by a signature or filling out a form. There may be ambiguities between researcher and participant in what counts as data i.e., body language,

or differences in understanding regarding how data will be used in thematic analysis for example. There are also possible occurrences which cannot be fully consented to simply because they are unknown, for example interviews evolve in unexpected ways for both the researcher and or the participant, or a participant may have consented to the archiving of the data, but this consent may not extend to what other researchers then choose to do with it (Mason, 2018, p. 95).

Therefore, it may not have been possible to receive fully informed consent that covered all bases, however, engaging in reflexive and sensitive moral research practice helped to mitigate any potential shortcomings. For example, even after giving consent, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview started, with the option of withdrawing consent at that time, or during the interview, if they felt it necessary. Participants were also given the opportunity to debrief after the interview process if, in hindsight, they felt they were not fully informed or advised prior to taking part. Newman et al. (2021) makes the interesting suggestion that the increased role of technology, necessitated by the pandemic, could improve the standard of informed consent because prior to giving consent, participants may be encouraged to look the researcher up to ensure they are legitimate, or they could use the Internet to learn more about the research topic. Furthermore, they argue that presenting information in written form via email may help introduce the study and the researcher, as well as provide clarity because participants can view the documents at their leisure and 'gain familiarity with the study' without immediate time pressures (Newman, 2021, p. 5). In this study, to maximise participant knowledge and understanding prior to giving consent, all information deemed to be relevant including the research aims and purpose, an overview of the interview process as well as a copy of the interview questions, and a brief description of how the data would be used to inform analysis, were sent to participants in advance by email. Participants were then encouraged to use the contact details provided if they wanted to discuss any points further or if they had any questions about the research or taking part.

Secondly, seeking informed consent online via email raises the question of who is consenting. It is not possible to know for sure you email correspondence is with, or that consent is given freely; given the age cohort of participants, it is not unrealistic to consider that third parties such as teachers, community leaders, or parents were influential in gaining their consent. To try and make this less problematic, at the first virtual face-to-

face encounter, every participant was asked at the beginning of each interview to confirm that they were taking part of their own free will and were not coerced into doing so. Furthermore, virtual interviews may minimise 'longstanding concerns about individuals feeling pressured to participate' (Newman et al, 2021, p. 5), despite reassurances that they do not have to proceed and can terminate at any time. Unlike turning up at a location and beginning a face-to-face interview, participants can simply disconnect or leave the virtual meeting with great ease and no opportunity for the researcher to intervene. This possibility helps alleviate ethical concerns surrounding the power dynamic, specifically unequal power, between the researcher and participant.

Finally, traditionally, signed consent forms were the gold standard for qualitative research, although this too has been criticised as conflicting with the relational and evolving nature of qualitative research (Wynn and Israel, 2018). Nevertheless, the ethical stance taken in this research was to email consent forms to participants and require them to be returned with either an electronic or scanned signature. Where participants found the technicalities of this difficult, they were given the opportunity to verbally consent on the record, by being asked to confirm if they knew they were participating in a study and if they were satisfied that all their questions had been answered (Wynn and Israel, 2018).

The second ethical issue relevant to the data collection phase of this research is a direct consequence of the digitalisation process, namely issues of accessibility and logistical requirements. For those who do not have access to high-speed Internet, reliable broadband, and a computer or device with a working camera and audio functions, virtual data collection can be exclusionary. Arguably, however, ethical problems associated with digital discrepancies or literacy were not prevalent in this study for two reasons. The first relates to a general point articulated by Lobe et al (2020, p. 2), which can apply directly to Northern Ireland:

> With our ever-growing digital societies, and moreover with this specific COVID-19 pandemic, people have become familiar with various platforms and applications to transmit at least some of their daily interactions and communication online. We might assume that their digital skills and competences have accordingly grown, consequentially making their participation in online research data collection easier.

The second reason is due to the age cohort of participants, that is 18-24. Young people are generally considered to be digitally astute, a generalisation which arguably became

even more accurate during the pandemic when this age cohort were required to use technology not only to socialise, but to attend school, university, and work. The pandemic required their personal, educational, and working lives to go virtual, and as such this research was not requiring, in a digital or technological sense, anything out of the ordinary. In fact, in the climate of remote working and learning, access to the Internet and possession of a computer or device with a working camera and audio function became in many respects a non-negotiable norm. This assertion is evidenced by the fact that there was never any difficulty for participants in signing on, connecting, or ensuring their audio and video settings were working, signalling not only that participants did not lack virtual experience, but that conversations over video platforms had become increasingly familiar. Having established that the Internet and its affiliated devices were readily available to young people in Northern Ireland, pivoting to virtual data collection did not increase the possibility of unethical exclusion. In fact, the opposite occurred; one glaringly obvious advantage of taking this qualitative research online, is that it overcame geographical limitations. The virtual method allowed for enhanced geographic diversity of participants, including those in what would be considered 'closed off' loyalist estates of East Belfast, as well as those located in the remote countryside.

The final ethical consideration in the virtual data collection phase of this study encompasses issues of privacy, confidentiality, and digital security. As Lobe et al (2020, p. 6) outline:

> Online data collection can generate issues that go beyond the standard procedure, such as deidentifying data and keeping it confidential, keeping various research files (e.g. transcriptions, notes, personal data), password protection, and possibly encryption for data stored on the researchers local computer, and a timely deletion of audio-visual recordings

It is the responsibility of the researcher to sufficiently and clearly explain potential risks, including those that participants may not consider or even find concerning (Newman et al (2021, p. 6), and outline how these risks will best be mitigated. Although their effectiveness cannot be guaranteed, there are two means of safeguarding these ethical requirements as much as possible: the first is to ensure that the chosen digital platform has adequate security settings, and the second is to establish clear practical protocols for research participation. As the required TCD digital platform for videoconferencing,

Microsoft Teams meets the ethical standards surrounding privacy and digital security according to the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science Ethics Committee, including compliance with GDPR laws, metadata management, and a solid encryption process.

Privacy was enhanced by the invitation setting on Microsoft Teams, that is, meetings were not publicly available, and individuals could only enter the meeting if they were in possession of the invitation link and password. This also meant that the likelihood of unwanted intruders joining the virtual meeting was very low. Concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality are elevated by the use of video in the Microsoft Teams meeting. Newman et al (2021, p. 6) argues researchers who would not have filmed their participants pre-pandemic and who do not have an explicit rationale and purpose for doing so should not collect video data. The ethical stance taken in this study was that video was an important part of the interview process, for the purposes of enhanced communication and rapport building, however there was no added benefit of recording the video. Therefore, the only aspect of the virtual interview that was recorded was the audio and the reason for this was to ensure accurate transcribing. These intentions were set out in the consent forms sent to all participants and were always discussed before beginning the interview, with participants having the final say on the arrangements depending on what they felt comfortable with. With the exception of one participant, all took part with their cameras on, and all permitted the recording of the audio. The audio files and transcriptions were stored in encrypted format on a personal laptop which is also encrypted, and each file was anonymised by removing personal identifiers. These files will be retained for five years and then deleted.

Given that videoconferencing can be done from nearly anywhere, at any time, clear practical protocols for research participation are critical to ensure, as much as possible, the privacy and confidentiality of participants (Marhefka et al., 2020, p. 1985). Participants were encouraged to use a private space where they could speak freely about the topic at hand and where there would be no or limited distractions. Nevertheless, interruptions were anticipated such as someone walking into the room or the doorbell ringing, and it was agreed with participants in advance that they could dictate the response plan i.e., they could terminate the interview, continue as normal, or change the subject. Interruptions did occur on a number of occasions; when it was a family member,

participants either continued as normal or called out, “Go away I told you I was doing an interview!”, or in the case of the doorbell ringing, participants either ignored it or simply said, “Hold on one minute”, before returning. On all occasions the interviewed continued as normal post interruption. Finally, the ‘potential visibility of the background in the participants surroundings’ (Lobe et al, 2020, p. 5) had to be considered from a privacy and confidentiality point of view. Participants were encouraged to use the blurred background feature to ease the potential discomfort in having the researcher peer into their personal space (Marhefka et al., 2020, p. 1985). Some participants did blur their backgrounds, but the majority choose not to, with some simply shutting the curtains or sitting in front of a plain wall, perhaps reflecting the varying degree of concern this privacy issue raised with individual participant.

Ethics and data analysis

The final phase of this study in which ethical issues must be acknowledged is the data analysis phase. A range of epistemological ethical issues are raised when analysing interview data to construct knowledge, make connections and provide explanations (Mason, 2018, p. 101). Central to epistemological ethics is ensuring that all commitments made to participants are kept, including those discussed above such as acting in the spirit of the informed consent received, protecting privacy, and ensuring confidentiality by anonymising the data collected. Epistemological ethics also demands that the research presents ‘data which are sufficiently contextualised for judgements about accuracy, validity and generalisability to be made’ (Mason, 2018, p. 103). In the context of data analysis, accuracy, validity, and generalisability are not only intellectual issues, but also ethical issues, stemming from the unique responsibility of qualitative researchers to produce rich and insightful knowledge given the capacity of its methods, in this case the semi-structured interview, to produce vivid and telling insights into the research questions and subsequent issues. Although presenting the findings of qualitative research requires a degree of creativity and originality, this must never put in jeopardy the trust that has been bestowed on the researcher by the participants.

To ensure these epistemological ethical standards were met when analysing the data, a three-point checklist devised by Mason (2018, p. 104) was relied upon and the following questions were continually asked: is this analysis well founded; is this generalisation (if any are made) fair and appropriate; and is this insight meaningful and useful in the wider

advancement of knowledge about the research topic? There is no doubt that this check list is epistemologically very ambitious, but it is nonetheless important to strive to achieve it not only for the purpose of meeting ethical standards, but also to help prevent the research from being dismissed as illustrative.

Summary

This chapter discussed the philosophical orientation of the research design and set out the specific research methods employed to best answer the research question. It is argued that given interpretivism's epistemological position, that knowledge is not natural and objective but subjective and actively constructed, this philosophical starting point was most suited to this research in its endeavour to explore and make sense of the lived experiences and attitudes of young people living in a society governed by consociationalism. Therefore, the knowledge produced by this study is the result of a series of subjective interpretations, including young people's interpretation and portrayal of their experiences and attitudes, and the researcher's interpretation of the data. These interpretivist commitments necessitate the use of qualitative methods of data generation and data analysis and as such the research adopts a reflexive thematic analysis approach as spearheaded by Braun and Clarke. The key focus of this approach is to go beyond surface level understandings of the data and instead develop implicit shared meaning across the data that helps provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the phenomena being studied.

This research therefore used semi-structured interviews to generate data and, in line with the qualities and values of reflexive thematic analysis, was not preoccupied with data saturation, believing that knowledge construction in relation to the research topic does not have a saturation or end point. The size of the dataset was therefore determined by time and resources available. Once the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, codes were generated which in turn formed the building blocks of theme development. The themes identified in the research represent implicit shared meaning across the data extracts and are the result of the analytic process. In line with the reflexive thematic analysis approach, the chapter outlined why this research does not seek generalisable findings, nor is it focused on positivist concerns of reliability and validity. In this study researcher bias and subjectivity are considered to be effective analytical tools that should be embraced rather than constrained. As a result, the strength of the research lies in its

reflexive, subjective and interrogative nature and in-depth interaction with the data, rather than claims of reliability, validity and generalisability. In addition to outlining the philosophical orientations of the research and the related methods, the chapter also discussed the impact of covid-19 on conducting the research and reflections on the pragmatism that was required in order to ensure data generation could take place. The ethical considerations relevant to this research were also discussed. The following chapter begins the reflexive thematic analysis process, starting with the domain of cross-community relations.

Chapter 4

Cross-community Relations

An accurate but inadequate analysis of the Northern Irish conflict is that it was a religious dispute in which the two protagonist rival groups were Protestants and Catholics. Even Lijphart initially saw the core cleavage in Northern Ireland as religious (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995, p. 31). Now, it is largely accepted that the conflict in Northern Ireland was born out of two rival groups, nationalists and unionists, who had competing and mutually exclusive constitutional ambitions. However, what these two analyses have in common, what is central to both, is the relationship between two opposing groups, that is, relations between people. When talking about the conflict, the late John Hume emphasised the role of relationships, both as the problem and the solution. Hume claimed that history had created 'sundered' relationships between the people on the island of Ireland and between the people of Britain and Ireland (Farren and Haughey, 2015) and reconciling these relationships was the key to bringing peace to these islands. The Good Friday Agreement utilised Hume's 'totality of relationships' ethos and adopted a three-strand approach to heal relationships between the people of Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between the Republic of Ireland and Britain. All three sets of relations were central to peace and stability (Kelly and Tannam, 2022, p. 4; Mitchell, et al., 2018).

A key objective of consociation is to facilitate 'sensible intercommunity cooperation' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 4-5) among political elites, and it is anticipated that overtime this cooperation would be replicated among opposing communities in society. To achieve intercommunity cooperation, consociation respects the existence of diverse groups by promoting their accommodation rather than assimilation. With neither group threatened by the possibility of subsumption, the logic is that cross-community relations will be enhanced by the community's ability to co-exist in a peaceful way, in which neither is threatened by the existence of the other. The focus of this chapter is the cross-community relations between members of the Good Friday Agreement generation in Northern Ireland. The chapter looks at two interconnected topics, firstly how young people perceive their own identity and the identities of others, and secondly, how young people

understand Northern Ireland's past and their diagnosis of the state of intercommunity relations in Northern Ireland today. The qualitative interview data has been collated according to these topics and in each topic, themes have been generated using reflexive thematic analysis.

Topic 1: Self-identity and the identities of others

Since Northern Ireland's creation in 1921, during the Troubles, and still in the present day, the salience of ethnonational identities in the region has been and continues to be profound. From cultural expressions, to where you live, what school you go to, what newspaper you read, what sport you play, the signs and symbols associated with identity are ubiquitous in Northern Ireland and they permeate almost every facet of life. Although the composition of Northern Ireland has diversified in recent years, the force of the competing mutually exclusive ethnonational identities, which lay at the heart of the conflict, remains strong. One of the most impressive feats of the Good Friday Agreement was to include multiple forms of mutual recognition of the competing identities, which served to legitimise and validate the two dominant communities. The Irish constitution changed to remove Ireland's official claim to Northern Ireland, the UK recognised the right of the people of the island of Ireland to exercise their self-determination if they so wished, nationalists recognised unionists and vice vera, and both communities recognised the 'others' who were neither. The topic of self-identity and the identities of others is explored here through three themes which were developed from the relevant data extracts. The first theme briefly explores young people's reflections on their own identity, as well as their perceptions of others, the second theme looks at the role religion plays in young people's identity, and the third theme explores intercommunity exposure and friendships.

Theme 1: Everyone is different, but we're all the same really

This theme captures the overwhelming sentiment implicit in the data extracts that referred to identity. Although participants presented with different identities, or different variations and combinations of identities, there were varying degrees of the importance of identity, and different experiences in relation to dealing with differences, the underlying shared meaning among the data extracts was that despite differences, individuals share a common humanity. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked what they thought of people who belonged to a different community and identified differently to

themselves. For the majority of participants, the question was interpreted as referring to the traditional identity labels used in Northern Ireland, namely Catholic/Protestant and nationalist/unionist.

When participants were discussing their own identity, overall, there was a sense of self-respect and pride that accompanied their declarations of self-identity and the community to which they belonged, for example: "I come from a cross community background, my Dad's from a Protestant unionist background, very strong loyalist family in Bangor, and my Mum is from the Bog in Derry, and I'm really proud of that" (*Interview 13*); "There is long history of republicanism in my family and you know we don't shy away from it, it is something that we take pride in and it's part of who we are" (*Interview 2*); and "Born and raised in loyalist east Belfast and proud of it" (*Interview 14*). These extracts stand in contrast to the claim made by Coulter et al., that 'many younger Northern Irish people [have a] growing aversion to the established ethno-national designations that define public discourse in the region' (2021, p. 15). Rather, these participants could be described as being what Jennifer Todd (2018, p. 108) refers to as "die-hards" meaning that they will resist any change to their identities. There could be an implicit negative connotation with this categorisation, that such individuals are stubborn or difficult, or in line with the discourse in Northern Ireland, entrenched in sectarian forms of identity. However, that was not the underlying tone of the contributions made by participants. Rather than portraying a detrimental staunch rigidity in terms of identity, the participants were interpreted as being proud of, and content with, their identity but not in a way that led them to be hostile towards others. They could be considered what Jennifer Todd (2018) refers to as "pluralisers", meaning that they will not give up their communal identities and they see alternative identities as just that, alternatives, rather than threats (2018, p. 130).

Other participants took the opportunity to question and challenge the narrative of binary identities in Northern Ireland and they articulated their understanding of identity to be multifaceted. For example, one participant included the fact that they are neurodivergent and claimed this is what they thought of when thinking about self-identity. They said:

> My identity isn't Protestant, Catholic, nationalist or unionist, even though I was born into a Protestant unionist household. When I think of my identity, I think of the fact that I am a neurodivergent person, so I have anxiety and I would be

> autistic and different things. So already what I'm showing you is I don't fit into the identity binary that people think about in Northern Ireland (*Interview 1*).

This participant continued to express that oftentimes they felt like they "didn't fit in" because their identity as a neurodivergent person was not "provided for by the traditional binary identities. They get all the attention" (*Interview 1*). This contribution speaks directly to an increasingly common criticism of consociationalism, that certain social groups, including minorities, can be or feel left out of the 'consociational bargain' (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 347). It speaks to the impact consociationalism's preoccupation with ethno-national identities can have on those who do not 'fit the mould', in that they feel underrepresented and the issues that matter to them are side-lined. Furthermore, another participant rejected what they perceived to be an "obsession" with being "one of two things here" and continued by describing their own identity as multidimensional saying, "I am Irish but I'm not a Catholic, nor am I a nationalist or a republican. I am a mixed race, bisexual woman who is also a mother. That is my identity" (*Interview 6*). Other participants also included their sexual orientation as being just as relevant to their self-identity as the traditional binary identities that is favoured in the discourse, for example, "I am a gay man and I suppose I use this to distance myself from the whole Catholic Protestant labelling system. I identify more with the gay community than the traditional labels used here" (*Interview 4*).

These participants could be considered what Todd (2018) refers to as 'privatisers' and 'transformers'. The first set of extracts align with Todd's concept of "transformers"; they want to distance themselves from the sectarian underpinnings of identity and are open to reinterpretation of social identities (2018, p. 133). On this occasion participants did this by incorporating their sexual orientation and their neurodiversity into their conceptualisations of identity, distancing themselves from the typical 'orange and green' discourse in Northern Ireland. The second extract, that refers to being a mother, among other attributes, is reflective of what Todd categorises as "privatisers"; they lean into roles in their personal life, for example 'parent', rather than traditional communal identities (2018, p. 126). In the relevant data extract from *Interview 6*, there was a sense that the participant was saying that they were much more than the traditional binary identities would allow and they were keen to stress their multi-layered approach to their own identity by highlighting aspects of their personal life.

This discussion around how young people approach identities, specifically changing identities, has relevance to consociationalism. We know that consociationalism holds that, almost always, identities are durable rather than malleable, especially those based on 'nationality, ethnicity, language and religion' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 5) and they caution against overly optimistic hypotheses that these inherited collective identities can be transformed into new and shared identities. Todd, who would be critical of consociationalism, challenged this stance in 2018 claiming that there has been 'pervasive' identity change in Northern Ireland, for example, where personal experiences do not align with the narratives and norms associated with someone's inherited communal identity (2018, p. 111). Todd (2018) does however make the point that while 'identity innovation' is possible, it is also reversible. With the exception of participants discussed above, who went beyond binary identities to describe themselves, the extracts offered little evidence of identity change or transformation among members of the Good Friday Agreement generation that took part in the research.

When talking about people who identify differently to themselves, there was an overwhelming sense of indifference among most participants, for example: "I don't care what anyone is to be honest, like it doesn't affect me whatsoever" (*Interview 3*); "Yeah I couldn't care less to be honest sure what difference does it make to me?" (*Interview 19*); "I don't view them any differently, it is what it is like it doesn't make a difference" (*Interview 22*); and "Generally I just view them as individuals, because like that's what they are" (*Interview 23*). Several participants explained their indifference by making reference to the idea that what unifies people from different backgrounds is their humanity, for example: "I view them as the same, same humans with different beliefs" (*Interview 7*); "I don't view them as any different as people, obviously they have different opinions to me but we're just people at the end of the day" (*Interview 5*); "We're all just individuals" (*Interview 17*); "We're more or less the same, different approaches to things but I don't think it should be the basis of hating someone" (*Interview 18*); "It really doesn't matter to me. I take people at face value and don't care what they are. I just think people are people" (*Interview 20*); and "I see them as just another human being. I try to see everyone as people not communities" (*Interview 21*). Other participants explained their nonchalant attitudes towards different identities and communities by implying that although differences existed, they were largely unproblematic, for example, "I mean

we're all more or less the same like with some differences. I like green flags and some people like red ones. Who cares? We are the way we are" (*Interview 18*). This sentiment, the idea that a different identity was just that, different rather negative, and a general lack of concern about different identities, was common among many of the data extracts.

Other participants made reference to commonalities that young people share, which they believed diluted the significance of identity difference. One participant for example referred to the shared experience of exam stress saying, "Ach we're all just kind of too bothered about our A-Levels and stressed about them and uni places to be hating anybody" (*Interview* 10). Another participant referred to their interest in music as having "opened my eyes to the fact that we are all just the same really" (*Interview 6*). Socialising, sport and TV are common interests and hobbies shared between young people who identify differently, and this was why it did not matter to them what someone "was". They said:

> In the beer gardens and at concerts no one gives a shit about the Protestant Catholic thing. I promise you we weren't sitting chatting about the Troubles like, everyone just wanted to be steaming [drunk], have a good time, talk about Love Island or the Premier League. We're just young people who want to socialise and be happy (*Interview 15*).

A participant from a republican background also implied that the issue of class could serve as a unifying force between different communities, they said "I think there is a lot more that unites us than divides us especially when it comes to class, like I would have more in common with an ordinary working class unionist than I would with a pure [very] posh middle class nationalist (*Interview 2*). This issue of class as a cross cutting cleavage among members of the Good Friday Agreement generation and its ability to dilute dominant ethno-national cleavages is returned to in the following chapter when young people's experience of economic opportunities in Northern Ireland is discussed.

Some participants placed caveats on their apathy towards identity difference. Several participants remarked that they would not accept or tolerate identities or beliefs that they would perceive to be extreme, for example, "I don't begrudge anybody for being anything, unless they're extreme and reactionary like I don't mind if you're in the DUP at all that's fair enough, but if that means you think gay people are like child abusers, then

yeah of course I have a problem with that" (*Interview 1*) and "I don't think I care what someone is, but at the same time I wouldn't be able to have a friendship with someone who was from the other side and who was very extreme in their views" (*Interview 27*). Other participants included caveats that emphasised reciprocity by saying, "I don't care as long as the other community is nice and open to me then I will be the same to them" (*Interview 25*). In stark contrast to the participant who said, "I don't worry about what community a person is from. It is probably the last thing I think about when I meet someone" (*Interview 26*), a common caveat that was mentioned by some participants was that although they were unbothered by someone's identity and community background, they "can't help" but have a curiosity to find out "what someone is". One participant from the republican community claimed their curiosity was to ensure that they did not "say the wrong thing in front of the wrong people" or insult someone. They remarked:

> I mean, I'm not gonna sit here and tell you that you know, if you meet somebody for the first time and you hear the name, you don't go "Wait, what are they?". I mean I wouldn't say I'm an out-and-out Republican but I would maybe hold back on saying certain things if I didn't know someone's background, like I'm not going to shout "Up the RA" in front of them. So maybe you do be reserved for a while but I do still take others at face value (*Interview 2*).

Other participants said, "Ach you'd always be wondering if they're from the other side of the house to you" (*Interview 8*) and "There is this just this thing in Northern Ireland where you do just sort of want to know what they are, like just for your own peace of mind. It's not that it actually matters but you'll ask someone what school they went to or where they live just so you know what they are" (*Interview 9*). To borrow Richardson's phrase, this behaviour could be considered as having a 'tinge of sectarian nosiness about it' (2008, p. 1), however, participants were insistent that their curiosity was born out of total innocence. Perhaps then it is unjust to refer to Richardson's (2008) full phrase, and a reference to 'nosiness' would offer a sufficient explanation for young people's curiosity about what "someone is". This idea of curiosity about how someone identifies or what community they come from invites an interesting conversation around consociationalism's preference of segregation and autonomy, over integration. This discussion will be returned to below, but it is interesting to question whether the 'curiosity to know' is a symptom of consociationalism, that is, does consociation breed 'sectarian curiosity' rather than familiarity due to its separatist nature?

Although participants were not asked explicitly if they had experienced being 'othered', it is interesting to note that the only participant who recounted a personal experience of being othered was mixed race. They said:

> Other black or mixed-race people are the ones who are 'othered' and obviously not in the traditional sense of orange or green, but as black or brown. I have been othered because of the colour of my skin plenty of times and well othered is putting it nicely (*Interview 6*).

The issue of racism will be returned to in Chapter Six in more detail, but it is interesting to interrogate this example of 'othering' in the context of consociationalism. When othering is spoken about in mainstream discourse relating to Northern Ireland, it is often always the case that the othering process pertains to the sectarian divide. Firstly, to offer a brief definition of othering; the process of othering serves to fortify the identity of the individual or group performing the othering, and consequently the individual or group being othered feels marginalised, disempowered and socially excluded, which 'effectively creates a separation between 'us' and 'them'' (Grove and Zwi, 2006, p. 1933). What the extract reveals, is that in Northern Ireland, the process of othering is not confined to the sectarian divide. Given that mainstream discourse has not significantly veered away from this type of othering, it is possible then that racial and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland, who have experienced othering, are denied their experiences and truths because they are not adequately included in the discussions.

The reason for this, could be linked back again to consociationalism's emphasis on ethno-national identities, at the expense of other social groups and minorities. So not only does this prioritisation impact some young people's sense of representation at the political elite level as discussed above, it may also inadvertently invalidate their experiences of othering, if they do not belong to the two antagonistic ethno-national groups. This may have wide reaching implications in terms of efforts to confront the process of othering in Northern Ireland. For example, McManus (2017) suggests a university programme of 'transformative education' to enable people to critically engage and reflect on the ramifications that othering can have on the wider society, including conflict and populist politics (p. 23). A possible issue with this, is that the influence of consociationalism may lead to such programmes including only those who ascribe to the binary ethno-national

identities in Northern Ireland, leading to further exclusion of those who already feel on the periphery of consociational thinking.

Theme 2: The secularisation of youth

During discussions of identity, religion was a recurring topic. Although the conversations around religion differed between different participants in terms of their views on religion and politics, their religious backgrounds and their current beliefs or lack of, the underlying shared meaning among the relevant data extracts was that for some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, religion does not play a significant or material role in their lives. In the 2023 Young Life and Times Survey, 40% of their respondents indicated that they belonged to no religion (YLT, 2023, p. 2). Despite the fact that Northern Ireland continues to be 'one of the most religious societies in Western Europe' (Coutler et al., 2021, p. 168), the results of the 2021 census show a trend towards secularisation revealing that 17.4 per cent of respondents had 'no religion', which was a marked increase on 2011 when 10.1 percent had 'no religion' (*2021 Census of Northern Ireland*). These statistics, and the insight provided by the qualitative data of this research in particular, may not be surprising. However, the secularisation of Northern Irish society, especially among young people, is still noteworthy considering the significant role that religion has historically played in society and political policy making.

Many participants suggested that religion played a role in their childhood, but they were no longer religious, for example, "For me I'm from a Protestant family but I'm not religious. I would say I was an atheist so I would" (*Interview 4*) and "Religion doesn't matter to me at all. I was raised Protestant and I'd probably still use the label, but it doesn't inform anything in my life, I'm not a religious person like" (*Interview 19*). The idea of religion now just being a "label", a way of identifying yourself, was common among most participants, for example:

> If people my age say they're a Catholic or a Protestant, there's a high chance they don't practice. So they're not actually. It's just a label, it doesn't mean anything. Sure that's why people joke, "Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?" and someone says, "I'm an atheist" and then they'd say "Aye but are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist?" [laughs] (*Interview 16*).

Related to the idea of religion being an identifier rather than an actual practice and belief system, it is interesting to note after cross referencing participants profile sheets and their extracts, it was common for participants to have identified as Catholic or Protestant, and then to have articulated that they "were not religious at all" during the interviews. In this sense, it seems reasonable to claim that for some young people identifying as a religion is, both literally and metaphorically, a tick boxing exercise, but that it does not inform their decisions or values, and they do not practice the religion that they 'identify' with.

Other participants were strong in their convictions suggesting that religion was "forced upon" them or "embedded" in them from a young age by virtue of their household and or because they attended a denominational school, for example, "I grew up in a *really* [emphasised] Catholic household and went to a Catholic school but I'm not religious now. I just use the label because it's engrained in us that we have to identity one way or the other" (*Interview 24*) and "I was raised in a Catholic family and went to a pure [very] holy school. So, I suppose we speak of Catholics and Protestants out of habit, but naw [no] I wouldn't be religious at all, it's not important to me now" (*Interview 2*). It was common among participants who discussed growing up under the influence of religion to have distanced themselves from their respective faith traditions as they had gotten older, for example, "I swear I didn't know you could be non-religious until post-primary and I read about it on the internet, I didn't know atheists existed. We're so conditioned from such a young age. I then found secularism and that's where I felt I belonged" (*Interview 1*).

Only one participant made reference to the interplay between religion and politics claiming that it "blocked progress" and they expressed how it impacted on their life:

> I find it so strange that politics and religion are so heavily mixed. A lot of our laws come from political party's Christian beliefs and that's really nuts to me … I'm a bisexual woman and why is it that I can marry one person but not another? It doesn't make sense to me. Politics and religion is a bad mix. It blocks progression (*Interview 6*).

It is accurate to claim that for decades, the legalisation of same sex marriage and the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland were blocked by some political parties, mostly of unionist affiliation, who initiated the petition of concern on religious grounds. Gribben (2021) makes an interesting observation that 'one of the most curious features of

sudden-onset secularisation on the island of Ireland has been the revitalisation of religious politics'. The overwhelming majority of data extracts in this research support the idea that, among young people, there has been a movement towards secularisation. What the extract from *Interview 6* shows however, is that this secularisation has not been reflected in politics. In fact, the opposite could be said to be true, as Matthews (2019, n.d.) notes that religion continues to play an important role in 'shaping party policy programs and party competition' in Northern Ireland. It seems reasonable to ask why religion has, in recent times, made a political 'comeback', when it appears to be on the way out among society. One of the reasons for this, is consociationalism's principle of veto rights, which was intended to protect minorities through granting them the ability to prevent the passage of laws that they considered would undermine or be detrimental to their culture, beliefs and values. As a result, the petition of concern has been successfully deployed many times to block, what many claim to be progressive liberal laws, on religious grounds, even if the legislation is supported by an overwhelming majority of citizens. For example, research revealed in 2017 that nearly two-thirds of young Protestant people under the age of 40 support gay marriage (Shirlow, 2017), yet Protestant unionist parties were the chief instigators of the petition of concern over this issue on religious grounds. There is a wider debate to be had about the petition of concern including its intended purposes and abuses, which will be returned to in Chapter Seven.

Several participants referred to the fact that although they are not religious, religion or phrases of a religious nature often informed their colloquial language and phrase, for example: "Like I'd say "Ach God bless ye" it's more a culture thing because I don't actually mean that sure I don't even believe in God, but it's just integrated into your life in them wee [small] ways isn't it" (*Interview 7*); "I'd say I'm a cultural catholic, like I'd be well up for Christmas and Easter and I probably say "Swear to God" about 20 times a day but I'm not religious I don't believe in anything or go to mass" (*Interview 10*); and "I'd be more inclined to say I'm a cultural Protestant if I had to, in that like I like the bands and the Protestant culture" (*Interview 4*). If the profile sheet that each participant had to fill out before each interview had the option of 'cultural Catholic' and 'cultural Protestant', there is a high chance that almost all who ticked 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' would have migrated to the former. Applicable to the Protestant variation also, Ferriter (2018) describes cultural Catholics as those who 'inherited faith but are not interested in it except when it serves their interests [funerals, marriage] … [and] treat Catholic

sacraments as festive conveniences [Easter, Christmas]'. The extracts produced by this research indicate that this is the preferred religion of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. If the petition of concern continues to exist and be used on religious grounds, consociationalism could face new critics from the so-called cultural Catholics and Protestants.

Theme 3: Intercommunity friendships are no big deal

This theme covered a range of different experiences by participants, including those who claimed not to have any intercommunity friendships, those who did, and discussions surrounding young people's experience of dealing with differences that arose during intercommunity interactions. However, what all these extracts had in common, that is the underlying unifying concept among them, was that the idea or existence of intercommunity friendships seemed to be an unremarkable and undistinguished affair. In other words, there was a sense of "what's the big fuss about?" (*Interview 6)* when the discussions arose in the interviews. This sentiment applied even to those participants who said they did not have friends from other communities but were keen to stress this was not by choice but a product of their circumstances and the segregated nature of Northern Ireland, and that they would be open to meeting people from 'across the divide'. For example:

> I wouldn't mix with people from the other community on a day-to-day basis. Living in a Catholic area and going to a Catholic primary school and secondary school it's just always going to be that way. It's not because I want to exclude them, it's just that growing up it didn't happen but it's not something I would be against either *(Interview 2).*

> I don't have any friends from the other community personally. I feel I haven't had a lot of opportunities to mix with people of different identities, it's very much people stick to their own identities, and they don't mix between different religions. And I would love more opportunities to be able to do that especially because I know I'm only getting one side of things (*Interview 11*).

Other participants emphasised this sentiment and spoke about the impact that the segregated nature of Northern Ireland has had on their ability to make friends with people from different communities, for example: "I have no Protestant friends in Derry, there was just never an opportunity growing up, it's not my own doing I guess it's a by-product of living in the city side and going to a Catholic school" (*Interview 3*); "I wouldn't say

I've friends from the other community. I've gone to a Catholic school for 14 years like" (*Interview 8*); and "I met all my home friends at school which was Catholic, I went to a Catholic university, and I played GAA. So aye, I've been surrounded by them my whole life basically and not really exposed to anyone else" (*Interview 9*). Other participants continued:

> There was next to no opportunity for cross-community mixing when I was growing up because I went to a Protestant school. It's weird when you think about it like we're educated separately and live in different areas based on religion. That's just the way it is, hardly a choice when you're 11 (*Interview 25*).

> I don't have any friends from the other community personally. I feel I haven't had a lot of opportunities to mix with people of different identities, it's very much people stick to their own identities and they don't mix between different religions if you don't go to a mixed school (*Interview 11*).

These extracts and the idea that the segregated nature of Northern Ireland is negatively impacting their exposure to and ability to meet other young people from different communities directly speaks to one of the central criticisms of consociationalism, predominately made by integrationists, that it exaggerates the depth of division between communities and entrenches the sectarian divide (Taylor 2006, 2009). The consociationalist thinking that leads to promoting accommodation of different communities, rather than integration is twofold: firstly, because identities are not malleable, promoting integration in Northern Ireland inescapably means the 'partisan victory of one community over another' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 28) and secondly, they fear that integrationists 'may provoke renewals of conflict' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009) if different groups are not left to manage their respective affairs where possible. Consociationalists would argue, however, that they are not anti-integration and that they do not prevent voluntary integration. As O'Leary puts it, the bigger question here is, integration into what? According to O'Leary, 'integration as an objective is piously upheld, but the question remains, integration into what? Into the UK, Northern Ireland, or Ireland?' (2019, p. 329). Although this question is presented in terms of nation states, it applies at the micro-level too. Interestingly, no participant expressed an implicit or explicit desire to see integration efforts increased across Northern Ireland more generally. Although, it should be noted that participants were not directly asked this question. There was a clear sense from participants who did not have experience in cross-community engagement, or intercommunity friendships, that they were open to the idea, but

integration of society, for example through education or housing, was not a suggested vehicle for doing so. Participants seemed content to continue to live 'separately' in and amongst their own community, whilst at the same time having "nothing against" and "being up for" engaging on a cross-community basis. For example, a participant from a loyalist estate described their area as "closed off" and this affected their ability to meet people outside of their own community. Although this was of interest to them, they did not imply they need or a desire to change the "closed off" nature of their estate. They explained:

> There's a massive veil over us in communities like mine [loyalist], like we don't really know what goes on in other communities. I don't really know people from other communities, so I don't really know what a day in the life of young republican looks like. It's not a hatred or even prejudice for me it's just a case of not knowing and not having an experience of them. I'm happy in my own community but I would be open to getting to know other people as well *(Interview 14)*.

The implication of this extract and others then, is that it cannot be assumed that increased integration is wanted by all members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, and according to O'Leary, integration can only work when it is wanted on both sides and where there is already 'extensive hybridity and mixing' (2019, p. 329).Therefore, contrary to how it might appear on the surface, it could be argued that consociationalism is in fact not the explicit reason why young people continue to experience segregation, nor for their lack of exposure to intercommunity relations. It may be the case instead, that young people are content as they are.

There were two examples from which perceived benefits of intercommunity mixing/integration can be inferred. For example, one participant said, "Being less extreme in my views only happened when I started meeting other young people who didn't come from my community so I think it's something everyone should do" (*Interview 21*). Another participant also spoke about what they perceived to be the benefits of integration and that they would "highly recommend it". They said:

> I've always been exposed to different communities. I would absolutely recommend it, its shaped me and I think I'm open minded. When you mix with different people every day you stop seeing the difference between people. Other people I know who haven't been exposed have a bit more trepidation when it

> comes to the 'unknown' of other communities and I don't just mean nationalists and unionists, I mean migrants too (*Interview 13*).

These opinions speak to the very premise of contact theory, which argues that the more social groups are in contact with one another, the higher the likelihood of reducing 'prejudice attitudes and [alleviating] racial and ethnic division' (Hayes et al., 2007, p. 454). No other participants alluded to the perceived benefits of integration, despite their positive experiences of it.

A second group of participants can be identified based on their declarations of multiple cross-community friendships of varying origins. Two participants spoke about the fact that they came from a mixed family, and therefore they were mixing with members of both communities and exposed to both cultures from a young age. The first participant recalled that because their parents had a "mixed marriage" and although sometimes it was hard to navigate this growing up, it meant that they were "always encountering people from different communities and backgrounds". They continued, "So aye I do enjoy meeting different people, love a wee bit of community relations so I do" (*Interview 13*). The second participant from a mixed family described their exposure to different cultural expressions growing up:

> I'm a loyalist but my grandparents are mixed so I'd go to one Granny's house and there would be pictures of the Pope, and then my other Granny's house would be covered in Union Jack bunting around the 12th so it was a bit mad but I've always been around both communities (*Interview 12*).

For some the opportunity arose from their experience of integrated education for example, "I went to an integrated school, so I met a lot of my friends through that and they're from different communities" (*Interview 13*) and "My school is mixed so most of my mates are different to me like they're Catholic and Muslim and all. It doesn't really come into our friendship" (*Interview 18*). A participant from a nationalist background who did not go to an integrated school but who had been involved in "shared education programmes" said "I have loads of friends that are Protestants from like east Belfast and Coleraine that I met through shared education programmes, or them peace programmes that young people can do. They were good experiences, and everyone got along" (*Interview 10*). Another participant from the loyalist community also spoke about their experience of peace projects and camps where they had met "a load of Republicans and

like we've stayed friends and all" (*Interview 12*). The subject of integrated education continues to evoke active lively debate in contemporary Northern Ireland. According to Gallagher of the 320,000 children who attend school in Northern Ireland, only 22,000 of them attend an integrated school, which is approximately only 7 per cent of students (2019, p. 6). Research has shown that attending an integrated school has 'positive long-term benefits in promoting a less sectarian stance on national identity and constitutional preferences' (Hayes et al., 2007, p. 454). Though participants did not connect their attendance at an integrated school with their views on identity or the constitutional question, it was clear that they considered it to be a positive experience that resulted in having a more diverse group of friends.

Other participants recalled meeting young people from different backgrounds through socialising, mutual interests, and hobbies, for example, "Outside of school I play tennis and they're all Protestants. It's not weird or anything, we're just playing tennis and identity doesn't come into it" (*Interview 16*) and "There's a bunch of us that run this wee climate change group and its cross-community" (*Interview 10*). One participant referred to "creative shared spaces" saying that, "I've always just run around with people that had the same interests as me so music and art. And it doesn't matter who you were, what side of the water you were from. They were creative shared spaces" (*Interview 6*). These extracts depict a civil society enjoyed by young people in Northern Ireland that is 'comparable to that of their contemporaries who live in other, more 'mature' political cultures' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 16). Intercommunity friendships were also forged through the use of social media as one participant recalled:

> I have friends from the Shankill and friends from the Bogside. I've met a lot of them on social media like Snapchat and Instagram. Would I have met them otherwise? Naw [no] absolutely not. Like my parents wouldn't have been able to make friends in that way you know. So it's easier now for young people like me to meet loads of different type of people (*Interview 22*).

Another popular site for intercommunity interaction between young people was at bars and pubs, for example, "After I came out, I started going to gay bars and that's where I'd meet the other side" (*Interview 4*); "I meet loads of young people, I assume from different communities, just in like bars and all drinking pints" (*Interview 12*); and "I had some unreal nights in what would be known as Catholic bars. Imagine I'd never gone out to them bars I'd probably still have never met a Catholic and still be afraid" (*Interview 21*).

One of the most common ways that young people met others from different communities and developed intercommunity friendships was through university. An interesting aspect of this experience is that for most participants, they had not (knowingly) met anyone from a different community until they were aged 17 or older. One participant from a unionist background spoke about this and remarked how it allowed them to grow up fearing the 'other' saying, "I was exposed to difference for the first time when I was 17. I was afraid about what the Catholics were going to be like, because it's just how I was brought up, I never engaged with anyone from the other community up until that point. Bit mad isn't it?" (*Interview 21*). In terms of university, it was common for participants to make statements that spoke to the nature of "just being thrown in together" at university and "just getting on with it", for example: "At uni you're just thrown into halls where you don't know anyone and you don't have a choice but to get along. So that's when I started mingling with other types of people and their identity was never an issue in terms of friendship" (*Interview 5*); "I have a wide diverse group of friends from all over Northern Ireland, but I only met them when I went to uni. Some of my best friends are from areas I absolutely would not have been to growing up" (*Interview 20*); "Before I went to uni would say there was no cross-community mixing for me, and then at uni I met loads of different people through classes and sports teams" (*Interview 25*); and "At uni you're just put into halls with an they're not segregated or anything so you can't avoid it but its grand like, normal once you get over it initially [intercommunity mixing]" (*Interview 27*).

Finally, where participants had experience of cross-community relations, discussions unfolded about how they handled conversations in which community difference and controversial or sensitive issues arose. For most participants their experience of handling difference was largely positive, for example one participant referred to possible antagonisms as having the "craic". They said, "There's no animosity. It's a bit of craic. Like if they call me a hun I'm not going to fall out with them over it because I know they don't mean it and within 20 seconds we'll be chatting about some other shite" (*Interview 5*). Other participants echoed this sentiment saying, "We might argue about political things like the constitutional question, but it's always done with respect" (*Interview 10*) and "Conversations might get heated but it's always respectful. Like I wouldn't just go "Oh you love the 'RA" if they tell me they are a republican. We can have differences and not throw shade" (*Interview 19*). One participant offered a positive endorsement of the

Good Friday Agreement more generally regarding their ability to deal with and accept difference. They said:

> I think something that is really good about our generation is that we're a lot less tense. I just feel like you're able to have a discussion with somebody and you're able to have conflicting views with them, and that's OK and yous can still be friends. If my friend says to me "Up the Ra" or whatever, I'm like right OK I don't agree with that but I'm not going to not be their friend anymore (*Interview 27*).

A small minority of participants did recount more negative experiences in some of their cross-community interactions, including from people that they were well acquainted with. One participant from the republican community recalled, "I worked with a Protestant loyalist in a clothes shop, and I thought we were friends but on a drunken night out she said to me "but you're a fucking Catholic, you're Irish" and I was honestly so shocked. I never really forgot it and we're not really friends anymore" (*Interview 2*). Another participant, from a unionist background, provided insight into their experience of sectarianism and prejudice in the gay community. They said:

> But you know, although we all identify under the rainbow, there is sectarianism in the gay community as well. I mean, I've had republicans, you know, as soon as they find out you're a unionist or a member of the UUP they say nope … it is quite annoying, because I mean, the gay community of all communities should know about prejudice and they're exercising it themselves (*Interview 4*).

Despite these experiences which were in the minority, overall, participants' experiences of cross-community relations were overwhelmingly positive, which contrasts to Morrow's finding that 'devolution has been accompanied by greater pessimism' that intergroup relations will improve in the future (2015, p. 1). It may also be a surprise that most participants recalled such positive experiences of cross-community relations and indicated their indifference to others, given the recent well documented rise in societal and intercommunal tension in Northern Ireland in the wake of Brexit and the unresolved issue of the protocol. These issues will be returned to later in Chapter Seven, where some tensions among participants do arise in relation to Brexit leading to a united Ireland. However, in terms of cross-community relations, these issues did not seem to negatively impact the experiences of some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation.

Topic 2: The past and the present

The Good Friday Agreement is often criticised for not addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent conflict and not providing a pathway to 'deal with the past'. Discussion of whether this is a fair criticism or not does not belong here, suffice to say the point is that there is overwhelming consensus that Northern Ireland continues to suffer from the legacy of the past. Discussions on why this is the case and who is to blame are also unnecessary here, but it seems reasonable to claim that it is possible that no unanimous agreement will ever be reached. The idea that Northern Ireland continues to suffer from the legacy of its past speaks to the confluence of the past and the present, and how they continue to overlap and interact, impacting the everyday lives of people in Northern Ireland. Members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are no exception to this. The topic of the past and the present is explored here through three themes which were developed from the relevant data extracts. The first theme how young people have come to understand the Troubles, the second theme highlights the different conceptualisations of reconciliation among young people, and the third theme looks at young people's reflections on the current state of affairs in Northern Ireland.

Theme 1: The Troubles as an emotive topic

It is widely accepted that there is no agreed narrative amongst the conflict generation when it comes to Northern Ireland's past, and members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are no different. When discussing the Troubles with young people, there was a variety of responses in terms of their approaches and understandings. The question that was asked was intentionally open ended, and most participants voluntarily pivoted around whether violence was ever justified. However, the shared meaning implicit in the extracts, despite different opinions on the past, was that the Troubles continues to be a sensitive subject that evokes a myriad of emotions, even for those who were born after the Troubles ended. There was a small minority of participants who chose not to comment on the past, citing their lack of political upbringing, or the fact that they were not alive and therefore felt they were in no position to comment. Even still, there was a recognition by these participants that the Troubles was an emotional and subject for many others. Some participants who did not express an opinion felt it was appropriate given that they did not experience the Troubles directly, for example, "I'm part of the *post* [emphasis added] Good Friday Agreement generation and I don't have an emotional connection to the

Troubles, but I know that the older generation do. I wasn't there so I can't sit here now and say things were right or wrong (*Interview 19*) and "I wasn't alive so I don't want to pass comment because if I did it would be me sitting here in a privileged position of peace, maybe because of what people did and had to suffer through back then" (*Interview 25*).

Others who did not pass comment on the Troubles referenced their family life growing up and how it was apolitical in nature, or the simple fact that their parents did not talk about the Troubles, for example: "I didn't grow up with Troubles chat or even politics at the dinner table. My parents weren't on one particular side, so I don't have strong opinions" (*Interview 3*); "I never grew up knowing the craic about the RA or loyalists or anything. I was very sheltered from that whole lifestyle, so I don't really know: (*Interview 6*); "I lived a very sheltered life with my parents, they did not talk about the Troubles and so I don't really either or know much" (*Interview 11*); and "I grew up in the country and everyone just sort of got on with what they had to do and well my parents would never have talked about it. Maybe they didn't want me to know much about it" (*Interview 23*).

Most participants did however want to discuss the Troubles. This complements the findings of the think tank *Pivotal* which revealed in a June 2023 study that 83.6% of their participants (aged 14-25) recognised that it is important for young people to be engaged with Northern Ireland's past and to learn about it (*Pivotal,* 2023, p. 09*).* Those who were sympathetic regarding the events that unfolded referred to them as happening in a very "specific context" and mentioned provocation as well as self-defence in trying to understand, and justify, why ordinary people (not state forces) resorted to violence, for example: "I think the Troubles was a very unique situation so in some ways some crime was justified. Like if you committed crimes out of self-defence then that makes sense" (*Interview 9*); "I kind of don't blame anyone who got caught up in the conflict. If people are telling you the IRA or UDA are going to kill your family and you think it's true, then of course you're going to want to defend them" (*Interview 14*); and "I wouldn't really blame the likes of the paramilitaries in Derry because I think they were reacting with emotion after the likes of Bloody Sunday. The actions of the British Army is a whole other fucking thing but that's for another day" (*Interview 24*).

In explaining their more sympathetic views regarding the Troubles and the resort to violence by some, a small minority of participants were open in discussing the direct experiences their families had of the conflict, namely through the active role played by their fathers and grandfathers, for example: “My Daddy and Granda were involved in the IRA and they were imprisoned. I’m pure [very] anti-war by the way, but I just try to sympathise with what people went through back in the day and try and understand without criticising” (*Interview 10*) and “I grew up in a republican household. My father was a member of the provisional IRA. So aye [yes], I think they were justified and I would commemorate members of the provisional IRA and I have had no issue saying that” (*Interview 2*). Another participant reflected:

> Look, I'm a child of a republican ex-prisoner. My Da was in jail for 12 years total. I just think that it was so completely different back then and violence was all my community had to protect themselves. Did the threat require the response? Well my Ma was burnt out of her home, and from the bedroom I’m in now, I can see a spot where 3 IRA men were massacred and I go to commemorations for those three boys every year. So aye, I do think it was justified *(F24 IRA #8).*

In total contrast to the above extracts, many participants were critical of the Troubles and the role that violence played, expressing their distain and in some cases anger, for example, “Whether during the Troubles or not, in my eyes it’s still a crime if you go out and shoot somebody” (*Interview 12*); “I think that [violent] behaviour was and still is utterly reckless and so disappointing. Sometimes I find it embarrassing to say I’m from a certain area because it can be known for the terrible things that happened during the Troubles” (*Interview 26*); and “I'd be opposed to IRA terrorism and loyalist terrorism. I don’t agree with killing somebody just because they’re a Catholic or a Protestant. I don't think the lost lives are justified at all” (*Interview 4*).

A small number of participants remarked on what they perceived to be the “glamourisation” of the past and how this made them feel “sick”, “annoyed”, “disturbed” and “uncomfortable”, for example: “I think there's a real problematic glamorization of violence and the “fight for freedom”. But the problem with that is when you’re fighting for freedom, you’re killing someone else so how can that be celebrated or made out to be a story of heroes? It just baffles me” (*Interview 9*). One participant who identified as Northern Irish and were not aligned to any one community directed their criticism of the glamourisation of the Troubles specifically at Sinn Féin. They remarked:

> I don't get the pride that comes with it the way Sinn Fein especially their youth wing flaunt it on Twitter like it's some massive achievement that you killed people or your people got killed. I don't really have any respect for anyone from either side who engaged in violence during the Troubles (*Interview 20*).

Theme 2: There is still a role for reconciliation in contemporary Northern Ireland

Discussions around reconciliation were varied as participants expressed different opinions on conceptualisations of reconciliation, who was responsible for reconciliation and the extent to which it is important in society. That being said, there was an underlying unifying concept among the relevant data extracts, which was that despite different approaches to and opinions on reconciliation, for members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, reconciliation still has a role in contemporary Northern Ireland. Given that the data extracts grapple with different meanings of reconciliation, this research will use the most basic definition, so as not to compete with the extracts or to be seen to be offering up an alternative view. As a starting point in the discussion, reconciliation can be understood as 'the process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships' (*Special European Union Programmes Body,* 2021).

Most participants felt that reconciliation was still vitally important in today's society. Some explanations that were offered included: "Extremism is bleeding down into my generation and younger with the likes of Saoradh in Londonderry. Until people stop repeating mistakes of the past reconciliation will still be relevant" (*Interview 4*); "We're still so segregated and grow up in one community without knowing the other community and then think they're the bogeyman. How else can we move on from that cycle if we don't reconcile?" (*Interview 5*); "We're still struggling to move on so reconciliation is still so important if we're going to make progress. It's a work in progress and the more we emphasis reconciliation the less chance people will grow up with fear and sectarianism" (*Interview 3*); "Working on reconciliation will allow the new generation to steer the country in the right direction. It will teach them the importance of remembering the past but as well how to move on from any lingering bitterness" (*Interview 26*); and "Yeah, I think it is important because there is still that legacy of, you know, loyalists and dissident violence that's being passed down three or four different generations and even just hatred other for other side being passed down in families" (*Interview 9*).

Other participants did think reconciliation was important, but they expressed doubt over how much time, space and energy it should occupy in contemporary Northern Ireland. They offered various reasons for this, including their families being unaffected by the Troubles, for example, "The Troubles never affected me or my family directed. So that's why I have the opinion of just draw a line under it and move on because all anyone seems to do is go back and forth and it gets us nowhere" (*Interview 22*). The sentiment expressed at the end of this extract was common among other participants, that focusing too much on reconciliation could jeopardise society's, specifically their generation's, ability to progress and move on from the past, for example: "When are we going to draw the line with the inquiries? Young people are carrying the burden of the past and we weren't even alive. We need to move on, not look back" (*Interview 25*) and "I respect what the older generation went through, but we're here now and we need stuff to happen. We can't keep letting the past define our future or take away from it" (*Interview 7*). Several participants referred to their future and implied their desire, and occasionally it was suggested their right, to have a "fresh start". One participant remarked:

> It [reconciliation] makes us too focused on the past, and that's dangerous because sometimes I think it brings up old emotions and almost reminds people not to get on with a certain group. I think it's a good thing not to think about it too much or know too so can have a fresh start (*Interview 16*).

Related to the notion that members of the Good Friday Agreement generation wanted or were entitled to a "fresh start", some participants were keen to stress exactly *who* reconciliation was relevant to and subsequently who was primarily responsible for it:, namely the "older generation". They remarked:

> Reconciliation and justice and all that stuff is undeniably important but it would be preferrable if the older generation dealt with it, they were the ones alive and I'm afraid our generation is having to pick up the pieces when what we actually want is a fresh start (*Interview 10*).

> It's [reconciliation] important, but not as much for us, more so for the older generations because that's where a lot of young people's knowledge and opinions come from so we need to go back to the ones who were actually affected and then work forward from there (*Interview 23*).

When asked what reconciliation meant and how it could be put into practice, participants articulated a wide range of multifaceted and sometimes unconventional conceptualisations. Very few echoed the more traditional reconciliatory approaches, in

fact there was some criticism, for example, regarding grassroots groups or programmes, one participant said, “Ironically I think the way reconciliation is now, for young people, is like OK you’re only here *because* [emphasis added] you’re a Protestant or *because* [emphasis added] you’re a Catholic. Like that puts people off … it’s too forced” (*Interview 15*). Another participant said:

> It’s not being dealt with the proper way. I don’t think we can rely on 3 week shared education programmes or cross-community summer camps because when people leave these, they leave behind all they were taught. They also sometimes focus too much on differences and then try to build from there and that can be difficult (*Interview 20*).

One participant was ready to move on from the “1998 idea of reconciliation” which they thought focused on “putting the guns down and bringing communities together” and replace it with a more holistic approach:

> Society now doesn’t look like what it did in 1998. When we say reconciliation now, I think what we really mean is social and economic justice. I’m thinking of a woman’s right to choose, rights of Irish language speakers like me, racial equality, climate justice, infrastructure equality, job opportunities and all that jazz. If we get all that then I think we’ll be reconciled with each other (*Interview 8*).

Other participants offered alternate but equally unique approaches to reconciliation today:

> We need to have a wider goal that can’t be claimed by one community so for example mental health, and while on the surface it might seem like reconciliation isn’t relevant to mental health, if through working on your mental health you were making building relationships with people from different communities that were built on trust and respect, then that will contribute to reconciliation in the long run. The point is that the foundation or bond has already been formed over a higher issue or cause (*Interview 20*)

The most frequent suggestion of how reconciliation could be achieved or what it meant in practical terms was a more simplified, smaller scale approach that was incorporated into everyday life, for example, “I think the best thing is just making it part of your everyday life so maybe it's, you go to a bar or a sports match that you normal wouldn’t go to. Then you get chatting to people and get more comfortable” (*Interview 27*); “We just have to talk to people, you know, and keep an open mind to what they say” (*Interview 5*); and “For me it [reconciliation] is having a conversation about anything, with everyone and anyone, you know just having the craic and shooting the breeze about mundane things.

The goal of reconciliation should be to humanise everyone" (*Interview 13*). Given the vibrant and multifaceted discussions surrounding reconciliation, as evidence by the data extracts above, it could be argued that consociationalism, despite the argument that it entrenches and exaggerates divisions, has not prevented members of the Good Friday Agreement generation from engaging with issues of reconciliation. By its very nature, reconciliation involves antagonistic communities or groups reaching out to one another with the aim of righting wrongs, that is improving relations and society more generally. If consociationalism was embedding sectarianism and division among young people, perhaps they would not be as interested in reconciliation, and adapting the concept to what they view to be the most pressing needs among their generation and society as a whole.

Theme 3: Northern Ireland as purgatory

This theme captures how participants feel about the current state of affairs in Northern Ireland. Although participants emphasised different concerns and different events, the shared meaning across the data extracts was that things are rather bleak in Northern Ireland right now, and it is hard to be hopeful because of the long periods of stasis. This complements one of the findings of the 2023 Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey, which reported that 43% of their respondents felt that community relations had not changed, that is, had not improved, in the last five years (YLT Survey, 2023, p. 3). During each semi structured interview, the existing state of affairs in Northern Ireland was not asked about explicitly, but quite often the conversation led to a short discussion or a general remark on the topic. Almost all of the participants that voluntarily talked about the current state of community relations were generally negative, with the exception of two participants who were, in their own words, "oblivious" because they do not " … pay any heed to what's going on …" (*Interview 6*) and the other participant said, "I live in a very rural area and I'm shielded from all that shit" (*Interview 23*). The other exception was one republican participant who expressed some sense of hope, however this was based on the premise that republicans would be running the North, and possibly, though unclear, the insinuation was that there would be a united Ireland. The participant remarked:

> … we'll get a lot stronger with our generation, you know when we become parents and stuff, because we'll teach the children a different way than our parents taught

> us. Like I'd be hopeful religion and segregation wouldn't be as integral to us when we're running the North (*Interview 2*).

Most negativity concerning the current state of affairs centred on the perception that society in Northern Ireland is desensitised. One example of this which was given by multiple participants was the "dark humour" that exists, particularly among their parents' generation, for example: "If I'm complaining about something in the house the response will be "awk wise up that's nothing sure I was held at gun point on my way to school"" (*Interview 9*). One participant recalled their frequent experiences of the dark humour, implying that it was an ordinary part of many of the household conversations. They said:

> Like my Ma and Da will casually talk about horrific things that happened during the Troubles like "yeah, someone was shot over there" or "see that house, the wee boy that lived there blew himself up making a bomb" and someone will reply laughing "he couldn't tie his shoelaces let alone build a bomb", it's all so blasé and off the cuff. It's not normal (*Interview 18*).

These extracts speak to what Coulter et al. refer to as 'Troubles nostalgia' which they claim tends to mostly assume an 'entirely innocent form of expression' (2021, p. 6). Some participants admitted that they too were somewhat desensitised given their infrequent but normalised experience of bomb scares and even explosions, for example: "You'd see that wee bomb robot in the middle of the road and just think awk right aye that wee thing here we go again and I'd just roll my eyes and get on with my day. But like, that's not normal! (*Interview 3*); "There was a time when all the Royal Mail vans were being targeted and blown up and the reaction was more fuck what about my ASOS parcel than anything else" (*Interview 11*); "Sometimes there would be a suspicious vehicle or something parked outside my school that the police would have to investigate and all we care about is if we're going to get time off school rather than if there was going to be an explosion" (*Interview 27*).

Several other participants were more general in setting out why they felt negatively about Northern Ireland in the present day. One participant pointed to the behaviour of people, specifically of politicians, saying, "It's all about being suspicious and jumping to conclusions about people and being adversarial towards them. Then that filters down into an already divided society. It's been that way forever and it doesn't feel like it's going to change anytime soon" (*Interview 1*). One participant recalled his daily experience of

community work, which left them feeling hopeless about the kind of society that young people are growing up in in Northern Ireland. They said:

> Every day the wains [children] will ask me, do you like Celtic or Rangers? Or if I'm gay, or a Protestant or a Fenian, or they'll tell me to fuck off because I'm an outsider - in those words, and they're not even 10 yet. You hear them talking about how they want all the Catholics and Protestants to be kept separate, all while singing songs like "fuck the Pope". I just be thinking to myself like what hope is there if 9 year olds are going on like that? (*Interview 13*).

Several participants also remarked on the lack of progress in Northern Ireland in terms of moving on from the past, for example, "We're so stuck, we're not going anywhere. And we're a couple of generations deep now and we still haven't moved on. Will everything be green and orange forever?" (*Interview 18*). Another participant said:

> We're still a part of a sectarian stagnant society. We're not a peace generation, but one that is continuing a sectarian culture of the past. Sure not that long ago young Catholics and Protestants, like young people, were fighting on the Shankill Road. And it's 2022. This is not peace. This is like purgatory (*Interview 21*).

There are those who will point to the consociational structures as primarily responsible for the current stasis in Northern Ireland. While this might be true at the political level (this will be returned to in Chapter Seven), it is much more difficult to discern consociationalism's role in young people's *emotional* assessment of Northern Ireland as "bleak" and "hopeless", given the variety of factors at play which were referred to in the data extracts. It could be argued however, that the well versed criticisms of consociationalism, including, its preference of accommodation rather than assimilation, its state-centric nature which leads to the exclusion of certain social groups, and its lack of forward-thinking in terms of how to move beyond the ever-luring cycle of stagnation that Northern Ireland has been locked into for the last seven years, has contributed to young people's largely depressing appraisal of present day Northern Ireland.

Summary

This chapter began by detailing the relevance of cross-community relations to consociational thinking and notes that relationships are central to the Good Friday Agreement. A key objective of consociation is to improve relations between antagonistic groups. Its efforts are concentrated at the elite level, and this chapter has explored the possible impact of this on young people and their everyday lives. The topic of 'Self-

identity and the Identity of Others was explored through the following themes: ‘Everyone is different, but we’re all the same’ which illustrated participants’ acknowledgment of difference but their indifference to it; ‘The secularisation of youth’ which highlighted the diminishing role religion plays in participants’ identity; and ‘Intercommunity friendships are no big deal’ which reflects how participant’s viewed cross-communal mixing as (positive) unremarkable and undistinguished affair. The second topic of ‘The Past and the Present’ was explored through the following themes: ‘The Troubles as an emotive topic’ which reflected participants’ acknowledgement that Northern Ireland’s past continues to elicit deep and often upsetting emotions; ‘There is still a role for Reconciliation in contemporary Northern Ireland’ which highlighted participants’ recognition that reconciliation continues to be relevant to and important in Northern Ireland; and ‘Northern Ireland as purgatory’ which illustrated how participant’s felt about community relations in present-day Northern Ireland.

The possible influence of consociationalism in terms of informing and developing young people’s experiences and attitudes was discussed throughout the chapter. Despite consociation’s aim of improving cross-community relations, critics would point to many of its features and principles as doing the complete opposite. The argument could be made that consociationalism’s preoccupation with ethnonational identity has emboldened the dominant binary identities among young people, that its caution around segregation has entrenched both the psychological and spatial division between each other, and that its state-centric nature has marginalised those who sit outside of the ethnonational sphere. However, as illustrated throughout the chapter, these accusations are difficult to prove with any degree of certainty, and with all qualitative research, conclusions from data extracts are open to interpretation. The next chapter will explore young people’s experiences of economic opportunities in Northern Ireland and questions whether the prosperity and peace dividend that was promised as a reward for reaching consociational agreement in 1998, has come to fruition for members of the Good Friday Agreement generation.

Chapter 5

Economic Opportunities

Exploration of the consociational literature does not make obvious the link between consociationalism and economics. A highly plausible reason for this is that since the priority of consociationalism is elite based cross communal powersharing, economics may be considered by some theorists to be separate from this analysis. Although there is evidence of increasing interest in the relationship between consociational powersharing and the economy, specifically in the case of Lebanon (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009; Salti and Chaaban, 2010; Salloukh, 2019; Mahmalat and Zoughaib; 2022), the accusation is made that the role of, or repercussions for, consociational theory is not sufficiently elaborated (Baumann, 2023, p.2). In the case of Northern Ireland, Coulter accused McGarry and O'Leary of having an 'unhealthy preoccupation to attack materialist analyses of the conflict' and instead encouraged a class-based analytical approach to Northern Ireland given the 'critical role that social class plays in the region' (2014, p. 773). The reason for including economic opportunities as a domain in this study when exploring the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism becomes clearer when considering the role of economic issues both before and during the Troubles and in the subsequent peace process.

The first point to note is what sparked the Troubles in the 1960s; it was not nationalists' aspirations of a united Ireland that initiated the conflict, but their grievances about their status as second-class citizens when it came to the distribution of vital resources such as jobs and housing (Finn, 2019, p. 39-48). The second point that illustrates why economic issues are relevant to the discussion in this study is the close association between political violence and economic deprivation during the Troubles. According to Mesev et al. if two maps were drawn, one indicating high levels of poverty and the other indicating fatal incidents during the Troubles, the two images would be roughly indistinguishable (2009, p. 900-1). Related to this, although not everyone was affected equally, it is the case that the region as a whole suffered financially and economically during the conflict. The third point to consider is the fact that the association between political violence and economic

deprivation filtered into the narrative surrounding the peace process (Coulter, 2021, p. 246) as politicians spoke of the prosperity that would accompany peace.

Architects and advocates of the Good Friday Agreement were cognizant that improved economic opportunities, specifically for communities in areas of material deprivation and high levels of violence, would be key to reducing violence and ending the conflict (Coulter, 2021, p. 246-7). Political leaders stressed what they believed to be the economic potential of the Good Friday Agreement; the thinking was that an end to violence would bring about an influx of multinational capital, specially from the US (Coulter, 2021, p. 247), which would in turn create a 'peace dividend' and a substantial boost to the Northern Irish economy. This chapter explores how members of the Good Friday Agreement have experienced the promised 'peace dividend' 25 years later by focusing on three topics related to the economy that are prominent in and relevant to the lives of young people. The first topic is employment and career prospects, and the second topic is university, and the third topic is the 'brain drain' but not in the traditional sense in which it is widely used. The data extracts have been collated according to these topics and in each topic, themes have been generated using reflexive thematic analysis.

Topic 1: Employment and career prospects

The historic economic disadvantages once endured by the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, including job and career opportunities, have been eliminated over the last five decades. One of the key reasons for this was the Good Friday Agreement's endorsement of past and future initiatives promoting fair employment, including legal requirements regarding equality of opportunity and good relations pertaining to people's backgrounds and political opinions (O'Leary, 2019, p. 192-3). This inclusion was a major factor in nationalist endorsement of the Agreement because it promised them equal economic opportunities, as well as political and legal equality. When participants were asked about their experience of the labour market and fulfilling their career ambitions, most felt that availability and possibility was based on the type of job and career field rather than, for example, what community they came from. The exception to this was participants who articulated that certain jobs and careers were off limits to them because of their community background and enduring tensions from Northern Ireland's past. The topic of employment and career prospects is explored here through two themes which

were generated from the relevant data extracts. The first theme explores how different jobs and careers have different levels of availability to young people in Northern Ireland, and the second theme highlights how some participants felt constrained in their job and career options due to certain stigmas stemming from the Troubles.

Theme 1: Needs and ambitions are not adequately served by the current labour market

This theme captures the different experiences participants have had of the labour market in Northern Ireland and whether the region can cater for their career ambitions. Although some participants found gaining employment easier than others, and some felt their careers could be fulfilled while others did not, the implicit unifying concept among the data extracts was that options regarding both employment and career field were dependent on the "type" one was interested in. Most participants with experience in the labour market in Northern Ireland felt that there was sufficient availability of part-time jobs in industries including retail and hospitality, although some did caveat this as having changed somewhat since the coronavirus pandemic. Participants remarked: "I've had a job in retail since I was 16 … if you just look and you aren't picky you'll find one" (*Interview 2*); "I've been grand at getting like you know wee part time hospitality jobs here and there" (*Interview 8*); "Aye for wee part time jobs Northern Ireland is fine, I've had loads of them and got them easy enough" (*Interview 10*); and "I think I've had it easy in terms of jobs, like I have four at the minute. Now the pay isn't great, but I am working" (*Interview 12*).

However, when participants were asked about higher paid and full-time jobs that required critical skills, for example, the responses took a notably negative turn. Concerns about this type of employment was common to almost every young person involved in the research. One participant commented on the length of time it took to get employment despite having attended university, and still they felt that the pay was insufficient. They said:

> So I graduated from university and it took me years to get a full time job. I just work as an administrator so it's not big money, especially if you're a graduate. The opportunities are bad in Northern Ireland, I mean it is the poorest region of the UK, economically, socio-economically, and has the most mental health and most addiction issues. The political instability doesn't help. And I suppose that's really

> just the way it is. I wouldn't know how to transform my prospects living here (*Interview 4*).

Another participant also commented on the issue of (in)sufficient pay, revealing that even young people who are graduates with (multiple) jobs, may still have to rely on the support of their parents to live and survive. They remarked that, "There are jobs, but they just don't pay very well. They're cash in hand or minimum wage and it's not enough to keep yourself, unless you live with your Ma and Da. Most of my friends have two jobs, and they're graduates working 50 hours a week" (*Interview 8*). One participant stood out for their openness in terms of how their experience of Northern Ireland's labour market made them feel, admitting that, "Getting a good job is just really hard. In the last year I've been rejected from about 10 job applications. It's absolutely devastating. I would have said I'd have good communication skills and be useful somewhere, but after all the rejections you do start to doubt yourself all the time" (*Interview 6*). This data complements the finding of *Pivotal's* 2023 study which reported that 62.1% of young respondents agreed there was limited job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland (*Pivotal,* 2023, p. 17).

In 2018 the British Council conducted research into the 'next generation' in Ireland and Northern Ireland and one of the findings was that it was unsurprising that many young people were concerned about their current and prospective employment opportunities given the challenging and complicated era of 'short-term and zero-hour contracts, unpaid internships, and high levels of competition' (Sturgeon and Lucas, 2018, p. 18). This summation can also be applied to this research. It is evident from the extracts that when it comes to employment in Northern Ireland, young people perceive two problems: the first is low pay and the second is a lack of "good jobs" which can be interpreted as meaning full-time, high skill, or good quality jobs. This finding aligns with existing research published on the Northern Irish economy in recent years. It is the case that only a small portion of jobs that have been created in Northern Ireland in the last 25 years are in high-wage, high value-added occupational sectors (Coulter et al, 2021, p. 249). The 2013 Peace Monitoring Report detailed that 60 per cent of jobs that Invest NI had brought to the region were in call centres and among them, 66 per cent offered salaries that were less than the average for the private sector as a whole (Nolan, 2013, p. 25).

The general sense from participants that it is difficult to find appropriate employment, and that they feel disheartened and apprehensive as a result, may initially appear to

contrast with existing employment statistics. Ironically, despite the common sentiment that "there are no jobs in Northern Ireland", in September 2020 statistics revealed that Northern Ireland had the lowest number of unemployed people in the UK (*Office for National Statistics,* 2020, p. 3) and as of February 2023 in the UK 'the largest increase in the employment rate compared with the same period last year was in Northern Ireland', which was up by 3.1 percentage points (*Office for National Statistics,* 2023). Although a deep dive into the specificities of how the Northern Irish labour market measured and quantified is beyond the scope of this study, briefly outlining how the metric of unemployment works is crucial in understanding why and how it produces accounts of economic performance in Northern Ireland that are misleading (Coulter et al, 2021, p. 249). In short, the metric of unemployment documents those who are looking for employment, that is, those who are fit to work, and it does not include those who are not seeking employment because they are unfit for work for various reasons. However, given that Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people of working age who are unable to work due to, for example mental or physical illness, than any other region in the UK (*Joseph Roundtree Foundation,* 2018, p.1), the low unemployment headlines are misleading and do not tell the full story.

Coulter et al. suggest that a more accurate indicator of Northern Ireland's workforce is 'levels of economic activity which estimate those in work as a proportion of the population working age' (16 to 64 years) (2021, p. 246). When this indicator is considered, a less flattering picture of Northern Ireland's workforce is painted. As of February 2023, Northern Ireland's inactivity rate was 26.3% which is marginally higher than any other region in the UK: Wales is just below at 25.5%, with the lowest level of economic activity recorded in Scotland at 20.8% (*Office for National Statistics,* 2023). Regarding young people specifically, the overall picture can be said to improve slightly when looking at the statistics released by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). In November 2022 NISRA revealed that the majority of young people aged between 16 and 24 in Northern Ireland were employed or enrolled in education or training (*NISRA Labour Force Survey,* 2023). The statistics on young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) indicate that between October to December 2022 18,000 young people were NEET, which represents 9 per cent of all people aged between 16 to 24 years. This was significantly lower than the recorded UK figure which 11.6% (*NISRA Labour Force Survey,* 2023). These statistics and the

findings of this research cannot be directly compared or given equal weight for numerous reasons such as the size of the datasets used, the scope of the research projects, the resources available to each, and so on. However, the statistics do provide an insightful backdrop against which the qualitative interviews for this research took place between 2021-22. The statistics supply the general context, and this research presents the experiences of a small dataset within this context.

Along with employment opportunities, some participants spoke specifically about their preferred career paths and many expressed frustration and disappointment because they felt that Northern Ireland could not cater for their goals and ambitions. This complements the finding of *Pivotal's* 2023 study which reported that 39.8% of their young participants found it difficult to progress in the career they want in Northern Ireland (*Pivotal,* 2023, p. 15). One participant spoke about teaching as their chosen profession and said, "Teaching here is a disaster, there is no work like there are literally no permanent jobs for young teachers in Northern Ireland so most of us will get educated here and then have to move away to get a job in education" (*Interview 9*). Another participant made reference to what they believed to be undervalued careers in Northern Ireland saying that "careers in like music or careers that are a bit out there, that you know aren't "taught" in schools aren't encouraged here so we lose that talent. We're good at promoting teachers, lawyers, and medics, but not less obvious ones so in that way I'd feel a bit lost" (*Interview 10*). One participant echoed these sentiments, specifically referring to the private sector, saying that "unless you want to work for PWC or Deloitte, you're screwed like there's nothing else for you" (*Interview 18*). A final participant who had a degree in French remarked that they "didn't know what to do with it here. There's not a lot of opportunities linked with languages here, too small and insular I think" (*Interview 3)*.

Invest NI lists 13 industry sectors in Northern Ireland including: advanced manufacturing and engineering; aerospace and defence; construction; creative technology; financial services; food and drink; global business services; green economy and renewable energy; life and health sciences; materials handling; professional and legal services; technology; and tourism (www.investni.com). From this it seems reasonable to claim that Northern Ireland offers a wide variety of industry sectors, a claim that participants were not denying. What participants expressed rather, was that certain sectors are less represented or "valued" than others, and the statistics regarding what percentage of employment

certain sectors account for appear to reflect this finding. For example, in line with participants asserting that careers in hospitality or retail are relatively easy to come by, the services sector reached a new high in December 2022 employing 660,170 people (NISRA, 2023b). Furthermore, the private sector accounted for 587,750 jobs in the same month and the public sector accounted for 223,000 jobs (NISRA, 2023b). The most recent statistics regarding other sectors, 'including arts, entertainment and recreation and other services' revealed that combined they accounted for an estimated 31,000 employees in 2021 (NISRA, 2022b). This is a significant decrease in the employment accounted for by other sectors, which is mirrored in the experiences and concerns of some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation that took part in this research.

Other participants were less apprehensive about job opportunities or career possibilities, and more concerned with what they perceived to be a lack of opportunity to progress and "move up the ladder" within certain careers once employed. All of these participants felt that other countries would provide the possibility of progression where Northern Ireland could or would not. For example, participants remarked: "There are good jobs, but Northern Ireland doesn't really offer you that way of sort of stepping up, you sort of get to a certain point and then you probably need to go away to get taken a step up in a career and earn more" (*Interview 20*); "I think Northern Ireland limits your ceiling, like how far you can go, whereas in other places the possibilities seem endless and that's more attractive for young people" (*Interview 25*); and "There's so much more opportunity for progression over in England like I could be a Head Teacher in five or six years but here it would take me about 25 years no joke" (*Interview 9*). Participants did not divulge why they think there are limits to career progression in Northern Ireland, for example, there was no suggestion of a culture of nepotism or internal hiring, which likely would be fervently denied by employers.

Existing research does however reinforce the sentiments in the data extracts above. Firstly, regarding participants' perception that working the same job in a different country is more advantageous; there is some proof that is accurate when looking at the statistics regarding salaries. NISRA (2022) revealed that in April 2022 the median annual earnings for full-time employees in Northern Ireland was £30,000 but, in the UK, this number was £33,000. Furthermore, weekly earnings in Northern Ireland were £48 below the UK average in the same year (NISRA, 2022). In 2019, NISRA also recorded that 'gross

weekly wages in the private sector in Northern Ireland were 16 per cent behind the rest of the UK' (NISRA, 2019). Secondly, regarding participants' views on opportunities for career progression, this is used by NISRA as one of eight indicators of work quality in Northern Ireland. The statistics echo the concerns of some of the participants in this study, revealing that career progression was consistently one of the hardest work quality indicators to achieve between 2020 and 2022, with less than 60 per cent of employees meeting the criteria in 2022 (NISRA, 2023c).

Theme 2: Legacy of the Troubles

That Northern Ireland's past continues to permeate its present is not an extraordinary or new observation, however the idea that emotional and or material remnants of the Troubles prevents members of the Good Friday Agreement generation from applying to certain jobs or pursuing certain career paths is perhaps underappreciated. Although participants alluded to different reasons for not applying to certain jobs or careers in Northern Ireland, namely that it was unsafe, unattractive, or unsuitable, the shared meaning among the relevant data extracts was that it was the lingering legacy of the Troubles that was the source of perceived danger and subsequent limitations. The first reason was offered by a participant who felt it was unsafe to pursue their chosen career path in Northern Ireland:

> I'm doing forensic science and I want to go into counterterrorism and I just thought maybe it wasn't the best place to pursue that career. Even when I did work experience at Magillian prison and the CSI unit in Maydown[4] I was really really paranoid after it that like someone would come to my home or do something to my family. 17 year old me was terrified. So that's why I left. It wouldn't be worth the hassle staying, like being afraid people would find out I worked with the police or British government and my kids would have to lie about my job. That's not how I want to live my life (*Interview 22*).

A second participant suggested that Northern Ireland was an unattractive place to work in their chosen field because of the "roundabout whataboutery" that often defines public discourse relating to Northern Ireland's history. They said: …

> I want to be a historian or researcher in a museum. Northern Ireland probably seems like a good place to do this but for me there was no question, I have no intention of working here and going over the same debates and fallouts. It would

[4] Maydown Police Station in Strathfoyle, County Londonderry

> be too frustrating and depressing. I want to go work somewhere that history isn't about he said she said or themins [them] versus us (*Interview 26*).

Finally, one participant felt constrained by identity politics in Northern Ireland and as a result felt that it would be an unsuitable place for them to pursue their career ambitions of "political consultancy". They said "… well because of my name and where I'm from it would be like I'd have a big label across my forehead saying what side I was on and so that would limit what party I could work for and who I'd get a job with. Better to go somewhere else where sides aren't so obvious or important" (*Interview 18*). In existing research it is often the case that the legacy of the Troubles is one of the prominent reasons for young people choosing to leave Northern Ireland (this research is no exception). However, there is little research exploring the relationship between the legacy of the past and young people's attitude towards certain jobs. In other words, how does Northern Ireland's conflict influence young people's willingness to do certain jobs or enter specific career fields? More research needs to be carried out to generate sufficient empirical evidence to answer this question fully. The exception to this is notably young people and jobs within the PSNI, which will be returned to in Chapter 6.

One observation relating to the topic of employment opportunities and career possibilities, and relevant across the two themes, is that there was no differentiation between participants in relation to their community backgrounds. In other words, participants from both the dominant communities, and those who identify as non-aligned, shared similar experiences of the labour market in Northern Ireland. This research therefore reflects to some extent the transformation of Northern Ireland society in terms of the 'economic disparities that once marked the sectarian divide but have been all but ameliorated' (Coulter et al., 2021, p11-2). However, that does not mean that economic opportunities are in abundance for members of the Good Friday Agreement generation from either or all communities; overall the data extracts are rather defeatist in tone and depict a less than desirable situation in which Northern Ireland is 'the site of a low-wage' and 'low-output economy' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 12).

That the Northern Irish economy can be defined in this way 25 years after the promised prosperity that was to follow the signing of the Good Friday Agreement owes much to economic policies that were adopted in both Westminster and Stormont after 1998. While the Good Friday Agreement represents a liberal consociation in the sense that it does not

prevent voluntary integration nor does it oblige voters to vote within their own bloc (O'Leary, 2019, p. 11, 198), the economic policies have been neoliberal in nature. This, according to MacGinty (2008), has meant that ostensible political progress has not coincided with economic progress for the majority of the population. In agreement with MacGinty, Coulter et al. claim that the pursuit of neoliberal economics during the peace process has 'merely served to widen the already stark material inequalities that mark Northern Irish society' (2021, p. 12). An in-depth analysis of these neoliberal economic policies is beyond the scope of this study; however, a brief overview helps make sense of why some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are rather defeatist when it comes to employment opportunities and career prospects.

Between 2002 and 2007 when consociational powersharing was suspended, *New* Labour under Tony Blair extended its economic policy to Northern Ireland which was underpinned by an enthusiasm for the spirit and demands of private business (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 254). This saw the establishment of the Strategic Investment Board in 2003 which was tasked with securing private investors for public infrastructure projects which previously was exclusively the responsibility of the state (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 251). When Stormont was restored in 2007, the DUP and Sinn Fein surprisingly agreed and proved willing to continue with the neoliberal strategies that the Labour Party had set for them in the years previous (Hughes, 2019). In the unprecedented decade of sustained consociation in Northern Ireland between 2007 and 2017, despite continuing to bicker over ethno-national issues such as flags and contested marches, when it came to economic policy the DUP and Sinn Fein were increasingly in sync when it came to their enthusiasm for the free market (Kelly, 2012, p. 45). In other words, the focus of the governing parties in Stormont was Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) and luring multinational corporations to Northern Ireland, that is, free market economics. The result of these free-market strategies, for people on the ground, is that communities that need investment the most, namely those who suffered the most during the Troubles, remain impoverished to this day and continue to fall further behind (MacGinty, 2006; Coulter et al., 2021).

Topic 2: University

The second topic covered in this chapter focusing on economic opportunities pivots to participants who attended, currently attend, or plan to attend, university or further education colleges. There are three universities in Northern Ireland, as well as two university colleges, six further education colleges, and an agri-food and land-based college (www.nidirect.gov.uk). The higher-level education sector has at times, like most aspects of Northern Irish society, been unable to escape the perils of the past and has been embroiled in a number of related controversies; from the Coleraine University debacle in 1968 to accusations of 'cold houses' for certain communities and the present-day campaign to expand Magee University campus in Derry. What is of interest here is not why participants choose higher education or what their experience was or is like, for that could be an entirely separate study. Rather the focus is on young people's chosen location to pursue their higher education, that is whether they stayed in Northern Ireland or left and why. The topic of university is explored here through two themes which were generated from the relevant data extracts. The first theme highlights how some young people stayed or plan to stay in Northern Ireland to attend university either for practical or financial reasons, and the second theme illustrates how most participants left or plan to leave Northern Ireland to attend university because they either wanted to explore new or horizons, or "get out".

Theme 1: Needs must

This theme was generated from the data extracts of a small minority of participants who stayed or plan to stay in Northern Ireland for university, and although the reason for this varied, the implicit common meaning across the relevant extracts was that participants felt they had no choice. For some participants, they felt they had to stay in Northern Ireland to attend university for practical reasons such as course availability, keeping their part-time job and to be close to family members. For others, there were financial considerations involved including the cost of living a well as tuition fees. One participant said:

> I'm at Queens and the biggest reason for that decision was the financial aspect of it. Fees were less expensive at the time than going away and the cost of living was cheaper here too so that was the biggest deciding factor for me, that it would cost me less to stay in Northern Ireland for my uni years (*Interview 25*).

Another participant was keen to make it clear that "sectarianism and community relations didn't come into my head when I was deciding honestly", they continued, "I hadn't really

given it much thought and then when I started looking into it and thinking about living costs, housing, flights, ferries, and stuff for travelling back and forth, staying here made more sense, it was cheaper. I just weighed up what was realistic and practical for me" (*Interview 23*). However, as will be discussed in the following theme, this participant was in the minority in stating that issues of sectarianism and community relations was not a consideration when deciding whether to stay or leave Northern Ireland to attend university.

Interestingly, there is conflicting research surrounding young people and 'educational migration' (*Pivotal,* 2021b). In this study, participants that chose to stay in Northern Ireland for university represented a small minority. This finding aligns with several existing studies. One example is research conducted by FitzGerald and Morgenroth in 2020 who found that Northern Ireland has 'suffered a significant outflow of school leavers aged 19 to 21 as they go to study in third level institutions in Great Britain' (2020, p. 76). A second example is research conducted by *Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI* in March 2021 which found that a 'concerning' high number of students leaving to study elsewhere (*Pivotal,* 2021). However, research carried out by NISRA in 2022 claimed that most Northern Ireland domiciled students study in Northern Ireland, with the proportion studying in Great Britain having decreased slightly from the previous year. The report recorded that of the 65,454 Northern Irish domiciled students enrolled at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 2020/21, 75 per cent (48,920) were enrolled at Northern Irish HEIs (NISRA, 2022c, p.3). One reason for this could be the impact of the coronavirus pandemic; when NISRA's research was carried out, society was in the throes of another national lockdown which prohibited the free movement of people. However, when the research for this study was taking place, the worst of the COVID-19 restrictions were over, and borders were opening again. Perhaps being told to stay in Northern Ireland for two years made members of the Good Friday Agreement generation keen to leave. An enthusiasm to leave Northern Ireland for university was overwhelmingly expressed by participants in this research, which will be discussed in the following theme.

Theme 2: An opportunity to see what lies beyond Northern Ireland

The participants in this theme left or planned to leave Northern Ireland to attend university and although the data extracts reveal two main reasons for this decision, the underlying unifying concept among the extracts was that there is a time when the home

nest must be flown and when the opportunity to do so arises, it should be "grabbed with both hands". The first reason for educational migration centred on the inoffensive and uncontroversial grounds of the size of the region, that it was too small, and the desire to broaden horizons. Common sentiments among participants were: "I wanted to spread my wings beyond Northern Ireland, sure it'll always be home. It's a good place to grow up, but a great please to leave as well" (*Interview 3*); "I want to leave just because it's pure [very] small like Belfast is so close to Derry. The world is so big, and I want uni to be something completely different. I want a change and a challenge I guess" (*Interview 16*); and "I just think uni is a great chance to explore and see what else is out there, and then if you want you can come back when you're finished so may as well take the opportunity" (*Interview 27*). It is not uncommon for young people to have strong desires to leave home, to explore 'the great unknown' and to be curious about what exists beyond their home comforts.

The second reason for leaving or planning to leave Northern Ireland to attend university was articulated by the overwhelming majority of participants who discussed this topic. The second reason was that Northern Ireland's past was often present in their contemporary lives. The past was negatively impacting on young people's experiences, and therefore they wanted to "break free" as one participant put it. Some participants were exasperated by the prominent role that identity continues to play in Northern Irish society and expressed their desire to avoid interactions underpinned by this issue. One participant said:

> I'm leaving for Glasgow in September. I didn't want to go to Belfast and meet people and say I'm [name] and I'm a loyalist and then bang, be judged, put in that tiny box and labelled forever. I want to go and study politics where it's not just going to be about predictable green and orange debates. I probably won't come back either and I say that with pride (*Interview 12*).

Another participant who had already left Northern Ireland echoed these sentiments by saying:

> I always wanted to go as far away as I could. I really just wanted to get away from all the same old shite. That sounds really bad. But every night out to be asked are you from Derry or Londonderry, I'd just had enough of it, I haven't been asked that once here [Newcastle, England] and it's so refreshing (*Interview 22*).

Some participants made explicit reference to sectarianism as their principal motivation for leaving for university. The accusations of sectarianism were not however levelled generally at society, but rather the divisions that exist among political and educational institutions. One participant said:

> I want to be a teacher but that career is a good example of why Northern Ireland is annoying. We have two sectarianised universities: the Catholic teachers go to St Marys and the Protestant teachers go to Stranmillis. I don't know if I'd feel comfortable or welcomed going to St Mary's even though I'm not from like a DUP boom boom boom unionist background (*Interview 17*).

This participant refers to the two teaching colleges in Belfast, St Marys College and Stranmillis College, and although many would disagree with the participants allegation of sectarianism, they do bring an interesting point to the fore. Segregated education requires the 'duplication of facilities' across Northern Ireland for 'parallel Catholic and Protestant schools' (FitzGerald and Morgenroth, 2020, p. 76). Although both teaching colleges welcome students from every background, Catholic primary schools require a certification in Catholic religious education in order to obtain employment. To preserve the relevant denominational ethos, fair employment laws currently do not apply to the recruitment of teachers on religious grounds. As a result, very few Protestant teachers are employed at Catholic schools or Catholic teachers in many Protestant schools (Milliken et al., 2019).

Another participant levelled their criticisms at what they perceived to be the sectarianism that often defines politics in Northern Ireland, which they felt was not reflective of "normal" political systems or institutions and would negatively impact their learning experience at university. They said:

> Unfortunately, I do see myself leaving here to go to university. Staying here doesn't appeal to me. I want to study politics … and I want a learning experience of politics that isn't tainted by sectarianism. Like I want to learn how 'normal' politics is done and not just talk about green and orange all the time it's so depressing *(Interview 21).*

Other participants levelled more general accusations against Northern Ireland as influencing their desire to leave for university, for example: "I want to leave … it's partly to do with the people I just think everyone is while [very] bitter and there's a lot of unspoken resentment. Sometimes you can't explain it, but it's just always tense or

something" (*Interview 7*); "I definitely want to go away … we are sort of backward and still stuck in a 'Troubles' world so I'll go away and start over" (*Interview 11*); and "I just think Northern Ireland is such a small and judgemental place like you're judged all the time from your name, where you live and what school you went to. I don't think it'll be like that over there [Scotland]" (*Interview 12*). Poor community relations and the sectarian divide was the most influential factor in participants' decision to emigrate for education. This finding corresponds with the findings of other research such as *Pivotal* (2021b), which found that participants' decision to leave was impacted by their lack of confidence that poor community relations and political instability could ever change (*Pivotal,* 2021b, p. 7). Other motivations to leave for university that might have been anticipated such as graduate opportunities or the caps on university places in Northern Ireland were not mentioned by participants. Interestingly, the participants who explicitly stated that political instability influenced their desire or decision to leave were in the minority. That said, it can be inferred from many of the extracts that the issue of political instability was implicit in their frustration with Northern Ireland in general.

Whilst it is undoubtedly a good fit for some young people, the difficulty with the sheer number of young people emigrating for educational purposes is that they might not come back, in fact many graduates do not return. According to the Department for the Economy (2018) in 2016/17 an average of 64 per cent of students from Northern Ireland who left to pursue their studies had not returned to the region to find employment six months after their graduation. This means highly skilled graduates are not bringing back their experience and expertise to help transform Northern Ireland's economy. According to FitzGerald and Morgenroth if 'Northern Irish graduates living abroad could be persuaded to return it could make a big difference to productivity performance in Northern Ireland' (2020, p. 81). By way of concluding their study on educational migration of young people, *Pivotal* (2021b) makes seven policy recommendations all with the collective purpose of encouraging young people to stay in Northern Ireland to study. Examples of the policy recommendations include an Executive strategy to address the ongoing loss of talent; acknowledgment by society of the role of poor community relations in young people's decision to leave; progressive politics beyond ethno-national matters; and an Executive led review of the funding of Higher Education (*Pivotal*, 2021b, p. 15).

Topic 3: The Brain Drain

The discourse surrounding emigration of young people is habitually concerned with the loss of those who are considered to be highly skilled or highly educated. The discussion in the theme above is no exception. The concern with losing the best and brightest from society and from the economy, forms the very basic premise of the phenomenon known as the 'brain drain'. Definitions of the brain drain that dominate popular discourse include the departure from one country to another of large numbers of 'educated and skilled people' (*Cambridge Dictionary,* 2023), 'educated and professional people' (*The Britannica Dictionary,* 2023), and, most specifically, 'scientists or academics' (*Collins Dictionary,* 2023). This research finds these definitions to be inherently problematic; they are at best narrow minded and at worst classist, implying that only the middle and upper classes have something worthwhile to contribute to society. Problematising the concept of the brain drain speaks to a wider debate about the human capital of skilled workers versus 'unskilled workers' *(Academy for Social Change*, 2021) and the conviction that 'unskilled' worders are less valuable to society and the economy. The insinuation is that the loss of highly educated and skilled people is greater than the loss of someone with less skills and qualifications. Not only is this arguably an outdated principle given the variety of jobs required to make the economy work, it is also highly detrimental to people's sense of self-worth and purpose.

Therefore, this study reconceptualises the notion of the brain drain and implements a much wider definition to also include those who are not 'highly trained' or 'highly qualified'. Here, brain drain will refer to the migration of young people of all skills, talents, qualifications, interests, and backgrounds. It is not in the interest of this study to determine that the loss of a biochemist for example is worse than the loss of a refuse collector. The point here is to explore the meaning behind youth migration, that is, why a young person of any dispensation chooses to leave Northern Ireland, or alternatively why they choose to stay. Using the data extracts related to young migration, two themes have been generated, each of which will be discussed in turn. Given the frequency with which the 'brain drain' in the traditional sense is referred to by observers of Northern Ireland, it may be surprising that a significant number of participants said they will not leave Northern Ireland and set up a life elsewhere. There were also, however, several

participants who had migrated or were planning to migrate for various reasons. These participants were resolute in their decision and had no intentions of "looking back".

Theme 1: There's no place like home

This theme captures the affection that a significant number of participants expressed for Northern Ireland as a whole and their hometowns and cities. All of these participants have chosen to stay in Northern Ireland; some of them are not opposed to migrating, whereas others would not even contemplate the idea. Two main reasons for staying in Northern Ireland were inferred from the data extracts, but the shared meaning among them is that Northern Ireland is home and there is no place quite like it. This echoes the finding of the 2023 Young Life and Times Survey which reported that 64% of their respondents felt a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland (YLT, 2023, p. 3). The first motivation that influenced some participants' decision to stay in Northern Ireland was the belief that they could be a force for good in society; the phrases 'be the change you want to see in the world' and 'if not me, then who?' come to mind. One participant expressed their belief in their generation to make positive change to the local economy in Derry and gave examples of successful local youth-led businesses. What is notable from this extract is that this participant was choosing to stay in Northern Ireland despite receiving opposite advice from their parents. They said:

> My parents would always say get yourself out of here, they don't think it can be fixed but I think my generation can change that 'get out' narrative and its already happening in Derry like there are so many young people behind successful businesses like Storefront, Sass and Halo, Han, and it is amazing to see. So I think my generation actually want to make the best of Derry, like we are so passionate about where we come from and we have to use that as a force for good (*Interview 2*).

Other participants admitted that the societal divisions and political stalemates created a temptation to leave, but their desire to make positive change in Northern Ireland, and the guilt they would feel if they "walked away", prevented them from doing so. One participant classified themselves as a "youthful optimist" and continued by saying "I think I can make change at some stage. I know other people are like, that's not my issue, but I think everyone can and should do something" (*Interview 19*). Other participants shared this sentiment:

> For a really long time I wanted to leave, I wanted to move away and just ditch it all, I just hated everything about the place. But if I move away I'll be the one responsible for the fact that my sister's kids are still living in Northern Ireland that's divided with loads of problems and no government you know, so I just don't really want to have that on my shoulders. I don't want to be sitting in some other country enjoy myself and then think you know, everyone else is still at home kind of suffering (*Interview 14*).

> I am dying to get out. But then at the same time there is change I want to make, I want to be able to say someday I made the place better whether that's the education system or that I got a bus after 6pm in South Armagh it would be worth it. So I feel this responsibility to do something good, you know? (*Interview 18*).

The second reason why some participants were choosing to stay in Northern Ireland was due to their genuine fondness for the region. One participant from a Protestant unionist background liked the familiarity of Northern Ireland, so much that they "want to remain even if there was a united Ireland [laughs]". They continued, "I wouldn't move away. I like Northern Ireland, I like the parochial sense of it, it's quite small and its sort of what I'm used to, and I like being around my own people, I like being around people from Northern Ireland" (*Interview 4*). Reference to the nature and spirit of the people in Northern Ireland, particularly their sense of humour, was common among participants, and often the point was made that this applied to people from across all communities, for example: "I do just like being around any person from this island, so not just like from my own community. I do think we have a common sense of humour that maybe people across the pond don't have. It's just home" (*Interview 15*); "I do love it here to be fair. I love the atmosphere; I think everyone's while [very] funny and they're just sound decent people" (*Interview 17*); and "There is a class sense of togetherness and belonging that you get here that I'd be afraid I'd lose if I went away" (*Interview 1*).

Other participants spoke about the special "connection" they had with Northern Ireland, and many pointed to the region's unique and quirky characteristics, "that special something that you just can't put your finger on" (*Interview 20*). One participant remarked:

> I'm very much connected to here. It is home. There's so much here that you don't get anywhere else. Even just the craic, the sense of humour, Tayto crisps. You can't imagine life without the wee things. There's no one like us here in Northern Ireland (*Interview 19*).

Several participants articulated great pride in being from Northern Ireland, and all of the participants that did so were from Derry, for example: “Derry people just love Derry, it is class [great] like why would I want to leave?” (*Interview 2*) and “I’m a very proud Derry girl and its home so I’m determined to make a life for myself here. I get sad when people move away, I think we’ve really let those people down who think they have to leave” (*Interview 10*). It is perhaps a surprise, or rather uncommon, to hear young people be so endearing about their homeland, particularly when their homeland is still trying to emerge from the shadows of violent conflict. It is interesting that so many young people who were choosing to stay in Northern Ireland referred to the people, yet for those who were leaving to attend university it was the people and their relations with each other, that was the main influencing factor in their decision to migrate. It is difficult to reconcile how these two vastly different experiences of Northern Ireland can both exist simultaneously for people from the same demographic. One explanation for the affection expressed by participants could be the recent ‘popularisation’ of Northern Ireland through mainstream media, for example, Northern Ireland is becoming known now for more than the Troubles, including the home of ‘Game of Thrones’. Furthermore, the success of the TV show ‘Derry Girls’ and the movie ‘Belfast’ have arguably instilled a newfound sense of pride in young people. These portrayals of Northern Ireland and the success and acceptance with which they have been met across the world, perhaps elicits a contentment among young people to stay in the region and make their lives there.

Theme 2: Brain drain? No brainer!

Not every participant shared this sense of pride or contentment, with several expressing not only their decision to leave but also their excitement at doing so. Although there were various reasons given by participants for leaving, the unifying concept among the extracts was that it was an easy decision to make and one that required very little thought. One participant stood out in their reasoning, explaining that they have no intention of staying in Northern Ireland because they had experienced a lot of racism (this issue will be returned to in Chapter 6) and that “people only think the different community thing is bad, try not looking like you’re from here. People here don’t know how to treat people who look differently to them” (*Interview 6*). Other participants who expressed a desire to leave used language such as “resentment”, “tense” and “judgemental” to describe their reasons, and others claimed they wanted a fresh start. They remarked:

> Leaving here behind is a good thing, it's a fresh start. If more people did move away and come back, they'd realise that Catholic Protestant isn't the be all end all, there is so much more out there but people don't realise it because they're stuck in this old mindset and they're not moving on and realizing what the world around them as to offer. I can't wait (*Interview 11*).

This extract suggests that the participant perceives Northern Ireland to be somewhat insular and that people's preoccupation with the sectarian divide prevents them from appreciating the vast offerings and opportunities that exist in the world. The latter sentiment was echoed by other participants who were leaving Northern Ireland not because of poor community relations, but due to their inquisitive nature and desire to see the world, for example: "I want to travel, the world is amazing why would you just stay here? I don't say that because of the Troubles or the way Northern Ireland is or anything, I do like here I mean its home but I just think there is a lot to see and do and that's the life I want for myself" (*Interview 24*) and "I do want to move away. Not because I hate Northern Ireland but I just want to travel a bit and see what else is out there. The possibilities are endless" (*Interview 25*).

Most young people who spoke about the brain drain and leaving Northern Ireland made reference to poor community relations and the political climate. However, migrating to find work was not mentioned by one participant, which is interesting considering the general feeling among participants that there are no "good jobs" in Northern Ireland and that similar jobs in other countries are paid better with better opportunities for career progression. There was no sense of reluctance to leave by participants, that is, that they would stay if they could but felt forced to leave in search of a better quality of life. This suggests that if there was an improvement in community relations, as well as political progress, perhaps young people would be more inclined to stay. This finding shares similarities with the findings of a *LucidTalk* poll in 2014, which found that lack of confidence in Northern Ireland's future was the main reason why young people wanted to build their future outside of the region. The poll revealed that 70 per cent of those surveyed felt that the area's local politicians were incapable of 'agreeing a joint vision for the future of the country' (Clarke, 2014). This is interesting considering that in 2014 Northern Ireland was enjoying a sustained period of unbroken consociation. A finding of this nature can be easier explained in this study because at the time of research and writing, the powersharing institutions were suspended which perhaps helps to explain

why young people emphasised state of community and internal relations as a reason for leaving, rather than jobs or the economy for example.

That being said, the challenging economic context may also be influencing young people's desire to leave Northern Ireland. Welfare reform in the age of austerity including universal credit, Personal Independence Payment (PIP), benefit caps, freezes on benefit levels and 'bedroom tax' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 255-61), initiated by successive Tory governments in Westminster and implemented by the DUP and Sinn Fein, has significantly exacerbated the already pervasive poverty in working class communities and throughout Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the impact of Brexit, not in terms of community relations but on the economy, could also influence young people's decision to leave Northern Ireland. In 2018 the *Peace Monitoring Report* stated that although there was a short-term boost for the economy after Brexit due to a weakened exchange rate and an influx of tourism, it also caused inflation and serious uncertainty for businesses (Nolan, 2018, p. 12-3). This uncertainty continues today, with Northern Ireland's labour market facing recruitment problems, issues with stock of goods and product across various sectors, and of course the lack of consensus that continues over the protocol and the movement of goods. Welfare reform, coupled with the consequences of Brexit, and the detrimental impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy which has yet to be fully realised, make the full realisation of the promised peace dividend seem more unlikely than ever before.

An interesting observation related to this point, is the infrequency with which it influences mainstream political debate (Coulter, 2014; Coulter et al., 2021). Despite the prevalent economic disparities in Northern Ireland, and the elephant in the room that is the undelivered peace dividend, the political elite continue to dedicate an overwhelming amount of time, energy, and space to ethno-national issues. What is of interest here, is whether this compulsion is at the expense of cross-cutting cleavages, and if so, is consociational thinking responsible? As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the relationship between consociationalism and economics is an area that is in need of further research, however, some initial comments relevant to this study can be made. One argument that could be made here is that the consociational nature of the Good Friday Agreement, specifically how it protects and preserves separate ethnic blocs, is

increasingly incompatible with, and unable to meet the needs, of a society in which people are faced with inequalities and injustices borne out of their social class, rather than their ethno-national affiliation (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 269).

This invites consideration of the nature of cleavages in Northern Ireland as well as the relationship between them. The argument made above implies that Northern Ireland is now less amenable to consociational arrangements because the class cleavages are more pressing and significant than the ethnic cleavages prioritised by consociation. When people are having to make the decision to either 'heat or eat', there are good grounds for supposing that economic concerns would trump those of identity. In other words, crosscutting class cleavages would dampen and dilute the persistence of ethnic cleavages. In 2016, the results of the May Assembly elections in Northern Ireland seemed to lend credence to this supposition. Sinn Fein faced punishment at the polls after their endorsement of welfare cuts, and the socialist party People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA) emerged with two historic wins. Their veteran activist Eamonn McCann was elected in the Derry constituency and the PBPA candidate in the republican heartland of West Belfast, Gerry Carroll, topped the poll ahead of Sinn Fein (Coulter et al., 2021, p.265). This appeared to show evidence of the prioritisation of 'issues of social class over those of ethno-national affiliation', as well as the emergence of 'new forms of political opposition', and a widening and normalisation of the political sphere in Northern Ireland (Coulter et al., 2021, p.264-5).

Less than seven weeks after these historic political developments, Brexit became a reality, and in less than one year, the powersharing institutions collapsed. By the time the Northern Irish electorate was next called to the polls for an Assembly election (March 2017), political and communal relations were on a downward trajectory as Brexit provoked questions over the Irish border – an issue that had been settled in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. As a result, questions over the constitutional status of the island of Ireland 'began to drown out those voices seeking to draw attention to crucial issues of social class' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 265) and subsequently the political landscape looked markedly different after the March 2017 Assembly elections, as PBPA were unable to hold their previously acquired votes and Sinn Fein closed in on the DUP. This shows the gravitational pull, the chokehold, that ethno-national issues still have on Northern Ireland; when issues of identity and constitutional status were on the line,

socialist principles were the first to be sacrificed (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 265). Proponents of consociation would therefore argue that social class is not yet an established cross cutting cleavage that could or should lead to any form of de-consociation in Northern Ireland. It is accurate to claim that class divisions have forged some inter-communal alliances, however the case still remains that they have not 'reduced the intensity of the dominant antagonistic cleavages between the principal national communities' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 22). It is interesting however, to speculate over the outcome of any forthcoming Assembly elections in Northern Ireland given the current cost of living crisis and the dissatisfaction among some quarters with the DUP for staying out of government over the protocol when the economy is in tatters. Perhaps a situation will arise again in which issues of social class emerge victorious over the traditional ethno-national issues that have plagued Northern Ireland for decades.

Summary

This chapter began by establishing the relationship between economic and consociationalism, acknowledging that the existing literature does not make the link between the two apparent. The most obvious and simplistic link is that the reduction of violence, facilitated by the establishment and maintenance of consociational structures, leads to increased investment and results in an upturn in the economy. The chapter highlights the significance of economic issues to the Troubles, as well as to the peace process, which was promised to bring prosperity and a peace dividend to Northern Ireland. The topic of 'Employment and career prospects' was explored through the following themes: 'Needs and ambitions are not adequately served by the current labour market' which revealed participants' concern over suitable job availability and constraints placed on the fulfilment of their career ambitions; and 'Legacy of the Troubles' which highlighted how Northern Ireland's past makes certain jobs and career paths unattractive for participants. The topic of 'University' was explored through the following themes: 'Needs must' which reflects participants' decision to stay in Northern Ireland for university based on financial and practical considerations; and 'An opportunity to see what lies beyond Northern Ireland' highlights reasons why participants' migrated for educational purposes. The third topic of 'The Brain Drain' was explored through the following themes: 'There's no place like home' which illustrated participants' decision to stay in Northern Ireland based on their affection for the region; and 'Brain drain? No

brainer!' highlighted participants' who had plans to or who had already emigrated Northern Ireland.

The possible role of consociationalism in fostering these economic conditions experienced by of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation is precarious. The chapter outlined how Northern Ireland's peace process resulted in a liberal consociation, however the economic policies adopted by subsequent devolved governments and direct rule administrations were neoliberal in nature, focusing on free market strategies that prioritised private investment. The implication of this was that ostensible political progress did not coincide with economic progress for the mass population. Perhaps consociational arrangements could be accused of negligence for allowing this to unfold, however advocates would robustly distance themselves from this being the responsibility of consociation, which is to create a cross-communal powersharing government rather than establish a fair and prosperous economy. The chapter has explored the idea that consociationalism could impact young people's experience of economic opportunities due to its preoccupation with ethno-national cleavages, which in turn has allowed the class cleavage to grow rapidly. This preoccupation also impacts the political agenda, which arguably has made little effort to tackle the growing inequalities and poverty in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 6

Security

Proper institutional management of security issues is a key component of complex consociational arrangements and are considered essential to their maintenance and in preventing them from breakdown. Given this, and the violent nature of the Troubles, mechanisms to properly manage security issues were fundamental to the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent peace process. The Agreement specifies decommissioning, demilitarisation, police reform and prisoner releases, and these interlinking issues were intentionally addressed in this textual order (O'Leary, 2019, p. 214). Owning to the fact that there has been a significant reduction in the politically motivated, physical, and direct violence that defined the Troubles, this study reconceptualises the traditional concept of security atypical of theoretical consociational thinking. As such security is considered here to be a broad and multidimensional concept that encompasses not only traditional understandings of security such as physical violence, but also includes the emotive and psychological aspect of security relations. This chapter looks at three topics that fall under the reconceptualised security domain, firstly police-youth relationships, secondly how paramilitaries are viewed by some young people and thirdly youth reflections on personal safety in everyday life. The qualitative interview data has been collated according to these topics and in each topic, themes have been generated using reflexive thematic analysis.

Topic 1: The PSNI

Due to the symbolism associated with the police during the Troubles, and their highly politicised and militarised nature during that period, reform of the police had to be a key factor in Northern Ireland's peace process (Ellison and Martin, 2000). The topic of policing was and remains emotive, contentious, and sensitive (Mulcahy, 2006). It has been 26 years since the publication of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, commonly known as the Patten Report (which was not without controversy), 16 years since Sinn Fein declared full support for the PSNI, and 13 years since the Hillsborough Agreement which saw policing and justice become devolved issues and established the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland. Using the data extracts relating to the PSNI three themes have been generated, each of which will be

discussed in turn. Overall, the attitudes of the youth participants were highly ambivalent, expressing negative, positive, and indifferent attitudes towards the police.

Theme 1: The PSNI as unfit for purpose

This theme captures the scepticism, cynicism and dissatisfaction that characterised the majority of extracts covering young people's attitudes towards the police, revealing from the outset a problematic relationship between the two from a youth perspective. Most existing research that looks at this relationship often examines the 'nature and type of interaction' between youth and the police, concluding that it is likely to have an impact on overall attitudes (Mazzerolle et al., 2013; Wooden and Rogers, 2014) In this study, an immediate distinction can be made between participants who have had direct interaction with the PSNI and those who have not. Unsurprisingly for the former, as existing studies have also found, the most significant factor influencing their negative views on the police was the nature of their interactions with them. For the latter, those who have not had any direct dealings with the police, the analysis reveals underlying influential factors that are more nuanced, including feeling stereotyped, feeling disempowered, perceived effectiveness relating to how they carry out their duties, the impact of police appearance, issues of representation, and the lingering legacy of the Troubles. Aside from the different influential factors, what is most significant is the implicit shared meaning among the extracts, which is that the PSNI, according to some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, is not fit for purpose. Interestingly, participants who expressed negativity towards the police did not communicate what they considered the purpose of the police to be, which contrasts to those who expressed positivity towards the police covered in the next theme.

Stereotypes, discrimination, and bias

A small number of participants who held negative views of the PSNI had direct experience with them. These interactions varied from being moved on in a public place, to having their car registration plates checked, questioned, and one arrest. The consensus here was that participants were treated "unfairly", that they were "discriminated against" and that the police were "out to get [them]" because of their age or their community background rather than their behaviour. The idea that the police sometimes target young people by making assumptions about their types of behaviour based on appearance (age)

or social background, rather than factual evidence, is supported by existing research (McAra and McVie, 2005).

Participants who had direct interactions with the police suggested that their engagement was antagonistic and hostile due to their community background. Based on their interactions and what they perceive to be behaviour most common among police (Gleeson, 2018), the feeling among these participants was that they are adversely overpoliced because of the community that they belong to. This brought out a degree of anger among some participants, as one young person commented, "any time they enter a republican community like ours, which is like all the time, it's pure intimidating and overwhelming. They just question people and they're always armed which I think is just so fucking unnecessary" (*Interview 8*). A participant from the loyalist community remarked:

> They try and intimidate my community by having an armed presence and driving big land rovers. I've been arrested twice and both times released without a charge because I didn't break the law, I think I was arrested just for being a loyalist and a young fella [boy] which pisses me off. They don't have the confidence of the loyalist community where I live. I don't really care how they treat nationalists; I just care about how my people feel about how they're being treated (*Interview 14*).

What is interesting about these two extracts is that they both implicitly question the neutrality of the police and give the impression of a lack of confidence in them based on their direct experiences. They are from different communities, but they use the same reasoning – community background – to arrive at the same conclusion – that the police are not impartial. Although both of these communities would have experienced high levels of violence during the Troubles, a difference of opinion on the police between these two participants may have been expected because historically one community would have had antagonistic relations with the police and the other traditionally would have been more amicable. However, on this occasion both participants expressed negativity towards the police based on what they perceived to be police preconceptions about them based on their community background. This finding contrasts with studies that were carried out in the earlier years of the PSNI. For example, McAlister et al. concluded in 2009 that the community background of young people did not significantly influence their experiences and perceptions of the police (rather their age did).

Furthermore, Byrne and Jarman wrote in 2011 that after police reform in Northern Ireland, there was little evidence to suggest that young people perceived their community background as a contributory factor in having a negative experience with the police (p. 443). Arguably, despite changes to policing, there remains deep rooted suspicion and mistrust within many communities and among some young people.

Byrne and Jarman go on to say that 'it is a common negative experience as a young person that unites young people from a Protestant and Catholic background' (2011, p. 443). Although this research found some evidence of this which is discussed below, the research also found evidence to the contrary. Some extracts suggest that it is possible for young people to feel pitted against each other due to perceived differential and preferential treatment by the PSNI depending on which community they're dealing with. In other words, the accusation is that the police serve the interests of one community at the expense of the other. One participant said:

> The hypocrisy of our police service is genuinely ridiculous, and it angers me so much. They don't treat communities equally because they're so concerned with not upsetting the nationalist republican community that they overcompensate and let them off with things like the Bobby Storey funeral shitshow (*Interview 21*).

Compare this extract to a comment made by a participant from the nationalist community, "It's not that I don't like them but as a Catholic I don't think they're a reliable organisation … you just know you'd be treated differently than like if they were dealing with a Protestant" (*Interview 7*). It raises a question that young people from both communities likely feel entitled to ask, which is paradoxical in itself: whose security do the police serve?

Other extracts, however, do lend support for Byrne and Jarman's finding that young people can be united by shared negative experience of the police despite belonging to different communities. One example of this was based on age and the result of direct interaction between the PSNI and the participant. They said:

> I had a run in with them outside Belfast City Hall when we were protesting against the homophobic preachers who were shouting about gay people being paedophiles and we were the ones brought into a room and questioned. Events like that are why I don't trust the police, they don't get us seriously. Justice isn't equal for everyone in Northern Ireland (*Interview 13*).

Believing that they were shown differential treatment by the police because of their age was interpreted as being unjust which led to a more general negative perception of the PSNI as untrustworthy. It can be inferred that young people feel there is a lack of respect shown for them by the PSNI; that they are too readily targeted as "troublemakers" and that they are not listened to and have no voice in matters relating to policing. In other words, perhaps there is a perception by some young people that there is no equity between them and the police. Such interactions in turn diminished some young people's respect for the police. The other example which could serve as a unifying negative experience among young people was based on perceived police biased regarding social class. The participant recounted:

> I think they're biased bastards but not from an orange and green thing, more a class thing. My boyfriend gets stopped all the time and his [licence] plates are run. But like I have friends who live in protestant areas and the same thing happens to them you know? So like just goes to show that working class/lower class estates are targeted by the police whether you're green or orange (*Interview 6*).

In this interaction, the participant felt targeted not because of their community background but because of their socio-economic background. Based on procedural justice theory, this and the other experiences outlined in the extracts above signal a real problem for police-youth relationships. The theory argues that if people think the police treat them fairly and impartially, they will be more likely to consider them as 'legitimate authorities' and feel compelled to comply and obey the law because they feel it is justified to do so (Mazzerolle, et al., 2013; Tyler, 2006). However, some young people did not feel they had been treated fairly by the PSNI, which leaves open the possibility that they may not cooperate or engage with the police in future instances.

Perceptions of performance

Most participants had never had direct interaction or experience with the police, but they still expressed negative attitudes about them and implied that they were not fit for purpose. For these young people one of the most common factors that influenced their attitudes was their belief that the police were ineffective at carrying out their duties, with one participant putting it colourfully, "they're as useful as a fucking chocolate teapot" (*Interview 18*). These perceptions of performance were mostly based on their own

instincts, anecdotal evidence from others, and certain media coverage. One influencing factor was an exception and particularly noteworthy; the participant suggested that they would not go to the police for "things that happen inside the community" because "you'll get caught out by the paramilitaries even if you report it anonymously. It's just sort of an accepted thing" (*Interview 14*). The participant continued:

> I wouldn't at all feel comfortable phoning the police. You know, there are other ways to deal with things. And I know for me personally, you know, like, one of our mates got robbed in an loyalist estate and you know, it wasn't the police anyone went to because there is kind of an understanding that if you were to do anything or give anything to the police that would come back on paramilitaries in any way, then it's gonna come back on you too.

No other participant expressed unease with how the PSNI performed their duties based on the fear that they would engage with paramilitaries and consequently inform on them. Perhaps this reveals more about paramilitaries than the police, which will be returned to when Topic 2 is discussed below. Another participant said as a gay man, "I just have a feeling that I can't have full confidence in the police when it would come to homophobic crimes and that is regretful. Don't know why but I just do" (*Interview 4*). Others relied on stories they had heard to inform their attitudes including one participant who questioned the PSNI's commitment to racial equality claiming "sure what will they do about it? Probably nothing". They said:

> My friend who's black had to report a racial crime to the PSNI and two years later it is still on-going. They're doing nothing. How could a mixed-race female like me have faith in that system? There's only justice if you look a certain way and live in a certain area. If it happened to me, I don't think I'd report it, what's the point? (*Interview 6*)

Another participant relied on what they had heard from their friends to conclude that the police are "very disconnected with young people". They continued, "I've heard from friends they've been bad at dealing with issues that affect us like spiking so it's like we don't matter much and that's probably why I think they wouldn't meet certain standards (*Interview 19*). *Interview 22* also referred to what they'd heard from others, "I have no reason to be like aw I hate them, they're shite at their jobs. But then obviously I've heard things from people about like the stop and search policy that make me question them big time" and another made reference to media coverage having impacted their perceptions of police performance:

> I'm being honest I would be slightly hesitant on them because of what I saw on the news. It doesn't give them a good reputation like their aggression at the Black Lives Matter protests was on the news and the fines they handed on yet at the anti-vacc protests the weekend before there were none (*Interview 20*).

Previous studies have found that attitudes towards the police are more influenced and shaped more by negative information than positive information (Bradford et al., 2009). This appears to be reinforced by this study given that not one of the participants recalled a positive story they'd heard about the police and the nature of the secondary information that influenced their attitudes was entirely negative. The extracts above suggest that due to perceived competency issues, some young people would be hesitant to report a crime to or share information with the PSNI, particularly regarding racism and homophobia. This is concerning because people who are likely to be victims of these crimes are already vulnerable and often marginalised in society, and from the extracts it seems reasonable to conclude that they feel underprotected by the police. There was a general feeling among participants that "young people and the police aren't on the same page" (*Interview 1*) stemming from the belief that the police do not understand the complexities and nuances of being a young person today. Other studies reinforce this finding, that the police fail to recognise or acknowledge issues young people face instead viewing them as a problem or a source of trouble (Byrne et al. 2005). This could be perceived as an accusation of adult-bias by some participants, leaving them feeling unable to communicate with the police on an equal level. This suggests feelings of disempowerment to some extent, due to a perceived power imbalance between young people and the PSNI.

Image issues

Another factor influencing some young people's negative attitude towards the police was based on their physical appearance and demeanour, namely that they are "too militarised" and "unapproachable". Some participants referred to the militarised image of the police and the implication was that it was problematic because it was reminiscent of "the past", even though they were not alive during the time period they referred to. One participant said:

> I think we need to start operating like a normal police force. We don't need army barracks, or armed police people or massive police stations that look like military bases in the middle of towns. They're so imposing and it makes people not trust them. It makes people afraid to approach them. We need them to be seen as

> friendly, and we need to start acting like a society that's 20 years on from the Troubles rather than still in it (*Interview 18*).

Another said, "I think they are abrasive, and their militarised image is like massive land rovers, guns, weaponry, batons and body armour so they're designed to be intimidating" (*Interview 13*). Many participants referred to the PSNI's image as intimidating, for example, "Whenever they're around they're while [very] intimidating, even if they just walk into the shop everyone becomes on edge" (*Interview 7*) and "Even when they're in the chippy or something and just standing there it changes the entire atmosphere" (*Interview 13*). The same participant summed up what they believed to be the consequential "knock on effect" of this perceived image problem saying that "Because of the way they look, we see them as people who will come and get us if we're bad, rather than nice protectors of the community who are looking out for us" (*Interview 13*). It can be inferred from the extracts that touched on the image of the police that their appearance elicited a sense of anxiety and nervousness in some participants, rather than feelings of safety, comfortableness, and friendliness which some participants indicated would be their preferred qualities of the PSNI.

Representation

The aim of the PSNI is to have a representative workforce that reflects the composition of the community it serves in terms of religion, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (www.psni.police.uk). As of 1st February 2023, 66.34% of police officers were recorded as perceived Protestant, less than half of this number were recorded as perceived Roman Catholics at 32.35%, and ethnic minorities represented 0.62% of police officers. Statistics on sexual orientation were harder to come by, but an investigation carried out by *The News letter* in 2018 revealed that 1.96% of the PSNI's workforce (officers and staff combined) were gay or bisexual and that transgender officers were not 'monitored' (www.newsletter.co.uk). The issue of an "unbalanced workforce" was noted by a small number of participants which compelled them to question the inclusivity of the PSNI. Two participants alluded to the lack of Catholics in the police workforce as being problematic, for example one remarked that the PSNI "didn't have many Catholics in their ranks" (*Interview 1*) and another said, "Ach well you know, they're just full of their own if you know what I mean" (*Interview 8*). Another participant directed their concerns at racial and gender underrepresentation which made them hesitant to give their full support to the police. They said:

> I wouldn't be shouting "Yay the PSNI" but I also wouldn't be shouting "down with the PSNI". I think that if they start attracting more people who are from different backgrounds that would be good but at the moment it's too imbalanced both from a racial and gender perspective … that makes me uncomfortable (*Interview 17*).

The issue of representation was not an overriding factor that influenced the participants attitudes towards the PSNI. It is important to note that a possible reason for this is that in this group of young people, 26 out of 27 participants were white, and so perhaps if the group was more racially and ethnically diverse the findings here would be different.

Lingering legacy of the Troubles

Some extracts allude to the lingering legacy of the Troubles as leading to a negative view of the PSNI. For example, one participant remarked, "I'm not their biggest fan. I don't see much difference between the PSNI and the RUC" (*Interview 2*) and another said, "To me it's bizarre that people that were in the RUC are now in the PSNI. What's that about like? Sure that doesn't make any sense, so naturally naw [no], I don't trust them" (*Interview 8*). In this sense the PSNI are still symbolic of the past for some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. This raises the question of how this can be, considering these participants are too young to have any living memory of the RUC which was disbanded in 2001. One explanation is the well-known phenomenon of intergenerational trauma. The UK Children's Commissioner acknowledged in a report that while many children and young people had not personally experienced the Troubles, other family members or adults that they associate with had, and this resulted in residual aftereffects for many of them (UK Children Commissioners' Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008). Some extracts show evidence of this by directly referring to a parent or older person, for example, a participant from the republican community said, "I asked my Da what would you do if one of your children came home and said they wanted to be a police officer and he said to me you'd be disowned so you would" (*Interview 2*). This is similar to another participant from the loyalist community who said, "in the loyalist community there is a stigma about joining the police especially with older ones, they'd defs [definitely] cut you off like" (*Interview 12*). Other participants recalled:

> When I was a wain [child] I was in a house when it was raided, and that was traumatic. I remember my Ma took me to window and I had to climb out and sneak out the side. I was 7 I didn't know what was going on … and when I was about 14 there was a bomb scare and the police wanted to talk to me and my Ma was raging. I don't think she wanted me to speak to them. There's a historical element that will never go away (*Interview 8*).
>
> Um I'm sceptical. I come from a prominent republican family that the PSNI would be aware of and I know I'm viewed differently because of my name even though I've never done anything wrong … so it's things like that, they're hard to move past (*Interview 10*).

Stories of the Troubles passed down to one participant impacted on her decision not to consider the PSNI as a career despite thinking it would be "stimulating and rewarding". They remarked, "It's just not attractive for young people … I live in a Catholic area and my parents told me that if I joined the police, they wouldn't support me because it's too dangerous and I'd have to check under my car every day because I'd be seen as a traitor" (*Interview 16*). These extracts illustrate that the past and the influence of parents are highly relevant to the opinions held by the respective participants regarding the police. There was a sense of 'hard to resist' rationale (Terry and Braun, 2016, p. 20) to justify their opinions, in other words, how could participants not feel *x* when their parents said or experienced *y*. Therefore, the historical, political, and symbolic significance of the police for some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation cannot be underplayed or overlooked simply because they were born after the Troubles came to an end.

Theme 2: The PSNI an integral part of society

A small number of extracts were used to generate theme two which encapsulates the praise, gratitude and admiration that characterised the contributions made by some participants who were steadfast in their loyalty and positivity towards the police. The extracts came from a range of participants whose identities included Irish, British, nationalist, unionist, loyalist, non-aligned, Catholic, Protestant and atheist. No participant from the Republican community is represented in this theme. Although this theme was borne from only a small number of data extracts, it does not make it any less significant because it stands as a direct contrast to that of theme one. Beyond sharing surface level positive attitudes towards the PSNI, the underlying shared meaning among the relevant data extracts is that the PSNI is an integral part of society. The general sentiment among these extracts was that the PSNI have a tough job to do and "someone needs to do it!".

These participants indicated what they believed to be the PSNI's role and responsibilities in society, for example: "I massively respect them. I think it's a tough job and I would trust them to protect both communities and implement the law" (*Interview 24*); "They are the police service of our country and I think they have come a long way. I trust them to do their job well because I have no reason not to" (*Interview 25*); and "The PSNI are the law enforcers in our country and yes I would absolutely trust them to do this properly" (*Interview 26*).

A common experience that influenced some participant's positive attitudes towards the PSNI was the opportunity presented to them by their primary and secondary schools to directly interact with members of the PSNI. One participant said:

> I do trust them and I would report a crime to them. I feel like I have these views because they were invited into my school multiple times a year to give talks on like firework safety, online safety and all, so from a young age I've had positive interactions with them and always seen them as there to protect you and keep you safe (*Interview 11*).

Another participant said, "There is a lot of police presence in the area because there'd be a lot of drugs but like they'd come into school to talk to us about it and they're all grand like. They were good craic and pretty normal down to earth people to be honest with you" (*Interview 12*). In these extracts a positive relationship with the police emulated from meaningful interaction and engagement between the young person and the PSNI. Anderson et al. (2007) reported similar findings in their research on police officers who interacted with young people in schools. It seems to represent an opportunity for young people to participate in dialogue with police on a level footing in and a comfortable and familiar setting, where they can talk about issues impacting them.

Theme 3: The PSNI as an unremarkable entity

The PSNI as an unremarkable entity is the final theme generated from the data relating to the police and it is underpinned by sentiments of apathy, disengagement, and disinterest. These sentiments were implied in remarks such as: "The police are just the police. I suppose I don't really care" (*Interview 3*); "I don't really think anything of them, or care about them" (*Interview 9*); "I don't mind the police. I just think they're the police and that's about it" (*Interview 16*); and "I don't have feelings for or against them. I wouldn't

be shouting "Up the PSNI" but I also wouldn't be shouting "down with the PSNI"" (*Interview 17*). For one Catholic nationalist participant, their indifference was influenced by where they live and their familiarity with serving PSNI members. They said, "it's probably because of where I live, a lot of my neighbours are in the PSNI because during the Troubles a lot of them relocated out here [Eglinton[5]] because it was safer" (*Interview 16)*. Another participant's indifference was influenced by the fact that they had "never had to deal with them so I don't really have anything to say about them" (*Interview 15*). This is interesting because it leaves open the possibility that were the participant to have a personal interaction with or encounter the PSNI, their attitude towards them could be subject to change.

Summary

Young people's relationship with the PSNI is complex and contradictory; some participants contributed to more than one theme as some of their ideas were held in tension with one another, sometimes unknown to the participant themselves. What is interesting about this topic is that there was no gender dimension across any of the themes. Different views, perceptions, or experiences of the PSNI cannot be explained by gender in this research as the mix of different attitudes were evenly spread across genders. This finding differs slightly from other studies that found that young men specifically had a negative view of the police due to feeling more targeted or harassed by them than their female counterparts (Roche, 2005; Lloyd, 2009). It was not the case here that males were more likely to complain about improper treatment or unacceptable behaviour.

The themes explored above caution against generalising and making assumptions about young people's attitudes towards the police, and the nature and form of engagement between the two. It is true however, that there was a depressing consensus among the majority of participants that police-youth relations are poor. This assessment was based on multiple influential factors including participants' direct experiences with the police, feelings of being stereotyped, lack of trust in the PSNI's capabilities, their appearance, the lack of representation in their work force, and the lingering legacy of the Troubles. A minority of participants expressed appreciation for and trust in the police and they felt

[5] Eglinton is a small village in County Londonderry and lies 6.4 miles north-east to Derry City (Google maps, map data ©2023).

they are essential to law enforcement, which was implied to be an integral part of any democratic society. The participants who showed indifference towards the police were smallest in number and they did so based on no interactions with the police, a familiarity with them, or just total disinterest.

Despite the ambivalence that exists in the data, the overwhelming finding is that the police are not acknowledged with any great deal of authority and legitimacy for the PSNI has not been fully established among members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. In other words, there seems to be a legitimacy deficit when it comes to some young people and the police. Republicans and loyalists feel overpoliced, while minorities such as members of the LGBTQ+ community and people of colour feel underprotected. Young people in general feel disempowered when it comes to the police, that they are not listened to and are too easily dismissed as nuisances. This is troubling because the establishment of a legitimate and efficient police force is not only essential in supporting consociation and its institutions, but it is also fundamental to peace processes where societies are transitioning from violent conflict.

Topic 2: Paramilitaries

Firstly, although it may be obvious, it is noteworthy that every participant without hesitation accepted the continued existence of paramilitary organisations, despite the honourable intentions of the architects and supporters of the Good Friday Agreement to consign them to the past. Arguably, 25 years on from the Agreement, paramilitarism not only continues to exist, but its influence seems to have increased in recent times as rising tensions spill over namely due to the fallout from Brexit and the issue of the Protocol. In 2015, tackling paramilitaries was central to the Fresh Start Agreement, and Westminster 'pledged to spend some £160 million' to improve security in Northern Ireland and £25 million was to be spent specifically on tacking paramilitary groups (Coulter and Shirlow, 2019, p. 13). However, Northern Ireland has never quite been able to eradicate paramilitaries, no matter how insidious or conspicuous they appear to be.

The most recent attempts to deal with paramilitary gangs comes in the form of a proposal made by the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) in March 2023 to initiate 'formal dialogue with illegal republican and loyalist organisations to help their transition towards

the eventual goal of disbandment' (O'Neill, 2023). The proposal is being considered by both the Irish and British governments. The UK Chancellor Jeremy Hunt also announced in March 2023 during his Budget speech an extra £3 million to tackle paramilitarism, serving as an extension to the 'Tackling Paramilitarism Programme' agreed in Fresh Start (Kula, 2023). Using the data extracts relating to paramilitaries, three themes have been generated, each of which will be discussed in turn. The majority of young people expressed total contempt for paramilitaries and indicated that they should no longer exist, while others, although critical of them, portrayed a sense of resignation about their existence. A small number of participants were the exception to these sentiments, while not outright supporting paramilitaries in absolute terms, they did present a more 'sympathetic' approach to the topic.

Theme 1: Paramilitaries are a stain on society (and need to be removed)

This theme captures the contempt with which most of the participants spoke about paramilitaries, using language such as: "scary"; "terrorists"; "fucking scum"; "death"; "embarrassing"; "idiots"; "lowest of the low"; and "degrading". Although participants expressed a variety of reasons for disapproving of paramilitaries, the underlying shared meaning implicit among the extracts was that paramilitaries are a stain on society and they need to be removed. A small minority of participants, all from the republican community, expressed their disagreement with the continued existence of paramilitaries, remarking that "the time had passed" or that there was "no need for them to do what my parents' generation had to do" (*Interview 2*), which could imply that although they do not think there is a place for paramilitaries in society presently, there was a need for them during the Troubles or, as one participant said, "during my Da's time" (*Interview 8*).

The most common feeling among participants was that paramilitaries were to be feared, with many referring to the murder of journalist Lyra McKee by the dissident republican group *Saoradh* in the Creggan estate in Derry in on 18 April 2019. Participants recalled this tragedy saying: "I always think of Lyra McKee as a scary reminder that dissidents are active and close to home" (*Interview 3*); "I just think of the whole Lyra McKee thing a few years ago with her getting murdered it's made more people think about it [paramilitaries] and its terrifying" (*Interview 6*); and "the murder of Lyra McKee was so awful and I think it was a wakeup call that they [paramilitaries] do exist and we can't just turn away and pretend like they don't" (*Interview 15*). Others recalled times when

paramilitaries impacted their own lives. They expressed disbelief that this was the case in "this day and age" and confusion as to what the end goal of paramilitarism is:

> I remember one time one of the schools in my area couldn't go in because there was a bomb scare and it was like Jesus Christ where are we its 2019. There was a lorry hijacked, and delivery vans were burnt out there for a while. I would love to ask them why, well I wouldn't really because I'd be terrified (*Interview 10*).
>
> I think it's scary. There was even a thing where like, my school is on Bishop Street[6], and a bomb went off right beside it. I personally think they're all idiots and I don't think politics has anything to do with it whatsoever. I think it's an excuse to just act out cause they have nothing else to do (*Interview 16*).
>
> I vividly remember that year there was a bomb in the courthouse. I was out that night and had about 100 missed calls from my Mammy. Just mad really that it was so recent. I see literally zero benefit to the existence of paramilitaries, like what do they hope to achieve? (*Interview 15*)

Other participants articulated what they believed to be the impact of paramilitaries on the wider society, for example: "they ruin people's lives, especially young people and it's not always their fault that they get involved because they naively believe that their community is being attacked by the police or the other community because that's what they're told" (*Interview 17*); "I see paramilitaries as terrorists. They are destroying communities with drugs and crimes like shootings and punishment beatings. I mean both loyalist and republican paramilitaries" (*Interview 4*); and "they're just the scum of the earth. The idea that somebody can take another person's life just like because of conflicting views and leave total devastation in communities and hurt innocent people is so wrong. That goes for both sides" (*Interview 6*).

One participant who had direct experience with "republican activism like community work with dissidents" suggested that there was a culture of toxic masculinity within paramilitarism. They commented that they found it, "so uncomfortable. I was the only person under 40 and the only person who wasn't a man. It was so macho and fully of men trying too hard to show off their masculinity. It was intimidating and sort of embarrassing" (*Interview 8*). According to Coulter et al. (2021, p. 227), 'paramilitaries remain primary arenas for overt expressions of hegemonic masculinity', which is evident in the data extract from *Interview 8.* This participant noted that they were the only one

[6] Located in city centre of Derry.

present who was not a man, suggesting that their gender was one of the reasons why they felt intimidated by sharing a space in which toxic masculinity was prevalent. There is a concern here that while females may be intimidated and made feel uncomfortable by the toxic masculinity prevalent in paramilitary organisations, young males may be enticed by it, or worse, inclined to replicate these behaviours. This speaks to the increasing problem faced by Northern Irish society of the influence and control that paramilitary groups exert over young people, but particularly young impressionable males.

Many participants were confused as to why paramilitaries still existed, or why members felt there was a need for such organisations. What often followed this sentiment was expressions by participants that paramilitary groups "just need to go away". Language that was commonly used pertaining to this was: "they shouldn't have a role in society, there is no need for them" (*Interview 5*); "They need gone, its 2022 why are we still talking about these sorts of people?" (*Interview 19*); and "They still have such a presence and that fact really annoys me, that they even exist, and we're still talking about them. Wish they would all just fuck off and leave of us alone. My generation want to be done with that" (*Interview 20*). Although the extracts do not support the claim that the entirety of the Good Friday Agreement generation want to be "done" with paramilitary groups, the overwhelming majority of extracts presented an intense distain and disagreement when it came to the existence and continued influence of paramilitary groups. O'Leary makes the 'prediction' that an 'acceptable level of peace' will continue to prevail in Northern Ireland, and one reason for this is his assumption that paramilitary groups will not have enough support or the capacity to enter into 'full-scale armed conflict' (2019, p. 308). The disapproval expressed by a majority a young people in this research lends modest support to this prediction.

The criticism could be made of consociationalism that it has been unable to stop the existence and increasing influence of paramilitary organisations, despite the emphasis it places on the need for security measures to be properly implemented to support and maintain consociational arrangements. The continued existence of paramilitaries could be interpreted as a prevailing fissure in Northern Ireland security, caused by ineffective security measures central to consociational plus arrangements. However, while paramilitaries do exist, it is evident from the data extracts that the majority of young people who participated in this research does not support paramilitarism or think there is

a need for their existence in society. The argument could be made that consociationalism, by virtue of its pacifying effect, has helped to foster this attitude. Consociationalism insists that hardliners, including ex-combatants, have a seat at the table; they argue that the possibility of being in power will act as an incentive to walk away from violence in favour of democratic and constitutional means to achieve their political goals. This is what happened with Sinn Féin who were key in securing decommissioning of IRA weapons. Therefore, perhaps it is the case that this moderation of hardliners, and rejection of violence from the political elite, has trickled down to influence how some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation feel about paramilitarism.

Theme 2: Paramilitaries have become normalised

Some participants, although still disapproving of paramilitaries, implied that they were resigned to their existence and that they were a normal part of society, for example, "When you drive into my estate there is a big mural that just says 'UVF' and then not too far away there's another one that says 'Join the IRA' so like it's just pure [very] normal I don't even think about it when I pass it" (*Interview 11*). Most of the time, this idea that paramilitarism was a normal part of society was followed by the suggestion that nothing could be done about it. The general sentiment was, "they exist but they aren't part of my life, they don't affect me, so whatever", the implication being that there were two separate worlds and so long as they didn't collide, some participants were happy to turn a blind eye because as one participant put it, "it has nothing to do with me". Some participants divulged the fact that they have friends or know of people who are members of paramilitary groups. These participants were united in their condemnation of this known membership, for example, "I'd love to just tell them to wise the fuck up, they're wasting their lives" and "I know two young people involved and after I found out I was pure mental [angry] at them like just don't do it". These participants continued that if they did express their disapproval to their friends, they would be met with, "Ach it's just a bit of craic" or "Sure it's just sorta [sort of] part of life here". This finding is evidence of the fact that paramilitary groups continue to exert influence and power over a small number of communities and the manipulation of some young people forms a key part of this. As Coutler et al. observes paramilitarism continues to exercise a 'tangible appeal for at least some members of the peace generation' (2021, p. 5). No participant expressed that they would ever join a paramilitary organisation, but some did imply that there was a certain

appeal to getting paramilitaries to "sort things out" rather than going to the police. This will be returned to in the next theme.

Other participants implied the blasé nature with which paramilitaries were spoken about in society, for example one participant said:

> You hear a lot about them in Creggan[7] where I'm from, kneecapping and all, just casual conversations in the shop about things that happened the other night. It's so passive and I don't hear people condemn it – it's always that someone deserved it and it's just part of society and the community norm. Most of the paramilitaries these days just use young people and push them out there to hide themselves (*Interview 24*).

It was also common for participants to remark on the perception that paramilitaries were "above the law" and are a "self-appointed police force in their own communities" (*Interview 25*). This provoked a sense of anger among participants, the implication being that it was one law for paramilitaries and another for everyone else. Related to this, as was mentioned in the extract from *Interview 24*, was the belief among some participants that "everyone knows who they are and they get away with so much because no one will report them, unless they have a death wish. It's like this weird immunity if you're affiliated with a paramilitary group" (*Interview 25*). Echoing this, another participant said, "I feel like they get away with so much like people know who they are and who carries out their orders, but it's all totally hush hush" (*Interview 22*). These extracts provide insight into the extent of paramilitary influence, as perceived by some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, that members are, allegedly, known to people and perpetrators of their crimes are also, allegedly, known and yet the suggestion from participants is that there are never any repercussions.

Theme 3: Paramilitaries are misunderstood

The final theme related to paramilitaries reveals that not all members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are in sync when it comes to perceptions of and attitudes towards paramilitary groups. There was a unifying concept among a minority of the data extracts, which was that paramilitaries are, to some extent, misunderstood. These views were exceptional, but still noteworthy. This theme was developed from implications in the

[7] A strong republican area in Derry City

relevant extracts that some paramilitaries are worse than others. The indication from some participants was that the extent to which paramilitaries could be considered bad, negative or undesirable in society was dependent on two factors; the first was the reasoning behind an individual decision to join a paramilitary group, and the second was the nature of the activity that the paramilitary group engages in. Regarding the reasons behind paramilitary membership, one participant implied that there was a hierarchy of acceptable reasons. They said:

> In the loyalist community where I live it's definitely a family thing like if you're the oldest son and your Da is in it and your Granda is in it and your Uncles, it's like you kind of have to as well and I can understand that, you can't blame them so much. It's different if you go out and actively seek to be involved (*Interview 11*).

This participant implies that hereditary membership of paramilitary organisations is more acceptable than someone joining who has no known family connection. The idea of it "running in the family" was also echoed by another participant from a loyalist estate who said:

> I think the word paramilitary is very loaded. I don't like when normal people talk about paramilitaries because they don't understand how it works or how it is. Firstly, when you ask a loyalist their opinion on paramilitaries, you're not really asking them for their opinion on some shadowy organization that no one knows, you're asking them for an opinion on maybe their Uncle or their Dad or their cousin. So, it's very personal. It's very close. If you're in a community that's run by paramilitaries, they're not strangers (*Interview 14*).

This participant was particularly insightful when it came to the topic of paramilitaries, and although they are long extracts, they are unique and therefore it is deemed important to give them the space that they require, so that they can be adequately and accurately interrogated. The participant continued:

> Secondly, not all loyalist paramilitary groups are the same. There's the ones who are involved in criminal activity like drugs and extortion and they're scum and they abuse their position of influence. Then there are people who want nothing to do with that side of things but are still members of the organisation, for community purposes (*Interview 14*).

Here, the idea that there were different degrees of paramilitary desirability or appropriateness based on the nature of their activities was introduced. The participant continued:

> In terms of these paramilitary groups, people go to them before they'd go to the police. A lot of them will have like little residents pages and stuff. So it doesn't have to be negative things. Like it could be these are the guys that you went to when you needed a permit to open your chippy. These are the guys that you went to whenever you wanted a community garden put in at the front of your estate. So there's like a system and it's not a sinister as people make it out.
>
> Them ones will protect the community too. So if you've got someone who has had, let's say paedophile allegations living down the street, people tend to be quite supportive of the boys putting them out of their house, that kind of thing. They do the same with drug dealers. So we as a community have given these people power to enact justice on our community and we hold them to account.
>
> I couldn't condemn all paramilitaries because that would mean condemning people that I know who are decent and work so hard for their communities (*Interview 14*).

This participant makes a distinction between what they view to be unacceptable criminal activity of paramilitary group such as drug dealing, and acceptable criminal activity such as dealing with alleged paedophiles. Clearly, this participant is talking from direct personal experience of paramilitarism in their own community, but what is interesting is that some of the sentiments contained in the extracts above were repeated by participants who did not allude to having had experience with paramilitaries or who, at one point in the interview, already expressed their disapproval of paramilitaries and then placed a caveat on it. Some participants therefore offered attitudes towards paramilitaries that appear contradictory, for example, one participant said that paramilitaries would be better "engaging in productive conversations with people", and then went on to say that, "although, say there is a known paedophile in the community and the dissidents will sort it out, then I'd turn a blind eye to be honest because like well its fair enough to get rid of them people" (*Interview 10*). This contradictory approach was common among a small minority of participants. Another participant who said that paramilitaries needed "to grow up and find something better to do with their time" also commented "but what I will say is that if they're punishing or getting rid of drug dealers or men that beat up women then work away. You hardly see the police being able to deal with that properly. So they can be useful in some ways" (*Interview 22*). Coulter et al (2021, p. 5) speak about the 'modes of vigilante justice' that are prevalent in Northern Irish society and that young people are

often the targets. Whilst this is true, some of the data extracts here suggest that some young people may be happy to avail of this 'service' on occasion.

Topic 3: Personal safety

Given the violent nature of the Troubles and the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement in significantly reducing violence, it can be assumed that improved personal safety is an intrinsic objective or by product of Northern Ireland's peace process. Personal safety refers to an individual's ability to go about their daily life without the threat or fear of 'psychological, emotional, or physical harm from others' (Waters et al., 2004). When participants were asked if they felt safe in Northern Ireland, most explained their answers by directly or indirectly referring to the spatial separation between communities that exists in Northern Ireland, rather than for example, exposure to crime. In addition to this, female participants articulated how their feelings of personal safety were mostly affected by their gender, rather than sectarianism or their community background. The topic of personal safety is explored here through two themes which were developed from the relevant data extracts. The first theme explores the relationship between personal safety, identity, and spatial separatism, and the second theme illuminates how some participants pointed to their gender or race as having the most significant impact on their levels of personal safety.

Theme 1: Location

This theme captures the key factor that influenced whether young people felt safe in Northern Ireland: location. This aligns with previous research, such as Leonard and McKnight (2010), that have examined how young people perceive various locations in Northern Ireland and the interplay between personal safety and distinctive geographies. The data extracts in this research reveal that young people feel safe and unsafe in society to varying degrees, but the unifying concept implicit in the extracts is that it primarily depends on where they are. This in turn will impact what they see, and depending on who they are, that is what community they belong to, what they see can stir up different emotions and reactions. In other words, this theme covers the where, what and who of personal safety. One participant represented an anomaly as they claimed they felt safe everywhere in Northern Ireland, with no exceptions, and that it was the fault of the "older

generation" for instilling unnecessary fear in young people in terms of personal safety. They said:

> If I go up to places in Belfast my parents will still say to me, like, don't go into this area it's not safe. But I think our generation definitely does have that mindset where it's like, well, places aren't unsafe anymore like we could walk into any area and be safe. A lot of the fear is placed on us from the older generation because of their experiences but it's not the same now (*Interview 12*).

The majority of participants said they felt safe in the areas and communities that they grew up in, but they would feel "uncomfortable", "unsafe", "scared" and "intimidated" being in the 'other' community. For example: "I feel very safe in my own community but I would feel uncomfortable in like the Fountain[8]" (*Interview 2*); "I feel safe living in this part of Newtownards but not in some other areas of Northern Ireland " (*Interview 4*); and "most of Derry is grand but there are parts I wouldn't feel safe walking around purely because I'm a Catholic" (*Interview 11*). This complements the Young Life and Times Survey result that 87% of respondents said they felt safe or very safe in the area where they lived (YLT, 2023, p. 2). Some participants went further than simply expressing their unease in certain places and implied that there were 'no go areas', for example: "I feel safe in the area that I live but there are places that I just wouldn't go in Belfast" (*Interview 19*); "you're brought up being told, don't go into certain areas, ever, so I don't" (*Interview 20)*; and "on both sides there are certain areas you just wouldn't walk through, even if you identified with the same nationality or cause" (*Interview 25*). One participant said they feel safe in East Belfast and would only go into West Belfast with their older sister because she is "going with [dating] a Catholic and so she spends a lot of time in West Belfast and so she's accustomed to them and a lot of people have accepted her" (*Interview 21*).

Participants revealed different factors that stirred feelings of discomfort or fear depending on location. For some participants there was a fear of being an "outsider" and that they would be "caught out", for example, "I think I'd be paranoid that they'd know I was a Catholic or that I wasn't local to that specific area" (*Interview 11*) and "I would feel like such an outsider, an imposter, that will somehow be found out" (*Interview 18*). For other participants it was the flags, symbols and emblems that they don't identify with that

[8] The Fountain estate is a protestant estate in the city centre of Derry that lies inside the city's historic walls.

provoked feelings of fear and intimidation, for example: “I don’t like seeing the tricolour. In the unionist community when we see a tricolour, we think of IRA terrorism, you know bang bang” (*Interview 4*); “It’s pure [really] scary to go somewhere that’s really loyalist you know with the union jacks and all, it’s really intimidating” (*Interview 7*); “It’s the flags and the blue, red, and white pavements it’s just so in your face” (*Interview 18*); and “I would be uncomfortable if I somehow ended up in an area with loads of tricolours and green, white and orange pavements” (*Interview 21*). Interestingly, it was not always the case that it was symbols from the ‘other’ community that were intimidating to young people. One participant expressed unease with signs of paramilitarism, for example: “parts of Belfast with the UVF flags are scary, even though I’m a Prod and a unionist” (*Interview 5*). Two participants made reference to the socioeconomic status of an area as influencing whether they felt safe, for example, “it’s just the reputation of certain areas, that they’re rough and have loads of gangs on street corners” (*Interview 18*) and “without being insulting the intimidating stuff is mostly in poorer areas, rougher areas” (*Interview 5*).

One of the most interesting findings related to this theme was the concept of disguising your identity to ensure personal safety, something that was mentioned by young people from different communities on numerous occasions. The fact that some young people felt the need to think about concealing their identity or actively do conceal their identity, even subconsciously, suggests a pre-emptive fear of what could happen if their identity was known when in certain locations or situations. Numerous participants referred to their names as possible identity indicators and the role that their name has on feelings of safety, for example: “you can’t tell what I am by my name so that makes me feel safer” (*Interview 2*); “My name is ambiguous so if someone stopped and asked me they wouldn’t be able to tell what I was” (*Interview 6*); “I probably feel safe when it comes to my identity because sure how would anyone know what I was unless I was shouting my Irish name and wearing a Celtic top” (*Interview 9*). The role that school uniform plays in revealing a young person’s identity and how that impacts how safe they feel in certain areas was common among a few participants. This aligns with the findings of existing studies such as Roulston et al. (2017). One participant said:

> When I’d be in my uniform like we’d go up the town [Derry city centre] after school which was across the water [city side] but we wouldn’t go any further than Foyleside [main shopping centre]. It’s awful but like you hear of people getting

> spat at because of their uniform so I was always aware that people were maybe looking at me like hmm you're not a Catholic (*Interview 22*).

Another said, "If I'm walking past people from another school I'd be afraid they'd judge me based on my uniform because like sometimes they would say something like call you a Fenian[9] even though I'm not, or purposefully bump into you" (*Interview 17*).

That personal safety is dependent on location and that certain areas 'belong' to certain ethno-national communities, can be understood in two ways: the first is a lasting consequence of the Troubles, and secondly as a consequence of consociationalism's preference of autonomy over integration. The consociational principle of communal autonomy applies not only to cultural matters such as education, language, and religion (O'Leary, 2019, p. 198) but it also applies geographically, to housing and recreational sites including parks, cinemas, shopping centres and bars. The extracts above illustrate that most young people experience consociation's communal autonomy as communal segregation. Whether young people think 'good fences make good neighbours' (Rees, 1994) requires further research, but what is revealed by the data extracts is that when some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation go beyond 'their' fence, they feel scared, uncomfortable, and intimidated.

Perhaps consociationalists would view this as an unsurprising characteristic of a society emerging from a violent ethno-national conflict, where integration cannot yet work because social cleavages are not fully cross-cutting (O'Leary, 2019, p. 329). Furthermore, consociationalists would claim that whilst segregation prevents avoidable renewals of conflict (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009), consociation does not prevent voluntary assimilation or integration if this is desired. No participant expressed such a desire, although it should be noted that they were not directly asked if they were in favour of integration. Based on some participants' desire for a united Ireland or to maintain the Union (this will be returned to in Chapter 7) it is reasonable to assume that they do not desire integration in terms of a shared communal new identity. In this sense, as consociationalists would argue, prescribing integration in Northern Ireland, would be to 'prescribe the partisan victory of one community over another' (O'Leary, 2019, p. 28)

[9] A derogatory term referring to a Catholic, especially of Irish ethnicity.

Theme 2: It's not all about Catholics and Protestants

Ethno-national division affects so many facets of life in the Northern Ireland, including the issue of personal safety that has just been explored. One consequence of this preoccupation is that at times it overshadows other forms of violence that have regrettably become part of daily life for so many in Northern Ireland (Coulter, et al., 2021). Some extracts reveal two other factors that impact how safe some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation feel in their everyday lives: race and gender. The underlying shared meaning among these extracts was that personal safety was not all about being a Catholic or a Protestant.

Beginning with race, the 2021 census revealed that Northern Ireland was 96.6% white and the total number of people with a minority ethnic group was 3.4% of the population (*2021 Census of Northern Ireland*). Despite ethnic minorities making up such a small percentage of the population, 'the transition towards a more multicultural society in Northern Ireland has not been without its problems' (Coulter, 2021, p. 10). Some commentators have labelled Belfast at the 'race hate capital of Europe' (Gilligan, 2019, p. 107) and although this may be contested by many, particularly those who live in the city, the most recent statistics for the entire region of Northern Ireland present an alarming picture. The year 2021/22 reveals the second highest number of racist crimes recorded since 2004/05 nearing 1,300 (the highest was 1,336 in 2014/15) (Belfast: PSNI, 2022, p. 5). This volume of racially motivated attacks surpassed those categorised by the police as 'sectarian' in motivation in the same year (approximately just over 1,000) (Belfast: PSNI, 2022(a), p. 5). These statistics provide the context for the following contribution made by one participant:

> For me it's racism that's the main thing. I've been racially abused by Protestants and Catholics. The fact that I'm mixed race is underlying all the time, so I wouldn't walk anywhere on my own at night because I'd be afraid of racial assaults. I'm even afraid during the day if I'm honest (*Interview 6*)

This reflects a bleak development in the post-Troubles era and is an example of a new form of conflict that some members of the Good Friday Agreement must contend with. Arguably the rise of racial hatred in Northern Ireland has not been taken seriously by the political elite, with some of them even being brought into the spotlight for allegations of racism. Some examples include but are not limited to Doug Beattie and his infamous

tweets that came out in 2022, Gerry Adams' use of the 'N-word' in a tweet in 2016, and Sammy Wilson who in 2009 said that "charges of racism always coincided with the holding out of the hand for money" (*The Irish Times*, 2009). It is also notable that the only person from a minority racial background who was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Anna Lo of the Alliance Party, left the field of politics due to racist abuse directed at her (BBC News, 2014).

Another form of conflict that has been belied by the prevailing focus on ethno-national and cross community concerns is gender-based violence, specifically violence against women. This has not gone unnoticed by some female members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, as one participant remarked "I actually think gender-based violence in the street is more prevalent but we're too obsessed with sectarianism to realise that we have bigger problems" (*Interview 2*) and another said, "Well you can hide your identity but I can't hide that I'm a female so I think that is a much bigger problem in terms of my personal safety" (*Interview 7*). This complements the finding of the 2023 Young Life and Times Survey which reported that males were more likely than females to state that they felt very safe (55% compared to 40%) (YLT, 2023, p. 4). The UN defines gender-based violence as 'violence that is directed against a woman, because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty' (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,* n.d.). Female participants did not report incidences in which they were victims of gender-based violence, but it was stated multiple times that they felt that their gender was an influential factor in why they might feel unsafe. For example: "Up the town [in the city centre] I wouldn't feel safe after a night out, just being a girl and all. I'd be wary of fellas with a lot of drink in them, then I wouldn't feel safe" (*Interview 9*) and "If I'm walking by myself and there's a huge group of boys walking towards me, I will feel nervous that they're doing to do something to me so I always cross the street. But that's a gender thing not a sectarian thing" (*Interview 17*).

At the time of the interviews, the brutal murder of 24-year-old Aishling Murphy had just taken place in the Republic of Ireland, which sparked national and international outcry. Many women came forward with stories of their own experiences of violence at the hands of men. Perhaps this tragic incident caused participants to reflect more on the relationship

between their gender and personal safety. That being said, gender-based violence, specifically attacks directed against women, has been on the rise in Northern Ireland for over a decade. In an 'era of purported peace' (Coulter, 2021, p. 9), in 2020/21 there were 31,196 incidents recorded by the PSNI where there was a domestic abuse motivation. This is one and a half times higher than the level recorded in 2004/5 (Belfast: PSNI, 2022(b), p. 4). In 2021 the number of recorded sectarian incidents was over 1,000 (Belfast: PSNI, 22(b), p. 4) and Coulter et al. determined that at that time there were 'around 37 acts of violence committed by men against women in Northern Ireland for every one that entails unionists or nationalists assaulting one another' (2021, p. 9). This calls into question the efficiency and effectiveness of the political response to gender-based violence, which is evidently now more prevalent in society than sectarian assaults. However, political priorities still appear to be skewed towards the latter. This reinforces the 'androcentric and state centric orthodoxies which underpin Northern Ireland's partial peace' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 255).

The state centric orthodoxy is typical of consociationalism; from the emphasis on political elites, to concerns about external state relations, and possibilities of federations and confederations, consociationalists would not deny their state centric nature. They might however argue that they are not androcentric because they seek an inclusive powersharing government that invites men and women equally, and any underrepresentation can be ascribed to the electorate who are solely responsible for voting candidates into government. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, some critics argue that it is consociationalism's preoccupation on ethno-national division, at the expense of other cleavages, that brings its androcentric nature to the fore. The argument here is that nationality is an inherently masculine concept, and as such consociationalism (possibly unintentionally) pushes the male-led ethnonational agenda leading to the marginalisation of women, and minority groups. Melanie Hoewer (2013) explored the peace process in Northern Ireland and contrasted this to the peace process in Chiapas. Hoewer found that Northern Ireland gave precedence to state-centric powersharing, whereas Chiapas recognised indigenous women's autonomy and was guided by both male and female contributions. Hoewer argued that in doing so, the Chiapas peace process 'created the conditions necessary for challenging community traditions and masculine power, leading to a significant decrease in gender-based violence' (Gilmartin, 2018, p. 98).

Indeed, in Northern Ireland, the proportionality and parity principles of consociationalism, and the emphasis of equality in the Good Friday Agreement, speak only to equality between nationalists and unionists; weighted voting, the petition of concern, and even the 50:50 recruitment policy of the PSNI. Considering the Good Friday Agreement did not include women's rights (nor did subsequent talks), it is argued by Coulter et al. that 'the primary architects of the peace process situated gender and women's issues as peripheral to the main priorities of guns and government' (2021, p. 235). Based on this, it seems reasonable to conclude that consociational arrangements in Northern Ireland have not improved gender relations and this is reflected in some of the data extracts provided by members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. To be clear, the suggestion is not that consociationalists or the architects of the Good Friday Agreement are complicit in gender-based violence, but as studies have shown, it is the case that transformation in gender relations at a macro-level can potentially curb the potential for gender-based conflict at a micro-level (Gilmartin, 2018, p.98). What the data extracts illustrate is that for some female members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, transformation of gender relations is a long way off in Northern Ireland. As Coulter et al. put it, 'it is clearly evident that the most pressing security threat to women in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday agreement is not 'terrorism', a hard Brexit, dissident republican or loyalist groups, but rather gender-based violence' (2021, p. 225)

Summary

This chapter began by outlining the importance of proper institutional management of security issues in complex consociations like Northern Ireland. The inclusion of security matters in consociational arrangements is argued by advocates to be critical in their maintenance and preventing their breakdown. Given the violent nature of the Troubles, the Good Friday Agreement addressed interlinking security issues including decommissioning, demilitarisation, police reform, and prisoner release. There is an overwhelming consensus, even among critics of consociationalism, that consociations do have pacifying effects, and this was indeed Northern Ireland's experience as the region saw a dramatic reduction in acts of political violence and continues to enjoy relative levels of peace today. The domain of security was explored here according to three related topics. The topic of 'The PSNI' was explored through the following themes: 'The PSNI as unfit for purpose' which highlights the legitimacy deficient of the police based

on participants' experiences and attitudes towards them; 'The PSNI as an integral part of society' which captures support for the police among participants; and 'The PSNI as an unremarkable entity' which reveals participants indifference towards the police. The topic of 'Paramilitaries' was explored through the following themes: 'Paramilitaries are a stain on society (and need to be removed)' which illustrates the contempt participants have for paramilitaries; 'Paramilitaries have become normalised' which reflects participants' views of paramilitaries as being an unfortunate part of life in Northern Ireland; and 'Paramilitaries are misunderstood' which explores participants' ideas that there are varying degrees of 'bad' paramilitarism. The topic of 'Personal Safety' was explored through the following themes: 'Location' which illustrates the link participants make between personal safety and spatial separatism; and 'It's not all about Catholics and Protestants' which illuminates the new modes of conflict experienced by participants' including gender-based violence and racism.

The chapter discussed the possible impact of consociationalism on young people's experiences of security related issues. Although not an impact of, but rather an impact on consociationalism, the chapter questioned whether young people's largely negative view of the police could have a destabilising impact on consociation (if the consociational institutions were functioning) considering the integral role security issues play in maintaining consociations. The chapter also highlighted consociationalism's inability to eradicate paramilitarism or curb their influence, but it was suggested that perhaps consociation's inclusion of hardliners and their subsequent moderation was influential in young people's overwhelming rejection of paramilitarism. Regarding personal safety, the chapter considered the following in relation to the possible impact of consociationalism: firstly, consociationalism's preference towards accommodation rather than integration and its role in young people's level of safety being dependent on their location; and secondly, given consociationalism's state-centric nature and the dominance of ethno-nationalism in its structures, the chapter explored the possibility that consociationalism has not adequately transformed gender relations. Consociationalists would however ague that this was not explicitly within the remit of consociationalism, not because they do not champion gender equality and women's rights, but because, in the case of Northern Ireland, they were not central to the conflict and therefore do not form a central component of the consociational solution.

Chapter 7

Governance

Establishing an appropriate and workable means of governance for deeply divided places, that will ensure peaceful and sustainable democracy, is arguably the raison d'etre of consociationalism. There are two tenets of consociational thinking that speak directly to the issue of governance. The first is the national sharing of political power between divided people based on the principles of proportionality, parity, autonomy, and veto rights. In a consociational system of governance, these principles apply equally across all three branches of government, including the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. The second tenet of consociationalism that speaks to the issue of governance is specific to ethnonationally divided places, like Northern Ireland, and it is the recognition of the right of people to exercise national self-determination. In order for Northern Ireland's peace process to be accepted across both communities, including hardliners, and to stand any chance of success, it was essential that the architects of the peace accord got the governance element right.

There are two factors that explain why appropriate governance arrangements were so important to the peace process. The first is Northern Ireland's history of 'bad' governance, captured by James Craig's phrase "a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people"; from its inception in 1921 to the return of Direct Rule in 1972, the Ulster Unionist party ruled Northern Ireland enabled by an inbuilt Protestant majority and electoral malpractice (Darby, 2003). The Ulster Unionist Party government prioritised security and unionist unity, which left nationalists distrusting, fearful and resentful for 50 years (Gillespie, 2016). The second is the nature of the resulting conflict which was at its core a national self-determination dispute; both nationalists and unionists held competing mutually exclusive claims for self-determination (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995), with the former aspiring to live in a united Ireland and the latter wanting to retain Northern Ireland's position in the union with Great Britain.

The Good Friday agreement sought to rectify the history of partisan governance by creating a representative cross communal powersharing executive with inbuilt measures to protect minority rights, including those related to culture and religion. The Agreement

addressed the self-determination issue in a number of ways, underpinned by a 'bounty of recognition' of the two dominant identities concerned, Irish and British, as well as those who are both or neither. Furthermore, the constitutional future of the island of Ireland was to be decided by the people of Ireland based on the principle of consent. The beauty and genius of the Good Friday Agreement then, was that it gave both nationalists and unionists, as well as hardliners, sound reasons for their respective assessments of its merits (O'Leary, 2019). In other words, it allowed each bloc to pursue their respective political and constitutional aspirations, despite them being mutually exclusive. This chapter looks at three topics that fall under the governance domain, firstly, Stormont and powersharing, secondly, youth reflections on the Good Friday Agreement 25 years on, and thirdly young people's opinions towards the constitutional future of the island of Ireland. The data has been organised according to these topics and in each topic, themes have been generated using reflexive thematic analysis.

Topic 1: Stormont and powersharing

The consociational powersharing institutions that were created under the Good Friday Agreement were endorsed and legitimised in two referendums held concurrently in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in May 1998. However, the years that immediately followed were defined by consociational instability as the powersharing institutions collapsed five times, with the longest suspension spanning five years from 2002-2007. The restoration of powersharing in 2007 marked the beginning of a 10-year period of relatively stable, but most importantly, unbroken, consociation in Northern Ireland. However, in recent times, after Stormont collapsed in 2017 and again most recently in 2022, the powersharing structures have faced intense scrutiny. The current discourse surrounding Stormont has called into question the sustainability and durability of consociational powersharing in Northern Ireland, with expressions of increasing uncertainty over the likelihood of its restoration. Using the data extracts relating to Stormont and powersharing three themes have been generated, each of which will be discussed in turn. Overall, the data extracts reveal ambivalence among members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, ranging from anger to cautious praise, as well as indifference.

Theme 1: A suspended government cannot govern and Northern Ireland suffers

This theme captures the concern expressed by most participants when discussing Stormont's recurring and present state of collapse. When the first set of interviews were taking place, Stormont had been restored for two years following a three suspension. However, when the second set of interviews took place, Stormont had just collapsed again the week prior in February 2022. Although participants expressed conflicting opinions on Stormont's suspensions and spoke about different consequences that mattered to them, the unifying concept among the majority of the data extracts was that when Stormont is suspended and does not carry out its functions, Northern Ireland suffers. There was an obvious surface level difference amongst the extracts, which was whether the suspensions were justified, with the majority of participants expressing they were not. Two minority groups can be identified from the data extracts: the first are those participants who were unaware of Stormont's recent collapse and the second are those participants who felt the collapse in 2017 was wholly justified. Firstly, when the participants who were unaware of Stormont's pattern of suspensions were informed of the interregnum, they expressed less than favourable sentiments including being unsurprised and to some extent unbothered, for example: "I didn't even know it had collapsed. Shows how invisible they are in my community" (*Interview 6*); "I didn't know it even collapsed for months and when I did hear about it I just rolled my eyes and was like here we go again. And it'll happen again and again. So I wasn't surprised" (*Interview 22*); and "Oh my God, did it collapse again? To be honest I couldn't give two fucks, sure they don't do anything anyways. What a joke" (*Interview 23*).

Secondly, there were two participants who expressed their support for Sinn Féin's decision to collapse Stormont in March 2017, both participants are from the republican community and fluent Irish speakers. One participant said, "Everyone applauded him [Martin McGuinness] for doing it. Political unionism was, and still is, denying me rights as an Irish speaker so they're the problem and we reacted to that problem" (*Interview 2*). The other participant who supported the 2017 collapse remarked:

> People started to say to me "you fucking Irish speakers yous [you are all] are holding us back", and I was like I just want some rights. I get that healthcare and education were disrupted but Irish speakers were affected by that too so we were sacrificing things as well (*Interview 8)*.

Interestingly, two other Irish speaking participants took contrary views and did not think it was appropriate or beneficial to collapse Stormont on the basis of the Irish language, they said: "I was really annoyed when it collapsed. Sinn Fein and the DUP were just playing politics because they don't want this place to work. Me and my family are all Irish speakers, but I don't think it's worth shutting everything down for" (*Interview 9*) and "I am a fluent Irish speaker but sure nothing was gained from the collapse in 2017, but I think plenty was lost you know? Everyone in the North suffers when powersharing is collapsed, Irish speakers as well" *(Interview 15).*

The overwhelming sentiment among participants regarding Stormont in the context of its collapse in 2017 and 2022 was one of negativity. Most participants used language such as: "regrettable"; "irresponsible"; "embarrassment"; "let down"; "concern"; and "hopeless". Some participants specified how the collapse was detrimental to their experience of the healthcare system, with one participant recalling that their experience in one of the second biggest hospitals in the region was "… terrible and so disorganised. It was chaotic and stressful. I have regular appointments and usually they take 15 minutes, but that time when Stormont was gone it was taking up to three hours and so I miss school as well" (*Interview 11*). Another participant said:

> I was so angry because I was on waiting lists for a medical condition for two and a half years for a first appointment and that was an urgent referral. And I waited another two years for an operation. So there was no one there advocating for me or pushing things forward. I think I calculated it one day there's been like 1/6 of my life that Northern Ireland hasn't had a government. It's a disgrace (*Interview 12).*

There was a palpable sense of anger, often articulated with colourful language, from several other participants because of what they believed to be the calamitous impact of Stormont's collapse on Northern Ireland more generally, for example: "I just thought, I hate you all so fucking much. All I could think about was all the vulnerable people and all the legislation that could help them just sitting there gathering dust. It is just so selfish" (*Interview 10*); "Universal Credit is not working properly, and mental health and special needs services are not working properly. They're issues that affect everyone" (*Interview 19*); and "There is no partnership in our politics. There are two parties leading the government that gain electorally from bashing each other and trying to keep the other out.

They're a disgrace and they should be ashamed of themselves. It doesn't work for the people" (*Interview 13*).

As is the case in this extract, some participants expressed equal annoyance at both Sinn Féin and the DUP, and felt they were both equally to blame for the collapse of powersharing. One participant said:

> It was a fucking disgrace. For three years there was no discussion of education, health, mental health, no progress. Why? Because the DUP were incompetent with money and Sinn Fein decided to place the Irish language above people's health, hospitals and schools (*Interview 5*).

Given that most of the interviews took place before February 2022, the majority of extracts refer to the March 2017 collapse, however one participant did make reference to the February 2022 collapse. Comparable to the Irish language speakers who did not believe collapsing the institutions was justified in March 2017 on the grounds of language rights, this participant from a Protestant unionist background expressed that the issues surrounding the Northern Ireland protocol also did not justifying collapse, saying, "I don't understand how unionists can be more concerned about identity than quality of life and living standards? It really makes me so angry I just do not get it, and I'm as much a unionist as they are" (*Interview 19*). Many participants expressed frustration at what they perceived to be the ease with which Stormont could be collapsed, all on the terms of one party or one bloc. It could be argued that this, that is, mandatory coalition, is one of the fundamental weaknesses of the consociational model. Although advocates would claim it is not mandatory strictly speaking because parties can remove themselves from the Executive at any time. Therefore it could be argued that the problem lies not in consociational thinking, but what could be interpreted as anti-devolution behaviour by the party or individual responsible for the collapse.

Theme 2: Stormont in its current form is problematic

Since Northern Ireland's powersharing institutions have only functioned for one year out of the last six, it is unsurprising that most participants questioned the extent to which Stormont was fit for purpose. There were two exceptions to this in which the participants stood out for their indifference to Stormont and powersharing saying: "I won't lie I am not familiar with Stormont and how it all works. I don't really care to be honest. Sorry, is

that pure bad?" (*Interview 23)* and "I'm switched off from it all, I couldn't even tell you who the First Minister is or when the next election is" (*Interview 3)*.

The remaining data extracts reveal a multitude of opinions on Stormont and powersharing ranging from unfit for purpose, to cautious praise, as well as more nuanced approaches that differentiated the rules and procedures governing Stormont from the actual concept of powersharing as a means of governance. However, despite the varying degrees to which participants were critical of Stormont, the underlying shared meaning among the relevant extracts was that for some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, Stormont in its current form is problematic, for one reason or another. Several participants from republican, nationalist, loyalist, and unionist communities took somewhat of an absolutist approach when contemplating Stormont's prospects, suitability and capabilities, for example: "Stormont is not going to last forever, its proved time and time again it doesn't work and we're going to get a unity referendum anyways. It's not a permanent fixture (*Interview 2)*; "How can it be fit for purpose when the past 14 years have been nothing but dysfunction and a lack of progress? It doesn't work" (*Interview 13*); "… it is entirely unsustainable and everyone knows it" (*Interview 4*); "Sure look how easily it can be collapsed, no one can convince me that's a good system" (*Interview 5*); and "It's baffling to me that you would try and force the DUP and Sinn Féin to work together, genuinely and sincerely. It just doesn't work. And it's proven that in the last few weeks. It's simply ridiculous" (*Interview 21*).

Other participants offered more specific criticisms; rather than dismissing powersharing as a means of governance in general, their reproval was aimed at certain rules and procedures that they deemed to be the source of Stormont's problems. Several participants made reference to the petition of concern, for example, "The fact that it [Stormont] can be so easily manipulated is a problem. I mean the ability to make any issue a green and orange one with the petition of concern is wild to me" (*Interview 9*). The petition of concern has been increasingly used by parties in recent years. According to McCulloch (2017) between 2011-2016 the veto system was used 118 times. The intention of consociationalists in including veto rights was to protect minorities and prevent one community from tyrannising the other. However the argument is increasingly made that it is becoming a 'blocking move and an abuse of its original intention' (Nagle, 2018, p. 411). Although parties appear to be manipulating the consociational veto rights

to suit their own social agendas, it is true that no single party has the ability to trigger this on its own and tyranny of one community over the other has been prevented. Therefore if reform, or removal, of the petition of concern was to take place, it would require an extreme level of delicacy.

Other participants mentioned the designation system, with the general consensus being that it is a "sectarian headcount " (*Interview 17*). One participant, who was from the loyalist community, highlighted what they perceived to be the adverse impact the designation system has on smaller parties like the Alliance Party. They remarked:

> I think the rules set us up to fail, like how Alliance can't take the deputy first minister position, the smaller parties like the Greens can only really be silent observers because of designation, and clearly there is too much power concentrated around the big two considering they can just pull the whole thing down when there is disagreement (*Interview 12*).

Several participants echoed the common criticism of consociationalism that it entrenches the sectarian divide and antagonistic politics (Taylor, 2006) through the designation system. While this may appear to be the case, it is also true that the designation system is essential to the voting rules, including cross-community consent, concurrent majority and weighted majority, and these are essential in fulfilling the consociational principle of proportionality. Furthermore, in relation to the Alliance party, the argument could be made that their lack of influence, or the fact that their votes do not hold as much value, is a direct result of their party performance and elections, rather than the consociational system. A blunt approach to this would be to suggest that if Alliance increase their vote share, as they have consistently done over the years, they could then be in a position to change the system as required with the consensus of all involved.

Several participants spoke about what they perceived to be the ability of one party to collapse Stormont as the main source of political instability, with one participant remarking that "… it allows, naw [no] it actually encourages, political complacency. They [politicians] know they're going to get re-elected again even if they pull the whole thing down because the system makes it that way" (*Interview 10*). Another participant suggested that the current rules governing Stormont allow too much power to be

concentrated in the hands of the two dominant parties, which only serve party interests rather than those of the wider communities. They said:

> If anyone can pull out at any time over anything then how is that a functioning democracy? It's too much power like its mad. It doesn't make sense it. It's not even a cross community thing so they're not even representing a whole community, it's just party interests. There needs to be some rule put in about that, seriously (*Interview 24)*.

Another participant spoke directly to the speculation at the time (January 2022) over whether the DUP would nominate a deputy First Minister if Sinn Féin were to receive enough votes in the May 2022 elections to entitle them to the First Minister position. The participant remarked:

> The way unionists are able to threaten not to take the seat beside Sinn Fein as First Minister makes me sick. That tells me there's something wrong with Stormont. So you can support democracy only if you like who you're working with? How can a *democratic* [emphasis] powersharing system not have safeguards to stop that sort of thing happening?" (*Interview 16*)

Other participants levelled their criticisms elsewhere, namely at the "parties and the people in them" (*Interview 1*) as causing political paralysis. This echoes a key finding in *Pivotal's* 2023 report that only 10.5% of young people agreed that politicians in Northern Ireland do a good job of representing issues that matter to them (*Pivotal,* 2023, p. 8). Interestingly, the participants who felt this way all asked before expressing their respective opinions for reassurance that the interview was anonymous. Some participants stated that they believed the DUP and Sinn Féin specifically were the problem. The extracts referred to the perceived lack of willingness to share power, a shared dislike of each other, and an innate lack of trust between the two, for example: "I don't think the DUP and Sinn Fein actually want to share power. That's Stormont's biggest problem number one. There is no political willingness to make it work, and if that's not there it doesn't matter how efficient the institution is" (*Interview 4*); "A lot of things are delayed or shut down because of how much the DUP and Sinn Féin hate each other. As long as they're at the top we won't make any progress, but that's not the fault of all of Stormont" (*Interview 27)*; and "I think the problem is that Sinn Féin and the DUP just do not trust each other and in politics for a working relationship you need to trust your partners and not be suspicious of them" (*Interview #5*). Another participant remarked:

> Personally, I don't think it's like Stormont itself that is faulty. Sinn Féin and the DUP its them who are faulty and not fit for powersharing. They create this impossible atmosphere and the way they treat each other could never produce good stable politics that we could be confident in. So aye [yes] it's not Stormont that isn't fit for purpose, it's Sinn Féin and the DUP (*Interview 19*).

Other participants spoke more generally about all of the parties and elected politicians and made reference to what they perceived to be inappropriate or unprofessional behaviour, being stuck in the past, and a lack of collective responsibility. Interestingly there was no identity or community dimension here as criticism came from right across the dominant communities, as well as those who are non-aligned, for example: "The politicians are the problem. It's their mindset, sometimes they just like an argument because it makes it look like they're working and fighting for their communities. But ordinary people see past it" (*Interview 22*); "All the parties in the executive hate each other, they don't want to work together, there is no collective responsibility, there's too much deadlock and they walk away when things don't go there way now. It's an absolute bloody circus" (*Interview 18*); and "I think it's the people and the parties that make Stormont so shit. Their behaviour 90% of the time is shocking and cringe because of how stuck in the past and addicted to fearmongering they are. There's no forward thinking" (*Interview 20*). The complaint here from some participants could be argued as the perception that the consociational system incentivises rival groups to get elected in order to grasp the reins of power, but because consociationalism does not place any credence on assimilation or creating a common narrative, arguably once elected the incentive to actually *share* power disappears.

A few participants expressed varying degrees of positivity towards Stormont, with some voicing their general support for powersharing as the chosen means of governing Northern Ireland. The underlying reason for this was an acknowledgement by participants that Northern Ireland is unique and therefore it requires unique governance by people who know it best, for example: "Well I think d'hondt is fantabulous, I like that ministerial positions are held by different parties" (*Interview 12*); "I do think that powersharing and Stormont is essential because it gives an opportunity for Northern Irish people to basically regulate their own affairs and show that the north can look after itself" (*Interview 15*); and "Powersharing is so important because in a place like here, everybody's views are so important. You really can't afford to leave anyone out even if

you really think their views are absolutely despicable" (*Interview 17*). A significant number of participants referred to Stormont's handling of the covid-19 pandemic as a positive example of powersharing working well and cross-communal cooperation benefiting the people on the ground. There was a sense of 'credit where credit is due' from participants, for example: "Well Robin Swann is doing fantastic in the Executive so he is an example of how Stormont can, and was, working" (*Interview 5*); "I think Stormont handled Covid very well like when they all appeared together for the press conferences that was a good look" (*Interview 27*); "I am glad that it got up and running when it did. I don't know how we would have got through a pandemic without a government" (*Interview 2*); and "It was good that there was a government during covid. I do think Michelle O'Neill and Arlene Foster worked very well together during the pandemic when they did the conferences" (*Interview 1*).

One participant offered a succinct and balanced summary of their perception of Stormont's recent performance remarking:

> When it works, it works well, like look at all the legislation being made all of a sudden after it collapsed before the election. So there is some proof there. But when it doesn't work, it really doesn't. We have gotten better but there is a long way to go before you can say it is fit for purpose (*Interview 25*).

Most of the criticisms of Stormont and powersharing made by participants are reflective of the ongoing debates in academia regarding the merits of consociation. However it is inaccurate to claim that most participants felt Stormont was not fit for purpose as a whole, as many offered support for powersharing as a means of governing Northern Ireland. Their criticisms were directed at the rules and procedures governing powersharing. This thinking aligns, to some extent, with supporters of consociation who claim there is no alternative to powersharing. Participants' support for powersharing could be interpreted as their satisfaction that it is dealing with the ethno-national cleavages to an acceptable degree.

Theme 3: Nothing changes if nothing changes

Several participants put forward reforms that they would like to see implemented in Stormont. These ranged from ending mandatory coalition in favour of voluntarily coalition, amending the petition of concern, scrapping the need to designate, introducing an official opposition, and changing what some perceived to be a two party system.

Despite offering different ways in which they felt Stormont could or should be reformed, the shared meaning among the relevant data extracts was that things could no longer carry on as they are because the same cycle of political stability and instability will continue otherwise. It was also implied by several participants that the sources of political instability were well known and therefore, it seemed obvious to participants that these issues would be the first to be subjected to reform.

The first matter that should be subject to reform according to several participants was that of mandatory coalition, for example: "We need to end mandatory coalition and replace it with a coalition of the willing" (*Interview 4*); "I think mandatory coalition is coming to an end, well I hope it is. It's not working. Putting all five of those parties together just doesn't work" (*Interview 18*); "Voluntary coalition is the best option. The other three will work together voluntarily, the big two only do it now because they have to and look how well that's worked out" (*Interview 20*); "We need to see the end of mandatory coalition. Like that does not work. The two main parties have both collapsed powersharing in the last few years and they'll just fucking pull it down again and again if they want to. We need to take away that power" (*Interview 21*).

The other most common reform suggested by participants was the need to change the requirement of the designation system and often this was based on a degree of sympathy toward the "middle ground parties", for example: "I think we'd have to do something with the designations because it isn't fair that an Alliance MLA's vote isn't worth as much as someone else because they're not green or orange" (*Interview 18*); "The designation thing makes people think they have two choices and they don't care about policy or changes, they only vote on green and orange and I would love that to change" (*Interview 26*); and "The system needs to make more room or give more power to middle ground parties rather than forcing two parties that don't share anything in common, other than the fact neither want devolution to succeed, to work together" (*Interview 13*). A smaller number of participants mentioned the petition of concern as being problematic and being an obstacle to Stormont's ability to "progress and make liberal laws that would benefit society". This participant continued, "I hate the way one party can block things just because they have over a certain number of MLAs" (*Interview 9*). Only one participant mentioned official opposition as a reform that could be made to ensure better accountability at Stormont, but they were not convinced of its prospects saying, "I think

official opposition would be good, but sure that's happened before and it didn't work" (*Interview 18*).

One participant suggested the need to separate what they perceived to be bread and butter issues from green and orange issues and proposed a reformed two-chamber Stormont. They suggested that, "one [chamber] would be responsible for green and orange issues, so the petition of concern and designations would be there, and then the other chamber would deal with day to day stuff so the country would continue to function even if the first chamber collapsed" (*Interview 14*). Other participants made less practical reform solutions, instead appealing to people's emotions claiming a need not only for politicians to reconcile their differences, but also for society to heal more generally, for example: "I think there has to be some reconciliation within the parliament itself in order for politicians to leave green and orange issues and the past outside so they can get on with the daily stuff that matters to people" (*Interview 11*) and "It needs completely reformed as it is right now but I don't know what I'd do differently. I think you need to heal the divisions in society first, that might help Stormont be better" (*Interview 24*). Some participants clearly had not given the reform of Stormont much thought, "Awk I wouldn't have a baldies [clue] where to start really. I don't know, get rid of all the 'Jefferys' and 'Jims'. Can I say that?" (*Interview 6*).

Topic 2: The Good Friday Agreement

When the Good Friday Agreement was signed 25 years ago, there was immense elation and relief, first and foremost, because it signalled an end to 30 years of violence that had ruined many lives in Northern Ireland, but also because it indicated the beginning of a new era in Northern Irish politics. At the grassroots level there was hope that divisions would heal, and at the political level there was hope that Northern Ireland would experience, for the first time, a political system that resembled those of other Western European democracies that were defined by their dullness but also their stability. However, not only could it be argued that neither of these hopes have yet to be fully realised, but it also seems reasonable to argue that the road over the last 25 years has been far from smooth. Political instability and intermittent breakouts of communal rioting and increased intercommunal tension were almost always part of life in Northern Ireland, or the threat of their actualisation was lurking beneath the surface. As Northern Ireland

prepares to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, it does so without a functioning Executive and a collapsed Stormont Assembly, as was the case five years ago when the 20th anniversary was being marked. Consequently, in recent years has the Good Friday Agreement has come under immense strain, as calls for its reform and questions over its longevity have become commonplace. There are those, however, who continue to back the Agreement, adamant that it is sacrosanct, and that it must be protected and implemented in full.

The topic of the Good Friday Agreement is approached in this research by exploring the attitudes of young people, the intended beneficiaries, towards the Agreement. Participants were asked one intentionally broad question namely, 'Is the Good Friday Agreement important to you?'. Two participants were indifferent claiming: "It's just doesn't bother me, I don't really have an opinion on it" (Interview 22*)* and "I don't really know what it means … it doesn't impact my life, I missed the hype" (*Interview 23*). However, for the other participants this question opened up a vast discussion covering many different angles and exposing an array of conflicting and concurring views. This complements *Pivotal's* statistic that 62% of their respondents reported that they had a 'good' awareness of the Good Friday Agreement (*Pivotal*, 2023, p. 6). Using the relevant data extracts, three themes have been generated, each of which will be discussed in turn. Overall, the attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation towards the Agreement of which they are named after were ambivalent. There were declarations of support, as well as a desire to see it reformed, and for some participants, a desire for it to be scrapped.

Theme 1: The Good Friday Agreement is the only show in town

Several participants made the point that for them, the Good Friday Agreement is as important and relevant now as it was in 1998. Although participants expressed different reasons for this, the underlying unifying concept among the extracts was that they had an unwavering and steadfast commitment to protect, and in some cases implement, the Agreement in its current form, as one participant said, "it must be protected at all costs" (*Interview 6*). Another participant recalled, "I turned one two days before the Good Friday Agreement was signed and its largely responsible for the fact that I grew up in peace, so of course it's still important. We need it to keep the peace" (*Interview 15*). An additional participant echoed this idea that the Agreement's job is not finished because

peace is a never-ending endeavour, saying “I found it in my granny's house and I had a look. It’s symbolic of what people can do when they work together and its relevant because the peace process isn’t over. Why would we move on from the Good Friday Agreement if we’re still in a peace process?” (*Interview 17*).

Participants also praised the Agreement for all that it achieved in 1998 and felt that there was no need to amend or move on from it, but rather a need to go back to it and reinforce its principles, for example participants said: “I think people can undervalue the Good Friday Agreement. Sometimes I think everyone could do with reminding themselves of what it actually says so it can be lived out fully today” (*Interview 7*) and “I think we have treated the Good Friday Agreement as though it's just something that was made and done. But it’s the foundation for everything here, present tense, so we need to get back to it ASAP and implement it properly” (*Interview 13*). One participant expressed their concern over what could happen if the Agreement was subject to reform saying, “I think if we started to in any way touch it, it would be like when you have a loose thread in your jumper and you pull it and your jumper just falls away. It would be better to work on adhering to it properly than trying to change it” (*Interview 15*). Other participants were more enthusiastic for reform, which is discussed in the next theme.

Theme 2: The times they are a-changing

This is a very significant theme as it reveals that some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are open to revising and reforming the terms agreed in 1998. Remarkably, the majority of participants contributed to the development of this theme. For them, the achievement of the Agreement in 1998 was undeniable however they felt that the content of the Agreement is of a time and place, that is, society has changed since 1998 and so has its needs. There were suggestions by participants to amend, edit or add to the Agreement, and for some, there was a need for something entirely new. Some participants expressed their feeling that the Agreement had a best before date, for example: “Yes it is important, but it is also outdated. It was the best at the time, but now we can do better. We’re allowed to revise it and I think we should” (*Interview 18*); “It was a tool for a time and place and we’re in a different place now” (*Interview 19*); and “I hope that it will be replaced in the future by a better document. It’s not a criticism of it, it’s just times change and we learn and need different things” (*Interview 10*). Some participants spoke to against the idea that the Good Friday Agreement is sacrosanct and

many of them appeared to support Arlene Foster's sentiments, saying for example: "It was never meant to be a finished document. I think it is meant to evolve and change with time, so it should be amended for people of today" (*Interview 20*); "We can't take it as the be all and end all. Just because something's in the Good Friday Agreement doesn't mean it's perfect and can't be criticised" (*Interview 19*).

Other participants spoke more directly to weaknesses of the Agreement, claiming that revisions to the rules could make Stormont more "efficient". One participant alluded to the Agreement's constructive ambiguity as being an issue. They said:

> I don't know if it would be signed today because it tries to satisfy everyone without satisfying anyone and people expect more now that the Troubles are over. It's an agree to disagree agreement so I think we need a new agreement to control powersharing (*Interview 24*).

Amongst the discussions surrounding reform of the Good Friday Agreement, only one participant, from a unionist background, commented on what they perceived to be the need for everyone's input and consensus if the Agreement was to be reformed. They said, "I don't feel overly attached to the Good Friday Agreement. It ended the conflict but it shouldn't write our future. I wouldn't be against a new Agreement as long as it was done with everyone's say so, I don't see why it shouldn't change with the times (*Interview 25*).

Theme 3: Ash heap of history

Participants who were not Agreement enthusiasts, all of which came from the loyalist community, were in the minority. This minority expressed negative views towards the agreement, and although their criticisms differed in nature, the underlying shared meaning among the extracts was that the Good Friday Agreement needed to be scrapped. One participant based this view on their perception that claims that the Agreement ended the Troubles were naïve and flawed. To the contrary, they felt the Agreement had made things worse. They remarked:

> People think the Belfast Agreement got rid of the Troubles but like, are they serious? The peace walls are still up, it didn't change people being sectarian, there is still violence that breaks out every now and again. It made some things worse too like when it released prisoners who are now just free and not facing any repercussion for their actions. People are quick to forget that part of the their precious agreement (*Interview 12*).

The other participant referred to what they perceived to be "the green and orange woven throughout" the Agreement saying, "people complain because we can't do normal politics, but the Good Friday Agreement, regardless of the issue, ensures there is a green or orange stripe on everything" (*Interview 14*). The participant continued:

> It [the Agreement] was supposed to make everyone feel respected and listened to, that concerns were being met. What loyalists are thinking now is that they were actually mis-sold that agreement. So we don't actually have the same respect as nationalists do, the Good Friday Agreement doesn't respect us equally, we can't rely on it for protection. A lot of people including myself have had to withdraw support from the Agreement for that reason (*Interview 14*).

This viewpoint is widely held among loyalist and unionist communities in response to the protocol. Those who may have previously supported the Agreement, feel that they no longer can because the protocol has "tainted" the Agreement. In other words, they thought the Agreement would have protected them against something like the protocol, against something that they consider threatens Northern Ireland's place in the Union and their identity.

Topic 3: The constitutional future of the island of Ireland

Within days of the results of the Brexit referendum, Sinn Féin called for a border poll, claiming that the conditions had been met for the Secretary of State to initiate the process, as per the requirements of the Good Friday Agreement. The *Northern Ireland Act 1998* states that 'if at any time it appears likely to him [the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland] that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland' then the Secretary of State is obliged to call a border poll (Paun and Sargeant, 2018). While debates are lively over what it would take for this condition to be met, debates are also lively over what a reunified Ireland would look like. The Good Friday Agreement left 'the major questions unresolved and for another day" (Doyle, 2021, p. 110), including what would happen to Stormont and the intergovernmental institutions, and the future of Agreement itself. The topic of the constitutional future of the island of Ireland is explored here through two themes which were developed from the relevant data extracts. The first theme explores the role that young people would ascribe to Stormont if there was to be a united Ireland, and the second theme documents how members of the Good Friday Agreement generation feel about the prospect of reunification.

Theme 1: Stormont's future is hanging in the balance

This theme was generated from the participants' varied viewpoints regarding Stormont's place in a united Ireland. There was no general consensus among participants and so it can be said that from the perspective of some young people, Stormont's future is hanging in the balance. When participants were asked what should become of Stormont, hypothetically, in a united Ireland, the answers broadly fell into three categories: Stormont should be disbanded; Stormont should stay as it is; and unsure.

The participants who expressed a desire to see Stormont dissolved in a united Ireland offered a variety of reasons. One participant suggested the creation of a new all-island government that would be "the first of its kind" claiming, "I would cut Stormont, cut the Dáil and I would make a new unified government and put it halfway through the island where everyone could reach" (*Interview 7*). A second participant also wanted to dispose of both Stormont and the Dáil, favouring a reimagined 12 province Ireland each with their own form of devolution which would "be like mini-states with its own granular devolution so it would be an all-island project but power wouldn't be centred in Dublin" (*Interview 1*). Another participant thought of the dissolution of Stormont as a means of encouraging unionists to participate in the Dáil. They suggested that if Stormont remained, unionists could boycott the Dáil "like Sinn Féin do in Westminster" but they considered this to be problematic because "unionist people would still be 'the other' and they wouldn't be represented on the national scale" (*Interview 15*). A small minority of participants were in no doubt that if there was a united Ireland Stormont not only would, but should, be a thing of the past. As one participant remarked, "Stormont can be made into a nice museum. In a united Ireland why would we have something that symbolises partition?" (*Interview 2*).

Some participants insinuated that Stormont in a united Ireland was not just something they would like, but in fact non-negotiable. The most common reason for this was a concern for unionists, which was voiced by both unionist and nationalist participants, for example, "Stormont has to stay because we need some sort of government in Belfast to keep unionists happy. We [unionists] need Stormont as a security net" (*Interview 4*); "I think Stormont would be critical for unionists to protect our culture in a united Ireland,

we can't just merge into Dublin" (*Interview 21*); "There would have to still be a Stormont because like what would people in the Dáil know about an estate in east Belfast?" (*Interview 12*); and "It would be bad enough accepting it as one country so I would definitely want separation between the Stormont and Dublin governments" (*Interview 14*). Others implied that it would not be their preference, however they would be accepting of it if it meant succeeding in bringing about a united Ireland, for example: "It depends on what Stormont would control and what powers it had, but on the whole if a united Ireland depends on us having Stormont, then that's OK. We need to take the views of unionists on board" (*Interview 10*); "I think I wouldn't care for Stormont but at the same time, if the unionists felt like they needed it I wouldn't lose any sleep over it" (*Interview 18*); and "The point of a united Ireland for me is creating a better life for everyone. As long as that's the outcome, I don't really give a shit if Stormont has to be part of it, that wouldn't be a dilution of a united Ireland for me" (*Interview 13*).

Two participants were unsure what role, if any, Stormont would have in a united Ireland. One participant raised their concern that two governments could create more opportunity for arguments and make it difficult to be productive. They said, "there would be no point in having two governments because there's a chance for there to be more arguments and more blockages to getting anything done. I don't really know the answer" (*Interview 22*). Another participant was concerned about the capacity of the Irish government to deal with Northern Ireland, not just from a resource point of view, but also in terms of its ability to deal with the complex and unique needs of the region. They said, " I think it would depend on the system that's in place in the south and how well it would actually be able to manage this increase of population and differences of opinion. I don't know to be honest with you" (*Interview 23*).

Theme 2: Everything is to play for

General discussions about a united Ireland often succeeded the specific discussion about Stormont, perhaps because of the current political climate in which conversations concerning the prospect of a united Ireland are on the rise. Needless to say attitudes and opinions varied amongst participants, but the unifying concept among the extracts was that anything is possible and nothing is yet decided among members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. *Pivotal* reported in their 2023 study that 60.6% of young people felt that the constitutional question was important or very important to them (*Pivotal,*

2023, p. 9). Three groupings can be established from the data extracts, the first group is 'the predictables', the second group is 'the undecided', and the third group is 'the fearful'. Some participants spanned more than one group, reflecting the ambivalence, and sometimes contradictions, echoed by some members of the Good Friday Agreement generation regarding the constitutional future of the island of Ireland.

There was a large group of participants from the republican and nationalist community (and one socialist) who were strongly in favour of a united Ireland. Some offered a general reason for their support such as "I think there could be something better than what everyone has now" (*Interview 10*) and "I would like to see a united Ireland and I think there will be one in my lifetime" (*Interview 15*). The main reason for supporting a united Ireland, however, was not to right a historical wrong, or even connected to identity issues, but because they perceived it to be the best way to achieve social change, for example: "I can say a united Ireland is a better alternative and a way of achieving social change. You can care about a united Ireland based on rights and identity equally. If you're invested in equal rights then you're invested in a united Ireland, that's how I see it" (*Interview 2*); "I want a United Ireland because I believe that's the only route to left politics in Ireland. I would like that united Ireland to be built on progressive and liberal democratic socialism. I don't take this position in terms of identity" (*Interview 1*); and "I want a united Ireland and to encourage people to vote for it because people will be better off, people will have a good life. For me it's not a romantic ambition for healthcare to be free in a new Ireland. People's welfare will always come first" (*Interview 13*).

One loyalist participant was strongly opposed to the prospect of a united Ireland. They expressed how a united Ireland would not be reflective of their identity and the fear that their culture would be erased and "everyone would be expected to be a republican". They continued:

> It's not something I could ever imagine and I don't think it will. It's kind of like if we all vote and it does happen would we all just like turn green or whatever? Like, how does this work for me as a loyalist? The scary thing for me is, I'm British, I feel more Scottish than I do Irish, so to me imaging myself living in an united Ireland just doesn't seem like something I could think about because it's just not my identity. In the loyalist community, people see a united Ireland as an attempt to erase their culture (*Interview 12*).

Another loyalist participant shared these thoughts and claimed they "don't like the idea of a united Ireland because I'm a loyalist. People say that Sinn Féin would try and get rid of Protestants or Protestant culture. I don't know if I believe that, but I don't want a united Ireland anyway" (*Interview 26*). Other unionists were not so concerned about their culture or their identity and instead pointed to the NHS and the cost of living as the reasons why they would oppose a united Ireland. They said:

> I am a unionist but I would say 90% of the reason why I actually want to stay part of the union is the NHS, not just because of a flag or history or my identity. I'm looking at quality of life, health care, cost of living – my vote isn't about my identity it's about my practical day to day life and I think that's best served in the UK (*Interview 25*).

Many of the participants who were undecided about their constitutional preferences spoke about the differences between their head and their heart; that they liked the idea of a united Ireland but they thought it was an underdeveloped idea, and they did not feel equipped to take a definitive position at this time, for example: "I feel like in my heart romantically, a united Ireland is a great idea but there's a lot of things that we need to take into consideration before we go ahead with it like free health care and also the Protestants need to be included, unionists and loyalists all need to be included" (*Interview 6*). Several participants echoed these sentiments, saying that there were too many unresolved issues, and too many debates to be had. These participants were keen to avoid the mistakes of the past by taking a premature stance on an issue with far-reaching consequences without all the correct information at their disposal. It was implied by participants that there should not be a repeat of the mistakes of the Brexit referendum. For example:

> I think in like a romantic idealist kind of way, I would like to see a united Ireland, but I don't see how it would or could work in reality. I haven't seen a comprehensive plan answering all my questions of how it would be, how much it would cost and so on. I don't want to rush into a united Ireland unless it was better for everyone (*Interview 9*).

The NHS was one of the biggest reasons why several participants were undecided about a united Ireland, as one participant remarked, "I think the NHS is probably the thing stopping nationalists or those who are 'other' from voting for a united Ireland. We're poor enough already, imagine having to pay for healthcare?" (*Interview 9*). Another participant, who was against a united Ireland, also spoke about the economic ramifications, including what would become of the NSH. They said:

> Economically I think a united Ireland is terrifying, we rely on Westminster for a lot of money. What about the NHS? A lot of people wouldn't be able to afford healthcare because they live on the poverty line. Republicans have a lot of work to do to convince anyone this is a good idea because there are way too many things that could go wrong (*Interview 11*).

Discussions of economic ramifications was common among participants who were undecided, including for one nationalist participant who felt that a united Ireland could "solve a lot of the problems that Brexit has caused" however they also considered the benefits of Northern Ireland remaining in the UK. They said:

> We also have so many benefits of being part of the UK like the fact that healthcare is free. Especially in Derry where there is massive deprivation and people rely on benefits to keep them going. I think there is a lot to be worked out and we need to think about it logically and not just say it because it is the right things to say as a nationalist and as someone who identifies as Irish (*Interview 11*)

Another participant who referred to themselves as "what yous [you all] call other" also thought of the constitutional question in terms of socio-economic issues. They said, "In terms of a united Ireland, I have a purely civic perspective. So, for me the reason for constitutional change has to be for social and economic benefits. Just because I'm not a nationalist or unionist doesn't mean I'll be passive on the constitutional question" (*Interview 20*).

An uncommon but insightful contribution made by a small number of participants explained that they were "fearful" about how the Republic of Ireland would receive "the North". For example:

> When I moved down here [Dublin] I had my eyes open a bit to how ignorant people are to the North. When they'd hear the accent it was like I was a second class citizen. It was upsetting. So I think we have to wake up to the fact that there's a lot of work to be done with southerners when it comes to a united Ireland, not just unionists, but it's not a given or a done deal with them either. I think they view Northern Ireland as violent and second class Irish people, and we don't want to go there again (*Interview 3*).

> Something I think about is what the South thinks and wants. I have a good friend living in Dublin and he always says to me "why would I want my tax to pay for another six counties worth of people's education and healthcare? I think people down there see us as a burden and almost not Irish enough. And that makes me uncomfortable (*Interview 9*)

A significant number of participants spoke about their fear that a united Ireland would lead to a re-emergence of violence, for example: “I’d also be afraid of violence breaking out in the North again if there was a united Ireland” (*Interview 3*); “I do fear there would be there would be a mini-Troubles again” (*Interview 7*); “Personally I wouldn’t vote for it because of the fallout. It’s impossible to have a “new” Ireland and please everyone so I would be afraid there would be bloodshed” (*Interview 24*); “It's so one of those things if there was a united Ireland so many people would be happy but then at the same time loads of people would absolutely hate it. I don’t know, it would make or break Northern Ireland and the people. There could be violence again” (*Interview 22*); and “One thing I think could go on is the re-emergence of violence. I really believe it's likely to dredge up old conflict, violence. We saw there was an imaginary border drawn in the Irish Sea and they were burning out buses in Belfast, rioting and setting tarmac on fire” (*Interview 12*). Another participant echoed these sentiments saying:

> I would definitely be scared of like cross-community violence as well because it's something that the unionist community are going to be so against that I don't think they're going to stand for it. If we left out their voice, it would be unjustified so we need to listen to them and tell them how it would benefit their lives (Interview 11).

It was common among unionist participants to express concern about their identity and culture in a united Ireland. One participant spoke openly about the privileged and unique set up in Northern Ireland of being able to be British, Irish or both and they were worried that “in a united Ireland it would become stigmatised to be able to call yourself Northern Irish never mind British. It would be really hard for the unionist community to transition into a new country that is so different, where we don’t naturally belong” (*Interview 19*). Another participant also revealed concerns they had about unionist culture being diluted if “Sinn Féin are successful in their revenge and chip away at Britishness against our wishes then there will be violence. Their rhetoric around a united Ireland is unnerving” (*Interview 21*). This participant however took a small degree of comfort in their belief that a united Ireland could not happen without “compromise towards the unionist community and our needs being met. We’d be in uproar if they weren’t” (*Interview 21*). One unionist participant revealed that recent events has forced them into “thinking about the options” in a way that they would not have entertained before. Although they

expressed fear for unionists in general, including how they would feel like "outsiders" the participant felt that it was "worth having the conversation to work out the logic of it all and the benefits. It wouldn't just be something I would agree to without think everything through. The unknown is scary" (*Interview 23*).

Summary

This chapter begins by highlighting the centrality of governance in consociational thinking, namely through its powersharing mechanisms and the credence it gives to the right of people to exercise national self-determination. The Good Friday Agreement provides for both, through the establishment of the powersharing Executive and by settling the constitutional question by ensuring that the future of the island of Ireland would be decided by the people of Ireland based on the principle of consent. The chapter looked at three topics related to governance. The topic of 'Stormont and powersharing' was explored through the following themes: 'A suspended government cannot govern and Northern Ireland suffers' which highlighted participants' views on the recurring suspensions of powersharing; 'Stormont in its current form is problematic' which illustrates participants' frustrations with the current consociational arrangements; and 'Nothing changes if nothing changes' which reflected participants' desire to see reform of Stormont. The second topic of 'The Good Friday Agreement at 25' was explored through the following themes: 'The Good Friday agreement is the only show in town' which illustrated participants' support for the Agreement; 'The times they are a-changing' which revealed participants' desire to revise the Agreement; and 'Ash heap of history' which revealed participants' opinions that the Agreement needed scrapped. The topic of 'The constitutional future of the island of Ireland' was explored through the following themes: 'Stormont's future is hanging in the balance' which reflected participants' differing views on Stormont's role in a united Ireland; and 'Everything is to play for' which illustrates the different approaches taken by young people to regarding the prospect of a united Ireland.

This chapter covered young people's experiences of and attitudes towards consociational powersharing and highlighted what reforms they would implement if given the chance. This discussion was reflective of the mainstream debates in the academy surrounding consociationalism, as the usual culprits were subject to criticism by participants including mandatory coalition, the petition of concern, designation and the lack of trust and willingness among elites fostered in the consociational system of sharing power. The

chapter suggested that participants did not disagree with the premise of powersharing as a means of governing Northern Ireland given its divisions, but that they took issue with some of the specific rules and regulations that oversee the sharing of power. Given the lengthy discussion on Stormont reform, it was perhaps unsurprising but still significant that participants' expressed desires to revise the Good Friday Agreement with many claiming Northern Irish society has changed since 1998 and this needed to be reflected in any document that dictates how the region operates. This has significant implications for consociation and raises the question: would revisions of the Good Friday Agreement see a significant dilution of consociational thinking in Northern Ireland, or would its underlying principles prevail in new reforms? The lively discussions surrounding a united Ireland among young people are perhaps reflective, in part, of the space created by consociationalism to consider national-self-determination as a legitimate course of action, and to provide pathways for confederal and federal possibilities. Discussions around the constitutional future of the island of Ireland have implications for the future of consociation too, which is inextricably linked to whether there would be a continuation of Northern Ireland, and whether parts of the Good Friday Agreement would be repurposed.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Employing a reflexive thematic analysis with qualitative semi structured interview data, this research examines the lived experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation; the first generation to be born after the Troubles ended, and to have come of age in a Northern Ireland governed by consociationalism. The rationale for this research was twofold: firstly, to expand our knowledge of consociational theory by exploring the possible impact it has on the society which it governs, in other words, the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism; and secondly, to provide a snapshot of contemporary Northern Ireland as experienced by members of the Good Friday Agreement generation. The research focused on four domains of society that should be expected to be positively impacted by consociationalism, and that are relevant to the lives of young people in Northern Ireland, they are: cross community relations; economic opportunities; security; and governance. The lived experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation reveal the complicated, complex, and often contradictory realities of living in a society that continues to bear the scars of its recent violent history, as well as the complexities of the consociational model that governs it.

Consociationalism and young people

It is virtually undisputed that consociation was prescribed to Northern Ireland first and foremost as a means of reducing the political violence that defined the Troubles, and that it was successful in doing so. In fact, one of the most widely acknowledged triumphs of the Good Friday Agreement, was that in the aftermath of its signing there was a sudden decline in political violence. The levels were notably lower than they had been before the first IRA ceasefire of 1994 (O'Leary, 2019, p. 219) and today the current death rate related to inter-ethnic violence is less than three persons per annum (McGarry, 2019, p. 545). There are two interconnected reasons why Northern Ireland's consociational peace settlement was able to reduce the levels of political violence so dramatically. The first is that the Agreement incorporated 'consociational plus' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009; O'Leary, 2019), meaning that it addressed security related issues including release of prisoners, the need to reform the police, demilitarisation, and the disarmament of

paramilitary groups. This stands in sharp contrast to the Agreement's predecessor, the Sunningdale Agreement, which was met with continuous rather than reduced violence because it was 'an exclusively political affair, with no novel security dimensions' (McGarry 2019, p. 545). The second reason, which is related to the first, is that because security matters were addressed in the agreed text, paramilitaries bought into the agreement and abandoned the bullet in favour of the ballot box, which in turn saw hardline political parties moderate in order to achieve political power.

Although there are occasional breakouts of political violence and a continuation of paramilitary style attacks such as punishment beatings and intimidation, Northern Ireland continues to experience low levels of inter-ethnic violence, especially deaths. However, 25 years on from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the conversation has moved beyond the reduction of political violence, both as an indicator of the success of the Agreement and as an expectation of society, and instead has refocused on other matters relevant to the afterlife of political conflict. The importance of, and life-changing consequences associated with, the reduction of political violence in Northern Ireland should not be understated. That being said, in the years since the Good Friday Agreement, other significant issues have become more pressing and more relevant, specifically to the younger members of society, the supposed beneficiaries of the Agreement, who have grown up post-1998.

Using a consociational lens, the research identified four domains of society considered to be understudied facets of consociationalism and relevant to the daily lives of young people in Northern Ireland. The first domain that was explored was cross community relations, which arose from consociationalism's emphasis on accommodation of antagonistic communities rather than assimilation. The second domain that was explored was economic opportunities, which arose from the consociational logic that peace would bring about prosperity and a peace dividend. The third domain that was explored was security, which arose from the emphasis consociational plus puts on these matters as integral to the establishment and maintenance of consociation. Finally, the fourth domain that was explored was governance, which arose from consociation's central objective of establishing peaceful, democratic, and sustainable governance in deeply divided places by means of cross communal powersharing.

Summary of findings

The values associated with reflexive thematic analysis do not oblige generalisable findings, and therefore this is not required of this study. Instead, the research sought to tell stories about the data, rather than finding essential truths lurking within it (Clarke, 2021). Therefore, the value and strength of this qualitative study lies in its subjective, reflexive, and interrogative nature, which enabled the construction of complex, nuanced and detailed knowledge about the social meaning of living in a society government by consociationalism. The data is rich and heterogenous, and reveals not only the complexities of consociation, but also the complexities of living in a post-Troubles reality. Coulter et al. write that 'political conflicts tend to have complex afterlives' (2021, p. 22-3) and arguably the experience of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation is no exception.

Chapter Four explored young people's experiences of and attitudes towards cross community relations, which covered issues of self-identity, intercommunal relationships, understandings of the Troubles, conceptualisations of reconciliation, and diagnoses of the current state of affairs in Northern Ireland more generally. In relation to self-identity, most young people were happy to label themselves as one of the binary identities of nationalist or unionist. However, some participants expressed their disapproval of the binary approach, mainly those who considered themselves to be nonaligned. Additionally, those minority groups expressed hesitation towards the binary system, articulating that even if they did identify as nationalist or unionist, they also wanted to include other aspects of their identity that were as, if not more, important to them, for example, neurodivergent, gay, and mixed race. Most participants acknowledged that the different communities in Northern Ireland did share some commonalities, and although there were also differences between them, they did not think the differences were problematic and they did not view 'others' as any different from themselves (this was caveated by some participants by saying extremist views would not be tolerated). Despite this common view, some participants shared their experiences of being 'othered' and others admitted to having a "natural" curiosity to know what someone "is" but for no reason. Related to this, in what seems to be held in tension with previously expressed views, some participants implied feelings of trepidation stemming from "the unknown", in other words, not knowing what community someone was from.

In terms of intercommunal relations, participants who had friends from 'across the divide' were in the minority. The participants in this category had intercommunal friendships because they grew up mixing with or were "exposed" to the 'other' through integrated schools, mutual hobbies, youth groups, peace programmes, and social media. Many participants however did not have friendships with people from a community different to their own but were keen to stress this was not by choice, but a result of the segregated living they experienced growing up. Some participants recalled that they encountered their "first Protestant" or "first Catholic" when they were 18 socialising in bars, at university or in places of employment. Several participants remarked that if differences arose in conversation, they were often handled in a positive and respectful manner. However, some participants did share less than positive discussions regarding differences, which left them feeling upset and surprised.

Participants expressed a range of views when discussing the Troubles. A small minority of participants said that because they were not alive during the Troubles, they felt they had "no emotional connection to the past" and therefore were not in a position to express an opinion on it. Similarly, there were participants who claimed they were not politically minded because of their upbringing and the influence of their parents, and as a result they too did not have much to say about the Troubles. Other participants vocalised strong opinions that violence and criminality were never justified and that there is a tendency to "glamourise" the past, particularly the violence, which they find deeply inappropriate and problematic. Then there were those participants who did not explicitly endorse the violence of the Troubles, but they did suggest that "times were different back then" and that it was a unique time in history and a different context to today. Most, but not all, of the participants that expressed these views had family members who were directly involved in the Troubles.

The discussions surrounding reconciliation were diverse and mostly centred on the extent to which reconciliation was important to the Good Friday Agreement generation. Opinions ranged from reconciliation being important, to it is important to "remember but not to dwell" in case it would prevent young people from "getting a fresh start". A common approach to reconciliation among young people was that it was important for the older generation not only because they lived through the Troubles but because they were passing down "prejudices and experiences". Therefore, it was implied that the older

generation were the ones who had to do the reconciliatory work, and some young people seemed eager to distance themselves from this responsibility. A few participants expressed novel and multifaceted approaches to reconciliation, holding that it encompasses more than truth, justice and forgiveness in relation to the past, but that it most also include social and economic justice, such as "a woman's right to choose", "language rights", "racial equality" and "climate justice". Other participants expressed how they felt reconciliation could be improved if it was integrated into the everyday mundane aspects of life, for example, "just by chatting to someone from a different background" would make reconciliation less complicated and "scary" to people. Finally, when reflecting on the current state of cross community relations in Northern Ireland, a small minority of participants expressed an indifference, claiming not to care or that they "weren't tuned in". However, most participants were overwhelmingly negative about the current political climate and societal relations in Northern Ireland. The language used to describe the current situation included "mistrust", "sectarianism", "divisions", "stuck", "desensitisation" and "fragile peace".

Chapter Five explored young people's experience of economic opportunities in Northern Ireland and covered issues such as employment availability, career prospects, where participants chose to carry out their higher-level education if they did so, and the emigration of young people for a "better life" than the one they have or had in Northern Ireland. Most participants agreed that part-time low paid jobs in retail and hospitality were easy to come by (although some participants remarked that the impact of covid-19 had changed this slightly). However, when discussing full time jobs with a higher salary, most participants recalled difficulty in finding such employment and they felt that Northern Ireland could not provide them with adequate options in this regard. There was also the perception among young people that Northern Ireland could not cater for their career ambitions both in terms of career field and career progression. The former felt there was no variety in Northern Ireland, that if your skills or interests lay outside of "traditional jobs" then there were very limited opportunities. The latter felt that there was a limit to how much you could "climb the ladder of success" in that they perceived there to be limited opportunities for promotion and increased wages once employed within a business or company. A small minority of participants suggested that it was unattractive and or dangerous to pursue their preferred or chosen career paths in Northern Ireland

because of the legacy of the Troubles, and consequently they had to leave the region to pursue their chosen field.

When discussing higher education with participants who attend or plan to attend university, most had chosen or planned to leave Northern Ireland. There were various reasons for this, from wanting to explore new places and meet new people, to wanting to escape what some perceived to be Northern Ireland's "insular" nature. In other words, some participants felt that they were continuously "boxed", "labelled" or "judged" based on their community background which could often be determined by their name or the area in which they lived. Related to this, some participants who wanted to study politics felt that had to leave Northern Ireland in order to learn about "proper" and "normal" politics, rather than risk their courses simply regurgitating typical "orange and green" issues that they felt dominated their everyday lives. Finally, those participants who stayed or where planning on staying in Northern Ireland for education purposes were in the minority, but they were still notable. Their reasons for doing so were down to practical and financial considerations, and they did not express this decision in terms of a choice, but rather a "needs must" situation.

The final topic covered in the domain of economic opportunities was emigration of young people for reasons other than education. The research reconceptualised the 'brain drain' phenomenon and employed a much broader all-encompassing description to include any young person who leaves Northern Ireland regardless of their levels of education or type of skillset. The findings here may be surprising to some as a significant number of participants articulated no desire to emigrate from Northern Ireland. There were various reasons for this, but the overwhelming sentiment was that these participants had a level of fondness for Northern Ireland, it was their home, and they wanted to stay. There were also participants who wanted to stay because they felt an obligation to "make things better" and believed that their generation was best placed to make the progress they felt Northern Ireland needed to make. Other participants expressed their excitement and enthusiasm for emigrating, some of which was because of the legacy of the Troubles and how participants felt it continued to impact their lives, whereas other participants simply sought adventure and wanted to travel to see what the world had to offer.

Chapter Six addressed security related issues that were relevant to the lives of young people, including their perceptions of the PSNI, attitudes towards paramilitaries and reflections on personal safety more generally in Northern Ireland. When it came to the PSNI, the majority of participants were sceptical and distrusting of the police, although for different reasons. Some participants compared the PSNI to the RUC, and others pointed to what they perceived to be the "image problem" of the police, in that they are too "militarised" and "unapproachable" which in turn made participants feel that the police were "out to get" them, rather than protect them and enforce the law. Participants from different communities articulated the same sentiment, suggesting that the police targeted their community to appease the other. There was also a clear lack of confidence in the police from participants who belonged to minority groups. Their concerns centred explicitly on the ability of the PSNI to effectively deal with crimes relating to racism and homophobia. A small number of participants, all from Protestant unionist backgrounds, expressed full support for the police and had a clear sense of their role in society as necessary law enforces and protectors who were essential in any peaceful democratic society.

Regarding paramilitaries, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed explicit disapproval and contempt at the continued existence of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The language used by participants here included "scum", "terrorists", "terrifying", "pointless" and "unnecessary". Many of the participants made reference to the recent murder of journalist Lyra McKee and how that impacted their lives. Other participants expressed a sense of resignation regarding the existence of paramilitaries, implying that they were "just a normal part of life" in Northern Ireland and there was nothing that could be done to change this. Some participants spoke about the fact that oftentimes there is local knowledge of who is in certain paramilitary groups but that no one will ever "tout" and this in turn enables paramilitaries to act above the law with no repercussions. A very small minority of participants implied that paramilitaries were misunderstood, and they expressed what could be described as a hierarchy of what was acceptable and what was not in terms of paramilitary membership and activities. For example, one participant suggested that for some families membership is passed down through the generations and this was considered more acceptable than someone voluntarily joining a paramilitary group who had no prior connections to it. No participant suggested that sectarian violence by paramilitary groups was justified or

legitimate, however, some did suggest that it was acceptable for paramilitaries to "sort out" problems in society that they believed the police would not deal with, or would be ineffective at doing so, including paedophiles, drug dealers and those who perpetrated violence against women.

Finally, in terms of personal safety, the majority of participants expressed that their level of safety was dependent on their location, and most implied the reason for this was the spatial separatism between communities that exists in Northern Ireland. Participants spoke about feeling like an "outsider" if they were in an area that was known to 'belong' to the 'other' community, and references were made to the feelings of intimidation that were provoked by certain flags, murals, and painted pavements. For the participants who did feel safe in Northern Ireland, this was either due to the fact that they rarely left their own community, or because they felt they could disguise their identity since, for example, their name was "neutral" or they were not wearing their school uniform, which was viewed by many participants as an identity "giveaway". A significant group of participants, all of which were female, expressed concern over their personal safety attributable to their gender and referenced what they believed to be a growing culture of violence against women. Other participants also highlighted the existence of racism in Northern Ireland, and one participant recalled their own personal experience.

Chapter Seven explored young people's attitudes towards matters relating to governance including their perceptions of Stormont and powersharing, reflections on the Good Friday Agreement at 25, and the constitutional future of the island of Ireland. Regarding Stormont and powersharing, the issue that dominated the discussions was the present and recurring collapse of the powersharing institutions, with many participants expressing frustration and anger. Although a very small minority of participants were unaware that Stormont had been suspended, other participants offered examples of how the suspension negatively impacted their lives, including their education and access to healthcare. When discussing whether Stormont was fit for purpose, a significant number of participants suggested it was not, and implied that it would not last forever. Other participants were less critical of the basic principles of powersharing and expressed acceptance that this was best suited to Northern Ireland, however, many took issue with certain rules and procedures governing the powersharing structures which they felt were the sources of instability, including the petition of concern, the designation system, and mandatory

coalition. Several participants pointed the finger at the DUP and Sinn Féin as the reason why powersharing was not working, citing what they perceived to be their "lack of political will" to work together and a "lack of trust" between the two parties. Other participants were more critical of the parties and politicians in general, suggesting that they were "stuck in the past" and therefore unable to move on and engage in progressive politics. These participants expressed frustration, arguing that the electoral system and the ministerial appointment methods allowed for "political compliancy" because they ensured that the two dominant parties would gain power. There was not one participant who felt that Stormont did not need to be subject to reforms. Although some could not specify exactly what needed to change, others pointed to the perceived sources of instability as requiring the most obvious change, for example, getting rid of the petition of concern, moving towards a voluntary coalition, and scrapping the need to designate as nationalist, unionist or other.

When it came to reflecting on the Good Friday Agreement, overall the attitudes of young people were highly ambivalent. Some participants expressed their firm support for the Agreement claiming it is as important and relevant now as it was in 1998. There was a sense of concern implicit in their extracts over present threats to the Good Friday Agreement such as Brexit and the discontent surrounding the protocol, with others suggesting that the Agreement had not been implemented fully and that this was necessary if the Agreement was to reach its full and intended potential. Several other participants acknowledged the significance of the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, but they felt that the composition of society and its needs had changed significantly since then, and therefore the Agreement needed to change also in order to reflect this. Participants suggested amending, editing or adding to the Agreement as a means of "bringing it up to date" but participants did not elaborate on the specific type of changes they would like to see included. Finally, there were a small group of participants, all from the loyalist community, who felt that the Good Friday Agreement needed to be scrapped in its entirety. They felt that the Agreement had made things worse for their community and that it made sectarianism ever-present in Northern Ireland. Consequently, these participants stated that if a referendum was held today on the Agreement, they would not vote for it and they felt that most members of their community would agree.

Finally, in relation to the constitutional future of the island of Ireland, attitudes were, once again, highly ambivalent. In terms of Stormont's role in a hypothetical united Ireland, some participants felt it would be essential to maintain powersharing in Northern Ireland because of the unique and complex needs of its people and to ensure that unionists still felt that they had a "seat at the table". Other participants were happy to disband Stormont in the event of a united Ireland, claiming that Dublin rule could cater for the entire island and that more power could be given to local councils. Attitudes pertaining to the constitutional future of the island of Ireland were split four ways: the 'predictables', the undecided, the fearful and the contented. Most of the predictable responses, with some exceptions, came from most nationalist and republican participants who were in favour of a united Ireland, and most unionist and loyalist participants who were not. However, for several participants, they were undecided because they felt there were too many 'unknowns'; the health service was the most frequently cited example. As a result, these participants claimed that despite what their identity might suggest, neither their support nor their opposition was a given. Other participants from across the communities were fearful of the prospect of a united Ireland; some unionist participants were afraid that their unionist culture would be "lost" and other participants from different backgrounds communicated a fear there could be a re-emergence of violence. Finally, there were those participants from both communities who were not ideologically opposed to a united Ireland, but they were content to make Northern Ireland work, believing that the people of Northern Ireland were best placed to govern themselves, rather than Dublin or London.

The findings summarised above tell the vivid and diverse stories contained in the data. They provide a snapshot into the experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement generation, living in a post-Troubles society governed by the values and principles of consociationalism. Although these attitudes and experiences are diverse, there are commonalities across the data. It is of course the case that in each analysis chapter, themes relating to each topic were generated on the basis that there was a shared meaning, or a unifying concept, implicit in the relevant data extracts. To some extent, therefore, these themes could be said to represent a degree of cohesive and analogous shared experiences and attitudes amongst some members of the Good Friday Agreement. For example, young people from across all identities and communities felt that Northern Ireland did not offer adequate job opportunities or career prospects. Young people also shared attitudes towards social issues, which they felt were always "dragged into the

green and orange" debates. Furthermore, there was a cross communal perception that the PSNI were unfit for purpose, and that there is no place for paramilitaries of any shade or cause in today's society. In consociational terms, there is modest evidence therefore of cross-cutting cleavages among some young people: class cleavages relating to economics; social cleavages relating to the advancement of equal rights and climate justice; and security cleavages relating to the need to tackle the new modes of conflict that are suffocating society, namely violence against women and other minority groups. Finally, there was some evidence of the persistence of the ethno-national cleavage among members of the Good Friday Agreement generation when discussing identity issues and those relating to politics, including voting determinants and their constitutional preferences.

It is also interesting to note that the theme of the 'legacy of the Troubles' was the only recurring theme that was generated across all four domains of society, which indicates that to some extent Northern Ireland's past does continue to impact the lives of those who were not even born during the conflict. The research here does not make this point in reference to intergenerational trauma related issues, of which there is an expansive body of significant and interesting research. What this research found evidence of was how the legacy of the Troubles can impact even the mundane or 'ordinary' aspects of life for young people including, for example: blasé conversations at the dinner able; the (un)attractiveness of certain jobs; whether they would report a crime to the police; and how they view politics in Northern Ireland more generally.

However, this evidence of harmony of experiences and attitudes contained in some of the disaggregated data cannot be overstretched and generalised. The importance of avoiding this becomes evident when looking at the aggregated data; the bigger picture is messier and much more diverse. The aggregated data presents the Good Friday Agreement generation as a heterogenous group, which challenges rudimentary assumptions that the 'new' generation are a homogenous group of liberal thinkers, who are not driven by ethno-national issues of the past, who are dismissive of binary identities in Northern Ireland and who are not animated by the constitutional question. This research provides empirical evidence that some cohorts within the Good Friday Agreement generation are nuanced, complex and sometimes contradictory in their experiences and attitudes. Looking at the disaggregated data and aggregated data together captures both the 'myriad

of complexities of what Declan Long characterises well as the 'disconcerting, backwards-and-forwards post-Troubles reality' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 22-3), and what Coulter et al. describe as the 'intricate interplay of continuity and change that defines a society still emerging from the shadow of its own turbulent recent history' (2021, p. 23).

Implications and areas of possible further research

Implications for consociationalism arising from this research must be approached with caution. As stated throughout the research, the aim of the study was not to test consociationalism in Northern Ireland or to assess the effectiveness of the model more generally. Consociationalism provided the context within which the experiences and attitudes of members of the Good Friday Agreement were explored and interpreted. Therefore, this study does not wish to make claims of direct causation between consociationalism and the experiences and attitudes of young people. Although this year marks the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has not experienced 25 years of consociation. Most recently between 2017 to the present day in 2023, consociation was only operational between January 2020 and February 2022. While critics would point to the consociational structures as being the source of this political instability, there is no denying that *sui generis* factors such as conflict over dealing with the past and cultural expression, Brexit and outstanding issues related to this, also significantly impacted political and social life in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to hold consociationalism directly and solely responsible for the findings of this research.

What this research sought to do was to broaden the discussions around consociationalism by bringing the attitudes and experiences of young people into the conversation. The research has attempted to interrogate the notion of trickle down politics, by exploring how young people receive, interact with, and think about the societal benefits that should be expected to trickle down from consociationalism. This taps into the recent work of Mac Ginty in his book *Everyday Peace: How So-Called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (2021). Mac Ginty (2019) is interested in trickle down peace and focuses his attention on 'the micro dynamics of interpersonal exchange in deeply divided societies', rather than the political elites and top-down peace. Mac Ginty is not dismissive of this type of peace, recognising its important role in allowing other forms of peace to take root. It is this notion of other forms of peace, beyond that of the absence of violence,

that this research focused its attention within a consociational framework. The research has sought to make a modest contribution to consociational scholarship by making an effort to bridge the gap between consociationalism and the everyday realities of young people.

There is a lack of existing research on young people and their everyday experiences within consociational societies. There are obvious and valid reasons for this, primarily owing to state-centric nature of consociationalism and in turn consociational scholarship. Consociation prioritises the accommodation of contending groups and the cooperation of the political elite, and how this trickles down to society, or as Mac Ginty is interested in, the level beneath civil society to 'so-called ordinary people' is underdeveloped in consociational research. The findings of this research pertaining to Northern Ireland and members of the Good Friday Agreement generation may offer some further understanding of, and insight into, how the trickle down process works and what it looks it. That being said, the conclusion of this research in relation to consociational scholarship is that a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the trickle down process is required in order gain a broader and more holistic understanding of consociational theory.

There are some broad observations and links that can be made, relevant to future research on consociationalism. Owing to the state-centric nature of consociationalism and its preoccupation with ethno-national issues, the argument could be made that consociation may have contributed to, or at least not helped to prevent, the emergence of new modes of conflict facing members of the Good Friday Agreement generation (and society more generally). Examples include gender inequalities, sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, all of which occupy very little space in the political agenda. Furthermore, the argument could be made that consociationalism has enabled, or at least not done enough to prevent, the continuation of paramilitarism, opposing cultures and histories, and political paralysis, all of which impact the everyday lives of young people in Northern Ireland. It is also evident that some young people want to see reform of the powersharing institutions and a revised Good Friday Agreement, both of which have implications for the presence and influence of consociation in the region. However, it remains an unescapable truth that the Good Friday Agreement generation were born into a Northern Ireland that had committed to an historic and unprecedented peace process, and for the most part, peace has prevailed.

By virtue of the environment in which consociation is required, that is deeply divided places with antagonistic cleavages, and its aim of balancing the imperatives of these competing and mutually exclusive groups, the consociational model is inherently complex. Perhaps then it is unsurprising that, to some extent, these complexities are reflected in the society which it governs. Afterall there is an undeniable link between consociation and citizens; in fair and free democratic elections citizens hold the power to elect the political elite, presumably on the basis that those candidates best represent citizens' interests, needs, and values. This taps into bigger questions surrounding the interplay between consociation, civil society, and ordinary people, and the social meaning of living in a society governed by consociationalism is an integral part of this wider conversation. This study advocates for further research into the trickle-down effect of consociationalism and suggests that the Good Friday Agreement generation are an interesting and unique demographic through which to pursue this line of further inquiry.

Furthermore, beyond advocating for future research into the impact of consociationalism on ordinary citizens, this research also reveals the need for future research into the role of ordinary citizens, and other members of society, in the establishment, but more significantly, the maintenance of consociations. This is particularly relevant in the context of the possibility of consociational reform in Northern Ireland if Stormont remains paralysed. Firstly, the breadth and richness of the data shows that young people in Northern Ireland want to be involved in discussions about political, social, and economic issues that impact their lives. The data shows that members of the Good Friday Agreement generation are knowledgeable about powersharing and are critically engaged in discussions about reform. Participants highlighted behavioural issues of politicians, how the system enables the continuation of green and orange issues, the problems associated with mandatory coalition, veto rights, and the designation system. It is reasonable to suggest therefore, that moves to address these issues in future discussions about reform would meet strong approval from young people. This research shows that while young people are generally supportive of powersharing, this cannot be assumed to equate to support for consociationalism in its current form. If the issues outlined in the data are not addressed, this could endanger consociationalism's future in Northern Ireland. It is imperative that the contributions of young people are picked up by the political elite and reflected in the system of governance.

Arguably the interdisciplinary approach of Peace Studies and the wider field of peacebuilding could offer some answers to consociationalism's problems. Perhaps it was the case that in 1998 consociationalism's elitist tendencies were not only effective but necessary in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. However, 25 years on, not least because of the continuing paralysis of Stormont, but also because of the issues raised in this research, perhaps it is time for consociationalism to be more flexible, to reflect the changing society it seeks to govern, and to adapt a more holistic approach to post-agreement peacebuilding. Leaning into the field of Peace Studies, consociationalism may benefit from incorporating a more multilevel approach to governance in Northern Ireland, focusing specifically on multiple actors in society, as well as the overlapping and interlinking social, economic, and political issues. Given that a stated marker of a successful consociation is good community relations, surely the inclusion and engagement between multiple actors is vital (Haughey and Loughran, 2023, p. 16)? Consociationalists may argue that this is not their raison d'etre, that it is beyond their remit to include multiple levels of society. However, not only may it be a question of consociationalism's survival in Northern Ireland, but it is also true that McGarry and O'Leary came to prominence by revising classical consociationalism and advocating for consociational plus. Just as McGarry and O'Leary added three additional dimensions to classical consociationalism, perhaps a fourth dimension must now be added which safeguards the critical role that all levels of society, including young people, play in creating and sustaining peace.

These insights from Peace Studies for consociationalism may offer a solution to those who, like the members of the Good Friday Agreement generation who took part in this research, are proponents of consociationalism's basic principles such as powersharing, coalition governments and proportional representation, but who are frustrated by the continuing instability and stalemate of the current consociational institutions. Consociationalism needs to do more work on developing and nurturing, social, economic and security issues that matter not only to young people, but the wider society, if it is to endure at the political level. Without incorporating multilevel and interdisciplinary peacebuilding, the consociational political arrangements run the risk of being continually threatened, undermined, and ineffective. If consociationalism is to continue its hegemony in Northern Ireland, public consent is non-negotiable. Therefore, to secure public support

and deescalate social discontent, consociationalism must broaden its horizons and expand its peacebuilding toolbox to include a diverse array of practices and incorporate fresh voices and new ideas from all members and levels of society.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

As presented to participants.

Title of Research
The Good Friday Agreement Generation's Experience of the "Trickle Down" Effect of Consociational Powersharing in Northern Ireland

Lead Researcher
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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS BY THEME

(1) Cross community relations and reconciliation

a. How do you view others from a different community, or who have a different identity to you?
b. Do you have friends / socialise with people from different communities / with different identities? If so, where does this socialising take place?
c. What do you think of individuals from both your own community and other communities who have committed crimes in the past relating to the Troubles?
d. Is reconciliation important? Is it necessary / relevant to a young person living in Northern Ireland today?

(2) Economic opportunities

a. Do you have a part time/full-time job? If so, were there many options when applying and why did you get a job?
b. What is your ideal job/career?
c. Is this job/career an option in your city / local area? Would you leave here for this job/career?
d. Do you attend or want to attend university and why?

e. Do you want to/do you have to leave Northern Ireland to go to university?
f. If answer above is yes, would you come back to live in Northern Ireland?

(3) Security

a. When I say PSNI, what comes to your mind?
b. Do you trust the PSNI? Would you report a crime to the PSNI?
c. When I say paramilitaries, what comes to your mind?
d. Do you feel safe in your own community?

(4) Powersharing

a. What did you think of Stormont/powersharing when it was collapsed between 2017-2020? How, if at all, did it impact your life?
b. What do you think of Stormont / powersharing now that it is back up and running? How, if at all, does it impact your life?
c. Is Stormont fit for purpose? What would you change, if anything?
d. Should Northern Ireland remain part of the European Union?
e. Should there be a united Ireland and what should happen to Stormont?

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet and Profile

As presented to participants

PARTICIPATION INFORMATION

When the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, one of the key hopes was that the lives of people in Northern Ireland would significantly improve as the region transitioned from conflict to peace. This research explores if this is the case and focuses specifically on young people like you who were born after the signing of the agreement in April 1998. Often referred to as the 'Good Friday Agreement' generation, young people like you have key roles to play not only in present day Northern Ireland, but also in the future of the region. However, sometimes the voices of young people are forgotten about, or heard but not listened to. This research will provide a platform for you, as a member of the Good Friday Agreement generation, to express your opinions and talk about your experience of growing up in Northern Ireland as a young person. It is an opportunity to feel empowered and to contribute to the current ongoing discussions surrounding Northern Ireland now and in the future. The research covers four main topics:

1. Community relations and reconciliation
2. Economic Opportunities
3. Security
4. Powersharing

During this study I, the researcher, will interview 25 or more young people from Northern Ireland born after 1998. Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and you will be supplied with a question guide beforehand in order to ensure you are comfortable and there are no surprises. The interview will be like an informal conversation and although your identity will be known to me, in the final write up the data I collect from the interview will be used anonymously. Given the Covid-19 pandemic you can decide

whether we chat online via Microsoft Teams, or in person. If you prefer the later, we must comply with all government restrictions relating to face coverings and social distancing. Before our conversation you will need to sign the consent form attached and fill out your personal profile. After our conversation I can send you a transcript for your review if you wish.

If you have any questions, please find my details below and do not hesitate to contact me, in the first instance, at any time. If you would prefer to contact my academic supervisors, please also find their details below.

Contact Details

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Thank you

1. Consent Form

Please carefully read the statements in each section and tick the box if you agree.

Please ask any questions you may have when reading each of the statements. Please leave the box blank if you do not agree.

General	**Tick box**
I confirm I have read and understood the i**nformation sheet** for the above study. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I understand that this study **is entirely voluntary, and if I decide that I do not want to take part, I can stop taking part in this study at any time without giving a reason**.	
I agree to take part in this research study having been fully informed of the **benefits and disadvantages** which are set out in full in the information leaflet which I have been provided with.	
I know how to contact the researcher and or the researcher's supervisors if I need to.	
I agree to being contacted by the researcher by email/phone[10] as part of this research study.	
I agree to take part in an audio recorded individual interview as part of this research study	
Data	**Tick box**
I understand that any identifiable information about me (personal data), including the transfer of this personal information about me outside of the EU, will be protected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
I understand that anonymous information from this study may be shared with third party academics worldwide for research and learning purposes.	
I understand that the audio recording of my interview will be retained by Trinity College Dublin for 5 years for use solely by Trinity College Dublin, and then destroyed.	

[10] Please include the appropriate relevant details in the section below

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Participant Name (Block Capitals) Participant Signature Date

2. **Personal Profile**

Please complete the following information and circle your answer.

NAME:

AGE:

GENDER: FEMALE / MALE / NON-BINARY / TRANSGENDER / INTERSEX / PREFER NOT TO SAY / OTHER (please state)

NATIONALITY: IRISH / BRITISH / NORTHERN IRISH / OTHER (please state)

RELIGION: CATHOLIC / PROTESTANT / ATHETIST / OTHER (please state)

AREA OF HOME ADDRESS (e.g. Belfast, Ormeau Road, Derry/Londonderry etc):

EDUCATION: SECONDARY SCHOOL / GRAMMAR SCHOOL / FURTHER EDUCATION / HIGHER EDUCATION / OTHER (please state)

EMAIL ADDRESS (and or) PHONE NUMBER: