

Exploring Barriers to Constructing Locally Based Peacebuilding Theory

The Case of Northern Ireland

Emily Stanton & Grainne Kelly*

Abstract

This article seeks to explore why, after significant financial investment and a history of nearly 50 years of civil society activity, there is a paucity of explicitly codified and consolidated indigenous theory that has emerged from peacebuilding practice in Northern Ireland. Methodologically, this apparent contradiction is explored, utilizing both empirical research (interviews with key peacebuilders) and the wide practitioner experience of the authors. It is argued that two complex dynamics have contributed to the subordination of local practice-based knowledge, namely, the professionalization of peace and the dominance of research over practice within academia. These two dynamics have played a mutually exacerbatory and significant role in creating barriers to constructing local peacebuilding theory. Phronesis, an Aristotelian term for practical knowledge, is explored to discover what insights it may contribute to both research, theory and practice in the field of peacebuilding, followed by examples of institutions demonstrating its value for practice–theory reflexivity. The article concludes with a call for peace research that validates and values practical knowledge. By doing so, the authors argue, new avenues for collaborative partnership between practitioners and academics can open up, which may play a constructive role in bridging practice–theory divides and, most importantly, contribute to building more effective and sustainable peacebuilding processes in Northern Ireland and in other conflict contexts.

Keywords: peacebuilding, phronesis, civil society, practice–theory, Northern Ireland.

1 Introduction

The Northern Ireland conflict, once called intractable (Kriesberg, 1998; Northrup, 1989), is now considered by many as a story of successful conflict transformation, with credit primarily being attributed to Track One political actors who negotiated the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. While these efforts were vital to negoti-

* Emily Stanton is PhD candidate in the School of Politics, Faculty of Social Science, Ulster University, Northern Ireland. Grainne Kelly is Lecturer of Peace and Conflict Studies at the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE), Ulster University, Northern Ireland.

ating a political settlement, less attention has been paid to smaller-scale efforts to build a constituency for peace at what is variously described as the community, grassroots or civil society levels, since the violent escalation of the conflict in the late 1960s. While perhaps not receiving as much public recognition, such peace-focused initiatives have received significant financial support from the European Union, the British and Irish governments, and national and international philanthropies, particularly from the mid-1980s onwards. With an estimated 4 billion US dollars distributed to date, the majority of targeted funds arrived after the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 and the 1998 Belfast Agreement to ensure and secure peace on the ground (Nolan, 2012: 172).

As a consequence of both an increasing demand for a resolution of the prolonged conflict, and an expansion of the grant-aid sources available to civil society organizations, the peacebuilding field experienced an exponential rise in activity during the 1990s and 2000s. An early report that describes community-based, peace-focused activities published in 1986, listed 45 'community relations' or 'reconciliation' groups funded either by private philanthropy or by central government through the Department of Education (Frazer and Fitzduff, 1986: 7). Post-ceasefires, however, the level of activity rose considerably. For example, between 1995 and 2007, over 21,000 applications for funding were approved by the European Union Peace and Reconciliation Fund (Buchanan, 2008: 387). Similarly, from 1986 to 2010, one philanthropic body, the International Fund for Ireland, supported over 6,200 individual projects (Deloitte, 2010: 20; IFI, 2006: 5). Given the region's 1.8 million population, these figures are impressive in comparative context.

While some categorization of peacebuilding approaches and activities have been proposed and various typologies developed (Fitzduff, 1993; Hughes and Carmichael, 1998; Hughes and Knox, 1997; Morrissey, 2006; Quirk *et al.*, 2001), it is notable that, despite the longevity of efforts, significant financial investment and wide scope of activities, *there have been a lack of investigations that include an aggregated or consolidated empirical analysis* of the peacebuilding activities occurring at the civil society level. Furthermore, there is an *under-examination of the theoretical implications* generated from the plethora of practical interventions either from interested academics, supportive donor organizations or reflective practitioners.

Closing this practice–theory gap in the field of peacebuilding to ensure reflexivity remains vitally important for academics and practitioners alike. In doing so, lessons may be learned and – where contextually appropriate – shared and disseminated to create robust and usable knowledge that can contribute to conflict transformation on the ground. Without such reflexivity, both theory and practice suffer. Reflecting on qualitative interviews undertaken with practitioners, donors and policymakers in Northern Ireland, Kelly identified this reflexivity gap as a knowledge deficit that has led to a serious lack of understanding of “what works and why” (2012: 102) in local peacebuilding, and described this confusion as a barrier to the progression of sustainable peace. This shows the need to address the barriers preventing such theory-building as a step towards addressing and constructing a consolidated local theory of peacebuilding.

Thus, this article will seek to propose some possible answers to the question: *why, given the length of time, extent of initiatives and significant financial investment, does there remain an absence of codified and consolidated indigenous theory (defined here as theory generated from local practice-based knowledge) about peacebuilding?*

In order to establish the background and motivation for the study, the article begins with an exploration of the role and function of civil society within the wider field of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. It identifies the gaps in the literature that seeks to explore, document and validate the experience of local practitioners in addressing the multiple causes and consequences of conflict in the region. It then goes on to describe the methodological approach taken to answer the research question, which utilizes both primary and secondary sources, as well as the experience and observations of the authors as active practitioners and researchers in the field. The findings of the article are then discussed, addressing two dominant and interrelated dynamics that have created barriers to the construction of locally based peacebuilding theory in Northern Ireland: the professionalization of peace and the subordination of practical knowledge within academia, drawing from the insights of Aristotle on the virtues of knowledge. Looking outside of the Northern Ireland context, examples of institutions that value and use practical (or phronetic) knowledge as sources of knowledge creation are then briefly profiled to illustrate the benefits of increased reflexivity. Finally, the article concludes with a call for peace research that seeks to validate and incorporate the wisdom and experience of practical knowledge.

2 Background

For over 50 years, civil society actors and organizations in Northern Ireland have engaged in a diverse array of peacebuilding initiatives to address both latent and, latterly, direct and persistent forms of violence and unrest. Such activities included advocating for civil rights and creating inter-group ecumenical projects during the mid-to-late 1960s; responding to the human crises and turmoil of communal violence that escalated in the early 1970s; building local capacities for peace through community development, interfaith dialogue and mediation skill development in the 1980s; and promoting and supporting pre-ceasefire, behind-the-scenes intermediation between Loyalist and Republican factions prior to the formal negotiations that led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement in 1998. Sixteen years on from the peace accord, the level of community-based activity has not diminished. Post-accord activities have proliferated to include festivals and arts programmes aimed at an increased understanding of issues of cultural diversity, field trips designed to educate about, and promote, a shared history, short- and long-term interventions to reduce tension in flash-point interface areas, intercommunity and intercultural events with young people, and projects aimed at coming to terms with the legacy of the conflict, to name but a few.

Academic literature that covers the role of civil society in peacebuilding efforts in Northern Ireland has, for the most part, focused on its role leading up to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The consensus appears to be that efforts undertaken by those working within civil society created a favorable backdrop that aided Track One actors during negotiations (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002; Fitzduff, 2002; Knox, 2011; Knox and Quirk, 2000; McCartney, 1999). There is also acknowledgment that local peacebuilding efforts within civil society may have helped to open lines of communication and build trust between chronically estranged communities (Acheson *et al.*, 2006), monitor the behaviour and actions of state and non-state actors (Belloni, 2010), establish the conditions for possible reconciliation (Potter, 2006), and contribute to the building of a 'social peace process' alongside the political peace process (Brewer, 2010). Cochrane and Dunn, in one of the few academic analyses of the role of the community-based peace sector in the peace process, suggests that the sector played a stretcher-bearer role, holding the society together during the worst of the violence and that cumulatively these efforts positively impacted society (Cochrane, 2006; Cochrane and Dunn, 2002: 173). Notwithstanding these positive influences, both local and international academics have generally evaded any definitive or decisive causal conclusions about the overall impact of the work of this sector in building peace.

The majority of research scholars exploring the role of civil society actors in peacebuilding interventions have opted to focus on specific sectors: churches (Brewer *et al.*, 2011; Ganiel, 2010); women's peace groups (Hammond-Callaghan, 2006, 2011); former political prisoners' groups (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008); reconciliation groups (Love, 1995); and the efforts of statutory and quasi-statutory bodies such as the Community Relations Council (Hughes and Knox, 1997; Morrow, 2013). While cumulatively such works have been important to help increase our understanding of both the contributions and limitations of such groupings to civil society peacebuilding, there remains a lack of theoretical development extending out of these investigations (Buchanan, 2011; Cochrane and Dunn, 2001; Kelly, 2012). Given the established research on specific elements of peacebuilding practice in Northern Ireland, it is surprising that there is an absence of consolidated evidence emerging either from academia or from practitioners as to what has been learned from experiences of peacebuilding practice that may contribute to the development of indigenous theory or theories of conflict transformation.

This lack of consolidated indigenous peacebuilding theory has been commented on directly by policymakers, practitioners and donors (Kelly, 2012: 78-82), and indirectly by several authors. Attributing it in part to the wider peacebuilding field, Buchanan cites a "definitional morass" in regional conflict transformation policy and planning, stating that peacebuilding in Northern Ireland was negatively impacted because there is no "single conflict transformation model" (Buchanan, 2011: 183). Cochrane and Dunn instead criticize the local field itself for incoherency and "muddle-headedness" (Cochrane, 2001: 97; Cochrane and Dunn: 2002: 171) and describe differing approaches within the field partly as a result of two distinct lenses through which to view the conflict, namely structuralist or behaviourist. Thus some interventions focused on creating institutional

reforms addressing socio-economic justice issues, while others primarily focused on relationships and attitudinal and behavioural change. They write:

[I]t would also be fair to say that the P/CRO (Peace and Conflict Resolution Organisations) sector itself shares some responsibility for its own shortcomings and cannot simply blame funders, policy-makers or the media for the difficulties it faces. There is a need for these organisations to think in a much more co-ordinated, holistic and strategic way about what they are trying to achieve. (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002: 171)

Interestingly, this text, while in many ways the most comprehensive academic study of the community-based peacebuilding sector in Northern Ireland, settles on analysis of the activities of civil society actors, rather than attempting to create greater coherence from the self-identified theoretical deficiencies. Some peace scholars such as Ross would argue that peace practices anchored in a range of conflict resolution theories are not necessarily problematic (Ross, 2000). However, Kelly's research on Northern Ireland suggests that a lack of explicitly codified theory or theories has negatively impacted progress on local peacebuilding efforts in both policy and practice (Kelly, 2012). In this line, we would argue that the lack of theoretical development is problematic for practitioners, academics and civil society in Northern Ireland alike, for three main reasons. First, it leaves the examination of the role of civil society incomplete as it fails to interrogate what has been learned about change processes as a result of its practical efforts, and what may have worked and why. Thus, from a research perspective, knowledge of tried and tested conflict transformation models, which if contextually appropriate could benefit other conflict zones, is absent. Second, it leaves current approaches, methodologies and practices that are routinely used by practitioners within peacebuilding projects under-scrutinized, with the result that practice can become rote and unreflective of changing conflict dynamics on the ground and, therefore, at best irrelevant or at worst damaging. A lack of interrogation and theoretical investigation is particularly problematic in Northern Ireland, where many divisive issues remain unresolved and society is still deeply fractured relationally and structurally. Third, greater theoretical coherency and consolidation might generate lessons learned that could serve to enhance and refine current peacebuilding approaches, create opportunities to understand effective change processes from local areas of success and provide steerage towards promising approaches on issues and areas that remain contentious and unresolved. Therefore, the current academic literature, despite its importance, does not extend to address *why* there is a lack of consolidated locally based peacebuilding theory. This article is a first step towards redressing this gap in the literature by examining what may provide some explanation for this lack of locally based theory.

3 Methodology

The findings of this research, and the arguments and propositions developed based on them, have been taking place within both formal academic and practitioner contexts, and are informed by both primary and secondary sources. Both authors, graduates of academic programmes in peace and conflict studies, have been independently engaged in peacemaking and peacebuilding activities in Northern Ireland over the past two decades, in practitioner, researcher and evaluator roles. Stanton's practice spanning twenty years, has primarily focused on intervention and training in the area of mediation, trauma awareness, as well as the facilitation of programmes aimed at conflict transformation and reconciliation among youth, in schools, and within grassroots communities. Alongside traditional empirical research, Kelly's work has focused on the development of interventions with applied research and evaluation components, and primarily focused on reconciliation and conflict legacy issues, both in Northern Ireland and internationally.

As part of this activity, in 2011, Kelly undertook primary qualitative research exploring the key practice and policy imperatives required to sustain and consolidate peace in Northern Ireland. Over 30 in-depth interviews with political leaders, practitioners and policymakers were undertaken, the data analyzed and core findings published and widely disseminated (Kelly, 2012). The identification of a notable lack of theoretical underpinnings for much of the peacebuilding interventions in Northern Ireland was a key finding of the research and prompted further desk-based investigations into the absence of both theory development and testing, and the lack of engagement of academia in supporting such elaboration – aspects that are addressed in this article. Stanton's current doctoral research on the development of indigenous theories and models emerging from grassroots peacebuilding practice in Northern Ireland has sought to engage reflective practitioners in a qualitative engagement and exploration of where theory and practice intersect. Primary data, in the form of in-depth interviews, has also influenced the arguments presented in this article. These interviews have been conducted with 10 highly experienced practitioners, a large majority of whom have worked for over twenty years on peacebuilding within grassroots communities and civil society and who now hold senior leadership roles within local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This article reflects insights gained about practice-generated knowledge and the lack of consolidated local theory drawn from these practitioners, each of whom represents a range of peacebuilding sectors and NGOs, including those working on: mediation, community relations and community development programmes, 'interface' flashpoint de-escalation, reconciliation projects in schools, arts-based and sports-based peacebuilding, victims support, and those involving ex-combatant reintegration.

The core arguments proposed in this article are conceptually informed, therefore, mostly by the authors' own experience of 20 years of peacebuilding practice, as well as their extensive interaction with, and observation of, civil society organizations in Northern Ireland in addition to the doctoral research interviews. It is further developed through engagement with pertinent and wide-ranging philo-

sophical and theoretical literature outside of the field of peacebuilding that seeks to explore the relationship between theory development and practical implementation. It also draws on an extensive secondary analysis of existing literature on peacebuilding practice in both Northern Ireland and beyond in order to develop its lines of reasoning and propositions.

Methodologically, Northern Ireland is utilized as a case study to interrogate and illuminate the more generalizable challenges that face many societies emerging from conflict and that seek to develop effective locally based strategies for interventions to support sustainable peace.

4 Discussion

This article seeks to rectify the current lack of academic literature, investigating why there exists a paucity of consolidated locally based peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Our research suggests two possible main reasons that have had interdependent and mutually exacerbatory dynamics. First, the professionalization of peacebuilding globally and locally has led to increased bureaucratization and the orientation of peacebuilding practice towards service provision and the delivery of donor-determined peacebuilding approaches. Second, the dominance of research over practice within academia has created hierarchies of knowledge, which have resulted in the undervaluing of practical knowledge as a source of knowledge creation.

It is important to state that these two reasons are certainly not the *only* reasons for a lack of locally based peacebuilding theory in Northern Ireland. Other factors may also be at play, such as the difficulty of researching a wide range of activities spanning funding cycles of varying length and focus; the methodological challenge of accessing a comprehensive collection of practice-generated data such as evaluations from which to draw generalizable conclusions; or concerns that in shining a critical light on local peacebuilding, work undertaken at the grassroots level will be undermined or jeopardized, resulting in gatekeeping and non-cooperation with researchers.

However, utilizing Northern Ireland as a case study, this article seeks to focus on the role that the two aforementioned dynamics (professionalization and the dominance of research over practice) have contributed to the lack of locally based theory. This is for two reasons: first, our research and practice-based experience indicate that these two reasons have played a *significant* role in contributing to the lack of local theory-building. Second, while this article reflects on Northern Ireland, the professionalization of peace and the hierarchy of knowledge within academia are global trends. Therefore, it is worth drawing attention to ways they may create barriers for reflexivity in peacebuilding theory and practice in other conflict or post-conflict zones.

Thus, we discuss below in sections (1) and (2) these two reasons, respectively, and their inhibitory effect on locally based peacebuilding theory. The discussion concludes in section (3) by examining examples of peace researchers and practitioners working outside of the Northern Irish context. Their work, which seeks to

close practice–theory reflexivity gaps by utilizing it both in theory-building within academia and within professional practice, demonstrates the value for practical knowledge.

4.1 *The Professionalization of Peace Globally and Locally*

The last 20 years have seen significant changes within both the practice of peacebuilding and the growing academic discipline of peace and conflict studies. Galvanized by the United Nations (UN) under Boutros-Boutros Ghali in 1992, and reinforced through the development of a UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2005, there is now a broadening scope of practice for professionals equipped with the theories and skills of conflict transformation and peacebuilding within a range of global institutions. These new professionally trained peacebuilders are increasingly integrated within foreign policy bodies such as the United States Department of State, the World Bank, USAID and other international NGOs working in relief, aid and development (Mac Ginty, 2012). This practice development has been reflected within academia, with an exponential growth in the development of graduate programmes aimed at creating ‘professionals’ addressing the global demands for “international conflict work” (Carstarphen *et al.*, 2010: 2).

Within an overall paradigm of *realpolitik* and pervasive militarism, this professionalization of peace has created both opportunities and anxieties in the field for both practitioners and academics alike. While some welcome the promotion and adoption of the language and practices of peacebuilding by international bodies, others view these developments with wary skepticism (Mac Ginty, 2012; Richmond, 2005). Critics identify concerns about the dominance of a liberal peace, noting a variety of reasons. Some view it as the imposition of a generic and universal model that sidelines local actors, decreasing their ownership of peacebuilding processes (Donais, 2009, 2012; Mac Ginty, 2013), or that it obscures local conflict dynamics and their role in a national conflict (Odendaal, 2013). Others argue that the liberal peace privileges a normative worldview that relies on a Cartesian, technical–rational ontology that is typically associated with Western institutions and that serves, in many parts of the world, to subordinate non-Western ways of knowing and indigenous cultural peacebuilding approaches (Abu-Nimer, 2013; Goldberg, 2009; Neufeldt, 2007). This, it is argued, can be counterproductive to embedding peace that is contextually appropriate and rooted in cultural relevance.

The expansion of peacebuilding has also witnessed a shift in discourse, perhaps in its efforts to prove itself a viable alternative to traditional militarist responses. Terminology has shifted from a conceptualization of peace as utopic and idealistic to realistic and strategic (Philpott and Powers, 2010; Schirch, 2004). This shift may have been made to move mainstream policymakers away from zero-sum debates between hawk and dove and to pave the way for greater integration and coordination of interventions designed to build peace. However, it is striking in its shift towards a more empirical techno-rational thrust, conceptually resting on an embedded assumption that peace *can* be designed. Finally, the professionalization of peace has also generated a greater expectation of quantifiable

impact and value for money from donors, NGOs and governments (Gaarder and Annan, 2013; Goodhand and Atkinson, 2001; Menkhau, 2004).

This global trend towards the professionalization of peace has been clearly evident during the life cycle of the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. Efforts by civil society to address the direct and proximate causes and consequences of the conflict have been undertaken for nearly fifty years, many initially focusing on holding communities together, and latterly on finding ways to build an infrastructure to encourage, support and institutionalize peace on the ground. Reflecting on the work of such groups, Cochrane and Dunn write, “[I]t would be reasonable to conclude that Northern Ireland would have been a lot worse off without its contribution” (2002: 173). As mentioned previously, this work expanded significantly after the Republican and Loyalist ceasefires in 1994, ushering in new opportunities for multiplying on-the-ground peacebuilding efforts. Increased financial and human resourcing benefited many grassroots community-led efforts by allowing the most ambitious and strategic to expand beyond their initial scope and extend their reach. It provided opportunities for new ideas to be tested, pilot projects trialled and further specializations and training to emerge from within the local peacebuilding field. It has also led to the perception that there is now a peace or reconciliation industry (Atashi, 2011; Eyben *et al.*, 2000; Power, 2011), with an expectation of creating external and quantifiable outcomes that require evaluation and assessment. Some might argue that although a considerable amount of work has been made possible by external funding, professionalization of peace has occurred in Northern Ireland at a price.

Several critiques have been lodged. The first is that it has resulted in a perception that projects are dominated by overly bureaucratic funding demands and a focus on ‘project’ delivery rather than needs-based practice. Both Buchanan and Byrne *et al* highlight that bureaucracy served to disempower communities who, in many cases, were ill-equipped and under-resourced to manage overly complicated funding grants, and the accompanying regulatory requirements (Buchanan, 2011: 177; Byrne *et al.*, 2008: 115). A second critique is that by focusing on narrowly designed, funder-led, project delivery, practitioners became insufficiently interrogative of the underlying change assumptions of their practice. Given the exponential influx of funds in a short period, it is perhaps not surprising that new levels of accountability stretched local agencies in directions that prioritized financial administration over reflective practice. With responsibility for overseeing the distribution and administration of significant grant-funds, one former senior executive from a local funding body commented that, over time, peacebuilding activities began to be viewed in terms of service delivery rather than as opportunities for learning (E. Stanton, personal communication on 10 October 14, with former CEO of community relations funding body, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 2014). Stanton’s own practice, supported by evidence from early stages of the doctoral research, suggests a perception in the field that reflective practice does not happen as much as it should. Blame is attributed by some practitioners to an over-reliance on tried and tested approaches, but also to an increasingly risk-averse and stressful practice environment, focused primarily on managing gaps in bureaucratic funding cycles.

Third and finally, a critique exists that the professionalization of peace has led to strains upon, and a decrease in, volunteerism, the marginalization of local community and grassroots practitioners' voices and a devaluing of hard-won practical knowledge of what works on the ground. Instead, there is evidence of the perception of practice increasingly directed by funding targets that do not necessarily match need. In a series of interviews conducted in 2013 on the theme of 'a shared future', one community activist attributed recent street violence in Belfast to unresolved identity issues and laid the blame, in part, on the role of professionalized peacebuilding:

In our own work with young people we didn't set out with grandiose notions, we just provided space for them to come together to discuss everyday issues, including questions of culture and identity. And I am convinced that most of those young people left those interactions with a more positive view of the 'other' community, of one another's identities. We were working away slowly, without fuss. And then what happened? All these high-powered agencies appeared – conflict resolution experts, conflict transformation specialists, academics with highfaluting theories, funders who only wanted to hear of programmes which promised magic solutions to the problems of sectarianism. The result? Absolute chaos. (Hall, 2013: 8)

In this example, academia and funders were accused of bringing *their* "conflict resolution theory" and *their* funding demands that simply served to whitewash over deep-seated sectarianism. Both Atashi and Byrne *et al.*, whose research focuses primarily on the funding of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, also comment on this dynamic, reflecting that practitioners felt donors were "dictating the scripts" (Byrne *et al.*, 2008: 115) that did not correspond to realities on the ground and that fund recipients felt decision makers were not "directing funds to their specific needs but were imposing projects according to misguided judgments on wrong issues" (Atashi, 2011: 216). These sources further illustrate how professionalism has played a role in transforming local practice towards service delivery, meeting bureaucratic reporting guidelines rather than community-identified needs, and furthering the distance between practice and learning.

4.2 *The Dominance of Research over Practice in Academia*

In the increasingly complex world, the compartmentalization of societal functions is widely accepted as both practical and desirable. In this context, academia is often viewed as the most appropriate institution to take on the functional role of theory construction and development. However questions of epistemology and what counts as 'scientific' knowledge and for what purpose it should be used is a debate with deeper roots.

While often viewed as a modern phenomenon, these tensions extend as far back as early Greek philosophical debates into the nature of knowledge. In book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out a discussion on what he calls the virtues of knowledge, dividing them up between invariable and that which is variable. Discussing first the invariable – described as scientific knowledge or *episteme*

– Aristotle outlines this form of knowledge as consisting of universals, able to be proven through processes of deduction or induction, producing demonstrated truth of the “necessary and eternal” (2009: 104).

Contrasting this are two types of knowledge that are variable: the first, *techne*, is knowledge of how things are made such as art, craft or skill-based knowledge. The second, Aristotle describes as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. This, he proposes, is a form of variable knowledge because it is context-dependent and involves the ability to deliberate on forms of action with an end towards one’s own well-being (2009: 106). Aristotle posits that *phronesis* is a type of knowledge required at both the micro level to manage households, and at the macro level to manage states. Aristotle argues that someone can be admired because they know things that are “remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless” (2009: 108). By contrast, however, practical wisdom is action-oriented and gained both through experience and by the accumulation of knowledge of particulars. Interestingly, unlike *episteme* (epistemology) and *techne* (technology), there is no modern derivative word for *phronesis*. While Aristotle validates the three different types of knowledge, he perhaps lays the first brick in the wall between practice and theory by stating that *phronesis* cannot become scientific knowledge, because it is concerned with variables that necessitate deliberation, judgment and understanding with the end goal that they provide a basis for action.

The divisions in these three forms of knowledge resurface in the work of Donald Schön. Writing in 1983, he argues that the divorce between theory and practice has caused a “crisis of confidence in the professions” (1983: 4). Attributing this division to the influence of Positivism in the early nineteenth century, he critiques it on two grounds – first, that as Positivism became embedded within universities, its focus on empirical, measureable data led to what he calls the emergence of ‘techno-rationalism’ as the dominant epistemology of practice, such that only what was measurable counted as knowledge. His second critique was that Positivism created a division between those responsible for theory and knowledge creation, and those responsible for practice. Building theory became the designated job of scientists and scholars, while the role of the professions was to test theory and bring it back to the scientists to refine. While Aristotle had defined them as different but equally valuable forms of knowledge, Schön argues that with the influence of Positivism, scientific theoretical knowledge was privileged over practical knowledge, and represented “the roots of the now-familiar split between research and practice” (1983: 37).

Schön’s argument is that this division of labor has left many practitioners ill-equipped to practise in increasingly complex professional environments. Those more successful in navigating the complexity he describes are practitioners who reflect on their ‘theories in use’, the implicit assumptions that guide their practice and who have learned to value their practice-based context-specific knowledge. However, a difficulty presents itself for practitioners who have operated effectively in the face of a complex and unstable environment when trying to describe *how* they knew *what to do* – because what counts as knowledge when judging a context is hard to measure, and therefore does not count within an empirical technical–rational model of practice. Thus, the very skills and abilities that are

needed to practise well in complex, variable contexts, and that should be highlighted as important, are made invisible by the dominance of the technical-rational empirical model.

This begs the question, what does a practitioner do with knowledge that is central to practice, but not valuable or measurable by the empirical yardstick? It may well be that practitioners internalize the subordination of their practical knowledge and therefore devalue it as a source of knowledge creation.

Michael Eraut (1994), an education scholar writing on professional knowledge and learning, faults both academic and professional communities for contributing to practice-theory divides, but lays the blame primarily within academia. His critique is that knowledge creation is assumed to be the domain of researchers, and that “by implication other professionals are not only excluded from the knowledge creation process, but assumed to suffer from knowledge deficiency” (Eraut, 1994: 54). Practitioners do not escape his critique entirely, commenting that often practice choices are made that rely on tried and tested methods, while more valid theories, rather than being tested out, can be relegated to “storage” (Eraut, 1994: 43). This is particularly true for those working within ‘hot’ action contexts that have less time for deliberation.

Eraut argues that barriers such as the difficulty of generalizing from practical knowledge need to be overcome through a commitment on the part of higher education to value, recognize and enhance its ability to collaborate with the professions. This should also be matched by mid-career practitioners building closer relationships with academic institutions to take joint responsibility for new knowledge creation.

In the Northern Ireland context, evidence seems to be emerging that the techno-rational thrust of professionalization and the bureaucratization of peace, exacerbated by the institutionalized dominance of research over practice within academia, has led to the absence of practical knowledge and experience used as a valid source of knowledge creation. A senior staff member from a peacebuilding and community development organization interviewed for Stanton’s doctoral research observed that, in her view, practical knowledge was devalued and that university programmes, in particular, were not utilizing the scope of practice expertise that existed within Northern Ireland.

I have real concerns about how both community development and community relations are being taught in our universities and how there is a massive lack of practice experience for those coming through the other end of that. ...I mean that doesn’t have to be people coming out to do placements if they’re not comfortable with that. But it could be about getting practitioners to come in and talk to students (E. Stanton, interview on 8 December 2014 with Senior Staff of peacebuilding and community development NGO in Belfast, Northern Ireland).

In order for a consolidated ‘indigenous’ theory to have emerged in Northern Ireland, inductive research would have been required to be undertaken, gathering evidence across a wide variety of types of peacebuilding practice, followed by col-

laborative theory-building between academics and practitioners. However, early stages of Stanton's empirical research reflects that practitioners believe that within academia they are not perceived as potential knowledge or theory-building partners. Reflecting on the collaborative opportunities between practitioners and local academics within the peace and conflict field, one long-time Director of a well-established local arts and culture NGO explained:

But I've always had the feeling that it's only really almost in very very recent years that the University would even see us as anything at a level that they would partner with. We always seem to be just seen as a bunch of maverick creatives in the city. I have always kinda felt the University in particular, they never come seeking us to work with, [or] see the work we are doing. I have always felt they have an ivory tower approach (E. Stanton, interview on 27 November 2014, with Director of an arts and culture NGO, Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland).

Stanton's doctoral research has also found that when practitioners did collaborate with academics, their own contribution has not always been adequately acknowledged. One experienced community relations practitioner, the Director of a small grassroots peacebuilding NGO, spoke of having commissioned an academic to undertake a piece of community-focused research to document their practice. This resulted in a publication, which that practitioner helped to develop and edit, but for which their contribution was never credited (E. Stanton, interview on 4 December 14 with Director, interface/community relations NGO in Belfast, Northern Ireland).

Given that academic research tends to prefer the empirical and quantifiable, building theory from practical knowledge (often held implicitly) is inherently more difficult to generalize, and may challenge traditional epistemic models. Similarly, practitioners have to step outside their day-to-day 'delivery' pressures to set time aside to pool their collective knowledge together, to discern, reflect and consolidate their implicit knowledge about what has informed their judgments and deliberation. Operating within the increased bureaucratic and technocratic field of peacebuilding leaves little time, in reality, for reflective theory-building. Stanton's preliminary research is finding that practitioners in Northern Ireland wishing to codify their knowledge find it difficult to find time amidst the competing pressures of programme delivery, tight resources, and funder reporting demands. Furthermore, given that some practitioners reflect a perception that their work has not traditionally been of interest, or attempts to collaborate have not always been on a basis of equal footing, it is perhaps unsurprising that this practice-theory divide persists.

4.3 Utilizing Phronetic Knowledge: Examples of Practice and Theory Reflexivity

If we are to take as given that phronetic knowledge is valuable, logic prevails that it should be validated, and used as the point of departure for knowledge creation, whether it be for theory-building or a study of particulars. Writing from the con-

text of peace research, Luc Reychler, echoed the call for practice–theory reflexivity, stating:

The learning of violence prevention and peace building can be improved by... creating structures which support a better exchange of knowledge between the decision makers, the practitioners in the field, and the research community. (2006: 9)

Indeed, using practice to generate locally based theory can be, and is being, done. Several peace scholars, while not making a link directly with phronesis, have emphasized the value of context-based practical knowledge. For example, although the term is not used, the concept of phronesis is evidenced in John Paul Lederach's ideas and his philosophy of peacebuilding. Influenced both by his mediation practice in Central America and the work of Paulo Freire, Lederach's early work stressed elicitive rather than prescriptive approaches, using insider–local indigenous knowledge as the “pipeline for discovery”, emphasizing the importance of understanding how the local conflict context shapes world views (1995: 31). Lederach's (1995, 1997, 2005) frameworks for peacebuilding, born out of practice, are useful precisely because they do not attempt to be traditional epistemic theories. Containing elements of explanation and prediction that can be useful for comparative purposes, they also retain flexibility.

Looking outside of the Northern Ireland context, two distinct institutions (one practice-based and one academic) demonstrate the value they placed on practice and theory reflexivity. Since the early 2000s one of the largest humanitarian aid agencies, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), has incorporated peacebuilding objectives within its development work located in areas of conflict. In 2004, the organization published *Conflict as the Beginning of Peace*, which described work undertaken with fieldworkers to learn from their peacebuilding interventions and develop models of practice to inform existing and future programs (CRS, 2004). The process was conducted in three phases, whereby fieldworkers were asked to write stories about their experiences of resolving local conflicts, followed by a workshop at which their stories were shared and collectively analyzed for lessons learned. Finally, a synthesis identifying inductively the principles of good practice was codified. This analysis then fed back into the regional planning unit and the organization as a whole. In this manner, practitioners' experience was used to build knowledge to directly inform future programme and project development.

Next highlighted is the work of an academic institution, the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), which explicitly describes itself as an institution that prepares reflective practitioners. A recent consultation brought together practitioners and academics working across the globe with the STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resiliency) programme, a trauma-awareness curriculum developed by academic-practitioners at CJP. The purpose of the consultation was to elicit the experiences, knowledge and insights from practitioners in adapting the STAR model within their different locales and contexts, including Burma, Haiti, Bolivia, Kenya, Somalia, United States and Northern Ireland. The consultation, the first part of a three-year plan,

uses practice-informed knowledge to guide subsequent stages of development of the STAR model to further refine its theoretical basis and, in collaboration with practitioners, to identify and direct further avenues for research.

These examples demonstrate commitment to utilizing phronetic knowledge to learn, develop and support greater reflexivity within peacebuilding theory and practice. As such, it is an encouraging example of how an international NGO (CRS) creates the space to use such knowledge to inform and shape future programme delivery. Likewise, it illustrates that within academia (CJP at EMU), it is possible to commit to creating a cycle of research, practice and theory-building to close the reflexivity gaps, which, as Reychler argues, can result in improvements to both violence prevention and peacebuilding approaches in societies affected by conflict (Reychler, 2006: 9).

5 Conclusion

This article investigates why, despite fifty years of peacebuilding initiatives and significant funding, there remains a lack of locally based 'indigenous' peacebuilding theory in Northern Ireland. We have found that this can, in part, be explained by a combination of two factors: one lies within the realm of practice due to the increasing professionalization and bureaucratization of peacebuilding, and the other is dominance of research over practice within academia as a result of the institutionalized hierarchies of knowledge. Nonetheless, we have also provided initial evidence that constructing locally based theory is supported by various scholars and implemented in other complex conflict zones.

In drawing these conclusions, it was recognized that the peacebuilding field itself has gone through a professional 'makeover' over the past twenty years – it has traded in its tie-dye T-shirts for a power suit and left utopian ideals for SMART (Specific Measurable Achievable Realistic Time-bound) targets and empirical results. This has resulted in the tensions between the emerging dominance of a technical-rational paradigm over one that can grapple with the fluid, complex and context-dependent landscape of protracted violent conflict. Reflecting on the Northern Ireland context, professionalization has been a double-edged sword, providing much needed financial resourcing, but at the cost of the marginalization of those who learned by experience, as though their own knowledge was irrelevant. Academic institutions, embedded out of the technical-rational model, may have inadvertently reinforced this divide as the field became professionalized. The difficulty with the current relationship between research and practice is that it leaves practitioners in silos and ill-equipped to analyze, critique and build upon their own knowledge, and it leads academic-generated, theoretical understandings of conflict without the more nuanced, practical knowledge of context. The current hegemony of episteme forms of knowledge has resulted in the subordination of insider-localized experience-based, phronetic knowledge, to the detriment of building a sustainable peace.

The evidence shows that a lack of consolidated theory has affected progress in advancing peace on the ground in Northern Ireland. While this article reflects

on this particular region, the barriers to building locally based theory that it has identified are, arguably, applicable in other conflict and post-conflict zones. That is, it might be that in other conflict zones the two reasons we discussed also inhibit the development of locally based theories. We would wish to argue that if *phronesis* were more widely acknowledged as valid and had an equal seat at the table of knowledge, it might have significant implications for peacebuilding theory and practice in a wide range of conflict contexts. While there is no current literature intersecting *phronesis* with peacebuilding, we believe the concept of *phronetic* knowledge is potentially illuminating for peacebuilding in two different ways. First, it provides a description for the type of knowledge that both informs and is gained as a result of practical experiences situated in the context of complexity, uncertainty and instability – characteristics that are endemic within protracted violent conflicts. Second, as a macro-conceptual framework, it values and validates this type of practical, context-derived knowledge and should be considered as equally prized for shedding light on what informs and constrains the actions of those seeking to build peace.

Therefore, we conclude this article with a call for greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners, and greater co-creation and co-ownership of knowledge production. The knowledge production process may be challenging and demand greater commitment from both academics and practitioners to collaborate over longer periods of time, to analyze implicitly held understandings of a conflict context contained in particular practices and to build knowledge together. However, this process, if undertaken well, may yield a form (or forms) of theory that look less conventionally epistemic, but nonetheless contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics necessary to build sustainable peace on the ground. Given the complex, uncertain and challenging terrain of conflict, this bridge between practice and theory is all the more urgent to build.

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Emily Stanton & Grainne Kelly

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