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'What they say peters down': How non-profit leaders assess the trustworthiness of government – Elite discourse and distrust in post-conflict Northern Ireland

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Abstract
This article uses Northern Ireland as a research context to explore how elite discourse (from political and media actors/institutions) influences how Non-Profit Leaders (NPLs) assess the trustworthiness of government. We provide emergent themes which should aid theory development and practice in the area of political public relations by showing: (1) the value NPLs place on 'soft' trust qualities in trust assessments of government, namely benevolence; (2) the importance NPLs place on communicative acts which model trust (e.g. dialogue, compromise, mediation); and (3) the destructive role of divisive political elite discourse within a defective political system, amplified via the media, in NPLs' distrust of government. The study thereby emphasises the crucial and constitutive role trust perceptions play in (in)effective political public relations, arguing that 'trust' must be defined by the perceiver and critically unpacked if public relations research is to fully appreciate its function. We propose that the nature of Northern Ireland's post-conflict divided society, and political discourse in specific, makes certain trust antecedents most desirable to cross-community stakeholders. The findings contribute to further refining the concept of trust in public relations and they may also be instructive for other contexts.

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Keywords

Introduction

Low levels of public trust in political institutions and actors worldwide are worrying for the health of democratic societies (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2019; Zmerli and Van Der Meer, 2017). The nature of elite discourse is increasingly considered to play a role in citizen (dis)trust (Davis, 2019). For our purposes, elite discourse comprises, 'the ways in which a topic is talked about and socially constructed' (Yeomans, 2016: 80) by political or media actors/institutions when they communicate information to the public. It is considered an instrumental element of a functioning, stable and critically trusting democracy (Davis, 2010; Habermas, 1989; Hetherington, 1998) that exudes a 'sense of community' (Kim and Cho, 2019). Elite discourse is an important element of political public relations, understood as:

> the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2011: 8)

But, there is a gap in the literature as to the perspectives of one important public, Non-Profit Leaders (NPLs), on elite discourse and trust. Non-profit organisations (NPOs) – through their leaders – play an important role across societies because they advocate on behalf of other citizens. They have the potential to provide a nexus for communication, relationship and trust building within and between citizen and government groups (Fyall and McGuire, 2015; Toledano and Maplesden, 2016; Wollebæk and Strømsnes, 2008). Their roles may be even more poignant in a post-conflict, divided society (Puljek-Shank and Verkoren, 2017) like Northern Ireland, where trust in government and the media is low (NISRA, 2017). In Northern Ireland, the community and voluntary sector is vibrant, and this sector has been involved in mobilising civil society and engaging with state actors for peace, as well as building inter-community trust (Doran, 2010; Knox and Quirk, 2016; Stanton and Kelly, 2015). NPLs have specific professional knowledge and expertise which affords them elite status (Davis, 2019). NPLs engage with both government and media to advocate for their stakeholders' interests, and in this respect, they perform a public relations function, whether intentionally or not (Toledano and Maplesden, 2016). They usually have greater access to information than the general public, because they are a regular consultee/interviewee on policy proposals and change (Jones and Gammell, 2009). NPL views on government trustworthiness matter since their trust perceptions are likely to impact on how NPLs communicate about government with their stakeholders – it may impact on these stakeholders' own views; how NPOs interact with government to advocate for their stakeholders' interests; and the strategic role cross-community NPOs seek to play in political discourse and in civil society overall (Kearns et al., 2014; Liu and Stolle, 2017).

This article therefore uses Northern Ireland as a context to explore what elements of elite discourse influence cross-community NPLs' assessments of trust in the Northern Ireland government. While there has been some tentative academic research on public trust in Northern Ireland's government (Clark and Wilford, 2012; Gormley-Heenan and Devine, 2010), it is based on a secondary analysis of quantitative data and relates to a different political phase than this contemporary history study. Past research does not foreground trust theory, the role of political or media discourse, nor the perspectives of cross-community NPLs. Similarly, the public relations field still makes limited use of trust theory, even though trust is a sought after 'intangible asset' commonly referred to in its literature and practice (Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2019). We address this gap by using an in-depth, qualitative approach which gives primacy to the words of interviewees in conceptualising trust and distrust via elite discourse. Our objective is to identify emergent themes which should aid theoretical development in the area of political public relations and trust, especially given the paucity of dedicated research into the topic from the perspectives of cross-community NPLs in a divided society. The article contributes to the public relations field by demonstrating the crucial and constitutive role trust perceptions play in (in)effective political public relations. We argue that 'trust' must be defined by the perceiver and critically unpacked if public relations research is to fully appreciate its function. We propose that the nature of Northern Ireland's post-conflict divided society, and its political discourse in specific, makes certain trust antecedents most desirable to cross-community stakeholders, which may be instructive for other contexts.

The next section provides a conceptual background of trust and distrust. This is followed by an overview of the roles that public relations and elite discourse in specific may play in trust in government, peace and conflict. The fourth section presents our case study context, and the fifth section presents our research question and methodology. The sixth section presents the findings and discussion. The last section presents our conclusions and discusses the implications of the findings for theory and practice in the area of political public relations and trust.

Trust and distrust

A recurring issue in studies of governmental trust is that 'trust' is often ill-defined or not defined at all. A widely accepted definition within the trust literature is provided by Mayer et al. (1995):

> the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. (p. 712)

Regarding trust in 'government' (often also called 'political trust'), following Van Der Meer and Zmerli (2017), we propose that this may encompass both 'political institutions and actors' (p. 4). Furthermore, in this article, we follow Mayer et al. (1995) and Kong (2014) to understand trust as influenced by some or all of the following trustworthiness components: (1) perceived *competence*: the extent to which an individual

perceives another individual or entity to be capable, effective, skilful and professional; (2) perceived *benevolence*: the extent to which an individual perceives another individual or entity or actor to care about their welfare; and (3) perceived *integrity*: the extent to which an individual perceives another individual or entity to be sincere, to fulfil its promises and adhere to 'a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable' (Mayer et al., 1995: 719).

Organisational studies reveal that trust is characterised by trustor feelings of positivity, confidence and security, which suspends risk through a 'leap of faith' (Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012; Mayer et al., 1995). Distrust, however, is characterised by 'risk awareness, skepticism, watchfulness, vigilance, and sometimes perceptions of threat and fear' (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015). Following developments in trust theory, we proceed on the basis that *distrust* is not the opposite of trust or 'low trust' but in fact is a distinct construct (Sitkin and Stickel, 1996). It involves value incongruence and pervasive negative expectations of the motives, intentions or actions of others, which after a tipping point precludes the existence of trust (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015). Thus, a key thread in both trust and distrust research to date, is the importance of the compatibility between certain values and expectations in explicating the character of a given relationship, be it individual or institutional in nature.

Public relations, elite discourse, peace and conflict

Organisational studies show that communication is a crucial vehicle of trust development (Thomas et al., 2009) and from a normative perspective, public relations communication, in particular, is supposed to build trust (Kent and Taylor, 2002; Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2019; Sommerfeldt, 2013). For example, trusting leadership behaviours can 'trickle down' via strategic leadership communication from the top to lower levels, or indeed 'trickle up' from one direct relationship to another more distant relationship (Fulmer and Ostroff, 2017). Whiteley et al. (2016) suggest that this process is applicable to public trust in local politicians and government institutions but there is little clarity about how or why this occurs.

As Wong (2016) notes, 'Trust development is an evolutionary process that involves constant evaluation and learning about the behaviours of the trustees' (p. 2). Through public communication and public relations activities, citizens are able to make such judgements about political actors, and this in turn affects how they engage with the democratic process (Brunner and Smallwood, 2019; Hargie and Irving, 2017). This is the case in any democratic society but nations that emerge from conflict often need to rebuild relationships between citizens and their government and between groups of citizens themselves (Doerfel and Taylor, 2004). Citizens living in deeply divided or conflict-affected societies may naturally have different expectations to the norm of government trustworthiness (e.g. transparency, competence), such as to rebuild societal divides and work for the 'common good' (Taylor, 2000; Wong, 2016), or indeed to represent group interests (Avraham, 2003).

New post-conflict relationships require strategic communication management. This involves many levels of communication such as political and governmental public relations (Rice and Somerville, 2013), government interventions and local communities

mobilising interest, aggregating into national, large-scale collective action (Minkoff, 1997). But the discourse of communicative elites, that is, political and media actors, undoubtedly have substantial power to influence this rebuilding. Political and media elites can influence the public 'agenda' by which citizens are directed to think about certain issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Underlying this influence are public relations strategies and communication management techniques that help distribute power and societal relations (Bourne, 2013). Conflict focused, simplistic language may fuel conflict 'frames' (Entman, 1993), tools that elites can employ (Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen, 2011) to highlight difference and division over similarity and reconciliation. Framing is a powerful element of the 'collective struggle over meaning' involving wider professional, organisational and socialisation processes (Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen, 2011: 112). Conflict frames can reduce the perceived capacity for deliberation and political outcomes based on compromise (Amsalem et al., 2017), and incite inter-group tensions and distrust of 'the other' (Armoudian, 2015; Avraham, 2003). The inter-relationship of political and media discourse within a divided society can facilitate or impede peace-building through, for example, promoting elite consensus and positive messages of reconciliation, or not (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

Van Wessel (2014) reminds us that evaluations of government are 'communicatively constituted' through discursive engagements with friends, family, government institutions, public services, the media and so on. But in contemporary (Western) democracies, it is through mediated communication of political actors and institutions that citizens largely learn about the issues of the day. Indeed Seyd (2015) states that research has explained political distrust as 'the consequence of high public demands or expectations – fuelled by politicians themselves as well as by the media – that are not met by the outputs of the political process' (p. 74). This is likely to be the case even with NPLs, who may have more direct engagement with government (Jones and Gammell, 2009). Indeed, political and media elites themselves use the media to strategically communicate with, and influence, each other (Davis, 2007, 2010). While Van Wessel (2014) acknowledges that citizens are 'active parties in the constitution of representation' (p. 761), the author found that people do derive most of their communication about government from political and media discourse. Therefore, we prioritise the crucial – yet not definitive – role of political and media discourse in individuals' perceptions of government. We argue that if citizens 'decontextualize' the discourse of government and media (Van Wessel, 2014), then those citizens with the most 'reach' (through their professional networks, resources and knowledge) to do so should be investigated.

Case study context: Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is often promoted as a successful example of peacebuilding (Stanton and Kelly, 2015). However, an array of tensions underpins Northern Ireland society, and sporadic terrorist activity and sectarian violence lead many to conclude that Northern Ireland is: 'neither at war nor at peace' (Hargie and Irving, 2017: 50). These tensions manifest in its complex government institutions, clearly evident by the fact that at the time of writing, the institutions have not been functioning for almost 3 years (since January 2017)[4]. This article is based on empirical data, collected during a time when

Northern Ireland's power-sharing government had been functioning without suspension for almost a decade, albeit with varying degrees of stability.

Consociational 'mandatory power-sharing' government was adopted in order to stabilise society after 30 years of violent ethnopolitical conflict between Unionists/Protestants and Nationalists/Catholics, and as a result of the 1998 *Good Friday Agreement* peace treaty.[1] This governance typically includes grand coalitions between the main groups/communities in a region; a cross-community 'weighted majority' system of parliamentary voting meaning a simple majority is not enough in decision-making processes; and proportionality to ensure fair representation for all sides in key societal institutions, such as political office, the civil service and policing (Rice and Somerville, 2017). All Assembly (legislative body) members must designate themselves 'nationalist', 'unionist' or 'other'.

The media's role is also important in understanding the political and post-conflict context. The main broadcast outlets, *BBC Northern Ireland, Ulster Television* (UTV) and several independent radio channels strive for impartiality in their news coverage of Northern Ireland and promote themselves as serving the whole population (Lafferty, 2014). Of the three national daily newspapers, only *The Belfast Telegraph* targets both communities in Northern Ireland (Rice and Somerville, 2017). *The Irish News* appeals to the Nationalist community, and the *News Letter* appeals to the Unionist community. Local politicians and their policies are now under daily media scrutiny, and journalists must report on policy matters rather than just political and societal violence (McLaughlin and Baker, 2012).

NPOs also have a role to play in the post-conflict public sphere. There are currently over 6000 NPOs, covering a wide range of services including community development, community relations, children's services, education and training, health and wellbeing, advocacy and policy (NICVA, 2016). Past studies of the sector have noted that during periods of Direct Rule (where Northern Ireland was governed remotely from Westminster, England, 1972–1998, with subsequent intermittent periods during inter-party breakdown), political stalemate and conflict meant community groups grew in number and in influence. To some extent, this meant that the 'voluntary sector came to occupy much of the public space in which the formal political structure otherwise would have existed' (Cochrane and Dunn, 2002: 151).

Some community groups in Northern Ireland are considered to have played a role in bringing about peace, channelling the voice of the majority of citizens who wanted a peaceful resolution to the conflict through dialogue, not violence (Acheson et al., 2006; Knox and Quirk, 2016). A growing number of individuals in Northern Ireland now identify as the more inclusive category of 'Northern Irish', rather than 'British' or 'Irish', which lays the foundation for further cross-community integration (Hargie and Irving, 2017). Similarly, most citizens value good cross-community relations (ARK, 2018). At the same time, high levels of public distrust in both the government and the media have been reported (NISRA, 2017). Since cross-community organisations can be considered to reflect the ethos of a significant proportion of Northern Ireland society and that 'Most community relations activity operates within and through the community and voluntary sector networks' (Doran, 2010: 138), we believe their leaders are an important route into how elite discourse informs perceptions of trust in government in the recent political climate.

Research question and methodology

We pose the following over-arching research question: *What elements of elite (government and media) discourse influence NPLs' assessments of the trustworthiness of government in Northern Ireland?*

Approach

In-depth semi-structured interviews were selected to answer the research question and to explore explanations from persons with experience or expertise (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011: 174–175). In-depth interviews coupled with rigorous thematic analysis proved insightful for exploring the 'genesis of general disposition to trust or distrust, through reconstructing individual histories of life experiences and interactions with government' (Van De Walle and Six, 2014: 171).

Sample

Leaders/key representatives from 17 established non-profit cross-community organisations currently operating in Northern Ireland, mainly within the Belfast and County Antrim areas, comprise the purposive and convenience-based sample. Through a combination of background research and the lead researcher's local knowledge, the research team selected organisations that were established and well-known in the local area[2] which together represented a breadth of civil society activities and experiences. Organisations in our sample cross a wide spectrum, namely peace and reconciliation work and community relations, but also advocacy, education, lobbying and faith-based relations. Of the 17 leaders interviewed, all worked at organisations explicitly promoted as 'cross-community' or were involved in cross-community work. As we have acknowledged thus far, our interviewees' perspectives cannot of course be considered representative of NPLs generally, the non-profit sector in Northern Ireland as a whole or the cross-community sector in specific, nor 'the public'. Nonetheless, their role as cross-community network facilitators and their engagement with a wide range of people (both politically engaged and not so) means that their experiences provide an important insight (Sommerfeldt, 2013) about trust and elite discourse when compared and contrasted across the whole sample.

While not 'traditional' elites (e.g. those in positions of direct political power), our cohort comprises a sample of 'elite intermediaries' who have an organised, specialist influence in civil society, often exercised through public relations activities (Davis, 2019). Interviewing elites presents particular challenges, such as accessing busy professionals, a need to be educated in the interviewees' general discourse and sectoral terms (Littig, 2009), how to best navigate power dynamics and how the researcher's 'positionality' will be perceived by the interviewee (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016). There are also context-specific issues to consider in a divided society, such that 'seemingly straightforward questions can provoke adversarial, sectarian responses' (McEvoy, 2006: 196). These issues meant that time and care was devoted to background research, tactfully contacting and following up interviewees, interview preparation and interview schedule design. Similarly,

we recognised that Northern Ireland is a small public sphere, and that opinion on virtually any aspect of community relations and governance is easily politicised. In addition, the majority of these organisations rely on some form of government funding so the research team gave all interviewees personal and organisational anonymity; anonymity allowed interviewees to speak freely on a range of relevant topics.

Procedures

All individuals were first contacted via email, where they received an informed consent form for signature prior to the interview and a Participant Information Sheet which gave an overview of the research project for their perusal. Interviews were conducted in the interviewees' workplaces, lasting around 1 hour. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed in full. The interviews were carried out between May 2016 and February 2017; during this time, the (British Unionist) *Democratic Unionist Party, DUP*, (Irish Republican) *Sinn Fein* and an independent unionist Justice Minister comprised the Executive. It was a politically turbulent (though not historically unusual) time of elections, deadlock and scandal,[3] and since data collection concluded, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly have not been operational (since January 2017)[4]. Following a pre-prepared, loose interview schedule, the interviewer asked each individual about their professional role, organisation and daily duties, before asking exploratory questions about their conception of trust. Interviewees were asked about how they sourced information on Northern Ireland's government and how they conceptualised 'government', before being asked about their trust in government and their reasons for this assessment. Thus, rather than becoming embroiled in a debate about whether trust in government is culturally or institutionally based (e.g. see Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wong, 2016), we allowed our research participants to make connections, in line with our exploratory approach.

Data analysis

Data analysis employed both inductive and deductive techniques. Following an extensive literature review and an initial scoping of the data, we developed an *a priori* codebook to capture ideas about trust and distrust. We included the adapted codes for trustworthiness outlined in our definition featuring competence, benevolence and integrity (Kong, 2014; Mayer et al., 1995), as well as 'distrustworthiness' (e.g. incompetent, self-interested, exploitative, deceitful). We also included the distinct indicators of distrust we found in past literature, namely from Bijlsma-Frankema et al. (2015). We employed a broad interviewee-directed definition of 'government' in line with our exploratory approach. Notably, in the end, we found that interviewees' conceptions of 'government' were based around the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Executive and the main political parties; thus other seemingly important institutions for trust such as the police and the courts (Uslaner, 2008) were not discussed to any great extent by our interviewees. Moreover, we were open to coding other ideas which linked to trust and/or elite discourse. For example, discussion of collaboration, dialogue and compromise was often strongly associated with, or even defined by interviewees as trust behaviours, whereas competition, dispute and

deadlock were considered examples of distrust; we wanted to allow interviewees to 'speak for themselves' and therefore we recorded these instances.

To assign data extracts to our categories, the coding of the interview data was conducted in the first instance, at the manifest (explicit) level and the results organised thematically, with findings based on the recurrent patterns and categories which surfaced in the discourse (Deacon et al., 2007). Thus, we progressed from deductive and inductive 'first-order codes' to inductive 'second-order themes' (Brown and Coupland, 2015). Themes were then more deeply analysed by attending to the way interviewees expressed their opinions and emotions on the topics and recounted their experiences; we reflected on their choice of terminology, their focus, examples and narratives and how that helped us answer the research question 'in context' (Larkin et al., 2006). Coding was independently verified or negotiated between the two researchers in terms of how statements were interpreted and assigned to categories and we had further confirmation through the assistance of a third experienced coder. While we have a large amount of rich data from the interviews, space restrictions require us to be selective in presenting our findings. In our 'Findings and discussion' section, we report and analyse the themes which recurred most frequently across participants and which give us the most insight into our research question. In reporting quotes from our interviewees we denote individuals as C1, through C17.

Findings and discussion

Assessing trustworthiness

Overall, NPLs defined 'trust' in line with previous trust research, that is, benevolence/concern for interests; integrity; competence/ability. For example, one stated, 'you trust your friends and your family because you think they have your best interests at heart. You trust, say, pilots or surgeons or other experts because they are competent' (C4). However, distrust was the main sentiment expressed in our interviews towards government; for example,

> [distrust] it's seeing something with a particular filter on where it doesn't really matter what they are going to say . . . you are going to view everything through that filter . . . it's not the civil servants I am thinking about there, it is the different [political] parties. (C7)

A number of themes emerged through our analysis of participants' assessments of government (dis)trustworthiness which strongly prioritise the role of political leaders and media coverage in distrust of government. We discuss these below.

Political leaders model distrust: The double integrity problem

A theme which distinguished how 'distrustworthiness' attributions were made was the sentiment that political leaders do not model trust behaviours through their public communication. This largely concerned the fact that government ministers often talked negatively about each other in the media, play a strategic 'blame game' (Nord and Olsson, 2013) and that this decreased interviewees' confidence in their ability to work productively for

Northern Ireland citizens. One leader stated, 'I wouldn't trust people who don't trust each other . . . they don't model the coming together within society . . . Ministers are saying terrible things about each other and threatening to walk out' (C3). This antagonistic behaviour fuelled distrust in government and was considered to have societal ramifications because, 'there has been no leaders emerged to unite us' (C9). Another agreed that 'What they are saying peters down' (C16). In their seminal work, Mayer et al. (1995) explain that 'The relationship between integrity and trust involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable' (p. 719). In the case of NPLs' views of elite discourse, it is mediated displays of inter-group conflict between political elites which demonstrate how their principles and values conflict with each other, together with the contrast between NPLs' own professional values and the partisan values of political elites, that are important in explaining their distrust perceptions towards government; we find here therefore a kind of 'double integrity problem'.

Political leaders' communicative behaviours appear in sharp contrast to the cross-community work that NPLs facilitate which is inclusive of all sides of the community. NPLs see themselves as actively involved in building community trust through practical support (e.g. in housing, education) and through the symbolic, communicative functions of community relationship building via engagement, dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding, as illustrated in the following quote of the mission of one NPL's organisation:

> dialogue and understanding . . . community relations are actually all part of being a witness to whatever you believe in . . . we are interested in people coming from across fracture lines . . . and recognising [our organisation as] a safe and inclusive place. (C12)

Such an approach demonstrates the elements of risk and vulnerability, in engaging with others dissimilar or unknown to us, required for trust building (Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012).

Indeed, several leaders commented that communities had progressed much further than political actors in terms of building peaceful, caring and trusting relationships with each other. Common sentiments were, for example, 'communities have moved well beyond our politicians' (C6) and '. . . we are miles ahead of the politicians . . . progress is happening despite the politicians, rather than because of them' (C3). One interviewee went further to explain that their organisation had actually helped to build up trust in government by linking their members with government services and political initiatives; they stated,

> The people that we would engage with would have a more positive outlook [on government] because we are involving them in the political system . . . So they would have a slightly better outlook on the system, on politics, would trust politics . . . we have been building trust up. (C5)

Benevolence and political culture

A related issue that was important in NPLs' trust assessments was the role of negative and divisive inter-party communication, typified as 'permanent campaigning' (Blumenthal, 1982) in diminishing perceptions of benevolence. This leads to distrust in

both government ministers specifically, and politicians generally, to make decisions in the interests of the whole of Northern Ireland society (i.e. benevolence), rather than on the basis of partisan (sectarian) concerns: '[politicians] bring a party political slant to nearly every decision . . . regardless of what's best for people in Northern Ireland' (C7). Similarly, NPLs commented that a trustworthy government would need to demonstrate 'openness and transparency, evidence-led decision making, which I don't think we have' (C15). Instead, common statements were,

> in that recent election for example, there was so much focus put on fear . . . if you don't vote for 'us' then 'they'll' get in . . . government here I think has a lot of work to do to make people feel that they can trust them to look after their interests rather than just sectarian interests. (C7)

Another NPL stated, 'instead of offering people any sort of vision, they are offering to protect people from what they see as a nightmare . . . It's identifying each other against the other side' (C4). This form of deliberate divisive political communication is typical of Northern Ireland's political culture (Hayward, 2011; Pow and Matthews, 2017) because there is little incentive for elites to attract voters from other communities when support is based on ethnonational group identification and intra-community competition (Horowitz, 2014). While the context – the consociational political system – is a crucial contributing factor for distrust perceptions, it is considered surmountable by NPLs, given political leader will, and thus it is this lack of desire from political leaders that fuels distrust.

Clearly, when Northern Ireland's government institutions are functioning, the communicative relationships between the political parties in Northern Ireland's mandatory coalition strongly affects trust in government as a whole (Bean, 2001). The partisan nature of elite discourse in policy debate and 'policy conflict' appears to reduce the perception of government responsiveness and 'commitment to the public good' (Van Wessel, 2014: 772). Indeed, a perceived lack of benevolence appeared to over-ride any other trust-inducing qualities from government such as competence, as one interviewee demonstrates below:

> I drive to work every morning and the traffic lights are working . . . the roads are good quality . . . we have a functioning administrative society. [But] I do not trust our government . . . to have the needs of everyone at heart. Our politics are very ideological. (C8)

This suggests, as argued elsewhere (e.g. Cho, 2006; Van De Walle and Six, 2014), that trust qualities such as competence might reduce the pervasive nature of distrust, but unlike benevolence, might not actually foster trust. Benevolence, from the perspective of our interviewees, is characterised by inter-communal dialogue and genuine concern and respect for difference; indeed dialogue is considered one of the hallmarks of rebuilding trust between groups (Kent and Taylor, 2002). NPLs often talked in benevolent terms about their own practice: 'I make a difference doing what I am doing . . . And if it is talking to people, maybe in ordinary society you wouldn't be talking to, then yes that's good too' (C16). Indeed, benevolence was even characterised by altruism by this same interviewee: 'I want to see a peaceful society, I suppose what I am actually aiming for is to lose my job' (C16), a sentiment reflected in Toledano's (2016) study of a public relations practitioner working for reconciliation in another divided society.

Media framing: Limited competence, propagating division and distrust

Media were clearly considered to fuel the antagonistic political climate. Most of the examples provided by leaders on their trust assessments were mass-mediated, as found elsewhere in study of citizen perception (Van Wessel, 2014). NPLs discussed the role of traditional media (and to a lesser extent, social media) in 'framing' political issues, that is, how a version of reality is made salient and transferred to an audience through the use of specific discourse and focus (Entman, 1993). Specifically, leaders commented on how the media play a role in propagating division, namely through recycling 'old' sectarian debates, instigated by politicians. One NPL stated,

> there are a lot of us that just want to move on . . . the media help the parties to drag us back . . . when they [political parties] are going down sectarian lines, the media could just say, we are not going to give that any air time . . . but they do . . . they keep the negative 'politiking' going. (C7)

Thus, there was a general consensus that the media had a moral responsibility to at least not incite sectarian division, or even to try to alleviate it, a sentiment found in other post-conflict contexts (Hanitzsch, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2004). But several leaders discussed the media as lacking the required competence to stimulate public debate, for example, one said, 'everything is very shallow here . . . the way people communicate and analyze problems is just very inward looking, the debate is never broadened . . . I think that is the same with politics' (C6). Media, like politicians, are not trusted to deliver the competent information that the public needs for informed public deliberations that may strengthen the democratic process (Ettema, 2007). Yet, media seem influential in terms of contributing to the negative tone of political discourse which influences NPLs' distrust. This may reflect the importance of 'credible communications' for perceptions of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995).

Inadequate consultation: Conflicting expectations

Furthermore, NPLs expressed distrust towards government because of an inadequate consultation process. Consultation was considered to be disingenuous, an exercise in strategically managed public relations, rather than their normative expectation of a participatory process with open-ended outcomes (Motion, 2005). One interviewee explained, 'It's tick box PR rather than consultation. People sell their idea rather than consult on it. Single option consultations where they give you no choice, where they do it too late, predetermined consultations' (C13).

Several NPLs emphasised what they considered to be the strategic timing of government consultations in order that community groups could not respond adequately, which they felt exploited their position as resource-limited organisations and left them 'disempowered' (C2). Another stated,

> They don't have a dialogue, they don't deliberate . . . They don't consider all the arguments, [or] look at the different priorities and values of others who haven't been invited to the consultation . . . given that they could be stakeholders . . . it's just not proper engagement. (C4)

These perspectives support Wong's (2016) argument that citizen trust in government is built through positive experiences of engagement, which involves communication for establishing mutual expectations and preferences, and shows government concern for public interests (p. 4). Our data also confirm the notion that significant power imbalances in a relationship can inhibit trust (Öberg and Svensson, 2010), exemplified by consultation in this case, for example, this NPL stated,

> our difficulty in working with them [government] to date is that the power all lies with them. For example, early on we agreed that we wouldn't write about stuff until the minister signed off, which seemed fair enough . . . we thought well, the minister will probably look at these and sign them off in a number of weeks . . . now we are waiting 6 months. And so we feel almost, betrayed . . . From now on everything is in the open. All correspondence with government is published on our website, because we can't afford to be caught in that trap. (C4)

While NPLs may have more direct engagement and communication with government, rather than solely through mediated communication, this falls short of their normative expectations and therefore does not contribute to trust building. Direct engagement seemed beneficial in building productive relationships (rather than 'trust' per se) only with individual (local) politicians with whom an interviewee had repeated interactions, emphasising the importance of distinguishing between different referents and processes of trust (Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012). For example, one NPL explained, 'if I was looking to get a steer on something or looking to get influence, I would identify particular people in particular parties to say can I talk to you about this' (C10); another stated, 'we've a very very good relationship with the local councillors . . . we had fantastic support . . . like when we had an issue with the funding of our community counselling project, yes they were to the fore on that' (C14).

Conclusion

Our findings provide insights for political public relations scholars who study government trust in divided societies and elsewhere, and for practitioners concerned with the topic. The findings are informed by cross-community NPLs' perspectives at a time when the government institutions were unstable, but functioning. Given what has since transpired (inter-party breakdown leading to the institutions not operating for almost 3 years at the time of writing), the findings must be viewed through this contemporary history lens. Yet, the current state of affairs, in our opinion, makes the findings even more pertinent.

'Soft' trust: Benevolence matters

Clearly, perceptions of value incongruence and negative expectations of behaviour are critical to explaining NPL distrust in our case study, as elsewhere (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015). However, we found that benevolence (genuine care and concern for others) is a central focus of trust or distrust perceptions in this context. Similar results have been found in other post-conflict countries (Wong, 2016), or non-Western contexts (Kong, 2014). Given the affective nature of benevolence, this supports the emotional nature of trust (Theiss-Morse and Barton, 2017), and of political public relations (Nord and

Olsson, 2013) which tends to, so far, be overlooked in the study of government trust and political public relations research. A perceived genuine concern for the public good, rather than for one's voters, has similarly been found to be important in assessments of government responsiveness and representation elsewhere, for example, in the Netherlands (Van Wessel, 2014), suggesting that exploring benevolence in elite discourse is a legitimate line of inquiry for other stable contexts. Thus our findings strengthen the notion that different qualities of trust, for example, benevolence over competence, may be more important depending on the context and audience (Cho, 2006).

More attention should therefore be paid, by both public relations scholars and those communicating on behalf of governments, to how communicating and enacting the 'soft' qualities of trust might improve trust in government among NPLs and citizens generally. In this way, our findings support calls within the public relations literature for better appreciation of 'Public Interest Relations' (Brunner and Smallwood, 2019), a public relations approach which prioritises the public interest through creating spaces for community dialogue and respectful debate to build 'goodwill' trust. At the same time, our findings show that we must consider the impact of the institutional system and political culture (Rice and Somerville, 2017) when investigating trust in government – in providing the conditions for political leaders to communicate benevolently, which appear to be restrictive (and presently non-existent) in the Northern Ireland context. Taken together, our evidence supports the notion that by analysing 'the language of trust', one can explore, 'the core values of an individual, a group or a society at a given time and place' (Wubs-Mrozewicz, 2019: 1).

(Dis)trust transference: Prioritising public relations

Second, our study has implications for how trust or distrust is transferred through elite discourse. The cross-community NPLs talked extensively about working and communicating both with government and other community groups and actors to build trust 'across the divide' despite the antagonistic rhetoric they receive from political and media elites, even despite their own distrust in government. In this way, NPLs engage in a form of activist public relations that prioritises dialogue and aligns with their personal, professional and organisational values of reconciliation (Toledano, 2016). This provides encouraging evidence that trust can be built even within a climate of distrust and that strategic communication is a crucial vehicle of doing so. NPLs believe societal trust is being built from the bottom up, through the benevolent communication and actions of their community groups. Conceivably, better appreciation from political elites of, and support for, the role of cross-community communication networks in building societal trust could improve not only 'generalized trust' (Uslaner, 2002) and encourage a peaceful society, but may also improve citizen trust in government (Wong, 2016); but this 'trickle up' notion (Fulmer and Ostroff, 2017) requires dedicated and more wide-ranging research.

Limitations and further research

The role of elite discourse in fostering or hindering trust in government is complex and will require different public relations approaches. We acknowledge that we have interviewed strongly engaged leaders within one (relatively unique) political context who hold positions of varying degrees of community influence at only one point in time. Our

findings, therefore, reflect these limitations. These individuals have a cross-community ethos which surely influences how they perceive elite discourse. It is recognised that our non-partisan sample might be particularly averse to political confrontation and to value benevolence-based compromise, this might be different for partisans who identify strongly with particular political parties (e.g. see McLaughlin et al., 2017). Indeed, NPL expectations of government may be higher or lower than what we would find among the 'average citizen' or among other types of leaders (Bish and Becker, 2016). In addition, since our study was designed to be exploratory in nature, we cannot infer causation in any definitive terms through our relatively modest qualitative sample and method. Further research might explore the longevity of our findings alongside under what particular conditions (e.g. media form, political issue type, audience demographic) trust is most affected by elite discourse in this context, as well as the generalisability of our findings.

Nonetheless, our empirical evidence strongly suggests that the divisive discourse of political leaders plays a crucial agenda-setting role in NPLs' perceptions of distrust in the Northern Ireland government, when the institutions are functioning. When divisive words and deeds are amplified by media, then conflict, rather than peace, becomes the dominant frame through which NPLs view their government. These conclusions, albeit somewhat disheartening, point to ways forward. Politicians need to understand how their communicative behaviours which lack benevolence are hindering government trust among even engaged citizens. Finally, community organisations can, and arguably do, make a positive contribution to building trust in a post-conflict society which can be further explored and capitalised upon for peace development. In an era of distrust of government and media elites and increasingly divisive politics across the globe (Davis, 2019), building trustful community-led public relations may be more important than ever.

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Notes

1. For a fuller explanation, see Roche and Barton (2013).
2. Organisations were deemed relevant due to the team's local knowledge, as well as reference to key databases, for example, NICVA (2016) *State of the Sector*.
3. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38612860
4. The Northern Ireland Executive was restored in January 2020.

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