Adolescents’ understanding of the potential motivations of those who engage in paramilitary behaviour was examined in young people’s essay writings. Seventy-four Protestant and Catholic young people residing in the border regions of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic wrote an essay entitled ‘Why do you think young people join paramilitary/terrorist groups?’ The essays were subject to a grounded analysis, which generated four categories of explanation/motivations for paramilitary involvement, namely group identity explanations, family and socialisation explanations, developmental explanations and pathological explanations.

The most prevalent explanation offered by young people for becoming involved in paramilitaries was a group-level explanation and involved references to individuals’ group affiliations and/or identifications. Not surprisingly, the groups most often referred to were the prevalent national and religious groups associated with the conflict [i.e., Irish/British/Catholic/Protestant]. The second most prevalent category of explanations offered by young people for involvement in paramilitary activity was one referring more specifically to issues which are salient for adolescents. These included issues related to status concerns and power, curiosity or boredom and ‘being drawn in’ in a more passive way. Not surprisingly young people highlighted families’ role and suggested a range of familial processes that could contribute to paramilitary involvement. Many respondents believed that parents and the wider family directly passed political values on to their children and that, if the family had a history of paramilitary involvement this could then directly lead the new generation to get involvement. The final category of explanations offered by our young respondents, though never mentioned in isolation, construed those involved in such activities as either unhinged, unhappy or consumed by hatred.

Though not asked to express the rights and wrongs of such activities a substantial proportion of respondents did, and females were more likely than males to openly condone or condemn such activity. In conclusion, though the pathologisation of terrorist activity has hampered deeper understanding of the motivations of those who seek to effect change using violence. This study has offered interesting insights into both young people’s perceptions and appraisal of paramilitary groups as well as the social and psychological motivations that may underlie involvement with these groups. The qualitative approach adopted surmounted the practical, ethical and methodological difficulties associated with researching this sensitive topic with young people. The approach has successfully highlighted the complexity of young people’s views with regard to these organizations and demonstrates the various pressures young people may be under to participate in such groups. Communal responsibilities, religious and political identification and patriotism as well as social status, reputation and peer pressure represent a powerful range of behavioural influences. Without a proactive stance on peace, and the removal of the causes of and opportunities for violence, it is likely to be difficult to reduce the allure of such groups.