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‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’: Young People, Place and Identity in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

‘Place’ and ‘space’ are key elements within people’s lives, central to a sense of belonging and personal/community identity. While noting the potentially limiting aspect of communities, Henderson states that they constitute “an important source of social recognition for individuals, providing a tangible sense of connection and identity: knowing who you are and where you belong”¹. This is a crucial issue in Northern Ireland, given its historical divisions, particular circumstances and politicisation of space.

Physical separation of the two main ethno-religious groups remains a lasting feature of Northern Irish society. Despite efforts to ‘re-image’ communities, public space is often symbolically labelled and politicised - demarcated by flags, murals and symbols in a display of specific cultural identity, territory and ‘ownership’. Education and housing are segregated. Leisure facilities and other services within predominantly Catholic or Protestant neighbourhoods are not accessed by children and young people living outside the community². For many people, therefore, cross-community contact remains limited.

Illustrating the effects of spatial separatism and identity linked to space, almost half of those interviewed in research that explored the impact of fear in Belfast interface communities stated they would not travel through an area housing the ‘other community’ during the day, rising to 88 per cent at night³. Research with young people living in some of the most segregated communities in Northern Ireland found that three quarters expressed fear of the ‘other community’ or of entering areas associated with the ‘other’

tradition⁴. Actual and feared intimidation, abuse, verbal and physical violence reinforce the legacy of ‘no-go areas’ and remain key factors in sustaining exclusivity as well as maintaining geographical boundaries.

Attempts to free or differentiate self identity from ascribed community identity invariably results in social exclusion. Communities can be strong and accepting of those who ‘belong’ or ‘fit in’, but hostile to ‘difference’. While shared perceptions of inequality are often a uniting force in areas of deprivation - resulting in mutual aid and solidarity⁵ - for some individuals strong communities can be oppressive and limiting⁶. In creating “strong in-group loyalty” they may also create “strong out-group antagonism”⁷. Within Northern Ireland the Conflict played a part in creating strong communities and this, in turn, now plays its part in maintaining separatism and perpetuates sectarian attitudes and activities⁸.

Based on primary research, this article explores the relationship between place and identity, considering the impacts on children and young people of living in communities with strong political identities and cultures. In particular, it notes how identity is linked to place on three levels – local, community and ‘national’ – each of which serves to create feelings of inclusion or exclusion, thus reinforcing notions of ‘insiders’ and outsiders’. It argues that these divisions are rooted in historical constructions of space, an understanding of which is passed down, both subtly and overtly, to children and young people.

Background to the Research

Given shared concerns about the dual impact of poverty and the legacy of the Conflict on children and young people, and the dearth of information regarding the impact of transition from conflict in the most affected communities, the Prince’s Trust (NI), Queen’s University and Save the Children (NI) established a partnership research project. Over an eighteen month period (2008-2009), primary research was carried out in six communities across Northern Ireland - one in each of the six counties. These included communities identifying as Catholic/ Nationalist/ Republican and those identifying as Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist, in both urban and rural locations. One ‘mixed’, albeit highly segregated, community was also included in the sample. Each community was materially disadvantaged and had been significantly affected by the Conflict.

Through individual interviews and focus group discussions, 65 adult community representatives⁹ and 196 children and young people aged 8-25 years contributed to the research. Specific issues covered in the research included: images of children and young people; personal life and relationships; education and employment; community and policing; place and identity; segregation and sectarianism; violence in the context of conflict and marginalisation; services and support; the rights deficit¹⁰. What follows focuses on the data relating to place, space, identity, violence and sectarianism.

Local Identity

As a result of their experiences, some of the communities had become isolated and introspective. Because of high levels of violence during the Conflict public services had been withdrawn or reduced, local shops and amenities destroyed and not replaced. While there had been limited reinvestment, most communities had not fully recovered. They were often policed from within and, for safety, a culture of secrecy had emerged. The deficit in State policing meant that alleged offending and offensive behaviour was locally regulated and punished. Within these communities, young people learned to fear punishment, distrust the police and demonstrate pride in their cultural identity. Given the isolation of communities, their strong cultural traditions and, in some, a powerful ethos of self-help, the main focal point of social activities was local - inextricably and intricately linking community and identity.

Divisions Within Communities

The politicisation of space and physical divisions *between* places as a consequence of residential segregation are persistent themes in political debate and popular discourse. Yet minimal consideration has been given to local divisions *within* single-identity communities and their impact on everyday life and identity. There has been little consideration given to the notion of territoriality within communities and nuanced divisions within cultural groups¹¹. In the research, however, what children and young people considered to be 'their' community was defined by where they spent their free time and accessed facilities. Within focus group discussions they were often explicit in talking about "my street" or "my part of the estate". Some defined their community as one side of an estate, others as a few streets or the street in which they lived. Knowledge of the local area, and perceptions about places or spaces within the area, impacted on their sense of self, their feelings of safety and their movements.

Internal divisions were evident, if not visible, in each of the communities. Particular neighbourhoods or clusters of streets had developed distinct identities and reputations, with evident consequences for individual and collective identity. The claiming of different and separate identities in specific neighbourhoods also affected the positioning and use of local services. In some communities, play parks and local shops were only used by those from one area within an estate or from one part of a neighbourhood. Failure to situate facilities on “neutral ground” led to their under-use due to spatial divisions. Internal divisions and the location of facilities also had consequences for social contact within communities:

“The areas are all separate and the people living there have graded themselves in social rank. The road acts like a river, like a natural divide. People won’t mix.”

Children and young people commented on, but were unable to explain, these divisions within their communities. Community representatives in two areas contextualised local divisions, explaining how some houses previously had been provided for families exiled from their homes elsewhere. The assumption was that these families were politically affiliated. As they were not local they were considered “outsiders”. Resentment was expressed about “blow-ins” who came to the area, occupied housing built for local people and “acted as if they owned the place”. Despite the passage of time, hostile perceptions of difference between ‘locals’ and ‘others’ remained.

In a third area, community representatives suggested there were “different moralities” and cultures in different parts of their estate. They referred to a perceived Republican ethos due to the organisation of, and attendance at, particular programmes or events in one part of the estate. Some service providers were acutely aware that perceptions of their provision were based on local history and politics. While these perceptions had been challenged, progress towards effective change had been gradual. Illustrating the enduring nature of, and resistance to, labels and identities linked to local spaces, some young people stated that they would not attend specific youth facilities because of their association with “the boys, the RA [IRA]”.

Representatives in two rural communities also noted divisions between adjacent, same-identity communities. They interpreted this as ‘parochialism’, with each community having strong local bonds. Often defined as “football territories”, divisions were created through allegiances to particular Gaelic football clubs. Community representatives considered this impacted on

identity, community relations and the use of limited facilities in sparsely populated places:

“Community relations is about more than Catholic or Protestant ... There are territorial issues in [the area]. People won't go to other areas. Young people are separated after school. This is about identity issues not based on religion ... Young people from small rural areas will often never meet because of football rivalries.”

Reputation and Personal Identity

While divisions often originated in housing policies and population movement at the height of the Conflict, in children's and young people's accounts they connected to 'reputation'. These included their perceptions about the 'good' and 'bad' side of the estate, the 'rough' and the 'respectable', the 'quiet' and the 'trouble orientated', the 'poor' and the 'more affluent':

“I'm not trying to say that [the other part of the area] is bad or anything'. But [where I live] would be tidier than bits of [the other part] and, like, there's not as many bad people in [my part] than what there is in [the other part].” (Co. Antrim, aged 10-13)

In focus groups those young people who lived in neighbourhoods or streets associated with negative labelling found it difficult to challenge established reputations or associations.

Internal community divisions impacted on children and young people in various ways. Those within the same locality often had very different experiences - where they lived and played in the neighbourhood affected what they witnessed and experienced at a personal level. Many commented that their free time and play was restricted to the neighbourhood in which they lived, as this was where they felt safe or where they 'belonged'. As a consequence, particular groups of young people would 'hang out' in the street, shops or parks closest to their homes or attend provision in 'their' part/side of the estate. The physical location of facilities connected them with a particular 'identity', excluding those from other parts of the same community. Subtle and local nuances consolidated a form of territorialism, with facilities located in 'their end of the estate' and run by people who lived there perceived as 'safe'. Others, however, knew that they "wouldn't fit in" and would be made to "feel like a wierdo":

“... it’s like all the one gang that goes to it, which means there’s other gangs in [the area] won’t go to it ... if ye go into the community centres you would never see one of the people from [one centre] down at [the other centre].” (Co. Derry, aged 22)

Children and young people’s negotiation of local space was not only about remaining safe, or ‘claiming’ a space as their own and ‘defending’ it against others. It was also about fitting in, belonging and affirming their sense of personal identity. This constituted identity formation at an immediate, local level. Their understanding of place, invisible divisions and the meanings attached to specific spaces, enabled them to regulate their movements and negotiate local space safely. Yet, the ‘choices’ they made about using existing facilities were not necessarily informed. They learned the ‘rules’ of their area quickly - who ‘belonged’ where and who would be perceived as an ‘outsider’ in specific places. Thus, they inherited and normalised long-standing traditions related to the historical and political meaning of local space which placed limitations on their movements and choices within, as well as outside, their communities.

Community Identity

Despite recognising the complex problems associated with the areas in which they lived, overall the research demonstrated children and young people’s attachment to their communities. Given that they remained mainly within them, their communities were places of relative safety - where they shared feelings of belonging, culture, identity and tradition. Yet, some were acutely aware of the divided nature of their lives - their housing, education, leisure and sporting activities, social networks - and how messages concerning the ‘other community’ were transmitted or reinforced through their families and in their communities. Invariably this translated as fear of, and hostility towards, the ‘other community’ - manifested in sectarian attitudes. For many, their understanding of the ‘other’ culture was reduced to notions of inherent differences between Catholics and Protestants. While divisions *within* their communities were often ‘invisible’, divisions *between* their own and the ‘other community’ were much more obvious and more fully explained.

Learning and Negotiating Cultural Identity

Given the unambiguous symbols of cultural difference in Northern Ireland, most of those interviewed had a clear understanding of their cultural identity in a divided society. Children learn from an early age to identify and

understand symbolic markers and spatial divisions, and to negotiate the immediate context of their lives. One group, in a mixed but highly segregated community, demonstrated their understanding of the meaning of space:

“Ye can tell from the old flags hangin’ on the posts - wherever that’s outside, that’s that territory.” (Co. Tyrone, aged 14-25)

As Hall et al. note, “knowing where others are from makes it possible to *place* them”¹². Being ‘placed’ as Loyalist or Republican created risk of attack outside community boundaries. Young people were clear that there were places they would not visit, defining these as “spaces of risk and threat”¹³. Fear of being identified as ‘the other’ restricted young people’s freedom of movement, safe leisure or socialising spaces, choices and opportunities.

Those living in a small but strong Loyalist community described feeling imprisoned. They identified their community as the *only* safe space. While it had no youth or recreation facilities, they felt unable to access those nearby because they feared for their safety:

“... you wouldn’t be long in gettin’ an auld crutch in the face if you used it ... if you walk up yourself then you wouldn’t be seen comin’ back out.” (Co. Fermanagh, aged 13-16)

Children and young people were susceptible to attack because in relatively small towns the place where they lived identified their cultural tradition. Visual cues also connected to cultural identity - school uniform, football shirts, caps, scarves, jewellery, chosen sports. This meant that even in more ‘neutral spaces’, such as town centres, they were under threat of sectarian abuse or attack. They had an identity conferred on them, whether or not they actually adhered to that identity.

Some children and young people managed or disguised their identities when outside their communities, especially by altering their dress. In contrast, others (particularly young men), openly expressed and asserted their identity¹⁴. They protected themselves by staying in groups, being vigilant and/or prepared for attack. This included adopting a ‘hard man’ persona, prepared to retaliate at any time. In some cases, perceptions about the cultural identity of a community, and the young people living within it, reinforced young people’s attachment to that place, strengthened their cultural identity and affirmed their group solidarity.

Asserting and Maintaining Cultural Identity in Uncertain Times

Demonstrating the connection between cultural identity and place, those living in the Loyalist community discussed previously were emphatic that they would not accept people from other cultures living in their community. Acceptance was granted to “people who move in, good people who think like you, are loyal like you”. Those rejected and driven out by force were “not part of your culture” (Co. Fermanagh, aged 16-21). For some young people in Nationalist communities, those of “the other religion” were not welcome:

YP1: “I know boys that know Protestants loads, but if they were seen near the Protestant side they’d get hit.”

R: “And what about the other way round?”

YP2: “Aye, if ye seen one [a Protestant] walkin’ about here you’d take a swipe at him.” (Co. Derry, aged 16-17)

Limited exposure to those outside their community, and strong beliefs within communities, consolidated negative attitudes about ‘the other’. Experiences of cross-community and community relations work were sometimes negative and generally felt to have had little lasting impact¹⁵. While they expressed loyalty to ‘their own’, many children and young people articulated mistrust and hostility towards ‘the other’. ‘Outsider’ status was conferred on those of the ‘other religion’. Defending space ensured that their cultural identity remained ‘clean’ and ‘uncontaminated’.

There was a strong sense that, in the recent period of ‘transition’, many communities had been, and remained, unprepared and under-resourced for change, particularly in dealing with the legacy of the Conflict. Community representatives regularly commented on the impact on young men - traditionally brought up to fight for and defend their cultural identity. Young men now are told that the ‘war’ has ended, and agreement has been reached. Consequently, previous expectations, particularly the use of violence, have been reversed. Yet, constant reminders of the past feed sectarianism – reminiscences and nostalgia, images in the form of murals and remembrance events, messages from some former combatants and politicians - “glorify the war” and “romanticise the idea of struggle”.

Rioting and sectarian clashes continued to assert cultural identity while symbolising resistance towards perceived inequalities. Sectarian violence was predicated on a perceived need to “stick up for themselves” and defend their culture – as it had been for their parents and older adults within their communities. Beliefs about persistent inequalities informed sectarian and,

occasionally, violent responses from some young people regarding the police, particularly in Catholic/Nationalist areas. Simultaneously, some young people in Protestant/Loyalist communities felt that the 'new' political situation in Northern Ireland had benefited Catholics to the detriment of Protestants.

While sectarian attitudes and violence were closely linked to defence of cultural identity, there was minimal, informed understanding about 'the other culture'. All Protestants were portrayed as identifying with Britain/ Unionism/ Loyalism. All Catholics were portrayed as identifying with Ireland/ Nationalism/ Republicanism. Retention of cultural identity was about defeating 'the other':

"We're not having a united Ireland. I'd be the first away. But that's the way it's goin' and we have to fight for our culture. If the Catholics took over what would you have? Would you want to live in Ireland? We'd lose everything. Everything we've fought for." (Co. Fermanagh, aged 16-21)

YM1: "We're fightin' for our identity. It's like they want Londonderry and we want Derry."

YM2: "It's Derry not Londonderry. London's got its own place and Derry's got its own place ... There's no London in Derry."

YM3: "If there's any people in Derry want to support the Queen an' all, they can fuck off back to England." (Co. Derry, aged 15-19)

Movements towards equality, power-sharing and the de-politicisation of shared space through removal of sectarian symbols were identified as 'concessions' to one community and 'punishments' to the other. Young Protestants considered parades, flags and bonfires to be significant expressions of their culture. Their curtailment was viewed as a concerted attempt to weaken this. Some believed that, through political concessions, their culture was being "stripped away" while 'Irish culture' was flourishing. This led to suspicion and fear, compounding a sense of insecurity alongside increased defence of territory and resentment towards 'the other side'.

For working class young men who shared an unambiguous, strong cultural and community identity, there was a collective sense of loss – their identity and place within their communities were no longer clear. Community representatives suggested that some responded typically to this dramatic change through violence to assert their masculinity and sectarianism to defend a culture they felt was under threat. Those who had been involved in sectarian rioting or violence re-told events with bravado, and perhaps some

exaggeration - reflecting the connections between the status associated with a violent, sectarian identity and a masculine identity¹⁶. The contradiction, however, was the vulnerability demonstrated when the same young people talked about fear of leaving their community and anticipated attacks from the 'other community'.

'National' Identity

In discussions about the negative aspects of community life, and perceptions of 'insiders' or 'outsiders', a common 'other' emerged. Many children and young people were united in their 'fear' and hostility towards 'new cultures' arriving in Northern Ireland. Since the ceasefires, and increased movement of labour throughout Europe, Northern Ireland has experienced an increase in 'foreign national' workers. Because of relatively low wages, they live in some of the most economically deprived (often the most divided) communities. Many children and young people interviewed presented an image of 'alien' cultures 'invading' or 'taking over' their communities. Foreign nationals were portrayed as dangerous, criminal and threatening to community safety. Myths and stereotypes about heavy drinking and violence were recounted as fact, and exceptional incidents were used to define an entire ethnic group:

"I want all the foreign people to get out because they kill people – one time in [this community] they killed someone. They broke into their car and they buried the body under the back seat." (Co. Antrim, aged 9-11)

Such stories spread quickly throughout communities, establishing a caricature of the unknown, unwelcome and dangerous 'other'. Many blamed increases in crime, particularly violent crime and drug dealing, on "outsiders movin' in".

Some young people considered that the availability of foreign nationals encouraged employers to pay below the minimum wage. They claimed that their concerns were about economic issues – access to local jobs and housing or decent wages – rather than expressions of racism:

YM1: "Oh no, we're not racist. It's just they're comin' over here and stealin' the jobs and workin' for less. So all the young people now lookin' for jobs aren't goin' to get one."

YM2: "It's not racist, it's about money. They'll work for £2.00 an hour and we'll work for £4.50." (Co. Derry, aged 15-19)

These young people were already disadvantaged in the labour market due to poor qualifications, skills and opportunities. Their futures were uncertain and some considered that they would be forced to leave their communities due to inadequate social housing. They believed that foreign national 'outsiders', with no attachment to the community or shared history and culture, received preferential treatment.

Within the Catholic communities, some children and young people stated that the police excused foreign nationals' criminal or anti-social behaviour. In the Protestant communities, it was considered unfair that foreign nationals could openly express their culture when they were experiencing restrictions. This further reinforced their belief that their culture was being eroded as a consequence of political change. They were also concerned about Polish and Lithuanian immigrants - not only perceived as limiting locally available job opportunities but, as Catholics, reinforcing the privileges gained by 'one side'. A community representative commented:

"Employment is 50-50 now between Catholics and Protestants but with many Polish people being Catholic it appears more than 50% now. It seems unequal, the balance is going."

This comment demonstrates how the views of children and young people are influenced by adults within their communities. 'Tipping the balance' of long-standing structural and cultural divisions exacerbated their fears about the potential dilution of cultural identity within communities. Many children and young people interviewed stated that they did not want foreign nationals living in their communities and that they would be driven out by force. Others agreed that:

"We should build a Lithuanian town so they stop comin' here, a separate town" (Co. Armagh, aged 12-21).

This perception that the 'natural order' of divided space should be extended to 'new groups' illustrates the deep roots of exclusive identity regarding space, and how segregation has been accepted as a response to dealing with 'difference' or fears about 'the other'. Thus, territoriality and the perceived 'ownership' of space extend beyond the religious divide. Due to the historical meaning attached to space, and current fears about loss or dilution of identity and culture, a shared, new 'threat', 'outsider' and 'other' has been identified.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that constructions of 'insider' and 'outsider' status are conferred at three levels in Northern Ireland – local, community and 'national'. These are linked intrinsically to place identity. Their intersections are demonstrated in the divisions within, as well as between, communities. While the former are not sectarian, they are rooted in the conflict-related history of internal feuds and the politicisation of space within Northern Ireland. During the current period of transition and uncertainty, institutionalised identities have been destabilised - compounding a sense of insecurity, increasing defence of territory and cultural identity, and reinforcing resentment towards both 'the other side' and 'new cultures'. Negative responses to 'incomers' emphasise and reproduce structural inequalities in a society already divided historically, politically and culturally by socio-economic class and sectarianism.

Children and young people are socialised into these prevailing local, community and 'national' divisions, acquiring their identities through everyday experiences of living in and negotiating a divided society. Gendered identities are also closely linked to cultural identities. The relationship between male identity and violence has been, and remains, significant in Northern Ireland. Violence has been used to maintain difference and assert both masculine and national identity. At a time of political transition and economic change, when the identity and position of working class young men is uncertain, violence as part of personal, cultural and political identity remains a complex and challenging issue. Equally important in developing an analysis of gendered relations and identities, although often ignored and under-researched, are the experiences of young women – how they negotiate personal and cultural identity, sense of place and use of space both within and between communities.

Notes

- 1 Henderson, 2007, p.129.
- 2 Hansson, 2005, p.28; Byrne et al., 2005; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006.
- 3 Shirlow, 2003, p.86.
- 4 Roche, 2008.
- 5 Cattell, 2001.
- 6 Hall et al., 1999, p.510.
- 7 Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p.2107.
- 8 See Boal, 2002, p.693.
- 9 Adult community representatives requested not to be identified by profession or location due to concerns that they would be easily identifiable locally. Their work in the communities included: generic and specialist youth and community work; health; child care and support; formal and informal education; youth training; community restorative justice; community development; criminal justice; community or residents' forums.
- 10 See McAlister et al., 2009.
- 11 See Kintrea et al., 2008.
- 12 Hall et al., 1999, p.509 – their emphasis.
- 13 Leonard, 2007, p.76
- 14 See also McGrellis, 2004.
- 15 See McAlister et al., 2009, pp.99-103 for a full discussion of experiences of cross-community programmes and community relations work.
- 16 See also Connolly and Neill, 2001; Harland et al., 2005.

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