



## Division on Ice

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**Division on Ice:  
Shared Space and Civility in Belfast**

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**Abstract:**

In Northern Ireland the Good Friday Agreement brought with it top-down political and social approaches to construct and increase intergroup contact and shared spaces in an effort to reconcile divided Nationalist and Unionist communities. In the period following the peace agreement, the Belfast Giants ice hockey team was established, and has become one of the most attended spectator activities in Belfast, trending away from the tribalism, single-space, single-class, and single-gender dynamics of modern sport in Northern Ireland. This article utilises the setting of the Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) Arena, home of the Giants, to demonstrate normalisation of interactions occurring between supporters who are willing to purchase a ticket beside someone from which they are politically opposed. This sport and its supporters choose to enjoy the experience of the hockey game, rather than be caught in the politicized attachment of meaning expected of shared space, offering a challenge to the reconciliation-centric assumptions in post-peace agreement Belfast.

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Eric is completing a PhD at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at University of Manchester (UK). His current research, with a focus on Belfast, explores spaces of contact and the construction of communities inclusive of the 'other'. The product of an interdisciplinary social science education, his research is motivated by a particular interest in unorthodox and unexpected spaces where peace emerges against a backdrop of conflict. Eric holds an MA in International Peace Studies from the Kroc Institute at University of Notre Dame (USA).

**Keywords:**

Belfast, intergroup contact, shared space, reconciliation, civility

## Introduction

*He told me that the first question is always to find out which side you are on. It can be as simple as asking where you are from in Belfast. When he goes to football matches at Linfield, where he has a season ticket, he knows who he is with. But when it comes to hockey, he has not got a clue who is what ... He figured that is what being a hockey fan does to you, as you become a part of its community, it steals the first question and gives everyone something else to talk about.*

Gate 9 Row Q Seat 73  
16 October 2015

Northern Ireland has a long history of division between the Republican communities, who desire a united island of Ireland, and Unionist communities, who maintain loyalty to Great Britain. Decades of violence and partition in the latter half of the 20th century, known as the Troubles, led to the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998. With the signing of this accord came a great deal of funding, attention, programming, and research with an interest in the 'post-conflict' reconstruction of Northern Ireland. The bulk of financial support for these initiatives came from the EU PEACE programme, with over EUR 1.3 billion spent to date (European Parliament 2016). This funding has been spread across a range of institutions, organisations, and projects, to pursue the EU programme's two main priorities: 'reconcile communities and contribute to peace' (European Parliament 2016). With weighty top-down goals of peace and reconciliation, much funding in post-peace agreement Northern Ireland has been dispersed to initiatives in the arts, sport, education, youth groups, and community organisations that promote contact between the ethno-nationalist groups.

However, against this social and political backdrop perpetuation and maintenance of division remain normalised. It is within the lived divisions that remain a part of everyday Belfast that this article finds a case study to explore a unique and intentional civility that has emerged in an unexpected setting. The Belfast Giants ice hockey team represents an unorthodox phenomenon in post-Troubles Belfast. **<PULLOUT> Ice hockey, a sport with no significant history in the region, allows the organisation to operate with a freedom distinct from other similar spectator sports, such as football, rugby, or Gaelic athletics, which are encumbered by historical positionality. <PULLOUT>** Through this detachment from political, social, and sectarian baggage that is attached to much of Belfast's everyday life a unique setting emerges for research focused on alternative space for interactions with the 'other'.

With no shortage of policy documents, government initiatives, and academic publications that connect shared space to wider regional initiatives of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and bordering counties, this article offers a reminder that there remains social and political value in a willingness to take part in a setting that involves sitting side-by-side a person one might not choose to live beside. This article, constructed out of my interviews and ethnographic research throughout the 2015-2016 ice hockey season, explores the role of the Giants as a shared interest in Belfast through a framework of literature founded in intergroup contact and shared space. This article critically engages the wider politicised goal of reconciliation associated with shared settings in Belfast, as well as the social constructions of division that remain in Northern Ireland. What emerges from this case study is that consistent and civil interaction across historical divisions can play an important role in challenging decades of division, even when contained to a specific time and place. This article thus contributes to a growing need for academic study on the complexities of human relationships

following protracted conflict, with an appreciation of the spaces where interaction occurs across historic divisions.

### **Framing the Approach**

The policies and community work following Northern Ireland's peace agreement have come under the umbrella of a community relations-centred agenda, which has 'aimed to tackle the problems of sectarianism and division through the promotion of greater inter-ethnic contact' (Hughes et al. 2001, 968). The goal of reconciliation in Northern Ireland has become institutionalised through the EU PEACE programme and the Shared Future policy documents (CRU 2005), both of which aim toward achieving a shared society constructed on reconciliation and trust. Reconciliation in Northern Ireland is a relatively ambiguous term, yet one that carries a heavy weight of expectation. McEvoy, McEvoy, and McConnachie (2006) express serious concern with the wide utility of the term, as it has come to represent a perceived political goal, and has shown little functionality in cross-community social processes where there has yet to emerge an imagined shared common ground to work towards. This concern has not stopped reconciliation from being central to much of the liberal peace agenda in Northern Ireland, where intergroup contact facilitates intertwined relationships that lend themselves to 'conceptual outputs of the programme such as "reconciliation"' (Graham 2012, 50). Academic study of peace and conflict has been critical of such liberal peace agendas – in particular the disconnect between top-down interventions and locally-led approaches to confronting conflict and division (see Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond & Franks 2009). **<PULLOUT> Within Northern Ireland the concepts of intergroup contact and shared space have become central to the post-peace agreement agenda. <PULLOUT>**

Miles Hewstone and his colleagues (2006) highlight the vast programming that promotes intergroup contact between Unionist and Nationalist communities, targeting intolerance and sectarianism. Intergroup contact programming is founded on principles of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which posits that positive interactions improve intergroup relations by reducing hostility and prejudice (Dovidio et al. 2003). This popular theory has not been without critique, with Dixon and Durrheim (2003) offering warning that 'contact researchers have underestimated the resilience of segregation' (2). Within the context of Northern Ireland, initiatives of intergroup contact have largely aimed at those who live in single-space communities. Positive contact is driven by a desired outcome of alleviating anxiety that is borne out of living in segregation, and experienced during cross-community interactions. Pettigrew (1998) notes that this anxiety impedes the quality of positive intergroup contact. It is against the backdrop of Belfast, where intolerance and anxiety continue to be fostered 19 years post-peace agreement, therefore, this cross-community support for a hockey team holds significance.

In correlation with the intergroup contact approach occurring in post-peace agreement Belfast is the planning and growth of shared spaces that are constructed with the aim of encouraging engagement, altering patterns of interaction, and transforming social processes to include the other (Komarova 2008). The city has long been known for the many peace walls and their corresponding interface areas, which maintain physical barriers of separation between communities along ethno-national lines. Markings such as flags, murals, and curb paintings offer visible evidence as to which community occupies the majority of any given neighbourhood. Recent statistics show that integration and shared space remain a challenge – the 2016 elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly exemplify that parties continue to be

elected along community lines (Russell 2016), and the education system displays a further example of segregation, with 93% of children attending schools based on their ethno-religious background (Hughes & Loader 2015). Against this backdrop, a number of spaces and activities have emerged where division is being confronted, disregarded, or actively avoided; thus, the city offers a clear case study in how location affects identity and social interaction.

The tensions between history and the present day are displayed when Nagle (2013) points out that Belfast has been a site where ‘civic and social life tends to occur within, rather than across ethnic cleavages’ (78), and Murtagh (2011) recognises post-peace agreement Belfast as a place where ‘simultaneous processes of segregation and mixing’ (213) are occurring. Such development towards sharing space in the city’s consciousness and planning has resulted in an academic approach that is focusing on the ‘emerging narrative of Belfast as a “shared city”’ (Komarova & O’Dowd 2016, 265). This article contributes to this literature of the shared Belfast, as I draw attention to the SSE Arena, home of the Belfast Giants.

### **This is Belfast. We are Giants.**

#### *Methodology*

This qualitative study, which took place through the winter of 2015-2016, utilises an ethnographically-inspired approach (Millar 2017) in which the primary interviews were conducted sitting side-by-side with fans within the SSE Arena during hockey games. As a method of random sampling, I purchased arbitrarily selected hockey tickets in different seats each game around the arena, and conducted verbally informed and consented interviews with the person to my left or right. **<PULLOUT> The format of sitting side-by-side with a research participant while sharing an experience presented the potential to make a connection that was far from scripted. <PULLOUT>** Aided by informality, there was great opportunity for opening the door to discussion around what the space represented, taking a different tone than if completed in a more traditional setting. Growing up in Canada, hockey is a sport I know well; this presented a natural positionality, which enabled access without negative assumptions connected to my outsider status in Belfast, as well as offered me a neutrality within the divisions of Northern Ireland. Although the Northern Irish context is commonly classified as an over-researched community (Whyte 1990), the SSE Arena provided a place where original voices and narratives could be heard; it is a shared space that sits outside of the reconciliatory agenda attached to many shared spaces in Belfast, whilst welcoming supporters from across a divided history.

These interviews within the SSE Arena were completed throughout the season’s 32 home games, and I accompanied the travelling support groups to three cities within England to deepen my ‘observant-participation’ (Vargas 2006) within the supporter community. The method of sampling also meant that the ethno-national community of the participants was not predetermined, and although I did not ask participants to directly identify, each one chose to do so during the interview. As a result, my interviews revealed hockey games as a cross-community activity – with a marginally greater number of representatives identifying as Unionist. In addition to my ‘side-by-side’ interviews, I conducted 28 interviews with key figures from the Giants organization, the city and regional government, academics, and organizers of peace initiatives. These more traditional semi-structured interviews were selected to provide context to the research and situate it within wider Belfast.

#### *Ice Hockey in Northern Ireland*

In Northern Ireland, facilities for ice-skating have been operating since introduced at the Kings Hall Pavilion in the 1930s, and in 1986, a more permanent facility, the Dundonald International Ice Bowl, opened in East Belfast (Hassan 2004). However, professional hockey made its debut in Northern Ireland in 2000, when the Belfast Giants were established as a tenant of the newly-constructed Odyssey Arena (known today as the SSE Arena). In 2015-2016, the Giants competed in their 15<sup>th</sup> season of professional hockey in the UK-based 10-team Elite Ice Hockey League (EIHL) as the lone team from Northern Ireland – or all of Ireland for that matter.

Placing the Giants against the backdrop of sport in Northern Ireland illustrates their unique position within the city and region. Sport has often been divided along ethno-national lines, with Gaelic Athletics traditionally being parish-based and a part of the Catholic community. Football/soccer has been neighbourhood or town-based, which has resulted in supporter communities being primarily single-identity spaces. Rugby, played by both communities, adds a class element for both the participants and the supporters – the middle-class draw of rugby aligns with the greater integration occurring amongst wealthier populations. The closest comparison to what the Giants have achieved in terms of their supporter community is boxing, a sport that draws across historical divisions and that appealed to working and middle classes throughout the Troubles, in particular the fights of Barry McGuigan (Greenslade 2004). The Giants are different from the appeal of boxing, however, in two important ways: first, through their consistency – playing 32 times from September to March gives them a regularity that boxing does not provide. Second, hockey has cross-gender appeal: the attendance at a Giants game is 48% female (Brooks 2015), which stands in contrast to my experiences at other professional sporting events in Northern Ireland.

#### *Who goes to ice hockey games in Belfast?*

My interviews and time with the supporter community showed a broad range of appeal, with participation across class, ethno-sectarian division, and as mentioned above, gender. The Giants' organisation was reluctant to provide me with statistics, such as season ticket holder postal codes, which would have given me an opportunity to map where the bulk of regular supporters are coming from. However, my side-by-side encounters were diverse in company – from those who had travelled from rural villages to those who lived in Belfast's Titanic Quarter, the distinct area of the city where the SSE is located that resulted from intentional planning for utilisation by both ethno-nationalist groups, as well as tourists (Etchart 2008). In general, those I sat with aligned with Gaffikin and Morrissey's (1999) observations of the deindustrialisation of Belfast and the trend towards service employment. With my intellectual curiosity, framed by the historic division in Northern Ireland, my time in the arena reinforced the inclusive policies of both the arena and Giants organisation, with a strong presence from both Nationalist and Unionist communities.

The connections supporters have made through the Giants ranged from strangers and acquaintances to friendships and even on-ice marriage proposals (see Down Recorder 2016). These relationships have developed both within and across communities between people who have met at games and embraced the team as a core part of their social lives. In framing this case study, it is important to note that interaction at games spans beyond the binary nature of the Unionist/Nationalist division. In one interview, I sat with a gay man who was an active supporter of the Giants; he cited his attraction to the team as based on the setting acting as a 'filter for the idiots' (Gate 17 Row Y Seat 168, 22 November 2015). Northern Ireland is the

last remaining member state of Great Britain where same-sex marriages are not legal; simply put, there are many places in Belfast where he did not perceive himself to be welcome – but this was not the case in the SSE Arena. He noted that he would often bring friends from the LGBTQ community – whether or not they were hockey fans – simply because the arena was an inclusive setting.

The activities associated with being a Giants supporter are not confined to what occurs before the final whistle; there are wide-ranging social media outlets and activities around the team that transpire in wider Belfast. One of the Facebook forums has more than 2,100 members, and the team was recently lauded as having a top-25 team in terms of digital reach, with the fourth largest Twitter following among European ice hockey clubs (EIHL 2016). There is also a large contingency of Giants fans who travel to away games to support the team. At these games, the Giants section almost unanimously pulls out phones following a goal to text, tweet, or Facebook update supporters back home, demonstrating that contact between supporters occurs across multiple platforms and locations. The team also hosts activities for supporters, from autograph sessions to summer boat rides on the ferries of their biggest sponsor, Stena Line Ferries. The largest initiative beyond the arena is the Giants' educational programme, which visits local schools to teach about healthy eating and exercise. This programme, sponsored by the restaurant chain Subway, reaches approximately 10,000 students throughout the region each year (Belfast Giants 2017). The school programme involves player presentations, and often includes tickets to games. **<PULLOUT> With most schools in the region still serving single-identity communities, the accompanying trip to the SSE Arena offers an experience within a shared space that stands outside routines.** **<PULLOUT>** The organiser of this program, Gordon Cameron (17 February 2016), noted the low-key and neutral territory of the hockey game as giving opportunity for 'seeing each other as children and not as one side or another.' What emerges from these activities around the Giants is a clear avoidance of political and sectarian discussions. In the Facebook group a volunteer moderates the comments, and in my three years as a member, discussion has rarely strayed from hockey and never took a turn toward ethno-sectarian politics. Likewise, the educational programming adhered to topics which professional athletes can competently speak – exercise and healthy eating.

### *The SSE Arena*

**<PULLOUT> The arena is a purposeful shared space that is far more than a home for hockey, with musicians, comedians, boxing matches, and professional wrestling regularly hosted within its walls.** **<PULLOUT>** However, these events do not carry the regularity of hockey. Such consistency has generated a community around the team, as noted above, that seemingly extends beyond any one-off event. The SSE Arena is one of the main attractions of the purposefully built Titanic Quarter. This area and the shared space it represents in many ways defies its location and history on the docks of east Belfast, historically identified as a majority Unionist section of the city. Murtagh (2011) recognises the appeal of the arena complex and the Titanic Quarter, noting, 'For a city whose recent imagery has been built on violence, peace lines and fear the formation of low risk, glitzy and speculator investment sites has been a vital strategy in place marketing' (215).

The construction of the arena was not free from pushback. According to sports journalist Stuart McKinley (23 November 2015), the arena was built with Millennium funds (money raised through the UK national lottery to celebrate the new millennium) at a time when Northern Ireland's football stadiums sat in a state of disrepair. Many traditional sports fans in

large part resented the construction of a multi-use entertainment arena because Scotland and Wales used their funding to construct stadiums for football and rugby. The animosity towards the construction of the arena is in many ways representative of Aughey's (2005) observation that there is a resentment emerging by those who have struggled through the Troubles and feel left behind by rapid change. Further, Bairner (2006) notes that 'the Odyssey is far more welcoming than Belfast's older sporting sites. But its welcome is conditional and the arena itself offers as its main sporting attraction an activity— hockey—which has no organic relationship with the city and the overwhelming majority of its people' (172). The house rules of the arena outlined on each ticket contribute to this conditional welcome by including clauses like 'sporting colours or tops are not permitted, except for Ice Hockey jerseys' (SSE Arena 2016). Further, each arena in the EIHL plays the national anthem prior to games, with the exception of the Giants, where the playing of 'God Save the Queen' and its allegiance to the United Kingdom would alienate a significant portion of the fanbase. Finally, the colour scheme of the team, which is primarily teal, has no history against the backdrop of Irish tri-colours, red-hands of Ulster, or Union Jacks, which are prevalent in marking territories of single-identity neighbourhoods.

### **Challenging Assumptions, Normalising Interactions**

Those who have played for, worked with, and managed the Giants have been predominantly 'outsiders' from North America. They have made top-down decisions with views that are shaped by the best interests of the hockey team, and not by having lived the struggles of Northern Ireland. This management, aided by their outsider status, has been given leeway within the fan and wider Belfast community for the occasional missteps regarding the unwritten rules that accompany the region's deep conflict. My observations demonstrated that within the arena this tolerance of difference extends beyond the players and organisation, to include Giants supporters.

The only jerseys allowed in the SSE Arena are hockey jerseys; this is significant as many people may regularly wear clothing that clearly signifies their community affiliation. These house rules are in place to prevent ethno-sectarian identity from obviously entering the crowd; however, I found that even when there was a possibility for negative interpretation of a symbol, interaction, or event, a conscious choice was often made to not react in ways that might very well be considered normal in wider everyday Belfast. One visible example could be seen as a loophole in the hockey jersey rule: it was not uncommon to see a New York Rangers jersey worn by Giants supporters. A famous hockey franchise in the National Hockey League (NHL), the Rangers' blue jersey has the red word RANGERS running across the front. This colour scheme and name has a strong association with sectarian symbolism and violence. The Glasgow Rangers are a Protestant-supported football team with a violent history and rivalry with Celtic, the Glasgow-based Catholic-supported football club. Thus, this hockey jersey would give way to hockey colours presenting a very politically-based, bold statement. However, when I asked about this jersey being worn, the response resounded that 'it's just a hockey jersey' and I should not read anything further into it; one woman from the Catholic community noted that the New York Rangers were her favourite NHL team (Gate 6 Row R Seat 14, 27 November 2015). Elsewhere in Belfast such a shirt would be used as a process of 'telling' (Harris 1972), a cue to identify the ethno-sectarian community of a stranger. However, within my encounters in the arena, this jersey inspired no such assumptions, nor did it inspire any emotional reactions connected to division.

*The SSE Arena: A Third Place?*



The Giants do not market themselves as competition to local football clubs, Gaelic games, or Ulster Rugby. Team management considers the competition for their market to be television programmes like X-Factor and Strictly Come Dancing (Thornton 2015). They cite this market as spanning across gender, age, class, and any ethno-sectarian divide (Thornton 2015). Game day operations are carried out with a consistency that is meant to appeal as much to the regular fan as it does to the first-time spectator, with entertainment that includes Subway sandwich cannons, dance cameras, and cheerleaders. In the paradigm of intergroup contact, Pettigrew (1997, 1999) notes that the quality of contact correlates with the effect on prejudice. Sitting once through a hockey game would thus have little effect on deconstructing intolerance; however, with 1,500 season ticket holders and many more who attend regularly, a level of prolonged contact – essentially a month’s worth of evenings – is occurring in this space. The 32 games, not including other team events that take place outside of the arena, provide a sense of consistency in the lives of the supporters. I was told by fans that the first games of the season are often spent catching up with those around you, finding out who did what through the summer, and how everyone’s families are doing (Gate 9 Row Q Seat 73. 16 October 2015). Such relationships align with Oldenburg’s (1999) concept of ‘third place’ (the ‘first place’ being the home and the ‘second place’ the workplace):

Third places remain upbeat because of the limited way in which the participants are related. Most of the regulars in a third place have a unique and special status with regard to one another. It is special in that such people have neither the blandness of strangers nor that other kind of blandness, which takes zest out of relationships between even the most favorably matched people when too much time is spent together, when too much is known, too many problems are shared, and too much is taken for granted. (Oldenburg 1999, 56)

The construction of such relationships has not always been likely or expected, particularly in this setting where many people in Belfast did not assume hockey to have a lasting draw (Bairner 2003). **<PULLOUT> The steadiness of the team, and its positionality within Belfast’s political and social landscape, has contributed to its success and the generation of a new, shared history around the Giants franchise. <PULLOUT>** In the winter of 2016, a mural was unveiled in East Belfast, which included the Giants’ logo and hockey players. The team was not involved in the creation of the mural, which was chosen by a local youth group to replace a rundown Ulster Defence Association (UDA) mural as part of a community rebranding initiative in this strongly Unionist neighbourhood. The inclusion of the Giants brand in such a project without the organisation’s involvement exemplifies that the Giants have slowly become engrained in the city’s post-peace agreement consciousness; particularly symbolic is the physical marking of the team logo over an historical emblem of division visible in everyday Belfast

### **The ‘Hockey Family’**

*When I asked her about whether divisions that are apparent in Belfast can be seen here in the arena, she was firm and unwavering in rejecting the notion that they are. She said she doesn’t know whether people are necessarily Catholic or Protestant, while taking this time to let me know she is a Protestant. She said sectarianism doesn’t affect a Giants game, referring instead to the fan community as a hockey family: ‘we are a hockey family, so that stuff doesn’t matter here’*

The normalised interactions and relationships constructed within the SSE Arena have made it an easy target for labelling as a reconciliatory initiative; for example, media outlets, predominantly from the North American sporting community, have tried to frame the team in such a light. A *Sports Illustrated* article entitled ‘Peace, Love and Hockey in Belfast’ sensationalised the team’s cross-community appeal against the backdrop of the Troubles (Farber 2011). The Giants organisation has sought to avoid the politicisation of reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and remain relatively outside of any lofty political or reconciliatory-focused discussions involving its supporters. In my interviews with Giants’ players and management, topics related to social outcomes of the shared space were largely avoided, aligning with Mac Ginty’s (2014) observation of avoidance as a means of maintaining ‘everyday peace’. Two prominent Giants supporters I interviewed at a game in November 2015, whose friendship crosses divided communities and has been constructed around all things Giants, immediately dismissed my questions about the arena as a space for reconciliation, stating that such a political term had no place in this setting as the arena was a place to be enjoyed. This reaction highlights avoidance of both divisive and reconciliatory pressures within this social group. Supporting this sentiment are the early promotional phrases the team has since shifted away from, such as, “Game for All – Game for Everyone”; in moving away from such marketing, the team has distanced itself from the stigma of politics attached to such blatant intergroup programming. Instead of this marketing, the Giants have constructed their brand around the notion of being a great family night out; inherent in this is an expectation for public behaviour – one should act knowing there are children present. Such structure has become an important role in creating a space that constitutionally does not allow the sort of disdain for otherness that may be permitted in other areas of Belfast.

However, top-down rules alone cannot dictate the character of the space. Sennett (2003) notes: ‘treating people with respect cannot occur simply by commanding it should happen. Mutual recognition has to be negotiated; this negotiation engages the complexities of personal character as much as social structure’ (260). <PULLOUT> **In this sense, the hockey arena represents a space where the actors must adopt a baseline civility towards everyone if they want to be involved.** <PULLOUT> It would be easy to assume that a sport which includes a certain level of violence and fighting within the game might give opportunity for fan violence to become a possibility; however, this is not at all the case. The SSE Arena is a decidedly optimistic, yet neutral space, managed in such a manner by both the rules governing the space, and self-regulated by those in the crowd. One such example of this self-regulation was seen during the game on 16 October 2015, when the Giants were trying out a new crowd involvement competition during one of the intermissions. Three t-shirts had been soaked in water, bunched up, and frozen. The first contestant to crack open the t-shirt and put it on won a prize offered by a local restaurant. Such activities are not foreign to the crowd, as events like this are used routinely throughout the game; however, on this day one of the t-shirts was a green very similar to that of the Irish tricolour, a colour commonly associated with the Nationalist community. The man beside me noted his disdain, saying something along the lines of ‘Not a green shirt, not here’ (Gate 9 Row Q Seat 73). The reaction to this colour reinforced that this space offers an interruption from the many territorial symbols of division that are so normalised outside of the arena. The temporary suspension of division offered by this setting can be seen through the fact that a green t-shirt, although political, would be of little note in the rest of Belfast.

The hockey arena, and the ritual of attending hockey games, has generated a community, or *communitas*, that Turner (1969) would highlight as arising from its positionality outside of the norms of social structures, be they divisive or reconciliatory. The uniqueness of this ever-changing community is fitting of the physical setup of a hockey game, as the arena offers the gathering of a crowd that is never twice the same and is dominated by the spectacle of hockey that distracts from requiring face-to-face interaction.

*Civility as a standard*

*There are people in that arena, and I won't name names, that I know have entrenched views one way or the other and if the two people who would shake hands in that arena were to meet in another scenario, they would despise each other.*

Giants fan,  
Rockies Sport Bar Belfast,  
5 December 2015

Within the strategies for healthier relationships and community construction across historical division in Northern Ireland, the role of civility has been overlooked. Civility, understood by Boyd (2006) as 'an active and informative moral relationship between persons' (875), implies a willingness to share space and engage respectfully with whomever one encounters in a public setting. Senator George Mitchell (1999), a central figure in the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement, notes, 'If there is ever to be a durable peace and genuine reconciliation, what is really needed is the decommissioning of mind-sets in Northern Ireland. That means that trust and confidence must be built, over time, by actions in all parts of society' (37).

**<PULLOUT> Spaces like the SSE, where shared experiences can occur outside larger political and social expectations, give way to a civility that is integral to the decommissioning of mind-sets and generating a new 'normal'. <PULLOUT>** As a 'third space', the arena has become a setting for Bhabha's (1994) 'cultural hybridisation', presenting an alternative space and a meeting point that generates a culture which differs from the Unionist and Republican neighbourhoods and patterns of socialisation. This hybridisation lends itself to possibilities for integrating across an us/them divide and generates an ability for those active in this space to become members of a shared social group that stands outside the cleavages of division. Even if after games many supporters return to segregated spaces, they do so with more knowledge of the other – a notion supported by Savelkoul and colleagues (2011), who found that casual contact lessened perceived threats from an outgroup.

The role of civility is not a universal one; Whitman (2000) suggests that public interactions of civility are 'a world purely of ceremony, not of substance' (1291), and that they do not necessarily represent a moral relationship. Valentine (2008) supports this, drawing attention to the vast difference between public acts and private views, thus challenging the notion that civility is anything more than an expectation or action completed through habit. However, in Northern Ireland, there have not always been notable differences in action or attitude between the public and private spheres (Hewstone et al. 2002); sectarianism has engrained both thoughts and settings that are not inherently civil, thus civility, seen in a willingness to share experience and social categorisation, is an expectation that should also be appreciated. Even if this is a public act that does not align with private views, Pettigrew (1998) recognises behavioural change is the precursor to attitudinal change. The normality in the encounters and interactions of the hockey arena is free from the expectations of maintaining age-old

grudges, as much as it is free from the hand-holding imagery of reconciliation that is married to cross-community initiatives. In a healthy social group, civility can be viewed as interaction in its simplest form. As Krygier (2005) notes, ‘civility is not one of those ideals that quickens the pulse ... But a civil platform is a secure place to stand’ (173). The hockey arena has normalised this secure place to stand, manufacturing a sense of acceptance in being side-by-side that has yet to emerge as normal in wider Belfast.

## **Conclusion**

A common sentiment that emerged from the side-by-side interviews, and which transcended community lines, was a feeling of fatigue with the attachment of meaning given to seemingly every interaction in both single and shared spaces. The expectation that single-spaces fostered further division and shared spaces produced reconciliation was not the reality of everyday Belfast, aligning with Jarman and Bell’s (2012) observations of functional coexistence taking place alongside heavily segregated spaces. This disdain for labels, both positive and negative, offers a direct critique of the Northern Ireland peace agenda that suggests intergroup contact and shared space light the pathway to ‘reconcile communities and contribute to peace’ After my season with the Giants supporters, I suggest that the political machinations and expectations attached to goals of reconciliation only serve as another obstacle to watching hockey within a community of fellow fans, no matter who they are.

As an interdisciplinary field, Peace and Conflict Studies has contributed to these attachments of meaning through focusing on macro systems of governance, strategies for negotiations and peace accords, and giving critical review and reflection to social, structural, and political forms of violence. In constructing such norms of study and research application, the understanding of where peace and civility are occurring has often been left to cursory mentions in the writing up of specific case studies. With its focus on hockey in Belfast and the unorthodoxy of the SSE Arena, this article joins a recent and subtle widening of perspectives to include spatial understanding and interactions where peace is or is not constructed, corresponding with further inclusion and valuing of geography (Björkdahl & Buckley-Zistel 2016; McConnell, Megoran, & Williams 2014) and everyday life (Mac Ginty 2014) in the study of peace. This research does not offer a defined project to upscale, as is often the case with positive intergroup activities in divide settings – ice hockey would be a surprising initiative to attempt in many post-peace agreement environments! Rather, this article’s offering is in contributing to knowledge about the spaces in which peace can be contested and created.

As peace and conflict research further engages everyday interactions and occurrences in settings of division, the spaces in which normality of interaction emerge become important to grasping the complexities of human relationships. The SSE Arena represents an optimistic space in which these interactions are occurring, and offers a challenge to binaries of ‘us and them’ and ‘reconciliation or conflict’, instead contributing to deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities in between these poles. Such an approach is not without limitations – the Giants sit outside of the normal everyday routines of Belfast, and so the effect their presence has on encounters of the everyday is finite. Further, one season spent with the Giants supporters, along with a random sampling of interviewing, cannot effectively speak to a holistic view of what this activity represents to all supporters. This study would be strengthened by further interaction of geography and peace study – in particular benefitting from continued qualitative narratives that deepen understanding of the long change processes required to move from living divided to living side-by-side.

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