Making Sense of Segregation: Transitional Thinking and Contested Space

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Making Sense of Segregation: Transitional Thinking and Contested Space

Abstract

In segregated societies space is typically a source of conflict and confusion. Everyday geographies are often navigated through complex patterns of movement that are sensitive to the ‘other’ and their spatial practices. Individuals adjust and tailor their movements, in part, because of the fear of the unknown. This paper, using three embedded cases of interface communities in Northern Ireland, considers how processes of spatial ‘sensemaking’ can reduce anxiety about contested spaces in deeply divided communities. The paper makes three important contributions. First it extends conceptualizations of sensemaking to a focused reading of geographical space in a divided society. This marks an important extension for a theory that until now has been largely confined to organisational studies literature and provides a theoretical scaffolding with which to better understand individual and group responses to spatial contestation and division. Second, it identifies how processes of sensemaking, married with what we term a ‘connecting methodology,’ can instigate individuals to make, break and give sense to themselves and others around issues of past contestation and current disputes. Finally, it argues that these interventions can occasion transitional thinking and new movement through contested space, an important contribution for those working and living in divided societies. The paper draws on data from a wider project on community commemoration in Northern Ireland which explored how individuals and communities collectively move through contested spaces. The process of sensemaking, we argue, can redefine the parameters for participatory methodologies and provide unique opportunities to break deadlock in deeply divided societies.

Key words: Sensemaking, segregation, conflict, community, Northern Ireland

Making Sense of Segregation: Transitional Thinking and Contested Space

Introduction

Community connections to space and place are central to our understanding of identity and the past, but associations and understandings shift and change through experience and interaction. This paper explores individual and collective journeys through contested space in the deeply divided society of Northern Ireland. Drawing on data from a wider project on community commemoration, it explores the ways in which individuals and communities make, break, and give 'sense' to themselves and others. It does this through a consideration of 'sensemaking' as a theoretical scaffolding to understanding decision-making processes around spatial contestation and also the potential relationship between sensemaking processes and 'connecting methodologies' within the context of contested spaces. The concept of 'sensemaking' has long been a central pillar of theory for organisational scholars seeking to better understand how we 'structure the unknown so as to be able to act on it' (Ancona, 2012 p. 3). Sensemaking contends that the ability to form an understanding of the world or to construct 'a map' through processes of refining, testing, data collection and conversation, enables individuals to form better judgements on their environment and to act on that judgment. By doing so, individuals 'sense make' to actively construct the world around them using available cognitive frames that ground their perceptions, thoughts, and behavioural actions (Cornelissen et al., 2013).

A great deal of the existing work in this area is focused on the roles and behaviours of organisational actors engaged in complex decision-making under pressure. Much of this literature focuses on what we now call 'extreme contexts,' where compressed timeframes and heightened physical threat can impact the choices of individuals (Hällgren et al., 2017; Weick, 1988, 1993). However, we argue that sensemaking as a theoretical approach has broader relevance and the potential to shed light on the activities, practices, and interactions of community actors in divided societies involved in conflict transformation activities. Such actors are often tasked with navigating places fraught with contested spatial politics; demarcated with the visual trappings of territorial ethno-national identities and where remnants and memories of the conflict in Northern Ireland is omnipresent. We engage in a conceptualization of sensemaking as it applies to a case study of three interface communities in urban centres engaged in a wider process of commemoration. The term interface is used to describe 'two' ethno-national communities living side by side but separately (Knox, 2011;

Murphy and McDowell, 2019). In Northern Ireland, interface communities can be physically divided by a peace wall or imaginatively without a physical barrier but with very clearly defined cognitive boundaries such as a local landmark (Jarman, 2008). Given their history and proximity to ongoing violent activity, interface zones in towns and cities across Northern Ireland can sometimes be perceived as extreme contexts (Bollens, 2002; Murphy et al., 2018) – a location of much work around sensemaking (Denyer and Pilbeam, 2014; Hällgren et al., 2017). Despite two decades of peace-making, these areas still experience low-level conflict-related activity and critical incidents emanating from residual division and sectarianism. Amid this ongoing contestation, communities continue to make sense of these spaces and conflicted histories. We suggest that the concept of sensemaking is critical when attempting to understand how people navigate spaces that are perceived to be either dangerous or contested during times of conflict and its aftermath. By extension, we argue that sensemaking can be employed in transitional contexts when individuals attempt to renegotiate and reinterpret space in the absence of violence.

The paper has two objectives. First, we extend a conceptualization of sensemaking to a focused reading of geographical space in a divided society. More specifically, we argue that sensemaking is a process undertaken by community actors as well as organisational actors and that a better understanding of sensemaking processes can facilitate understanding and spatial sharing in contested environments. We outline the ways in which this theoretical approach can help us understand how divided communities navigate spaces associated with violence and division. Second, we elucidate how a 'connecting methodology' instigated individuals to make, break and give sense to themselves and others around issues of past contestation and current disputes. Our project tracked and traced this process through three focused interactive workshops with several groups who had themselves engaged with histories of past violence. Membership of these groups included community activists involved in peacebuilding, those who had suffered personal loss through conflict-related violence, and the representatives of non-governmental organizations who have engaged over time in cultural understanding and conflict transformation endeavours.

There is a burgeoning literature around 'connecting methodologies' that bring people together in novel ways in divided societies (Coyles, 2017; Robinson, 2020; Robinson and McClelland, 2020). In this paper we think about the ways in which such methodologies, in the form of walking, photographing, and mapping, can cut across community hostilities and allow individuals and groups to 'sensemake' about their connections to contested environments. We suggest that the effectiveness of these methodologies lies in their ability to facilitate participants to make, break and give sense. Shared encounters of segregated space create opportunities for reimagining urban landscapes of conflict. This is important as it addresses Legeby et al. (2010, p.3) assertion that 'segregation needs to be understood in a multifaceted way'. While much of the traditional work on urban segregation has focused on residential divisions, we join a growing body of scholars who are interested in unpacking how individuals move and navigate through unknown spaces. We argue that such communities are involved a sense-making process across multiple scales (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). They try and make sense of the past and the environment in which they find themselves, and of the peace processes that they have been shaped by or have helped shape.

The paper begins with a discussion of our conceptual framework. We define sensemaking outside its traditional organisational focus and in relation to activities, actions, and behaviours in the 'extreme context' of divided communities and 'interface' spaces. A note on the research design and methodological framework follows. We then outline the ways in which the sensemaking process can be instigated and supported through 'connecting methodologies', as illustrated in our cases. The remainder of the paper focuses on the ways in which community actors make, give and break sense and the scales at which these processes take place, before drawing some conclusions on the nature and resilience of 'connecting' as a way of moving beyond violent conflict and its legacy.

Living in Fragments*: *Conceptualizing Sensemaking, Space and Conflict Legacies

We employ the theoretical construct of sensemaking to think about the ways in which community members in divided societies navigate and understand contested spaces individually and collectively. Our conceptual approach is borrowed from scholarship more often associated with management and organisation studies (Beech et al., 2017; Cornelissen et al., 2013; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking at its foundation can be defined as the ways in which individuals seek to 'make sense' of the world around them. It explores how individuals engage in 'structuring the unknown' (Waterman, 1990, p.41) and is often thought of as a process that bridges a 'communicative gap' within an environment of contextual rationality where actors explain their decision-making (Brown et al., 2015). Seen as primarily concerned with 'the practical activities of real people engaged in concrete situations of social action' (Boden, 1994, p.10), sensemaking research contends that individuals actively construct their understandings of the world and do so using available cognitive frames that shape the perceptions, thoughts and the actions that follow (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). As Brown et al., (2015) note, sensemaking is an active process ‘by which people seek to understand ambiguous, equivocal, or confusing issues and events’ (p.266).

Sensemaking research has been most often associated with episodes of intensified complexity and danger, in which organisational actors are required to engage in decision making quickly, when the stakes are high and judgement windows are compressed (Hällgren et al., 2017; Heverin and Zach, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). A key point in an understanding of the concept of sensemaking is its reproductive nature ‘people generate what they interpret’ (Weick 1993 p.13). Therefore, individuals extract and interpret clues from their environment and use those clues to ‘make sense’ of what is happening and to enact responses within their setting (Brown et al. 2015). The repeated construction of ‘realities’ and sensemaking around them allows for discovery and invention to recur repeatedly – leading to three sets of overlapping processes: the perception of clues; interpretations of those clues; and action arising from this interpretation (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). This works sits alongside others which focuses on the extreme contexts of danger and disruption where the significance of sensemaking is already well recognised as an aid to deconstructing decision-making (Baran and Scott, 2010; Buchanan and Hällgren, 2019; de Rond and Hedges, 2017; Ng et al., 2020). Sensemaking often emerges as storytelling and the creation of narratives which contextualize and give meaning to events and activities (Zwaan and Goverde, 2010). Time is important too. Within many studies, a specific events or incident generates a minute-by-minute analysis of a crisis or an emergency (Cornelissen et al., 2013). For others, environments are more mundane, and timescales are longer forging an understanding of how sensemaking occurs overtime (Patriotta and Brown, 2011). The act of articulation of contexts and actions is central to subsequent action and understanding and communication. Discourse and storytelling are the realisation of this (Zilber 2007). Communication in its many forms, is seen as a critical mediating mechanism for an individual’s interpretation and ‘framing’ of a situation. As Brown et al., reflect ‘sensemaking stories…permit actors to manoeuvre between contradictions, to ignore and to gloss ambiguities, to both mask and disclose emotional responses and intellectual positions, to simultaneously make and to unravel sense’ (2015, p.269).

While Weick (1990), whose seminal work has defined the field of sensemaking, recognised that environmental factors such as landscape and weather conditions contributed to complex situations for decision-making, it has only been more recently that scholars have sought to engage in discussions about how spatial and environmental contexts interact actively with sensemaking processes. This recent, innovative work has explored sensemaking in landscapes affected by disasters or threats of disaster (Hodgson, 2007), ecological materiality (Whiteman and Cooper 2011) and participatory design processes in urban environments (Matos-Castano etc al. 2020). Sensemaking research is similarly sparse in relation to conflict processes. Where scholarship exists, it adheres to the established utility of sensemaking to understand and intersection with extreme contexts. In this way, Paananen's (2021) exploration of how military commanders make sense of complex peacekeeping operations in which understandings of agreements are embedded, negotiated, and regenerated to adapt to local necessities and sustain peace gives us an insight into sensemaking processes in active 'hot' conflict environments. Hartley et al (2021) provide a perspective on antagonistic conflict and leadership at a political and parliamentary level. These existing insights, illustrate the theoretical opportunity for sensemaking to provide rich exploration of the interactions of community actors faced with the lived experience of spatial conflict and its aftermath. It is this sensemaking around place, space and contestation which particularly interests us. We adopt an approach drawn from Maitlis and Christianson's (2014) scales of sensemaking with a focus on perception, interpretation, and action. This foregrounds sensemaking through storytelling and narrative creation /disruption as having the potential to generate and reframe understandings of space and place over time (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Kerby, 1991).

We place our understanding of segregated societies and interface communities within the realm of extreme contexts in which the tropes of sectarianism and division are magnified and exaggerated between and across different communities and the spectre of violence in urban space looms large (Cunningham and Gregory, 2014; Herbert, 2019). This is particularly relevant to interface communities where there often exists a heightened awareness of security despite the veneer of peacebuilding (Shirlow, 2003). Much work already exists on contested cities and urban segregation (see for example Bharanthi et al., 2021; Bollens, 2009; Calame and Charlesworth, 2009; Rokem and Vaughan, 2019; Murphy and McDowell, 2019) and much of this scholarship focuses on divided communities with Northern Ireland as a frequently cited exemplar (Byrne, 2006; Morrissey and Gaffikin, 2006). However, rarely does this literature look at the micro interactions between community members which form the basis for perception forming, active interpretation and action. This paper speaks to that aspect of contestation.

In contemporary Northern Ireland, the term 'interface' refers to contested physical space, in urban settings, which is the site of sectarian hostility and usually delineated by a physical boundary that functions to separate opposing community factions (Bell et al. 2010; Byrne 2006; Jarman, 2005). The most obvious of these barriers are the so-called 'peace walls' and the huge tracks of security fencing that demarcate residential segregation. Interfaces have long been considered dangerous and intense environments, and the sites in which wider issues of division and conflict are most likely to flare (Shirlow, 2003) and have been extensively researched, described, and analysed (Bell et al. 2010; Heatley, 2004; Jarman, 2005; Morrissey and Gaffikin, 2006; Rafferty, 2012). Barriers have been erected over decades, either at the behest of the residents to protect personal safety, or through inter-agency decision-making, to contain civil unrest. The architecture of conflict between these communities makes co-presence challenging (Legeby, 2013) despite the proximity of communities to each other on either side of these divides.

Residential segregation, hostility and ethno-political polarisation has increased in some areas since the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement which sought to draw a line under decades of ethno-nationalist conflict (Graham and Whelan, 2007; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Visually striking sectarian graffiti, flags, curb painting and other expressions of cultural/political identification and paramilitary association exist in all three of our case studies. Within Belfast, 'peace walls' separate many working-class communities, comprised of people whose ethno-political identification is predominantly either Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist (PUL) or Catholic-Nationalist-Republican (CNR)[1]. In other locations, inter-community violence continues to threaten personal safety along less visible divides on a regular basis. Despite hopes that sectarian interfaces would go the way of the Berlin Wall after 1989, more were built (Jarman, 2008, p. 23). The Stormont Executive (when it is sitting) has been vocal about the need to remove the architecture of segregation. The Interface Programme at the Department of Justice had, for example, set a target of removing interface barriers (peace walls) by 2023. At the time of writing the lack of political stability exemplified by the suspension of the power-sharing Executive and the lack of progress in working with communities that live within interface spaces means that this deadline appears at times disconnected from political reality. Interfaces have though changed to reflect the shifting political environment. There have been attempts to soften their appearance through community artwork or the removal of barbed wire and corrugated metal sheets. Gates have been inserted in some areas, allowing safe passage during daylight hours. At the time of writing the major Flax Street interface in North Belfast has been altered from a fixed barrier to automated gates allowing vehicular access for the first time in forty years[2]. These interventions, however, do not change the fact that these interfaces are neither safe nor civic spaces. Peace walls create both perceived danger, and actual threat, known locally as ‘the chill factor’ and act as a repelling mechanism for the ‘other’ community.

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[1] Although these terms are frequently used to describe the two main identifications and 'communities' in Northern Ireland, the authors are aware that this is simplistic and a reification, although it is also a reflection of the ethno-political realities for many people.

Image 1 about here.

Caption ‘Longstanding interface in the Fountain area of Derry, softened by trees and planting’

We argue that defining interface communities as extreme contexts allows us to explore how communities make, break and give sense to the experience of violence and its aftermath. By this we mean the surfacing of existing fragmented narratives, the challenge of sometimes contradictory understandings and a new way perspective on old understandings. The next section will look at the role of connecting methodologies as a generative mechanism in these sensemaking experiences.

Connecting methodologies: Facilitators of sensemaking process

In societies emerging from violent and political conflict, space emerges as a paramount consideration (Graham and Nash, 2006; Liu et al., 2016; Vallacher et al., 2010) and how individuals and communities use it can often be a point of contention. Using a case study approach, we consider how methodological interventions can help reframe the ways in which communities understand and use deeply divided urban places. We argue that connecting methodologies such as walking, photographing, recording, exploring soundscapes and creative mapping can help associate people to the physical landscape and evoke opportunities for discussion. They capture emotive responses to particular places in situ and therefore have the potential to transform understandings about space. Walking methodologies are commonly used to explore how individuals experience, ‘see’ and remember place. As an embodied way of seeing the world we are better placed to understand how our encounters with place shape our identities and interactions with others (Coyles, 2017; Vergunst and Ingold, 2008). In the context of Northern Ireland, walking methods have been employed to grasp how segregated space is reinforced and navigated (Hocking et al., 2018) and more recently to co-produce narratives of the past that have often been silenced (Robinson and McClelland, 2020). We suggest that these interconnected methodologies can be understood as ‘connecting’ in that they bring together the participants across both the landscapes in which they engage and with each other on multiple levels.

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[2] https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/peace-interface-opens-for-first-time-on-flax-street-marking-historic-step-towards-normalisation-42168773.html

The data for this paper comes from a broader study on commemoration, memory, and place in Northern Ireland. We held workshops in three locations within, or in close proximity to, interface communities: Portadown, North Belfast and Derry/Londonderry between 2015 and 2016. These locations were chosen as they each contained several interface communities and a history of acute sectarian tension. Portadown, is a town in County Armagh, about 24 miles outside Belfast. The area has a long history of economic activity in the textile industry but is better known as the centre of the long running ‘Drumcree’ dispute, an ongoing clash over Protestant Loyal Order marches through the town, opposed by Catholic residents of the Garvaghy road area. These disputes reached their peak in the 1990’s and led to widespread violence throughout Northern Ireland (Mulholland, 1999). The town itself was divided by seven interface barriers at the time of the research[3], all erected between 1998 and 2002 (Bryan, 2000). North Belfast (the location of one of our workshops) is a district of Northern Ireland’s largest city and has, according to the Belfast Interface Project (2011), forty-four identified interface barriers and historically suffered from heightened ‘intercommunal violence and unrest’. It remains an area of tension and turbulence, despite very considerable intervention in the form of EU peace monies and government funding (Brück and Ferguson, 2020; Heatley, 2004; Karari et al., 2012; Leonard, 2006). Derry/Londonderry is similarly home to several interfaces. The Fountain/Bogside communities of Derry/Londonderry are the most recognisable with the enclave of the Fountain representing one of the last PUL communities remaining on the predominantly CNR West Bank of the city (McDowell et al., 2015). All three interfaces are deeply segregated and experience intermittent violence despite the peace process.

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[3] Attempts are ongoing to remove or replace physical barriers at the time of writing.

Urban space in each is heavily demarcated by the markers of territoriality and ethno-political symbolism.

Workshops spanning two days were held with a selection of different actors in the three different interface communities. Invitations were sent to community groups and NGOs who were engaged in commemorative activity or single-identity heritage practice across Northern Ireland. Each workshop comprised between 20 and 25 participants and there was equal representation across the ethno-political divide. We were also cognisant to balance gender and age where possible.[4] Our findings reflect the experiences of individuals who are actively engaged in either community relations or single-identity work in the region. Each session began with a discussion on how the group could create connections in the room itself, and then outside within the context of the space to be navigated. Participants co-produced a code of practice and behaviour which included open-mindedness, confidentiality, and respect for alternative viewpoints. Participants then walked around the neighbourhoods and the wider peripheries. Local historians walked with the group and gave a brief overview of the historical trajectory of each location.[5] Participants were then given time to wander individually throughout the space and photograph anything of interest. Later sessions involved creative mapping, facilitated in a careful non-directive way by experienced practitioners, whereby participants organised themselves into small groups and attempted to make sense of the walking and photographing processes. Photos were merged with old and existing maps of interfaces to create new visual understandings of place.

Image 2 about here

Caption 'The process of map discussion and construction'

There was a concern for an articulated awareness of 'aporia' – providing a productive pause in discussion to give participants the opportunity to hold and consider multiple ideas in tension (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010). Participants in the workshops, we argue, were engaged in sensemaking through these methodologies to bridge the communicative gap that exists across communities allowing them to navigate contested space in unprecedented ways. Finally, participants were encouraged to present their maps to the group. They articulated how they perceived the space differently and were given the freedom to come to understandings on their own. The intention was not to ask or direct participants to explicitly engage in sensemaking around interfaces. Rather, this emerged throughout the process and in post hoc reflective sessions – what might be termed 'capturing' sensemaking in flight (Pettigrew et al., 1992). Reflections were recorded through detailed, anonymised notetaking on the room. The remainder of the paper explores the ways in which the methodologies allowed the participants to perceive, interpret and action their understandings. We suggest that connecting methodologies serve to expediate sensemaking to reduce confusion around complex and unknown spaces.

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[4] Representatives of ethnic minority populations were invited to participate but are missing from our cohort. There is a body of work to be done on how ethnic minorities navigate historical ethno-nationalist tension in Northern Ireland and more specifically, how their everyday geographies are influenced by segregation.

[5] Historians were locally recruited for their expertise and intricate knowledge of interface spaces. They reflected upon their own experiences and positionality at the beginning of each walk.

Image 3 about here

Caption 'A finished 'map' of the community reflecting the participants perceptions and interpretation of the contested landscape'

Initial responses: 'Perception'

Our participants, like many living in Northern Ireland, experience place and space through the lens of segregation and the legacy of the 'Troubles', the colloquial term given to describe the three decades of acute violence that 'ended' with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast in 1998. It was interesting to watch them navigate divided places and see these spaces together, anew. Much of the conversation as the participants walked through interface communities (on each side) pivoted around the entrenched patterns of segregation. For many in the workshops, moving through interface spaces allowed them to experience urban environments in a completely new way. They were asked to photograph anything they found interesting or poignant. For many it was their first and only opportunity to visit a space that would otherwise be hostile or outside their own everyday geographies. While walking through the architecture of interfaces (peace walls and barriers) many participants shared their individual interpretations of the functions of that division and what that might mean for particular groups in society. Walls, as one in the North Belfast workshop noted '*have a double meaning, they are both to protect those within and exclude those without – walls function very clearly as symbols,* *offering or denying a welcome*'[6]. In contested urban landscapes, the emergence of walls and barriers as a space of othering reproduces binary divisions '*when I am looking through or over walls, what I am thinking of (is) the other person – are they a threat or a friend?*'[7].

Some individuals could relate more to a particular 'side' of the interface. One participant reflecting on her own community background, expressed how she felt at 'home' in a working-class Protestant estate (the Fountain) in one side of the interface in Derry/Londonderry. The Fountain lies within the city's historic walls which add an additional layer of division. For that person, the primary feeling of belonging was within the walls of Derry/Londonderry and not beyond them. These walls were built as part of the plantation of Ulster in the late 1600s and speak to a strong sense of Unionist heritage. As she expressed it, they were a symbolic marker of her history, tradition, and sense of safety '*Outside the walls has no relevance for (us). As soon as I come into the walls, I have an automatic connection with this city'* [8]. While the historic walls represented inclusion and belonging for one participant, they were interpreted differently by another participant in the same workshop: '*(its) very clear from walking on and below them that they have a function both to empower and to intimidate and oppress, depending on where you are in relation to them*.' It is significant that the Fountain estate is within the Walls and led another participant to reflect '*if I lived there, I would constantly feel suppression, (as if) I was being watched*'[9].

The sense of exclusion and inclusion in specific places was acutely expressed across all the workshops and was underlined by a sense of fear. One participant in the Derry/Londonderry workshop when walking talked about how the '*fear of the unknown'* had stopped her historically *'going into other spaces*'[10]. Participants in the Portadown workshop had similar experiences as they walked through segregated neighbourhoods. One participant during the mapping exercise highlighted several physical locations that were '*unknown and to some extent feared places' – the Bann River underpass, path to Obins Street and Garvaghy Road, the Tunnel*.' The same individual discussed a nationalist estate that has often been a focal point for tension suggesting: '*I have never been there; I know very little about it still…. There are very*

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[6] Participant in Derry / Londonderry workshop

[7] Ibid

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Ibid

poor connections'[11]. Another recalled '*I wouldn't use the train station at night – I had to get Mum and Dad to leave me there in the early morning…. when I was at university*'[12]. The concept of fear is a critical process in the territorialisation of deeply divided societies. Power and control rests fundamentally on reproducing both the real and imagined fear of the other (Shirlow 2003). In the context of these workshops, it was interesting for participants to watch each other respond to places and articulate a sense of inclusion or exclusion-thus engaging in sensemaking and giving.

This discourse mediated by the physicality of walking through sometimes unknown and perceived hostile spaces allowed for an articulated exchange of perspectives and understandings not just about the spaces themselves and their meaning but over the trajectory of the peace process itself. As one participant in North Belfast noted: '*we need to be mindful that we still don't agree on what is past – not everyone considers conflict over*'[13] and the difficulties in speaking honestly about perceptions and concerns. Another commented: '*the past haunts us. There's this kind of feeling that the past is very much alive*'[14]. That idea of walking through a community where the past is alive in the present was also questioned by one participant who wondered whether it was 'right' to enter '*the space of the 'other'* '*where is the balance between voyeurism, maintaining respectful distance, and increased understanding through being able to access a space?*' For many participants, the walks and workshops gave them an opportunity to discuss segregation and efforts to build peace through sharing space. One participant observed '*I hate the term 'shared space', but the town centre is too one-sided. The concept of shared space in the town of Portadown' (is) just ridiculous'*[15]. This quote highlights a central problem of shared space creation and attempts to neutralise the entrenched geography of segregation.

There were moments when some participants took the opportunity to share their experiences with others. One commented, while gesturing to a local memorial commemorating a group of individuals killed during the 'Troubles' '*That is where my history starts'*[16] reflecting that they had *'learned (the) history of 'massacre' from father*'[17]. The role of memory and commemoration within interface areas and how it was used or interpreted to both include and exclude provoked much discussion. Of particular interest to participants was the use of emotive language on memorials. Descriptions such as ‘killed by’ or ‘murdered by’ were recognized as illustrating the importance of who is telling the story. The emphasise in memorials was also noted as a form of militarisation ‘*cannons, figures of soldiers in war memorial, murals*’[18] and the question was posed ‘*does this communicate that violence ‘works?*’[19]. The issue of memorialization was particularly complicated and difficult to disentangle from history, community, and loyalty to traditional identities.

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[11] Participant in Portadown residential
[12] Ibid
[13] Ibid
[14] Participant in North Belfast residential
[15] Participant in Portadown workshop
[16] Participant in Portadown residential
[17] Ibid

Urban space is not only a zone for contestation, but also for silencing. Anthony Gormley’s ‘Sculpture for Derry’s Walls’ was one of the landmarks encountered by the walking participants. It portrays two identical cast-iron figures, joined back-to-back. One faces the urban walled city and the other outside the walls. Despite their differences, participants acknowledged the shared space metaphor inherent in the Gormley sculpture. However, the sculpture is without a mouth and for one participant ‘*this is significant and sinister; it leads me to think about individuals and communities who haven’t been able or willing to tell their story*’[20].

Sharing knowledge: ‘Interpretation’

After engaging in the process of walking and mapping interface areas, workshop participants were invited to engage in an exchange of interpretations in the light of their discussions and in relation to their reflection on new information which they had previously been unaware of. This part of the workshops allowed for a creative generative process of looking to the future for participants. While the shadow of the past and present difficulties was still present, participants were able to reflect on their own experiences and the circumstances of others. One commented ‘*I was struck by what was said about maps and monsters and the fear of the unknown, I was thinking about the fear of going into other spaces*’[21]. Another considered the challenge around public remembrance and its implications for society as it moves forward: ‘*It’s such a massive responsibility, commemoration, and I had never appreciated that before. I had always thought it would always be the same, and it was something I had no connection to, but*

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[18] Participant in Derry / Londonderry residential
[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid

I think commemoration is everyone's responsibility, everyone has a part to play in it'[22]. There was also a renewed understanding of their own journeys and the experiences of those close to them '*If you are living that every day as a child who has no living memory, you can imagine the trauma being absorbed, it is becoming a very narrow view, very little possibility of creating a bigger story, if you are just hearing a single narrative you're talking about generational trauma*'[23]. The understanding led to discussions about group processes and how forces for community cohesion could also feed cycles of division '*There is a pressure within the community to be seen out commemorating, watching the parade and the laying of the wreath, and I know where the wreath is laid, that woman doesn't want it there at her house. If you are opposed to commemoration in your own community, how can you deal with commemoration in other communities?*'[24]

There was also an acknowledgment that people claim the dead for their own purposes and that political parties are attempting to influence commemoration for reasons of power, controlling communities, excluding certain groups, and preventing activities they might consider harmful or inappropriate. One participant spoke about a model of commemoration which he was familiar with which focused on '*remembrance without glorification*'[25] and the possibilities that exist for commemoration to be imaginative, distinct, and different. It is important to observe that at this stage of the dialogue participants noted that while the internet is a useful tool '*the web can't do everything*'[26] and that '*face-to-face conversations and encounters also needed.*'[27] There was also an acceptance that while the mapping exercises were important, they were only one representation of that space. As one participant noted '*maps can be used for surveillance, for good or evil.*'[28] There was also an understanding of the place of other aspects of the landscapes surveyed – rivers for example and their roles historically. For example, a recognition from the Portadown participants of the foundational importance of the local river '*the river was the reason why Portadown was founded*'[29] and the associated connective symbolism they identified around it as leitmotifs for change, movement, banks, barriers, and bridges.

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[22] Ibid
[23] Participant in North Belfast residential
[24] Participant in Derry / Londonderry residential
[25] Participant in North Belfast residential
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid
[28] Participant in Portadown residential
[29] Ibid

Bridges, symbolized not just connection for many participants but of division and one participant referred to the image of a bridge '*split in middle.*'[30] In general, participants alluded to two new understandings of their environment. The first was the importance of narrative, dialogue and stories as a demystifying mechanism which shone light on what had been previously frightening, forbidden or 'closed' boundary spaces and a recognition that they could now see some of their own stories and perceptions in a new light. Indeed, one participant reflected that reality was '*not what you have been told back at your mother and father's knee – some of the stories that have come out have been laughable*'[31]. This, however, did raised questions of its own – particularly as one attendee reflected '*why were we never taught that at school?*' and the adjacent challenges of education within divided and spatially segregated contexts.

An important aspect of this process relates to the physical movement through previously unknown or unappreciated landscapes – an activity which acted to unlock dialogue, animate stories and 'give sense' to real and imagined difficulties. As one workshop attendee commented. '*We would never have talked about all this today if we hadn't been on foot. I have learnt so much today about even my own town.*'[32] There was also a recognition that at times communities coexisting in these interface areas, geographically proximate but psychologically separate were '*never curious enough about the other*'[33] and that the normal challenges of life in environments of deprivation and unrest stifled interest. However, this was countered with a suggested that commemoration obscures more complex concerns about the roles of communities in ongoing violence and disorder. As one participant reflected '*do we commemorate certain things and in certain ways to avoid dealing with guilt?*'[34].

Participants discussed the elusive challenge of trying to revise the territorialisation of space in the aftermath of the armed conflict. Many urban spaces in Northern Ireland are heavily punctuated with visual territorial markings that narrate community history. Yet, after participating in the workshops, and traversing previously unexplored terrains, the same participant reflected '*if I can think about looking again, what do you see, what vision do you*

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[30] Participant in Derry / Londonderry residential

[31] Participant in Portadown residential

[32] Ibid

[33] Ibid

[34] Participant in Derry / Londonderry residential

have? There are lots of perspectives. I see my tendency to look at people through what divides rather than what joins.'[35] Transforming perceptions of space were deemed by participants to be important. One example identified was the 'Peace Bridge' in Derry/Londonderry that spans the River Foyle connecting Ebrington Square, a former army barracks, with the rest of the city. For one participant in the Derry / Londonderry workshop, the peace bridge '*overcomes the imposed boundaries on spaces.*'[36] Recognizing the importance of accessing space to transform attitudes and behaviours around identity, memory and territory, another participant cautioned '*is it important for communities to allow visitors access to their spaces?*' Breaking down assumptions about the permanence and inevitability of space emerged as a key theme in the mapping process.

While for one participant, the purpose of the workshops was firmly to '*to look at human history in a politicized landscape*' for another, the diversity of spaces beyond typical conflict dynamics was also important '*no matter what else is happening socially, politically, and economically (there is still) 'Terry Loves Margaret*' (photo of graffiti observed on tour). There were also understandings expressed of urban space suppressing empathy within communities**.** One participant remarked that '*many times have to work with what's there, but (there is) often room for negotiation on personal/individual levels*.' This process of exploring urban areas facilitated people to engage with spaces they typically could or would not engage with on an ordinary basis. Encountering this led one participant to reflect '*complexity is beautiful, and it is about embracing that*.' Others mused on the longevity of their disengagement within their own home locations '*I grew up in a different area in Portadown – I was very disconnected from it all. A very different experience*'[37]. Another commented on the process of constructing new maps post 'walking the area' which allowed for a different lens on which to see a known location '*our map is about how commemorative architecture changes the local landscape*'[38].

Other areas of concern particularly those economic and social issues (wages, women's rights, racism and so on) were seen as '*smothered, cut off*'[39]. Indeed, the representation of these issues was usually in more 'transient' forms-via posters and graffiti rather than murals and memorials.

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[35] Participant in North Belfast workshop
[36] Participant in Derry / Londonderry workshop
[37] Participant in Portadown workshop
[38] Participant in the derry / Londonderry workshop
[39] Ibid

One North Belfast participant coined the term '*commemorative electioneering*'[40] to express their frustration for the interwoven political engagement with conflict legacies. Within the North Belfast group, there was a sense of a lack of ownership of commemorative landscape. This might be articulated as groups telling stories *of* the past but *about* the present as a part of producing meaning and finding a place in the world. This was connected to an awareness of boundaries – both on maps and in participants understanding of their own communities and those outside it. One put it succinctly '*it's not that we don't recognize others, but it's not part of our identity*'[41] (i.e., what is beyond the boundary). There was also an acknowledgement that within some environments there were no rights and wrongs, and that as such '*some problems are unanswerable'*[42] but that engaging in the reflective process carefully and with effort at sensitivity (sometimes in face of hostility) '*can be healing in itself.'* [43]

Changing approaches over time: 'action'

A year after the initial workshops we brought all the participants together to reflect upon their experience. New relationships had been formed within each workshop group and new connections made across each place. Spaces which had previously been perceived as inaccessible to some were now regarded as less threatening. The groups also were able to reflect on wider issues which has become more apparent overtime. In the original workshops, one participant commented on the '*significance that some people were not present at the residentials'*[44] such as members of groups such as the Orange Order or the police. This again arose as a pressing issue of concern and one which reflected the importance of striving for a more inclusive approach even if this is challenging. The exploratory nature of the walking methodology was seen as one way to open up a dialogue.

Another had raised the issue of addressing unresolved trauma that is omnipresent in some interface communities: '*If you are living that every day as a child who has no living memory, you can imagine the trauma being absorbed, it becoming a very narrow view, very little possibility of creating a bigger story, if you are just hearing a single narrative*'[45]. This concern for the intergenerational impact of division and its reflection in the environment remerged as an ongoing and enduring theme beyond the lifetime of the project. Overall, the groups agreed on the simple importance of '*just connecting people*'[46] through multiple and imaginative ways as a counteraction against entrenched spatial division. Evaluation of the project pointed to new understandings of interface areas within the participants and with those who had been engaged in the project more generally. This manifested in developed connections, new lines of communication and a demystification of geographic spaces explored. It is important to state that the data in this paper was drawn from individuals and communities at a particular juncture in Northern Ireland's peacebuilding journey. Ongoing debates such as the outworking's of the Brexit referendum, the British government legislation on dealing with the past and ongoing reframing of boundaries and identities means that these individuals and their communities are again engaging in making sense of place and space on multiple levels as the political environment shifts and changes.

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[40] Ibid
[41] Participant in North Belfast residential
[42] Participant in North Belfast residential
[43] Ibid
[44] Participant in Belfast residential
[45] Participant in Derry residential

Conclusion

This paper has sought to elucidate the outworking of sensemaking scales of perception, interpretation and action undertaken by community actors in the contexts of interface spaces in Northern Ireland. It has done so by exploring their experiences by facilitated 'walking' of groups through of their own spaces and that of the 'other,' and the exploration of these experiences through mapping exercises, dialogue and storytelling. In this it has set out to understand better discourse surrounding shared and segregated space and the associated territorialization, ownership and cultural, social, and physical appropriation of space through a new lens of sensemaking. One of the most significant understandings to emerge was the relationship between a 'demystification' of other's space and the physical movement of the walking methodology. The embodied experiences and encounters allowed participants to 'make sense' of what they knew and did not know about these spaces. By engaging in the process of perception, interpretation and action, information was both newly selected and retained, allowing them to come to a shared understanding of previously contested ideas and experiences and the possibility of revised decision making (Kramer ,2017). The physicality of the urban environments and the engagement of the groups with the reality allowed participants to make sense of space differently, challenging preconceptions about contested places and transforming attitudes about space through sharing experiences and ideas.

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[46] Participant in Portadown residential

Public memory, and representations of it within interface communities happens when stories of the past are captured and put into vessels (murals, gardens, textbooks) defining the landscape and requiring those who inhabit those environments to navigate around it. By allowing a process of 'restructuring' groups were able to reinterpret their experiences and explain the decision-making of themselves and others, allowing fresh possibilities for future action (Boden, 1994; Brown et al., 2015). It has also sought to extend traditional conceptualizations of sensemaking in organizations to a focused examination of attitudes to geographical space in a divided society. In doing so it has illuminated how individuals and groups 'sense make' and has identified the utility of a 'connecting methodology' as a way to instigate individuals to make, break and give sense to themselves and others around issues of past contestation and current disputes. Finally, it explicates how these interventions can occasion transitional thinking and new movement through a contested space an important contribution to those working and living in divided societies. In doing so, it illustrates how an understanding of sensemaking can allow us to think anew about the experiences of individuals and communities living with division. We suggest that walking methodologies can serve as catalysts for enacted sensemaking and that such sensemaking has the potential in turn, to facilitate conflict transformation in contested spaces. In the cases described here, we see communities that are fragmented internally and in relation to wider social and spatial environments making sense of their own experiences and giving sense to others. This process of connection and linkage that took place would seem to provide one approach to close enduring schisms of space and place.

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