

Shared Space

*A research journal on peace, conflict and community
relations in Northern Ireland*

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Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

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Shared Space is a multi-disciplinary research journal addressing themes of peace, conflict and community relations in Northern Ireland. The Journal is owned and published by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, a registered charity established in 1990. The aim of *Shared Space* is to publish current and recent academic research on the themes of peace, conflict and community relations in Northern Ireland. While the publishers may solicit articles from those who are currently engaged in or have recently completed relevant research, approaches from others will be considered on application to the Editor.

Any views expressed in *Shared Space* are those of the authors of the articles and do not necessarily represent those of the Community Relations Council.

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Introduction

Building a shared future in Northern Ireland will require learning from the experience of what sustains division and what works in helping to remove it. Many of the research articles in this third issue of *Shared Space* seek to assist in that learning by documenting good practice and setting out recommendations for future action.

The first article, by Robin Wilson, is based on research involving 37 interviews conducted with community relations practitioners in eight organisations in the voluntary and community sector. The organisations chosen represent a wide range of types but all have considerable experience and track record in the field of reconciliation. The elements of good practice identified by the author include having a compelling ethos, supporting effective dialogue, achieving wider impacts and mending the social fabric. The resulting picture is a positive one with much having been achieved. There is a call, however, for greater support for this work from Government and other funders. There is also an awareness of the frustrations and limitations for reconciliation work of stalemate in the political system, even if the stories told by the interviewees might suggest a new political culture in the making.

A second article, by Katy Radford, looks at the specialist area of support work for victims and survivors. In particular the research examines the role of music as a form of therapy. Drawing on two earlier music-related projects funded by the Community Relations Council the author suggests that music is currently a greatly under-used and under-resourced therapeutic tool that could be better used to address the legacy of conflict and to act as a tool for reconciliation. She argues that as a therapy music does not rely on language for communication and has an appropriateness within a sector where contested narratives have been found to block some forms of group and therapeutic work.

The work being done to reduce tension at interface areas has been the subject of much research. In this issue of *Shared Space* Neil Jarman of the Institute for Conflict Research looks at the variety of community-based initiatives known as community policing. These range from the mobile phone networks, established to enable community activists to monitor and respond to interface tensions and disorder, to the use of observers, monitors, stewards and marshals at parades and other points of tension. These have often developed as forms of peacebuilding rather than policing. Over time these community-based initiatives, which have increasingly operated with the knowledge and support of the police, have developed local capacity and ability to reduce tension and conflict. The approach has moved beyond ‘fire-fighting’ and is now producing dialogue and discussion within and between communities. This is recognised as a valuable element of conflict reduction and order management in many parts of Northern Ireland, although, as the author says, whether this is a feasible long term answer to the issue of policing and community safety is a matter for discussion.

Mary Delargy’s article on multiculturalism in schools in Derry attempts to identify good practice among teachers across a range of schools in the area. While the immediate need in schools where pupils are of diverse ethnic backgrounds is to overcome the problem of teaching children who do not have English as their first language, her research found that teachers in the study showed enthusiasm for weaving the idea of diversity and difference into various aspects of the curriculum. More research needs to be done in this area and extending good practice will involve developing more teacher training opportunities to address the issues involved. The development of inter-school networks, home-school liaison and contact with external organisations are among the key recommendations of the author.

Derry/Londonderry is also the subject of the final article by a group of academics from both local universities. Commissioned by St. Columb’s Park House Reconciliation Centre the research sought to investigate perceived alienation and political marginalisation among the Protestant population of Derry/Londonderry. The research found that although the demographic decline of the Protestant population in the city had halted and that the majority of Protestants worked in predominantly Catholic workplaces, and were content to do so, there remains a general mood among the city’s Protestants of uncertainty and discontent leading to a powerful but complex sense of

alienation. The researchers have stated that comprehensive and collective planning is required to place the local community on a more progressive and confident future. They suggest the establishment of a series of theme-based Delivery Alliances leading to an agreed strategy. Action on these recommendations has already begun.

The articles in *Shared Space* establish the value of scientifically based research as a means of reaching a better understanding of the nature of conflict in Northern Ireland and, importantly, the measures that could or are being taken to address that conflict. We hope that as a result good community relations practice will be more widely adopted and disseminated.

Ray Mullan

Editor

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