

# 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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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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## Notes on Contributors

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# Introduction

The recent high profile international investment conference in Northern Ireland and the focus in the Programme for Government on economic development marks a new optimism that the Troubles are now behind us. Much indeed has been achieved in terms of restoring devolution and creating normal politics in place of violence and communal conflict. However much remains to be done to create a shared society which is able to address with maturity issues of diversity and division. In this issue of Shared Space we look at some of the recent research which may help inform us in doing so.

Fears have been expressed that high achieving young people who leave Northern Ireland to study elsewhere are less likely to come back, particularly if they are Protestant. Existing statistics do show that the majority of students at both of Northern Ireland's universities are Catholic and that the majority of those who go outside Northern Ireland to study are Protestant. Statistics also suggest that those who go outside Northern Ireland to study are less likely to return.

However, Dirk Schubotz, Director of the Young Life and Times Survey at ARK, takes issue with this view of a Protestant 'brain drain'. He points out that while young people going outside Northern Ireland to study may not immediately return the statistics do not measure whether or not they do eventually return after a period of living and working outside Northern Ireland. Moreover, the statistics only measure those leaving for formal study and not other reasons.

Using attitude surveys of 16 year olds Dirk Schubotz's article attempts to paint a fuller picture of the intentions of young people. It concludes that overall Protestants are more likely to want to stay in Northern Ireland than Catholics and also more likely to plan to come back if they leave. Significantly those most likely to want to leave Northern Ireland for good were those who did not have a strong identification as either Protestant/unionist or Catholic/nationalist. The traditional communal divisions themselves would seem to be a major factor in persuading young people to leave.

The sectarian divisions within the community are the subject of two articles from the Institute for Conflict Research (ICR). The first, by its Director, Neil Jarman, looks at the interface barriers in Belfast. These include not only the 41 security barriers, or so-called 'peace walls', erected over the course of the Troubles on the direction of the Northern Ireland Office, but also other less formal barriers that are designed to keep communities apart. In total 82 were identified. While these create some security reassurance to local residents they also effectively create barriers to movement and interaction across communities and further segregate and divide.

Although there have been many improvements in recent years in reducing tension at the interfaces and in building relationships between communities who live there, the physical barriers remain. An attitude survey carried out in a number of interface areas across the city, commissioned by Trina Vargo, revealed that most residents felt safer because of the existence of the walls and were opposed to their immediate removal. However, there was also a recognition of the negative impact of the barriers in maintaining tension and antagonism and, encouragingly, most people in the survey wanted the walls to come down when it was safe to do so. How the conditions could be created that would allow that to happen needs to be the focus of further debate.

A second ICR article looks at the impact of segregation and sectarianism on everyday life and uses as a case study Castledearg and Newtownstewart, two small rural towns in west Tyrone. Both towns are marked by a high degree of residential segregation between Protestant and Catholic areas, although this is more marked in Castledearg than in Newtownstewart. In both towns segregation of young people in their school years was very apparent and there was peer pressure against making friends in the other community, reinforced by the visibility of different school uniforms during the school week. There was also wider evidence of social segregation, particularly in Castledearg where the perceived geographic division influenced where people felt they could socialise, shop and use banking facilities. Despite this however there is some evidence that inter-community relations had improved over the years and that there was an increased willingness for shoppers to consider factors other than the perceived community background of the shop owners in their choice of shops.

Whether highly polarised communities are prepared to engage effectively in conflict transformation remains an important question. It is one which is addressed by Lee Smitley in regard to organisations within the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community. In an article based on his interviews conducted in the summers of 2005 and 2006, together with other research, he

assesses efforts being made through work on parades, murals, bonfires, commemorations and Ulster Scots events to modify cultural expression within grassroots unionism. Part of the aim of such ‘single identity’ projects is to reframe unionist identity in a way that makes it more palatable to others, and also to prepare individuals and groups for undertaking dialogue and building coalitions. To that extent it enables cross-community co-operation and is part of conflict transformation. But as the author points out, there are pitfalls in this approach. For the community relations promise of cultural traditions work to be met historical explorations will eventually have to be shared across ethnic divides.

As we seek to recover from the violence and conflict of the Troubles and build a more shared society the healing process becomes crucial. Katy Radford and Sara Templer in their article look at the experience of the victims and survivors of the Troubles and those who work with them. The community-based groups that make up the Victim Sector are diverse in size and capability and rely very much on the strength of individual relationships. The authors highlight the pivotal role of women as resourceful and resilient community carers, project co-ordinators, activists and educators from all communities, resolute in their commitment to establish a better and shared future. It is important that their role is acknowledged and supported.

Finally, we include an article from Chris Gilligan, Paul Hainsworth and Aidan McGarry based on research conducted at the University of Ulster on the attitudes of our politicians to ethnic minorities. In the increasingly ethnically diverse Northern Ireland there have been calls by minority ethnic organisations for politicians to go beyond moral condemnation of racist attacks and deliver policies and resources on the ground. This may require them to challenge the racial prejudice of some of their supporters. Encouragingly, the research suggests that the elected representatives (in all parties) are less likely than their party supporters to say that they are prejudiced against ethnic minorities. The questionnaire and survey results are open to differing interpretations, however, as the authors discuss; but as we try to create a shared society respectful of difference and diversity it is important that our political representatives are pointing in the right direction.

**Ray Mullan**

*Editor*

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