Adapting to Difference: Organisational Socialisation in the Northern Ireland Workplace

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Introduction

Segregation permeates much of the social fabric of NI, affecting most institutions such as housing, education, and sport.[1] Over 98% of public housing in the city of Belfast is segregated along religious lines, in that 90% or more of the residents belong to the same religious grouping; integrated schools educate only about 7% of the total school population; and, issues of religion and national identity permeate many sports. As noted by Jarman[2] 'Segregation, polarisation and social division are endemic within Northern Ireland society'. Sectarian schisms have also caused problems in the workplace.[3]

One of the most comprehensive studies into how sectarianism has affected attitudes to the workplace was conducted on unemployed young people from interface areas in Belfast.[4] Here, it was shown that difficulty and/or reluctance to secure employment, particularly long-term employment, was commonplace amongst these young people. Those from either side of the interface had little contact, if any at all, with members from the other community. They suffered from 'bubble syndrome' in that they seldom left their own immediate area, where they felt safe and secure.

Young people from these disadvantaged areas of Belfast who obtain employment will find themselves in organisations that comprise a mixed workforce or even a majority workforce from the young person's religious community outgroup. Stringent anti-discrimination legislation means that there is a legal imperative on large employers to recruit a balanced workforce and to ensure that no employee suffers from sectarian abuse. As a result,

individuals from the two communities work side by side in private and public sector companies. However, while corporations have formal procedures in place to prevent and deal with sectarianism, more research is required into what actually happens within organisations when those from the two communities actually meet and interact. Given the scale and depth of segregation that still exists between the two communities, especially in Belfast, the issue of how they manage the process of communication in contexts such as the workplace, requires further examination. Few studies have focused on cross-community divisions and the direct effects of the intergroup schism on relations in the workplace in Northern Ireland.

The main aim of this research was therefore to investigate how and in what ways neophyte employees, especially those from segregated areas, learn to adapt and accommodate to a mixed workplace. Organisations are inherently rule-based regulatory social systems.[5] Although individual and collective behaviours are determined by these rules and regulations, it is also the case that individuals have personal needs, skills and aspirations, which can be in conflict with the organisations' goals and beliefs. The difficulty faced by the new employee is to identify what represents acceptable behaviour within the organisation, and this is where organisational socialisation, or enculturation, is important.[6]

When neophytes enter a new workplace, to be effective they must learn and display the behaviour, attitudes, and values that are prevalent in that setting. In their study of organisational socialisation, Haski-Laventhal and Bargal (2008) identified three transitional stages of enculturation. An anticipatory or early socialisation stage when people are preparing to join the organisation; an accommodation stage where the neophytes begin to learn what is expected of them; and, an adaptation stage when the person has become a fully operational member of the organisation. In arguing for more research in this field, Haski-Laventhal and Bargal showed how most research focused on the pre-entry stage, whereas the most important stage of socialisation frequently happens after one enters the workplace.

While the processes of organisational learning and adaptation cover a variety of "soft"[7] organisational aspects, undoubtedly the issue of sectarian difference is one that is particularly pertinent for Northern Ireland corporations, particularly those that recruit from interface areas of Belfast. Two core issues emerge here. Firstly, it may be the case that the young recruit has never had any prior workplace experience. Secondly, research indicates that many such young people have had little or no previous cross-community contact.[8]

In a study of cross-community relations in the Northern Ireland workplace, Hargie, Dickson and Nelson (2005) expressed their surprise at the lack of research in general regarding the effects of culturally divided workplaces on human relationships. They found that although intergroup communication was reasonably good across the Northern Ireland organisations studied, tensions from outside tended to reverberate in the workplace. Organisations therefore need to make more effort to minimise, if not pre-empt, the impact of community tensions in their work sites. In order to achieve this goal it is necessary to understand the processes of organisational socialisation and assimilation. The research reported in this paper, which was part of a larger investigation[9], was therefore designed to address three key objectives:

1. To ascertain how and in what ways aspects of community group difference are communicated in the workplace.

2. To uncover the means whereby acceptable methods for dealing with difference are learned and assimilated by neophyte employees.

3. To establish the relationship between formal and informal organisational processes for regulating cross community interaction.

Methods

A qualitative methodology, employing deep-probe semi-structured interviews[10] was employed to educe detailed accounts of actual experiences described by participants. In this instance they enabled the researchers to obtain a multi-layered understanding of the way information pertaining to contentious issues is communicated to employees. This method helps to elicit unanticipated information as well as documenting in detail the personal meanings attached to experiences[11]. Questions were designed to ascertain how information around community group difference was communicated to and received by employees, and secondly to establish the relationship between formal and informal organisational processes regulating cross-community interaction.

Sample

The focus of this study was employees of organisations who employ people living in interface areas of Belfast. While there is a degree of confusion over the exact number of interface barriers in Belfast[12], the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has identified areas where they have erected physical barriers. At

the time of this study, some 27 NIO-built physical barriers marked clear interface boundaries between Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist communities in Belfast. Based upon this knowledge, employing organisations within both the public and private sectors were identified as being likely employers of people from these areas.

A previous investigation by the research team involved employers that recruited from interface areas[13]. Many of these organisations expressed a willingness to be involved in future research and were therefore approached and invited to take part in this investigation. The Belfast Telegraph's "Top 100 Companies" was also used to select the remaining corporations. Organisations were recruited from both the public and private sector in Belfast. The research team also sought a wide range of corporations, including manufacturing, IT, call centre, health organisations, government and retail centres.

Purposeful sampling was adopted to identify suitable participants. Two separate categories of employees were included, to obtain valuable insights from complementary angles:

- *Neophytes*: young people (18-24 years) who had been employed in their current organisation for less than two years;
- *Established employees*: people employed in their current organisation for five years or more.

A list of postcodes that mapped onto areas identified as interface areas was formulated and provided to employers. For reasons of data protection, it was necessary for employers to select potential participants themselves. The contact person in each organisation selected from their database employees who fitted the criteria given and sent them a letter inviting them to take part in the study. The recruitment of participants took account of equality issues in terms of a balance of gender and religion. Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the participants, by religious denomination and location, as well as employee status and gender, while Table 3 describes the participating organisations.

Table 1 Religion, gender and employee status of participants

	Catholics	Protestants	Others	Total
Neophytes	12	16	2	**30**
Established Employees	22	28	1	**51**
Total	***34***	***44***	***3***	***81***
Males	18	19	1	**38**
Females	16	25	2	**43**
Total	***34***	***44***	***3***	***81***

Table 2 Location of participants

	North Belfast	West Belfast	South Belfast	East Belfast	Total
Neophytes	9	7	5	9	**30**
Established Employees	15	11	17	8	**51**
Total	***24***	***18***	***22***	***17***	***81***
Males	8	8	14	8	**38**
Females	16	10	8	9	**43**
Total	***24***	***18***	***22***	***17***	***81***

Table 3 - Details of employers, number of employees and proportion of Protestant and Catholic employees

Organisation	Industry	No. of Employees	Proportion of Protestants and Catholics
Organisation 1	Call Centre (Private)	1000-2000	P:60/C:40
Organisation 2	Retail (Private)	500-1000	P:50/C:50
Organisation 3	Government (Public)	<2000	P:50/C:50
Organisation 4	Transportation company (Private)	201-300	P:60/C:40
Organisation 5	Educational establishment (Private)	<2000	P:50/C:50
Organisation 6	Health organisation (Public)	500-1000	P:40/C:60
Organisation 7	Construction (Private)	50-100	P:50 / C:50
Organisation 8	Hotel (Private)	50-100	P:50/C:50
Organisation 9	IT company (Private)	500-1000	P:60/C:40
Organisation 10	Manufacturing (Private)	1000-2000	P:70/C:30

Procedures

Once participants agreed to take part, a time was allocated to carry out the interview in a private room in their workplace. The research was then explained in detail and a brief outline of the topics to be discussed was provided. The participants were asked for their permission to record the interview on a mini-disc player and were assured that, once transcribed, the tapes would be destroyed. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Ulster.

Results

Only two participants raised the issue of working with people from a different background as a potential source of worry. The vast majority did not mention this and furthermore, when this was put to them, dismissed it as a potential cause of concern. Almost all of the employees said that, before starting their current job, they were appreciative of the fact that they would be working in a diverse environment. Only a few indicated that going to a mixed workplace had given them any cause for concern. However, this absence of concern was not due to a dearth of knowledge or understanding, but rather was mainly the result of them having had prior experience of mixed work environments and hence, holding a perception that such diversity was normal:

> *I wouldn't say that there's anywhere in Northern Ireland you wouldn't come across a mixed environment, so it's something you don't even think about now (Male, P, NB, neophyte)*

Interestingly, a slightly larger proportion of neophytes (55%) as compared to established employees (45%) felt adequately prepared to work in a diverse environment prior to entering their new workplace. Perhaps this is an illustration of how cross-community relationships have changed in Northern Ireland over the past few years. A few respondents also raised the positive influence of their upbringing as an explanation for feeling prepared to work in a diverse organisation:

> *Since I was in primary school I've been going to mixed schools…A lot of my friends were Protestants, a lot of my friends were Catholics, a lot of my friends were Muslim, and everything. I would not look at somebody and wonder if they're Protestant or Catholic. To me it's neither here nor there (Female, P, SB, neophyte)*

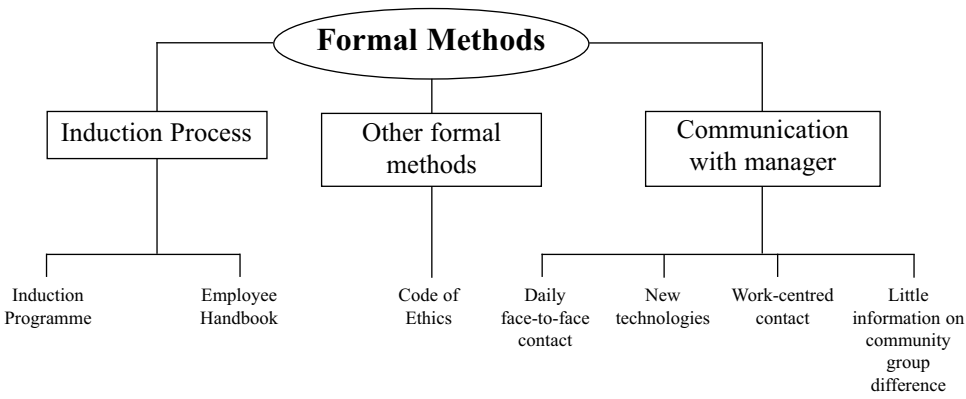
On the other hand, another respondent who regarded herself as not being appropriately prepared to work in a disparate environment explained that she had never worked with people from different backgrounds before, although despite this, she further indicated that she felt enthusiastic about it:

> *I guess in terms of preparation I was not prepared because I'd never done it before. So it was just a kind of a case of have a go and see how it goes (Female, other, SB, neophyte)*

The next stage of the interview process examined how employees looked for and received, both formally and informally, the information they needed to deal with this potentially difficult context. Several formal methods were identified for communicating information on issues pertaining to community group difference. As shown in Figure 1, these fell into three main categories:

- *induction process* (including the induction itself, the employees' Handbook and other training);
- *code of ethics*;
- employees' *communications with their manager.*

Figure 1 - Summary of formal communication of information relating to community group difference



The utility of the induction process was not always obvious when talking to respondents. With the exception of a minority of respondents who could not remember whether or not there was an induction on their first day, some 80% recalled or had some recollection of the induction process. Although it would have been anticipated that established employees would be less likely to remember the induction, surprisingly it was the newest employees who had most difficulty with recall. With the exception of one employee, the induction was conducted on the premises on the day of their arrival. The induction lasted anything between *"a quick chat with my supervisor" (Male, P, EB, neophyte)* and two days. The majority (60%) stated that they had received no information on community group difference during induction. Most said that they would have liked to have received information on this dimension.

On the whole, respondents were not overly impressed with the information received regarding information on community group difference. Several mentioned that they did not actually learn anything about the company's policies during induction. The great majority did not feel better equipped after the induction to deal with community group difference issues. Interestingly, a few indicated that they did not particularly feel the need to have any more preparation, as they believed that they were sufficiently prepared prior to their arrival in the new organisation.

Some three-quarters of interviewees stated that they received an employee Handbook. The remainder either did not receive one or could not remember receiving one. The majority (90%), regardless of age and religion, admitted to not having read the Handbook at all or having only flicked quickly through it. A few regarded it as a tool of reference and would read it only if and when they needed to, after an incident occurred.

Since a majority had not read the Handbook, it was difficult to gain a picture of whether or not they believed it contained any information on community group difference. The most common answer (70%) was that they could not recall any information on these issues. An analysis of these Handbooks revealed that most organisations actually did include some information on community group difference, such as a policy on sectarian harassment. However, when asked whether or not they were aware of what would happen in a case of sectarian harassment, only 12 respondents (14%) could confidently state the procedure.

A few mentioned that they received further training regarding issues on community group difference during the months and years after their arrival. In two of the companies, employees were required to fill in a questionnaire (Code

of Ethics). Interestingly, most were not able to say precisely what it entailed, underlining perhaps a certain low level of interest in and impact of the exercise. Some were more precise in their description:

> *Last year, we had an Ethics course… that everyone had to do online…It was all questionnaires, asking you about religion, different things, not just religion, about gay people, racism, everything like that (Female, C, NB, established employee)*

Other formal methods for receiving information on community group difference included a monthly newsletter, notice boards and website.

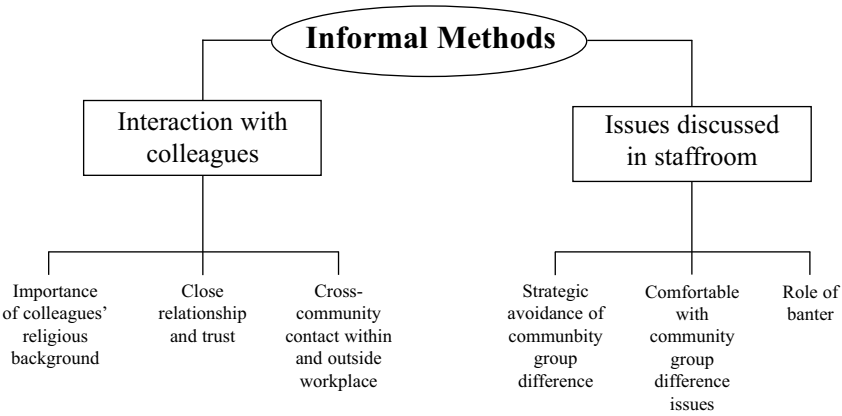
The relationship between employees and managers was another formal channel through which information on community group difference was communicated. Participants perceived a gap (a "them and us" dichotomy) between managers and themselves. Most regarded their communications with managers as being definitely formal and task-centred. A majority (60%) felt that managers were not aware of personal issues concerning employees and therefore were not able to deal with them. As a result, some (mostly established employees) further asserted that they did not trust their managers:

> *Well you talk to your manager about work. Obviously there's still that "them and us" problem on the shop floor, so you would trust your colleagues before you would trust your manager (Male, C, NB, established employee)*

In addition, they preferred to go to their colleagues rather than their managers when they needed to get information about important matters. As for issues relating to community group difference, a majority felt that they received very little or no such information from managers. They believed that managers tended to "*brush such issues under the carpet*" instead of being proactive and talking about them.

As shown in Figure 2, the informal communication of information relating to community group difference revolved around two main areas: *interaction with colleagues* and *issues discussed in the staffroom*.

Figure 2 - Summary of informal communication of information relating to community group difference



When asked whether they knew the religious background of their fellow employees, the general consensus was that they could rapidly and confidently ascertain this, from their names or through informal personal conversations. A few also mentioned that, not only was it something that they could guess or learn, but also that it was almost impossible to escape religious issues and to not be aware of them:

> *I learned early on, it's one of the things that you have to know early-ish. (Female, Other, SB, neophyte)*

At the same time, a substantial minority (a quarter) claimed not to know the religious backgrounds of their colleagues. The extent to which this reflects social desirability (i.e. not wanting to be perceived as someone who is interested in such issues) is of course a matter for conjecture. These employees further claimed that they had no desire to gain such awareness. They expressed the explicit view that the religion of their colleagues had nothing to do with work, and therefore there was no reason to seek to acquire such information. Indeed, the overriding view was that religion was not something to which great attention was paid and this lack of interest was attributable to already encountering diversity in many parts of everyday life:

> *To be honest, I'm the kind of person that doesn't bother with this… I also play football for a mainly Catholic team, so I'm very aware of it. That doesn't bother me in the slightest. It's not something that I would think about (Male, P, WB, neophyte)*

On the whole, respondents across all organisations were positive about their relationships with colleagues. A large majority (80%) indicated that some of their fellow employees, from both religious backgrounds, were also friends. This was for two main reasons. Firstly, they had got to know one another quite well over a period of time. Secondly, they believed that they could discuss and share both work and personal issues with them. They were more likely to trust their close colleagues rather than their managers. A large majority of participants (80%) indicated that their peers were the people they would trust the most.

When asked whether they mixed with employees from a different religious background in the workplace, all but two participants responded in the affirmative. Interestingly, those who claimed that they did not know the religious background of their colleagues were among the employees who stated that they mixed with people from different religions in the workplace. The two employees who did not appear to mix with people from different backgrounds were neophytes. One indicated regret at this:

> *I feel bad about this. I would say most of the people I have contact with are Protestant. I know this from talking to them. I don't honestly speak to Catholic people in here, I don't why to be honest, maybe 'cause the office has more Protestants than Catholics? (Female, P, NB, neophyte)*

Once employees left the mixed working environment and went home to their generally more segregated areas, a significant proportion (over half) admitted that they tended to socialise mostly or only with people from their own community. The remainder stated that they would socialise with friends from the other community. The interviews revealed that many developed an informal network in the workplace. Employees at the same level tended to "stick together", work well together and become friends. Managers were left out of this network. Not only did their workmates provide information that they felt their managers could not offer, but interestingly they also were, in most cases, the first person they would turn to if they were the victim of a sectarian incident in the workplace.

Although interviewees stated that they were comfortable working with people from different religious backgrounds, the general trend was that a large majority (90%) did not speak about community group difference issues whilst in the workplace and, furthermore, did not feel happy about these types of issues being brought into the conversation. The main reason for the strategic avoidance of these issues was that respondents were afraid of creating and

fuelling arguments which could turn into potentially damaging conflicts:

> *It's never really come up for me anyway, it's not a problem, it's never discussed. Maybe that's why it's never a problem (Male, P, EB, neophyte)*

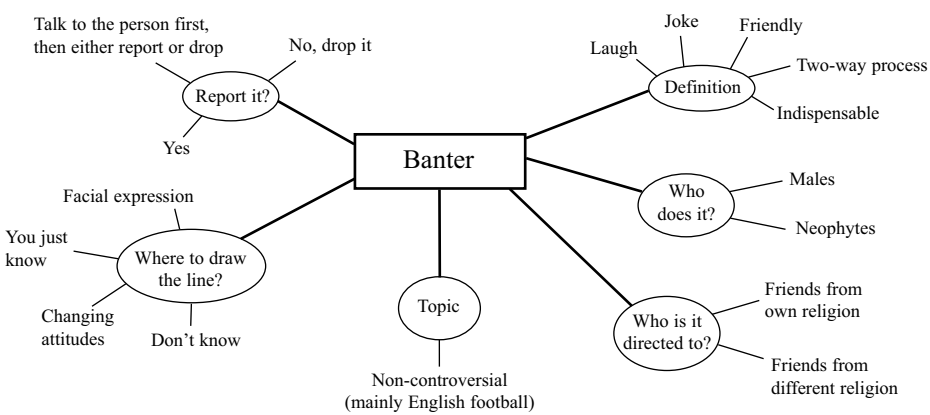
This response highlights a view held by many that avoiding any discussion of politico-religious issues would contribute to an argument-free workplace. Rather than running the risk of creating an uncomfortable or potentially explosive situation, they preferred to avoid talking about these types of issues altogether. A minority (10%) stated that they were comfortable discussing politico-religious topics. The main reason provided for this view was that their colleagues' religious or political background did not pose an issue for them, and therefore they believed that they should not be restricted in their choice of conversational topic:

> *I don't care about their religion. We're all the same. Why should we not talk about it? (Male, P, SB, neophyte)*

A substantial minority (30%) believed that talking about community group difference issues, even though not all of them actually engaged in this at the time, would be beneficial and positive and would help them get to know their colleagues better.

One recurring theme was the key role of banter in workplace communication. Banter occurred in most organisations and was most prevalent among men and among neophytes. Figure 3 gives a summary of the characteristics of banter emerging from the respondents.

Figure 3 - Characteristics of banter



When asked what they believed the word "banter" meant, the consensus was that it was a form of humour. Another common defining feature was that banter was regarded as very much a two-way process. Indeed one main difference between banter and sectarianism was that unlike banter, sectarianism was perceived to be a one-way process. All of the respondents found the line between when banter ceases to be innocuous and inoffensive and transmogrifies into a more serious and darker behaviour, such as sectarianism harassment or bullying, difficult to educe. The most recurrent comment here was "You just know", as if it was innate. Some indicated that they knew where to draw the line by looking at the other person's facial expressions and noticing that their attitude was changing, at which point they would stop the banter.

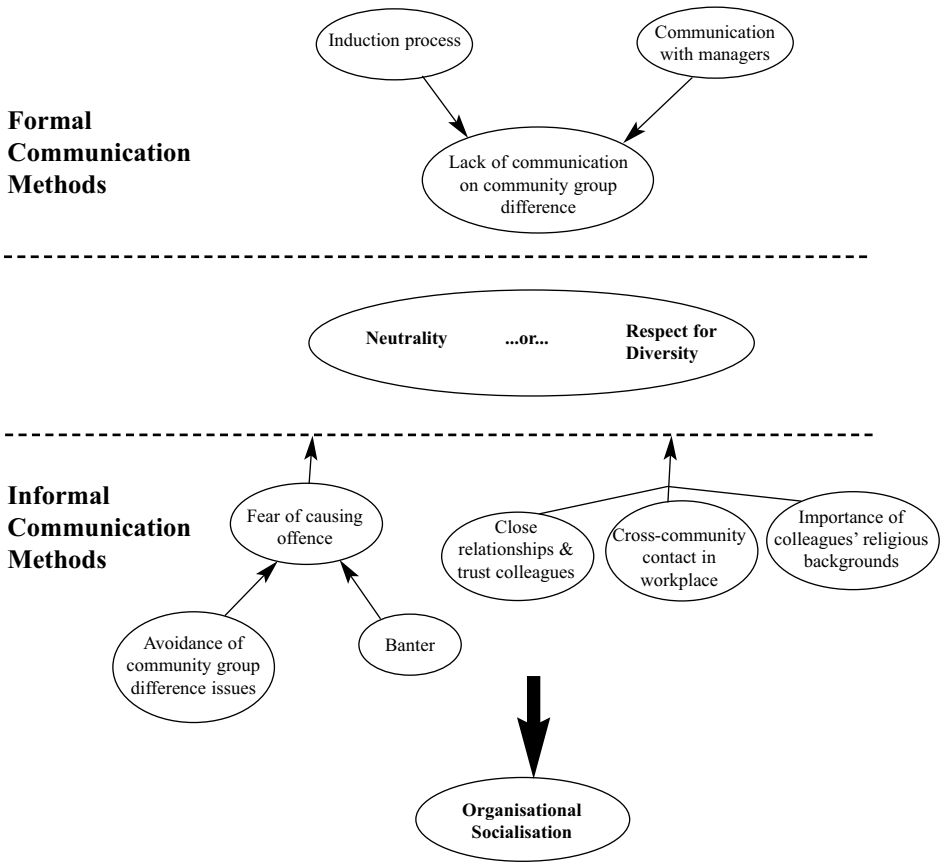
When asked what topics they tended to banter about, the most common theme was English football. Conversations involving the Scottish football teams Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers, and those concerning Northern Irish football tended to be avoided. The majority stated that they did not banter about political issues, in order to avoid potential tensions. Banter was also only used with people respondents considered as friends, as they would be less likely to take offence. A few claimed that they engaged in banter on political issues with colleagues from the other religious denomination, but again crucially, the colleague had to be regarded as a friend.

Whereas some interviewees considered banter as an indispensable feature of a "healthy" workplace environment, a small number (5%), believed that it could be counterproductive to a harmonious working atmosphere because of the conflict it might bring about. They stated that they would never engage in banter.

Discussion

A number of themes have been identified as contributing to organisational socialisation (Figure 4). It is clear that neutrality in the workplace is a key component in workplace enculturation. This emphasis on neutrality was communicated to employees both at the formal level (e.g. in the induction, Handbook and in communications from managers), and the informal level (e.g. employees indicating that they rarely discussed community group difference issues among themselves).

Figure 4 - Summary of emerging themes from findings



At the formal level, the theme of neutrality was highlighted by a lack of institutional communication on community group difference issues. Previous research has shown that taking up a new post can invoke considerable anxiety in newcomers[14], who have a myriad of issues to assimilate and understand at the "accommodation stage" as they enter the workplace. An effective induction programme can greatly facilitate this process. In the present study, most employees across all organisations questioned the utility of existing induction procedures. Indeed, the impression was that it was treated as a formality through which both parties (managers and employees) had to proceed, with no real learning involved. In particular, issues pertaining to

community group difference were rarely mentioned during induction. Yet, a significant minority of interviewees felt that they could benefit from a more proactive induction process which included discussion of political issues. Similarly, they believed that greater interaction with their managers on this topic could be beneficial.

At an informal level, respondents stated that they did not particularly want to ascertain their colleagues' religious background and claimed not to attach much importance to it. However, and in line with previous research[15], they admitted to engaging in what in Northern Ireland is the learned process of guessing an individual's religious affiliation. Although many claimed to have a network of friends from both communities both within and outside the workplace, most were still reluctant to engage in conversations about community group difference issues on the shop floor. The fear that to do so would raise tensions seemed to be the prevailing reason for this avoidance of potentially contentious issues. In theory, many believed that such discussions in their organisation could be beneficial. However, the existing practice was rather different.

The question, then, is whether or not this neutrality is the best way forward to achieve peaceful relations between employees from different religious backgrounds? Or is it the case that facilitation of conducive and structured discussions of community difference could achieve better understanding of such difference and promote a more inclusive working environment? The workplace provides a safe place for people from various religious backgrounds to work together. However, once employees from segregated areas go back home, it is more difficult for them to maintain this cross-community contact. So, perhaps providing proactive encouragement to share their views and experiences within the workplace, might be more beneficial than brushing issues under the carpet, as is the current practice. It should be noted, however, that the majority of respondents in this study did express support for the policy of neutrality at work.

Although banter was highlighted as a way of broaching contentious issues, respondents felt that it was only possible to do so with very close friends. Therefore, free expression of one's views and experiences is limited only to a small minority of colleagues, and almost always with those from the ingroup. Perhaps employers ought to provide more forums, both inside and outside the workplace, for employees to express, respectfully, views and experiences with a greater diversity of colleagues. This will not by any means be easy. As summarised by Morrow, Eyben and Wilson[16]:

"Generating a society where everybody is at ease rather than patrolled is an extremely delicate and difficult process, usually involving organisations learning to do what they have no previous experience of doing and therefore often have every inclination to avoid. What is important is the active development of settings within which people and organisations can learn to face these difficult issues, consciously developing new practice over time".

Recommendations

- Organisations have the potential to act as a vehicle for helping to move forward the process of peace and reconciliation. The workplace is, for many employees, one of the few locations where they can interact in a meaningful and ongoing way with those from the other community. In order to achieve best practice our research indicates that the following issues should be addressed:

- A reengineering of induction programmes is essential. At present, many employees perceive the induction programme as a procedure of "just going through the motions". This is unfortunate since research has shown that an effective induction process can have a major positive impact upon incoming staff.[17]

- The typical employee Handbook currently seems to serve no real purpose. This appears to be distributed as a matter of course, but it is then rarely read by the new employees. Companies need to examine the overall aim and specific functions of the Handbook, and make it both more accessible to and relevant for employees.

- As part of induction, issues pertaining to cross-community issues should be introduced. At the very least this should include information on the corporate policies and procedures in this area.

- Respondents perceived a clear "them and us" between employees and managers. In high-functioning organisations there is much greater harmony in management-employee relationships.[18] If managers do not have a radar for employee views then they will be unaware of impending problems. We would therefore recommend that companies devote much greater effort to training managers in communication.

- Issues pertaining to the use of banter should be investigated by organisations. Banter was actually banned by some of the companies in this study. We would commend to companies that banter should not be banned as it can be a positive force in relational development and maintenance. Rather, organisations should have a policy on what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of banter.

- Finally, we would recommend that all corporations introduce a system of auditing current practice on organisational communications, on an annual or biannual basis.

Note:
*The lead researcher on the project on which this research was based, Dr David Dickson, passed away on 24*th *May 2008. Dr Dickson was centrally involved in the research from its inception and was a wonderful source of insight and inspiration. He is remembered with great affection.*

Notes

1 Church et al., 2004; Hamilton, Bell and Hansson, 2008.
2 Jarman, 2005, p. 11.
3 Dickson and Hargie, 2006; Dickson, Hargie, O'Donnell and McMullan, 2008.
4 Hargie, Dickson and O'Donnell, 2006.
5 McAleese, 2005.
6 Moorehead and Griffin, 2001; Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo and Tucker, 2007; Taormina, 2008.
7 Rollinson and Broadfield, 2002, p. 567.
8 Hargie et al., 2006.
9 Dickson et al., 2008.
10 Downs, Hydeman and Adrian, 2000.
11 Millar and Tracey, 2006.
12 Jarman, 2008
13 Hargie et al., 2006.
14 Garavan and Murphy, 2001.
15 Hargie and Dickson, 2004.
16 2004, p.180.
17 McAleese, 2005.
18 Tourish and Hargie, 2004; Clampitt, 2005.

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