Is shared space really *shared*?

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There have been many attempts to solve Northern Ireland's problems over the last thirty years. The primary focus has been to increase the amount of intergroup contact between the two dominant groups (Protestant and Catholic) through developing shared space. Outlining a body of developing research, the present paper argues that shared space does not necessarily mean that groups interact in a meaningful way with one another. This is evidenced through data which examined intergroup behaviour in integrated secondary schools, further education college classes and a cross-community group in Northern Ireland. Results show that even in what is deemed as shared space, Protestant and Catholic young people remain highly segregated in homogenous groups at the individual level. The findings presented in this paper argue that shared space is not really *shared* in the true sense and suggests how this could be achieved as a way to improve intergroup relations in Northern Ireland.

Looking around every day spaces it is clear to see that individuals tend to spend time with those who are similar to themselves. This similarity could be anything from simply being from the same neighbourhood, having the same hair colour, attending the same sports club or being of the same gender, religious or ethnic background. This observation in itself is not surprising but is something which is often neglected when realistically considering the impact that developing shared space can have, especially amongst groups in conflict. This paper aims to outline the problems associated with shared space. Stemming from research in the U.S.A. and South Africa we will draw on several studies conducted in Northern Ireland which demonstrates that shared space is not necessarily shared in the truest sense.

Developing shared space to bring conflicted groups together

It is often assumed that the best way to improve intergroup relations in conflicted societies is to bring groups together in a shared environment. This is because political violence often results in high levels of segregation both at the societal and the individual level. Whilst bringing together groups may be

the first step to encouraging positive relations, there are a number of recommended conditions which should be met for meaningful interactions to occur. Firstly, it is argued that the groups involved should have common goals or interests. An example of this could be to complete a university degree or a school project. Secondly, groups involved should cooperate with one another and not be in competition so for example working on joint projects. Thirdly, there should be equal status between groups during the period of interaction such that no group is viewed as more important than the other and both have access to the same resources. Finally, the shared space should be socially and or institutionally supported. For example, integrated schooling now receives government funding.

The idea of bringing groups together, under these favourable circumstances, is something which is highly researched in the social psychological literature and has attained substantial empirical support. It has been shown that encouraging groups in conflict to spend meaningful time with one another can lead to positive changes in terms of intergroup attitudes and can facilitate friendship formation. Despite this, research in South Africa and the USA has shown that even in what is perceived as a shared space, groups often remain highly segregated in homogenous groups. As a result, shared space does not necessarily lead to meaningful encounters between groups. This is because the conditions required for the most successful group interactions are not necessarily facilitated in everyday life spaces where individuals interact with one another.

Lessons from the rainbow nation

Nelson Mandela's vision of a rainbow nation in South Africa has been a source of inspiration for many other societies. Following a series of processes leading to the end of Apartheid in the early 1990's it was hoped that the many racial groups in South Africa would learn to live together in harmony. Whilst studies have highlighted that attitudes of Blacks towards Whites and vice versa have improved over time this is not reflected when looking at the use of space. In fact, a plethora of studies in South Africa have shown that individuals remain highly segregated in racial clusters in a variety of everyday spaces. The idea of examining racial interactions 'on the ground' in South Africa stems from earlier research conducted in the USA in universities, churches and on bus usage. One of the most interesting studies examined racial group interactions on a beach in Scottburgh on the Kwa-Zulu Natal coastline. Over a series of observation points it was evident that even on

beaches Blacks, Whites and Indians remained highly segregated. More recently another fascinating study examined interracial interactions in bars and clubs on Long Street in Cape Town. This study also found high levels of group segregation even in the very informal setting of bars and clubs. A series of studies in educational settings including universities and schools in South Africa have further confirmed these findings demonstrating that even the youth are continuing to segregate along racial lines. Ironically, based on these findings, it would appear that South Africa truly does represent a rainbow nation; such that whilst in a space together these colours do not seem to overlap.

What we can learn from this research is that simply putting groups together does not mean that they will engage in meaningful interactions with one another at the individual level. It is suggested that the impact of shared space on intergroup relations may be reliant on the type of shared space.

Types of shared space

We suggest that there are three main types of shared space which individuals may encounter.

1. Naturally shared environments where there is no agenda to encourage groups to interact with one another. These include everyday spaces such as cafes, beaches, universities, the workplace and classrooms in colleges.

2. Policy driven shared environments where the stance is to encourage interaction and maintain integrated status such as integrated schools.

3. Field interventions where the favourable conditions for interaction to occur are generally met and facilitated over a short period of time. For example cross-community programmes.

Given these different types of shared space, it would be expected that some forms of shared space will be more effective than others. This is based on the assumption that group interactions which occur under the most favourable circumstances will lead to more positive outcomes for intergroup relations. We have examined whether this is true in a number of studies focusing on interactions between Protestant and Catholic youth in Northern Ireland.

Shared space interactions in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is a highly divided society. This is evident in almost every aspect of life including housing, schools, sports clubs, pubs and even shopping centres. As a direct consequence, it is often difficult for Protestant and Catholic inhabitants of Northern Ireland to come together or even find a shared space where they could interact if they wanted to. This is because even when there is a shared space, groups tend to interact with those who they feel more comfortable with, and due to the segregationist nature of Northern Ireland these people tend to be from the same religious community background. Unlike obvious racial differences in South Africa and the US, the categorisation processes in Northern Ireland are more subtle. Whilst group differences are not physiognomic, cues such as school, neighbourhood, name, accent and pronunciation of particular words or letters and even facial features can facilitate categorisation. Following this categorisation process of a person as either Protestant or Catholic, individuals can then decide whether they feel comfortable sharing space with this person. As previously outlined, research in South Africa and the United States has shown that even in naturally mixed settings groups can remain highly segregated at the individual level. The studies presented here were conducted in Northern Ireland and aimed to examine whether this phenomenon is true in a non-racially divided society. In a number of studies we examined interactions between Protestant and Catholic young people in a variety of different shared spaces including a further education college, integrated schools and a cross-community initiative. We will outline each of these studies in more detail as follows.

Study 1
Further Education College
Education in Northern Ireland is highly segregated with Protestant and Catholic young people often being educated separately. As a result young people often have little opportunity to come in contact with one another. Therefore, aside from integrated schooling, Further Education (FE) Colleges and Universities often represent the first setting for young people to mix with those from the other community. These settings, whilst being religiously mixed and offering a shared space, do not specifically aim to encourage Protestant and Catholic interactions. They therefore, represent a naturally shared space for young people to interact.

Aims
In our first study we examined Protestant and Catholic seating choice in three classes in an FE College. This was to determine whether Protestant and

Catholic young people interact in this naturally mixed space or whether, like previous studies in South Africa and the US, they remain highly segregated only evident through their observed behaviour.
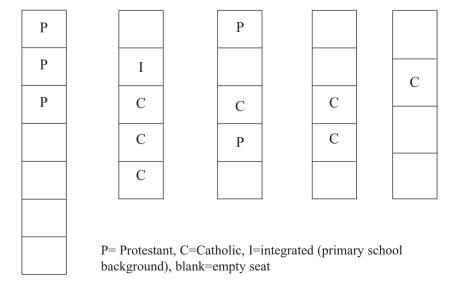
Sample and Procedure
We examined the seating choice of young people in three college classes at two time points, September and January. These time points were chosen because September is when young people start college, therefore preventing us from examining seating choice as a result of habit, and January is four months later allowing sufficient time for contact between the two groups to take place. To determine the religious identity of each student within the classroom a questionnaire was given out. Each questionnaire was numbered and then an outline of the seats in the classroom was drawn and mapped.

Analysis
Levels of segregation were examined using a statistical calculation called the aggregation index. This index determines whether segregation is more or less than what would be expected if the class was randomly assigned to seats (See Campbell paper in suggested reading for more information).

Figure 1. **Map of seating choices according to religious background in a further education college class at Time 1 (September).**

P= Protestant, C=Catholic, I=integrated (primary school background), blank=empty seat

Results

Behavioural observations demonstrated high levels of religious segregation despite the opportunity for Protestant and Catholic young people to spend time with one another over the four month measurement period. These findings demonstrate that providing a naturally shared space is not necessarily enough to result in the true sharing of space between Protestant and Catholic young people in Northern Ireland. This led us to consider whether policy driven contact would have a more positive outcome in terms of the use of space.

Study 2
Integrated education

The majority of young people in Northern Ireland attend religiously segregated schools. Whilst the integrated education system was developed in 1981, and has increased steadily since that time, it still only accounts for less than 10% of the entire school population. Although each integrated school differs, they do all have a policy of integration which one would expect would suggest that they encourage Protestant and Catholic children and young people to mix with one another.

Aims

The aim of our second study was to examine contact in integrated schools in Northern Ireland through an analysis of seating choice. We chose this setting because unlike FE colleges, integrated schools represent an environment where contact between Protestants and Catholics is actively encouraged.

Sample and Procedure

In a year-long study we conducted behavioural observations of the seating behaviour of pupils in three integrated secondary schools in Northern Ireland. We examined seating preference in terms of religious identity in September, January and June of the school year amongst pupils in Year 8 and Year 10.

Analysis

As in our analyses of seating patterns in the FE college we also used the aggregation index to examine the levels of segregation in the classrooms seated in rows (See Figure 2). For those classrooms with a cluster layout we used a measure of group unevenness (dissimilarity index) and a measure of the extent to which Catholics are exposed to Protestants (exposure interaction index). See Figure 3 for an illustrative example.
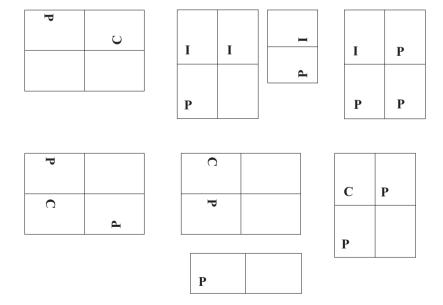
Figure 2. **Illustrative example of school classroom mapped according to pupils seating choice in terms of religious background.**

P= Protestant, C= Catholic, I= Integrated (primary school background)

P	**P**	**P**			
C	**P**	**P**	**C**	**I**	**I**
I	**C**	**I**	**I**	**I**	**I**
P	**P**	**P**			

Figure 3. **Illustrative example of school classroom mapped according to pupils seating choice in terms of religious background.**

P= Protestant, C= Catholic, I= Integrated (primary school background)

Results

Results show that the majority of classrooms were religiously segregated and further that these patterns tended to be consistent over time, from September to January to June. Interestingly, the levels of segregation between Year 8 and Year 10 classes were very similar. This is in contrast to the expectation that time spent at an integrated school would lead to more Protestant-Catholic friendships. This led us to consider whether Protestant and Catholic young people do truly share space and if it is necessary to do more than simply provide a space if groups are to interact in a meaningful way.

Study 3
Cross-community programme

Following the emergence of the recent conflict in Northern Ireland schemes were developed from the 1970s to take children away on holidays during the most fraught time of the year, the summer marching season. In recent years these schemes have continued to develop and now play a role in organising and facilitating workshops between Protestant and Catholic children and youth attending religiously segregated schools in Northern Ireland.

Aims
The aim of our third and final study was to examine whether young people remain segregated following contact with one another through a cross-community scheme.

Sample and Procedure
We examined Protestant and Catholic seating choice amongst two groups of young people attending a cross-community residential program. We analysed seating choice at the first and last group meeting.

Analysis
As in the previous studies we examined levels of segregation using the aggregation index.

Results
Observations at the beginning of the residential programme showed high levels of religious segregation whilst observations at the end of the residential programme showed this segregation had disappeared. This was accompanied by high levels of own religious group preference at the first group meeting which then was eradicated by the last group meeting. These findings show that

only shared space which actively encourages groups to interact with one another in a meaningful way can lead to behavioural and attitude changes, for the better.

Figure 4. **Illustrative example of meeting room showing more religious segregation than expected by chance.**

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P | C C C C C X C C C C C C C C C C C P P P X P P P P P
P |                                                     | X
P |                                                     | X
P |                                                     | X
P |                                                     | X
C |                                                     | D
C |                                                     | O
C |                                                     | O
X |                                                     | R
X |          Key                                        | P
C |                                                     | P
  |          P = Protestant                             | P
  |          C = Catholic                               | X
  |          X = Facilitator
P P D O O R X P P P P P P P P P P P P P P P
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Implications for developing shared space

The findings outlined from previous research in South Africa, the United States and ongoing research in Northern Ireland clearly demonstrates that shared space is not really shared in the truest sense. This was evidenced through high levels of Protestant and Catholic segregation in a variety of settings in Northern Ireland. Further, it was only in the shared space of a cross-community programme which encouraged meaningful interactions which led to behavioural change from more to less segregation than would be expected by chance. This demonstrates that we need to do more than simply put groups together in order to create a cohesive society. Most importantly it highlights that it is vital to be realistic in terms of what to expect from providing a shared space. Whilst our findings demonstrate that meaningful interactions may not be occurring in shared space we suggest that shared space is important if intergroup relations are to improve in Northern Ireland. This is because some

contact is better than no contact at all. We suggest that our research findings have important implications for research, policy and practice.

Firstly, research examining relations in conflicted societies should consider the impact of creating shared space on the ground, rather than focusing primarily on self-report measures. This is important because individuals tend to report the politically correct answers when asked questions relating to relations between groups in conflict. By examining behaviour as it occurs it is possible to examine true interactions between groups. Secondly, we suggest that it is important for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to work together to bridge the gap between what is happening on the ground and what appears in scientific journals. It is vital that we recognise the need to inform each other about what does, and does not, work when creating a shared space, so as to develop the most positive outcomes. Thirdly we argue that to facilitate this process we should be conducting serious evaluations of the effectiveness of different types of shared space using a variety of research approaches. This will help us to determine the most effective types of space. Finally we suggest that integrated schools and FE colleges should encourage interactions between Protestant and Catholic children and young people. For example especially in integrated schools teachers often place their class in a particular seating plan. This could be problematic especially when using alphabetical order as teachers may be inadvertently segregating their class along religious lines. This is because surnames in Northern Ireland are highly indicative of one group or the other. We therefore argue that teachers should actively encourage interactions rather than potentially restrict them by not allowing children and young people to form their own friendships within the classroom.

Conclusions

Based upon previous research in the United States and South Africa, and continuing research in Northern Ireland, we suggest that shared space is not really shared in the truest sense. This was evident in two studies which demonstrated that Protestant and Catholic young people remained highly segregated in school and college classrooms despite having potential to interact. Further our final study demonstrated that only space where meaningful group interaction was encouraged resulted in behavioural changes. This again argues the need for doing more than simply bringing groups together by creating a shared environment. It is important to note that we do not suggest that shared space should not be developed. Rather we conclude that it is important to be realistic when considering the impact that developing shared space can have, especially in societies with a history of conflict.

Suggested reading

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