

Differentiation, difference and denial: Drinking in divided societies

Peter Johnson

Introduction

Although Northern Ireland is attempting to move into a post-conflict era, the impact and legacy of the ‘Troubles’ still receive much attention. Aside from the tragic reality of death, injury and emotional trauma, the conflict continues, in varying degrees, to shape the attitudes and experiences of many young people. Children within the province are born into an already-existing political conflict and, accordingly, many live in segregated areas, attend segregated schools and occupy separate leisure spaces (Leonard, 2008). It is therefore not surprising that social problems within Northern Ireland are often understood and analysed against the backdrop of the wider political conflict and the conflict to peace transition (Higgins and McElrath, 2000, McElrath, 2004). More specifically, when it comes to investigating underage drinking patterns, research points out that it is the interplay between the teenage peer group and the wider societal context which influences the meanings young people attach to their behaviour (Honest et al., 2000, Pavis et al., 1997). Using these observations as a starting point, this article reflects upon the attitudes and experiences of 14-15 year old drinkers in Belfast, questioning whether underage alcohol consumption is indeed marked by an ethno-national imprint – a presumed part of growing-up in a divided society.

Northern Ireland remains a highly segregated society, with deeply entrenched divisions between the main, internally diverse, Protestant-Unionist and Catholic-Nationalist communal groupings. Sectarianism permeates the social formation on personal, social, political and economic levels (Connolly and Maginn, 1999). Studies have investigated the social-psychological impact of growing up in a divided society (Muldoon, 2004, Muldoon et al., 2000, Trew, 1992); the saliency of ethno-religious awareness (Connolly and Healy,

2003, Connolly and Maginn, 1999) and the on-going re-negotiation of sectarian identifications (Leonard 2006). Moreover, youth subculture within Northern Ireland is often expressed in highly sectarian forms (Bell, 1990; Jenkins 1983). However, the impact of the 'Troubles' may have had less of an effect than outsiders assume (Muldoon et al., 2000) and the intermittent, spatial nature of the conflict means that many will have no direct experience of violent political acts (Leonard, 2007). As such, when conducting research within Northern Ireland, it seems necessary to evaluate the extent to which the wider socio-political climate may intrude into the social issue under investigation, whilst appreciating the danger of over-interpreting and reifying communal division by awarding primacy to antagonistic binaries.

Background to the research

This research draws on focus-group discussions with 295 teenagers aged 14-15 years old from six schools in East Belfast and six schools in West Belfast. The schools reflected the religious, gender and class composition of teenagers in the area. The discussions were stratified by gender, with single-sex and mixed-sex groups, each ranging from six to eight teenagers. The research design was influenced by the theoretical paradigm contained within the 'New Sociology of Childhood', which prioritises the active agency and voice of the child (Prout and James, 1997). This is particularly significant because teenagers are subject to the definitional power of adults and are subsequently analysed according to the ways in which they have already been labelled (Griffin, 1993). Discussions were loosely based on a topic list and a set of pictorial prompts, but tended to be more directed by the participants. The data were analysed thematically, with broad themes emerging from the interplay between the initial topic list and the subsequent teenage narratives.

The drinking patterns which emerged from the research coincide with the 'adolescent drinking style' charted by Harnett et al. (2000). The vast majority of the respondents regularly consumed alcohol at the weekends, in parks or at house-parties. Drinking was a collective experience, organised and practised with the peer group. Large quantities were sometimes consumed over a short period of time and inebriation was a routine, although not inevitable, consequence. The subsequent body of this article discusses three themes, emerging from the focus group discussions, which grapple with the similarities and differences between broad Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist drinking orientations. The issues under consideration include: the extent to which sectarian identifications are mediated through notions of 'good' and 'bad' drinking styles, how territoriality impacts upon consumption location and the ways in which attitudes towards the police are

underpinned by generational tension. Throughout the discussion, speakers have been chosen in so far as they illustrate a common theme from the empirical data.

The impact of the Northern Irish socio-political climate upon underage drinking

1. Status differentiation

Drinking alcohol is woven into a wider process of in-group solidarity, as a means of cultivating and testing friendships as well as developing and displaying social identity. Drinking styles, activities and practices act as boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Amongst these Belfast teenagers, ethno-national identifications were mediated through ‘good’ and ‘bad’ drinking styles. Those from the ‘other side’ of the communal divide were believed to drink in an undesirable manner, trying ‘too hard’ to look ‘cool’ or ‘failing’ through incorrect clothing, physical appearance, accents or behaviour to create a favourable impression. The teenagers struggled to clarify the exact nature of these presumed differences between ‘their’ drinking styles and those of the ethno-national other, instead falling back upon vague, loose, taken-for-granted yet unspecified prejudices concerning the abnormality of the ‘other’. In this manner, the teenagers constructed their own group boundaries, using notions of cultural superiority and inferiority to delineate the dividing-line between communal collectivities. This process is illustrated by the following comment, where a Protestant girl casts aspersions on the authenticity of a group of Catholic girls’ drinking credentials:

Like the last time I was there in the Odyssey and stuff, there was wee girls that were Catholics and they were pretending to be drunk n all and pretending to be hard n all and we were just like, ‘Come on, wise up’. (Protestant girl)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Catholic respondents, as the following extract indicates:

Catholic boy 1: They [Protestants] act all like hard.

Catholic boy 2: They’ll like overact it [when drunk] or something.

Catholic boy 3: They’re just a bunch of fags.

These vague notions were entangled with implicit class undertones, with those associated with a different communal background automatically placed into a lower position within an unspecified status hierarchy. Indeed, when discussing the drinking behaviours of the 'other side', the following comments were reiterated by Protestant and Catholic teenagers alike, with each statement voicing a perceived characteristic of the ethno-national other:

He/she doesn't come from a good family.

His/her parents don't care about him/her.

Tramp, has family problems.

Stupid looking alcoholic.

Wants to look hard.

Stinking hood/steek/chav/reject.

In such a manner, group identity was defined in relation to an out-group, with the creation of the in-group intricately linked to the overwhelmingly negative stereotyping of an out-group (Jenkins, 1996). This reification of group identity is particularly heightened within divided societies due to the perception of threat, with costs and benefits associated with maintaining or rejecting communal membership (Leonard, 2006). In this instance, blurred, imprecise notions concerning divergent drinking styles and behaviours were used as a means to differentiate among ethno-national groups. The teenagers were thus engaged in the everyday, micro-level creation and re-creation of ethno-national identifications and distinctions in order to enhance and display their own positions of power, advantage and cultural sophistication.

2. Territorial difference

Belfast remains a deeply divided city. A mosaic of interfaces between ethno-national communities coincides with the fear of transgressing into 'unsafe' areas, to inhibit spatial mobility (Neill, 2006, Shirlow, 2003, Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). This restricted mobility is all the more acute for children and young people who have fewer opportunities and resources than adults to travel out of their respective areas. For the teenage respondents, localism was intensified with the construction of safe and unsafe drinking areas, with the demarcation of restricted social spaces aiding the reproduction of sectarianism in and through their lives. As the below extract indicates, sectarianism and territoriality impacted markedly on drinking locations:

But there's places where like there's a park in between two estates and they both [Catholic and Protestant teenagers] go and drink there and when they're drunk like they go into fights, like proper fights, like riots fights, not fully riots, police, but they fully like hit each other with bottles and stuff (Catholic boy).

However, to view young people's drinking choices exclusively through an ethno-national lens is to create a partial picture. The need to secure a space to consume alcohol away from the adult gaze, as part of a wider process whereby children are increasingly ghettoised in modern society (Matthews, 1992; Sibley, 1995), was a key factor in the selection of consumption locations. The teenagers did not just construct 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas in terms of the ethno-national divide, but also in terms of the likelihood of adult detection and the ease of hiding their practices from adult others:

Protestant boy 1: You never get caught there, under the bridge, you just go under there.

Protestant boy 2: The park round my way, you don't get caught down there either. No one goes down there.

Despite the divided nature of Northern Irish society, the optimistic 'post-conflict' narrative of progress suggests that within a remodelled, consumerist Belfast, the city centre is a much-heralded 'shared space', straddling the communal divide. However, such optimism seems misplaced for these teenagers:

Well, we walk into town and they [Protestants] all keep on firing us dirty looks an all. (Catholic girl)

They [Catholics] act as though they own the city centre. (Protestant girl)

Nonetheless, although the city centre was not perceived as a shared space, this was not exclusively construed in sectarian terms either. In fact, other group identifications were given greater attention by the teenage respondents, with subcultural peer affiliations such as 'Goths', 'Millies', 'Chavs', 'Emos' and 'Steeks' sometimes transcending sectarian boundaries. Within the focus group interviews, the young people energetically discussed how different teenage groups appropriated and controlled certain zones within the city centre, thereby presenting a complex picture with many multilayered micro-geographies co-existing within the same location. Respondents across the Catholic and Protestant schools reiterated similar sentiments to this one group

of Protestant teenagers:

Protestant boy 1: Yeah, actually there's, like, Emos and all that drink round the Waterfront.

Protestant girl 1: Yeah, it's where all the Emos go.

Protestant boy 2: I wouldn't want to go up there.

Protestant girl 1: And then the Goths go to the city centre.

Protestant girl 2: I never like any of them ...

Protestant boy 1: It's the Skaters that go there.

Protestant boy 2: I don't go down there, just loads of like Hippies go down there.

Such insights caution against the presumption that ethno-national awareness is a predominant form of identification amongst Northern Irish young people. At times, other structural factors such as class and gender, along with teenagers' own subcultural distinctions, do indeed matter.

3. Shared experiences of denial

While a sectarian imprint may be discernable in terms of how young people differentiate between drinking styles and in terms of how young people conceive of safe drinking areas, one issue which forcefully united all of the teenage respondents, across the communal divide, is the view that young people are policed differentially because of their age. Within the focus group discussions, attitudes towards the police were underpinned by generational rather than ethno-national tension. This is interesting because the police are the interface between the state and citizen and, as such, bear the brunt of the legitimacy deficit of the state (Smyth, 2002). Accordingly, it may have been assumed that Catholic-Nationalist respondents would have recounted a more negative view of policing than those of a Protestant-Unionist persuasion. However, when the underage drinkers recalled their own experiences of policing, otherness was exclusively manifested in generational terms. As the following extract indicates, Protestant teenagers felt they were excessively targeted by the police:

Protestant Girl 1: And I'd seen a big peeler wagon and I went, 'Oh my goodness'. And they pulled up and they goes, 'What's underneath your jacket?' and I goes, 'Nothing' ...

Protestant Girl 2: And they took my name and I've got my name with them so many times with the police, it's unbelievable.

Protestant Girl 1: On a Friday, for nothing. For drink. And they says to me, 'The next time I see you or hear from you drinking again, you're getting done for underage drinking'. I crapped myself.

A similar experience was recounted by Catholic teenagers:

Catholic boy 1: And they never, never leave you alone anymore the police, because there's so much trouble there.

Catholic boy 2: I used to drink with my friends in the park and the police used to come up every Friday and Saturday night and we used to hide in the bushes.

Catholic boy 3: They [the police] pour it out there. And that's just like literally a waste of your drink.

Indeed, the respondents displayed a deep sensitivity towards the manner in which they were policed, lamenting how the atypical behaviour of a small number of 'stupid wasters' was used to stereotypically label all teenagers - regardless of communal background - as inevitably 'deviant' and in need of police correction and control.

Conclusion

The framing of Northern Ireland's divided society provides the lens through which much research is designed and analysed. Despite the multi-faceted nature of Northern Irish society, ethno-national divisions often represent a principal concern of both research and policy-making, thereby encouraging an essentialist, intractable understanding of identity which ignores the heterogeneity within and across various communal groupings. Furthermore, sectarianism is sometimes presented as fixed and given. However, although ethno-national sentiment interlaces the province, it does not totally define everyday life. When considering the attitudes and experiences of underage drinkers in Belfast, it is indeed necessary to appreciate the wider socio-political context but this should be done without over-interpreting the socio-political climate. At times, a sectarian imprint appeared to interlace elements of teenage drinking cultures when vague, taken-for-granted distinctions regarding drinking styles and behaviours were employed to negatively stereotype the ethno-national other, reinforcing notions of in-group superiority and out-group inferiority. Furthermore, the

selection of consumption location was partly shaped by the fear of transgressing onto the territory deemed to belong to the 'other side' of the communal divide. However, teenage constructions of otherness were not just defined in Catholic/Protestant terms. Other subcultural markers also played a part in the construction of 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas across the city centre. Moreover, a shared sense of exclusion from the adult world, mediated through similar experiences of interventionist policing, was sometimes explicitly prioritised over sectarian identifications. In light of these observations, it is clear that any attempt to neatly map ethno-national difference onto underage drinking experiences can only lead to unsatisfactory results. Age-based solidarity and subcultural distinctions wrestle with and at times displace communal rivalry, but just because ethno-national boundaries are temporarily crossed, it does not mean that they are removed.

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