

Sectarian Harassment and Discrimination in Employment

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The majority of research on sectarianism and the workplace has often focused on differentials in employment between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and has long been a focus of controversial debate.

The difficulty of understanding...employment [in Northern Ireland]...has deterred many academics, researchers and policy practitioners from carrying out research in the past.¹

There are unsurprisingly two broad approaches, one which identifies state and employer discrimination as the cause, the other which points the finger at the Catholic population itself. However some of the debate has questioned the very existence of discrimination at all. Hewitt (1981, 1983, 1985) argues that discrimination in housing, labour market and the electoral system is much less than conventionally thought. O'Hearn (1985) in turn accused Hewitt's arguments against the existence and extent of discrimination against Catholics as "academically useless", "racist" and "bigoted and sectarian".² Whyte (1983) gave a strongly qualified admittance of discrimination suggesting:

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the shortfall of Catholics in the public service was due entirely to a reluctance to serve.³

In later work he suggests that discrimination has at least been exaggerated or overstated converging on a conclusion that sees discrimination as having only a "subordinate part to play in explaining the degree of Catholic economic disadvantage".⁴

Cormack and Osborne (1985) whilst highlighting Catholic under representation in skilled jobs and professions did not regard it as systematic. Promoting an academic version of the 'breeding like rabbits' argument Compton (1985) argued that the higher Catholic birth rate was the reason for higher Catholic unemployment.

More recently Gudgin (1999) has argued that “although the instances of discrimination against Catholics in the public sector were of both political and individual importance the numbers involved were very small”.

Smith and Chambers (1987) in a major study that focused on the relationship between a range of socio-economic variables concluded that religion was a main determinant of employment and that the employment differential between Protestant and Catholics remained significant and that:

...apart from discrimination or unequal opportunities, no adequate explanation of how they are confined within such sectors has yet appeared.⁵

Nonetheless the difficult and hazardous task of talking about discrimination continued into the nineties with Gallagher (1991) noting the ongoing lack of agreement among researchers on the continuing significance of direct or indirect discrimination. In 1996, Shirlow and Shuttleworth criticised a Gudgin and Breen study in a government funded report⁶, which they claimed overemphasised low Catholic migration and high birth rates as a reason for Catholic underemployment. Shirlow and Shuttleworth argued that after taking account of migration and birth-rates on their own, Catholic unemployment would still remain almost twice as high as that of Protestants.⁷ Yet the issue has remained live as Dignan in a study for OFMDFM found that:

The main conclusion drawn from the foregoing review of differentials across key policy areas is that the labour market continues to be the primary source of disparities between the two main communities.

The controversy remains of course because:

Employment equality research is political and because economic issues remain important in political conflict in Northern Ireland.⁸

Nonetheless, despite the apparent lack of robust evidence, contemporary research affirms the acceptance of an unfair differential in Catholic access to the labour market, and whilst there is not total agreement

regarding all of the factors that have created that differential, it is accepted that discrimination is part of the landscape of disadvantage and plays a part in establishing and sustaining that disadvantage.⁹

Therefore, whilst improvements in Catholic representation can be seen, unemployment differentials remain and new ones may also be emerging. Alongside the continued likelihood of Catholics remaining more likely than Protestants to be unemployed there is an emerging under-representation of Protestants in the health and education sectors.¹⁰ Whilst it may be problematic to quantify the extent of direct sectarian discrimination and its relationship to historical, ongoing and emerging differentials in access to the labour market there is still of course considerable interest in identifying the impact of sectarianism on workplaces, and access to them. Two of the most significant dynamics are those of workplace segregation and the existence of sectarian chill factors in which partisan cultures, discriminatory practices, and harassment and intimidation contribute to the maintenance of the overall imbalance.

Segregation in employment

Segregation in employment is one of the key factors which make up the landscape of discrimination in Northern Ireland. The highly segregated work landscape that emerged from Northern Ireland's particular historical context was reinforced by the increased threat of intercommunal tensions and violence which has led to a significant degree of self-segregation along ethnic and sectarian lines.¹¹

The industrial and occupational structure of Northern Ireland's employment, based as we have seen on complex historical dynamics that have included discrimination, has meant that even during years in which employment rose, Catholics "did not obtain a foothold in bastions of Protestant privilege"¹² and when an increase in the service sector occurred it was largely the availability of unskilled low paid work to which Catholics had access.¹³ Even those reluctant to admit the existence of discrimination in employment are willing to acknowledge that "a pattern of job segregation was also common in many areas", suggesting that these patterns were not necessarily linked to institutional or state discrimination but rather

stemmed from shop-floor antagonisms between Catholic and Protestant manual workers. These antagonisms have a long history, including sporadic outbreaks of violence.¹⁴

In regards to the actual levels of workplace segregation Mitchell (2006) showed that up to 80% of the workforce were described as consisting of a majority of one identity with 20% per cent of workplaces overwhelmingly comprised of one community identity. The survey also suggested that larger organisations were less likely to be segregated, and that there had been a

decrease in segregation over the years.¹⁵ Whyte states that due to the impact of fair employment legislation "segregation at work is one of the least acute forms of segregation in Northern Ireland".¹⁶ Indeed most commentators agree that there is evidence for greater mixing in workforces in the 1990's and an increased ability of some employers to recruit workers from both communities. Whilst the numbers of mono religious workplaces is said to be decreasing Heaton and Teague¹⁷ placed them at 60% in as recently as 1997.

Attitudinal surveys have supported the findings that workplaces are more integrated and indeed that support for integrated workplaces is also reflected in research into the attitudes of workers towards shared workplaces. Sheehan and Tomlinson found a willingness amongst both communities to work in places where they might form the minority in the workplace. However this changed significantly when that workplace was in an area perceived to be the territory of the 'other'.¹⁸

In 2004, an Equality Commission review found that there had been considerable increase in the numbers of people who work in integrated workplaces.¹⁹ This was most marked in the public sector but not solely confined to it. More recent research has again found that a majority of people said they prefer to work in a mixed workplace.²⁰

Nonetheless Hughes et al (2003) suggest that whilst the majority of the population expresses a preference for mixed religion workplaces there are still preferences amongst a significant minority in favour of workplace segregation. He also argues that despite the peace process and the impact of equality legislation:

there is evidence that Northern Ireland has become a more divided society since the Belfast Agreement....The overall picture is one of (still partial, but nonetheless significant) retreat into single-identity environments.

This suggests that continued segregation in employment may be supported by residential segregation; given that many private sector firms tend to recruit from their immediate surroundings it may be that religious polarisation in the labour market is being fuelled by these new residential patterns. Most research finds that there is still 'considerable divergence, with domination being possible in neighbouring territories'.²³

The dynamic of localised employment reflecting segregated living is unlikely to improve the overall patterns of imbalance as firms will tend to reflect

the demographics of local areas. These patterns of employment are based upon Extended Internal Labour Markets (EILM) where recruitment from local communities into SME's can still be highly informal. Manwaring helpfully points out that this situation holds benefits for employers as it creates worker discipline as "new recruits...are eager not to undermine the operation of the EILM by behaving badly", he doesn't explain what constitute 'behaving badly'. Closer analysis of EILM's in the context of Northern Ireland also describes a situation open, not just to the undermining of workers rights generally, but to the perpetuation of ethnic and religious discrimination and the emergence of sectarian and partisan workplace cultures.²⁴

This kind of labour market exclusion and employment monopoly is compounded by the absence of a legislative requirement to monitor religious and ethnic intake if the company employs less than 10 workers. Considering that micro businesses and SME's accounted for 87.8% of the Northern Ireland private sector it suggests that significant numbers of people in Northern Ireland are employed in areas which favour localised patterns of employment in which there is greater potential for the emergence and indeed maintenance of sectarian harassment and intimidation:

Monitoring covers around 72% of employee jobs in Northern Ireland, and does not include those private sector concerns with less than 11 employees, school teachers, the self-employed, the unemployed, nor those on government training schemes.²⁵

Significantly, Shirlow in a study of private sector employers suggests that the absence of adequate monitoring data has led to an underestimate of the extent of workplace segregation and prevents a more sophisticated study of ethnically territorialised spaces and the related reproduction of ethno-sectarian conflict.²⁶

This situation is further compounded by the fact that trade unions continue to have no legal right to recognition in small companies and it is often these workers who are in need of the most protection. Smaller businesses often have lower rates of pay, poorer health and safety records, bigger gender pay gaps than larger unionised companies.²⁷ Minorities working in smaller businesses compared to larger companies continue to be denied adequate protection and are more vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. Recent research by the TUC in GB has shown however that many small to medium businesses are in fact signing voluntary agreements which provides strong evidence both of the benefits of union recognition to business and the need to end the exclusion of

employees of firms employing fewer than 20 people which disproportionately employ women and people from ethnic minorities.²⁸

Recent research has also suggested that union recognition can improve relationships in the workplace, improve personnel procedures, ensure a better trained workforce, and safer and more inclusive work environments.²⁹ As a result non-partisan workplaces are likely to emerge with the added benefit of employees and employers more likely to resolve potential cases of harassment in the workplace.

The general picture emerging is of less pandemic segregation whilst also recognising that labour mobility can in places remain highly localised and territorialised.³⁰ It is in part the existence of these ethnically territorialised workplaces that gives rise to what has become known as a sectarian chill factor in the workplace which has a range of impacts on the maintenance of both segregated workplaces and indeed partisan workplaces where sectarian intimidation and harassment of minorities can be part of workplace culture. The term itself attempts to capture the reluctance of individuals from one community to join organisations where the other dominates the workforce due to the threat of intimidation, personal injury or in the extreme case, death.³¹ White suggests that fear of discrimination and intimidation is a genuine reality and can seriously inhibit choice:

Many West Belfast residents do not even apply for jobs outside their immediate area even though they believe they may be suitably qualified. They believe they will encounter discrimination, intimidation and inequality of opportunity due to their community background or their postal code.³²

Green et al. (2005) in a study which focuses on access to work for young people highlight the persistence amongst the study group of the view that some places are often seen as “inaccessible or unsafe”. They suggest that this perception creates a chill factor which occurs alongside other more complex spatial decision making processes which are affected by neighbourhood identity, gender and social class.³³ They also suggest that claiming the existence of a chill factor is possibly an ‘excuse’ to cover for lack of confidence in venturing further afield and that policies which enhance the mobility of disadvantaged people in the labour market by increasing their confidence in using available public transport and in venturing into new areas should be implemented.

It is clear that accessing work can still be problematic due to perceptions of the potential for sectarian intimidation and fear of the ‘other’. Many are wary

of working in an area dominated by the other community, and decisions on where to apply for a job are still based on territory and the perceived existence of majority workforces and partisan cultures. The evidence in the research of the extent and impact of the chill factor on employment and access is mixed and not overly robust. Whilst workforces have become more mixed in the public sector and indeed has seen significant shifts, the picture in the private sector remains somewhat obscure.

Sectarian Harassment

The extent to which sectarian harassment in the workplace maintains an imbalance in employment figures and contributes to both workplace segregation and chill factors is an area which has largely been ignored by researchers and academics. SACHR in a review to the Secretary of State mentioned chill factor as a factor in perpetuating differentials “the fear...of being subjected to intimidation or hostility by a predominantly Protestant or Catholic workforce.” Finlay also notes:

...even the fair employment agency which conducted and commissioned much valuable research into patterns of inequality between Catholics and Protestants and explored some of the factors giving rise to these patterns did not consider the role of tension, hostility or conflict in the workplace.³⁴

More recently Dickson et al. (2003) remarked that there was little research on the scale of sectarian harassment in the workplace.³⁵ Dickson and Hargie further suggest there has been “a paucity of research conducted into cross-community relationships in organisational settings” as a whole³⁶, though Jarman in a study on sectarian violence notes that it remains a problem in the workplace.³⁷ Dickson and Hargie’s research is somewhat limited as it rests primarily on the individual and indeed ‘employees’ not as the object of discrimination and harassment but rather as its source:

It is essential for organisations to monitor inter-group communication and assess employee views about how organisations currently deal with any sectarian problems that arise.³⁸

In another qualitative study of sectarianism in four organisations, Hargie et al (2006) suggest that there was some sense of positive changes in the workplaces in the years previous to the study being carried out. In discussing their findings the authors suggest that whilst the legacy of the conflict is still

very visible, with segregation in education, sport and housing still evident, in terms of the workplace they noted that:

...projected against the community background just sketched our findings are slightly surprising...sectarianism is not perceived to be a significant problem in the organisations included in this study.³⁹

They argue that perceived neutrality in the workplace, promoted through equality legislation has been important in encouraging young people to venture into other areas to seek work. Hargie et al (2006) highlights how the legislation was felt by employees to have been beneficial in ensuring appropriate action could be taken when any complaints of sectarianism were registered and thus contributed to a culture or “sanctuary of neutrality” whereby the vast majority of employees left sectarian divisions outside the factory gate.⁴⁰

The research focuses on the individualist nature of sectarianism referring to perpetrators as “shadowy faceless figures”.⁴¹ The authors’ analysis presents an extremely positive view of the workplace environment:

work may even be seen as a neutral sanctuary where endemic sectarian tensions of tribalised residential areas can be escaped from for a while.⁴²

The focus on individualist manifestations of sectarianism situates these studies within a Unitarist paradigm in which workplace conflict of any kind is seen as acting against the interests of ‘corporate functioning’⁴³ and in which positive inter-ethnic group relations are desirable for corporate success rather than worker and community solidarity.

Alternatively Eyben et al (1997) have suggested that in order to combat discrimination it is crucial that the culture of organisations is taken into account when addressing sectarianism. Workplace cultures are not established and maintained solely by workers but also by the structures, policies and decisions taken by owners and managers.⁴⁴

In a partnership with Counteract the anti-intimidation unit of the ICTU they developed a framework for addressing sectarianism which sought specifically to address the informal and hidden cultures that allow discriminatory attitudes and behaviours to exist. In this context, sectarian harassment emerges not solely from individual workers but from at best, complacent and at worst, complicit employers.⁴⁵

Clearly workplace segregation and separation is part of a complex historical process in which sectarian harassment and sectarian chill factors play a significant role. The relative absence of studies on sectarian intimidation and harassment would suggest a serious lacuna in the provision of robust evidence on the extent and characteristics of sectarianism in the workplace and therefore its related impact on policy and practice:

If we are to better understand sectarianism in the workplace and its effects on equality of opportunity then more research is needed. We need to monitor incidents of sectarian harassment, intimidation and conflict...we also need in-depth, historically informed case studies of `work places in which incidents have occurred.⁴⁶

The provision of such evidence is of course a challenge for those interested in addressing sectarianism in the workplace and it is evident that more work needs to be done to tell the often hidden story of sectarian harassment and intimidation in the workplace in Northern Ireland.

Notes

¹ Goodwin 1997: 167

² O'Hearn 1985: 94

³ Whyte 1983: 144

⁴ Whyte 1990

⁵ Smith and Chambers 1987: 31

⁶ Gudgin and Breen 1996

⁷ Shirlow and Shuttleworth 1996

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Breen 2000

¹⁰ Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004

¹¹ MacGinty et al 2007

¹² Maguire 1989: 23

¹³ Eversley 1989.

¹⁴ Gudgin 1999

¹⁵ Mitchell 2006

¹⁶ Whyte 1990:37

¹⁷ Heaton and Teague 1997: 274

¹⁸ Sheenan and Tomlinson 1998.

¹⁹ ECNI 2004

²⁰ OFMDFM 2007.

²¹ Hughes, Donnelly, Robinson and Dowds 2003: 19.

²² Heaton and Teague 1997.

²³ Jarman 2005:10; also Horgan 2006; Knox 2011; MacGinty et al 2007.

²⁴ Manwaring 1981.

²⁵ ECNI 2006

²⁶ Shirlow 2006

²⁷ TUC, Law at Work, 2009

²⁸ TUC Annual Survey 2009

²⁹ Trademark 2009

³⁰ Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery 2005

³¹ Heaton and Teague 1997.

³² White 2002: 01

³³ Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery 2005.

³⁴ Finlay 1993: 85

³⁵ Dickson, Hargie and Nelson 2003

³⁶ Dickson and Hargie 2006

³⁷ Jarman 2005

³⁸ Dickson and Hargie 2006: 04

³⁹ Hargie, Dickson and O'Donnell 2006: 50

⁴⁰ Hargie, Dickson and O'Donnell 2006

⁴¹ Ibid.: 51

⁴² Ibid.: 50

⁴³ Dickson and Hargie, 2006: 03

⁴⁴ Eyben, Morrow and Wilson 1997

⁴⁵ Eyben, Morrow and Wilson 2002

⁴⁶ Finlay 1993

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