

# Segregation and Sectarianism: Impact on Everyday Life

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## **Introduction**

This paper highlights some of the findings of a seventeen-month study funded by the Community Relations Council through the European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The research aimed to document and analyse the ways and means that sectarianism and segregation are sustained and extended through the routine and mundane decisions that people make in their everyday lives.

A sectarian attitude or belief is one that discriminates against another person or group, or excludes them, on the basis of their actual (or imagined) belonging to a different community. Brewer defines sectarianism as:

*The determination of actions, attitudes, and practices about religious difference, which result in them invoked as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict.*<sup>1</sup>

Reparation for an injustice done to one's own community is often invoked as a justification for sectarian attitudes or beliefs. MacNair<sup>2</sup>, referring to previous research, argues that sectarianism in Northern Ireland is experienced at three levels: ideas, individual actions and social structures. Ideas are negative stereotype notions about members of out-groups; individual actions are expressed through acts of intimidation such as territorial fear and harassment including verbal; and physical violence and social structures involve a legacy of spatial and institutional separation involving strategic planning decisions and discrimination in access to employment.

The most obvious link between sectarianism and segregation is that sectarianism in Northern Ireland appears to be tied to territory. In Northern Ireland the conflict focused on who should be entitled to occupy Northern Ireland, both physically (through residence) and politically (through

authoritative decision making power). MacNair<sup>3</sup> states that territory can be the source of conflict but also reproduce conflict by keeping ethnic groups apart. In terms of segregation a segregated area is then one in which a Protestant or a Catholic majority of 70% or more is concentrated.<sup>4</sup>

Even after the Troubles, sectarian beliefs and attitudes are still commonly expected to be more prominent in segregated areas or segregated social sectors of life, and segregation is expected to match and to reinforce sectarianism.

## **Methodology**

The field research on which this paper is based was carried out between May 2007 and March 2008 in six areas of Northern Ireland. The report documenting the findings of all six areas is due for publication in May/June 2008. For the purpose of this paper one case study area is highlighted, Castleberg and Newtownstewart, Co. Tyrone. These two areas in spite of their close geographical proximity reported differing attitudes and experiences.

The methods adopted were qualitative and anthropological. The research was developed through:

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews and conversations with a total of 48 interviewees;
- A mapping exercise to identify areas within their town/location that people perceived as being Protestant, Catholic or Mixed, with a total of 12 maps being completed;
- Further conversations and a walk about around their environment to gain a sense of how subjective perceptions are translated into daily routines of shopping, going to work and accessing services and facilities.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

Castleberg and Newtownstewart are two small rural towns located west of the River Bann in County Tyrone. The population of the Castleberg ward according to the 2001 Census was 2074, with 59% of the population identifying themselves as members of the Catholic community, and 40.5% coming from the 'Protestant and other Christian' community. The research found that it was the view of a number of interviewees that the presence of a

number of Union and Northern Ireland flags on the main arterial routes into and out of the town gave the appearance to outsiders that the town was a predominantly Protestant town despite the relatively even demographic split. The population of the Newtownstewart ward in 2001 was 2133, with 46.8% of the population identifying themselves as coming from the Catholic community, and 52.1% coming from a 'Protestant and other Christian' community background. Newtownstewart is a smaller rural town located approximately ten miles east of Castleterg. A number of interviewees referred to a recent downturn in economic fortunes in both towns, and according to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005 (NIMDM), both Castleterg and Newtownstewart are in the top 10% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, with Castleterg the 43rd most deprived and Newtownstewart the 52nd most deprived of all 582 wards.

In Castleterg the research highlighted that, although in demographic terms at least the town appeared to be mixed, there is a significant amount of segregation and lack of meaningful interaction between the two main communities. This level of segregation may be in part attributed to the legacy of the Troubles, as Castleterg has often been referred to as *'the most bombed small town in Northern Ireland'*. Although located only several miles away, Newtownstewart appeared to be much less affected by the worst of the Troubles, with only eight incidents documented as occurring within the area or involving local people within the same time period.<sup>5</sup>

### **Views and opinions of the areas**

A number of interviewees referred to Castleterg as being '50/50' in terms of Catholic and Protestant residents although there was a sense among several interviewees that the town itself would be slightly more Catholic, with the surrounding areas being more Protestant. There was a perception that the north end (top) of the town from the Diamond onwards was predominantly Catholic, whilst the south end (bottom) below the Diamond on the main street would be considered predominantly Protestant.

It also became apparent that despite this level of residential segregation, there were also several areas within the town which a number of interviewees felt were relatively mixed, and one interviewee felt that these estates had managed to retain their demographic mix even during the Troubles, and despite the impact that the violence had on the town itself.

The maps completed by interviewees within the town supported these perceptions, as they clearly showed the north/south residential division within the town discussed by the interviewees. It was interesting to note that males, and particularly younger males who completed the mapping exercise were more inclined than females to mark areas as either predominantly Protestant or Catholic, and were less inclined to highlight the presence of residentially mixed areas within the town.

Despite the perceived levels of residential segregation within the town, the majority of interviewees felt safe and comfortable going about their daily lives. However, a key issue noted by a significant number of interviewees was the difference between where they felt they could go within the town during the day and where they felt they were able to go to at night:

*We can't walk home. We actually, we can't even go for a walk where we live, like we're married and we were out walking one night and we were just shouted at... (Male, Protestant, 25-29).*

Another interviewee pointed out that although there were still some issues within the area to be addressed and some people would be wary of where they went in the town, the situation had improved from the Troubles, and she felt much safer moving around the area now than in the past.

In Newtownstewart many interviewees felt that the town contained a relative demographic balance between the Catholic and Protestant communities. These perceptions appeared to be supported by the mapping exercise, and Newtownstewart appeared to be less residentially segregated than Castlederg. Discussions and the mapping exercise did however reveal that there were still perceptions amongst interviewees that certain parts of the town were predominantly Protestant or Catholic. Also, as in Castlederg, individuals tended to highlight the presence of flags, murals and other political symbolism as the justification for these perceptions. Interviewees in Newtownstewart indicated a higher number of what they perceived to be mixed estates within the town compared to Castlederg.

### **Relations within the areas**

The research found that despite the impact of the Troubles on Castlederg, the majority of interviewees felt that relations within the town between members of the Protestant and Catholic communities had improved slightly in recent years. One interviewee compared the situation today to when she was in secondary school:

*When I was younger it was really, really different to what it is today. When I was younger, ... 'Catholics were bad and Protestants were good', because this (past events) had happened to our family. (Female, Protestant, 25-29).*

Several interviewees felt that there were a number of indicators to suggest an improvement in community relations within the town. These included a number of mixed bars in the town which would have been less common during the Troubles, the increase in numbers of people from one community background shopping in a store perceived to be of the 'other' community background and anecdotal evidence of an increased number of mixed relationships in the area among younger people:

*...and sometimes I think as they get older they know there are more opportunities to mix and I do see more of a trend nowadays for Catholics and Protestants going out together at the 14-16 year age group, which would have very rarely happened in my generation. (Female, Catholic, 30-44).*

Although a number of interviewees felt that relations within the area had improved over the years, several interviewees suggested that these relations were at best cordial, with a lack of real and meaningful interaction between the two main communities:

*...there are the two communities in Castlederg and... even at this stage I would say that they are probably quite separated... (Female, Catholic, 30-44).*

According to several interviewees sectarianism was still an issue in the town and for the most part people socialised with others from within their own community background. It became apparent during the course of the research that relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities in the town were made even more strained by the issue of parades. Although a number of interviewees suggested that there were still difficulties in the town in terms of community relations, several participants mentioned the role played by organisations such as Border Arts and the Castlederg Youth Forum in attempting to improve the situation.

In Newtown Stewart a common theme in discussions was that "*the two communities live here and appear to mix well*". One Catholic interviewee contrasted the situation in Newtown Stewart and Castlederg over the parades issue, noting that during the marching season, members of the Apprentice Boys would socialise in the area. Indeed a number of interviewees felt that the fact there were little or no current disputes over parades contributed to better relations within the area than in Castlederg.

While there appeared to be a reluctance among many interviewees in Castlederg to venture into certain parts of the town at night, this was not the case in Newtownstewart. A number of interviewees felt the quieter nature of their town and less divided social venues made this less of an issue. Despite this however, young interviewees in Newtownstewart tended to be more negative in their perceptions of relations within the area than their adult counterparts:

*We were walking down the street a few days ago and I was wearing a Celtic tracksuit and someone said 'Celtic are shite you fenian scum', so I shouted back 'Aye, you proddy bastard. (Female, Catholic, Under 16).*

This highlights the depth of feeling among some young people within the community and the levels of sectarianism which can be directed towards members of the 'other' community if their community background can be established by particular sportswear.

### **Impact of the Troubles**

The overwhelming consensus in discussions with local residents was that Castlederg itself was seriously impacted upon by the Troubles:

*I know that Castlederg was probably one of the worst towns in Northern Ireland to be affected by the Troubles. (Female, Catholic, 30-44).*

This impact and the personal experience of a number of people in losing friends, relatives and colleagues in a small tight-knit community was said to have contributed to the hardening of attitudes on both sides of the community.

It became apparent that for a number of interviewees in Castlederg, the violence during the Troubles had impacted how they went about their daily lives, where they would go, and at what time and with whom. Several interviewees noted the difficulties they had in working in the town and the violence had restricted some people's ability to go out into the community:

*There would have been a few cases where you would have been wary of saying your name, you know what I mean? That's the way it was then. I remember some people telling me they were frightened to go into the hospital because their name didn't sound right... (Female, Protestant, 60+).*

In West Tyrone generally, there were a number of shootings of security forces personnel by the IRA. A focus group revealed the impact of the Troubles on their lives even to this day:

*I went through the security forces. I lost seven of my own family to the IRA and I lost seventeen of my best friends around the Castlederg/Newtownstewart/Sion Mills/Strabane area. (Male, Protestant, 60+).*

Many interviewees reported the economic downturn the town had suffered since the ending of the Troubles and the opening up of the border. Shop owners in Castlederg felt that for their town the opening up of the border had actually allowed people to ‘escape’ elsewhere for the first time and it was felt that this had a detrimental impact on the economy of the town.

Newtownstewart, despite its close proximity to Castlederg, appeared to be much less directly affected by the violence of the Troubles. Interviewees in Newtownstewart noted that the impact of the Troubles had not affected relations within the area as much as in Castlederg and more than one interviewee felt that the impact of the violence in Castlederg may have been greater due to its closer proximity with the border.

### **Issues within the areas**

The issue of parades contributed towards increasing tensions at particular times of year in Castlederg. A number of interviewees were of the opinion that any progress made in community relations during the year were offset when the marching season came around again each year:

*You have the divisions, you take the parading in Castlederg, I would say if you took parading out of Castlederg, that people would get on a lot better. (Male, Catholic, 30-44).*

A significant number of interviewees from both the Protestant and Catholic communities felt that the number of parades within the town throughout the year was detrimental to any efforts to improve community relations.

Discussions revealed that alcohol was perceived to be a factor in fuelling violence related to the parades dispute. A number of interviewees also spoke of a feeling that their movement was restricted whenever a parade was on, particularly during the summer months of July and August:

*I don't feel like I can go into the town when there is a parade on because of fighting...* (Female, Protestant, 30-44).

Although there were some disturbances related to parades in Newtownstewart several years ago, currently there appeared to be few difficulties. One interviewee recalled that the last trouble associated with any parade in Newtownstewart was “*eight or nine years ago*”.

Another issue within Castleberg appeared to be the presence of flags. A number of interviewees felt that the Union Jacks and Northern Ireland flags marked out the town as a Loyalist area and there was a general feeling that “*there are too many flags*”. There were some GAA flags at the north end of the town again which visibly marked the territory. One interviewee felt that the presence of flags in various parts of the town made people more wary of where they felt that they could or could not go, and this perception appeared to be stronger among younger males than females.

The flying of flags was also raised by a number of interviewees in Newtownstewart as an issue which had the potential to impact upon relations within the town, but was reportedly less problematic than in Castleberg. In both areas there appeared to be a general consensus that any flags that were flown for commemorations should be taken down again at the earliest available opportunity.

## **Impact on Daily Routines**

### ***Shopping***

The research highlighted that shopping routines within Castleberg had changed over the years, and were now primarily based on price, choice and convenience given the presence of a number of larger supermarkets in the town which were perceived to be “*neutral*”. A number of interviewees felt that in the past and particularly during the Troubles shopping patterns would have been based primarily on community background. Indeed, the research found that there were still a number of smaller shops located in certain parts of the town centre which were perceived to be either Protestant or Catholic owned, and there were a number of interviewees who felt that some of these smaller shops would receive most of their custom from members of their ‘own’ community.

For some interviewees there were still issues linked with sectarianism and segregation within Castlederg which impacted upon their shopping patterns. However, many believed that there was now an increased willingness amongst people to base their shopping habits on convenience and the price of goods rather than on community background:

*That would have been the case before the peace, where people would have stuck to the nationalist shops and the unionist shops, Catholic and Protestant shopping. I would think now that people have mixed more in shopping and just go now where the best bargains are and where they can get the best grocery.*  
(Male, Catholic, 30-44).

In Newtownstewart the majority of interviewees referred to a shop being either Catholic or Protestant owned, but that this would not influence the decision of individuals as to where they would shop in the town:

*...we use the same shops like, and I have no problem going into (name of shop), even though it is a 'Catholic' shop. I will give them my business.*  
(Female, Protestant, 25-29).

This highlights how residents are now less inclined to base their shopping patterns on the religion or perceived religion of the owners of the shop and more on which store is the most convenient and the best value for money.

### **Work**

Many of the interviewees in Castlederg worked in the area and reported few current difficulties regarding their own community background and employment. It became apparent that several interviewees felt that relations within their workplace had remained relatively good even throughout the Troubles. A number of interviewees compared the situation during the Troubles with today and felt that they were much less restricted today in terms of what geographical areas they could work in. One or two interviewees noted however that they would still feel slightly anxious working in areas of the town which they perceived to be predominantly Catholic or Protestant:

*I have had to go out to (name of area) to do inductions... I would be slightly conscious... and would take things like that (badges) down (from the car) if I was going into those areas... I would be conscious and it is always there in the back of your head.* (Female, Catholic, 30-44).

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that community background could under certain circumstances influence where and which job an individual applied for:

*Like if you were Catholic you wouldn't apply for a job at (name of organisation), and if you were a Protestant you wouldn't apply for a job at (name of organisation). (Female, Protestant, 25-29).*

The general consensus was that relations within the workplace in Castlederg were good. Some interviewees were keen to stress that sectarianism was not an issue in the workplace as people just got on with their jobs:

*I work in a totally mixed environment for the (name of workplace), obviously you have to communicate with each other. Our office is all mixed, people would talk about mass, or about church, or about football or Celtic or Rangers, people, they know what you are, but they don't really pay any attention. They seem to get on ok. (Male, Catholic, 25-29).*

In Newtownstewart there appeared to be even less difficulties with regards employment, with the vast majority of interviewees in the town believing that “jobs here are mixed”. Two interviewees who worked together and were of different community backgrounds commented that working in the same environment was one of the few opportunities for contact between people of different community backgrounds in the town. In contrast to Castlederg, no interviewees felt they would not get certain jobs because of their community background.

The general perception emanating from discussions in both towns was that the workplace was a mixed and culturally neutral environment in which they felt safe. This appears to support the findings of the Good Relations Audit which found that 70% of respondents perceived the workplace in the area as neutral.<sup>6</sup>

### **Schooling**

One of the main issues apparent in the research in both towns was the segregation of young people during their school years. In Castlederg, both primary schools and the two secondary schools within the town were divided between state and Catholic maintained sectors. In Newtownstewart there only were two primary schools, and the young people had to attend secondary school elsewhere.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions in both towns was the level of segregation, particularly between the 11-16 age group. A number of interviewees also believed that when they were younger and at school they did not have enough opportunities to meet and interact with other young people from a different community background. Several interviewees noted that there was an element of peer pressure against making friends with pupils from the ‘other’ school:

*It was just something you didn't want to do. Have your friends see you mixing with the other side. There was just no contact between one side and the other. (Male, Protestant, 30-44).*

It became clear that in both towns school uniforms could easily identify a young person's community background, and this in turn could restrict their movement within the area at particular times during the day. In Castleberg, one young Protestant interviewee felt unsafe walking around the predominantly Catholic north end of the town during the day as “*they know what religion you are by your uniform*”. The fact that a young person's community background could be ascertained by their school uniform alone had led to instances of name calling, stone throwing and more serious violent incidents usually between groups of young males from each of the two local schools in Castleberg. Several interviewees suggested that the locations of the schools and potential for trouble led to a decision some years ago to let the two secondary schools out at different times of the day.

Another key issue in Castleberg was the division of school buses within the town. Most interviewees referred to local young people getting on different buses depending on what school they attended. Similarly, in Newtownstewart a number of interviewees referred to divisions in the buses, and that pupils from the different schools would sit apart from one another on the same bus:

*I really remember the first bus, Protestants at the front and Catholics at the back and you didn't vary it. Even if there was a seat at the back you didn't go down to it, you'd stand. (Female, Protestant, 25-29).*

A number of interviewees in Castleberg were keen to stress that the situation regarding the school buses was getting better, and one interviewee whose brother was now a pupil at St. Eugene's felt that he had few problems in comparison to what it was like several years ago.

### ***Socialising and leisure facilities***

It became clear in discussions with local residents in Castledearg that pubs and bars within the town were segregated. This perceived segregation in terms of which pubs or bars interviewees felt safe frequenting corresponded with the perception of a predominantly Catholic north end of the town and a predominantly Protestant south end of town. Younger males tended to be more negative in their perceptions in terms of which venues they felt safe going to.

This research finding also corresponded with the mapping exercise which indicated that younger males were more likely than females to map certain parts of the town in which they would not feel safe. Indeed, females were more inclined than males to suggest that some bars in the town were mixed, whilst males were more inclined to see pubs as “*one or the other*”. The segregation in socialising in Castledearg also appeared to support the day/night division suggested by many interviewees, whereby they would feel safe in the town during the day, but at night would feel much more unease with regards to their safety given the amount of segregated bars and possibility for alcohol fuelled violence.

It was also suggested by more than one interviewee in both towns that a reluctance to venture into a pub which was perceived as predominantly Catholic or Protestant was linked to the fact that the towns were small and people tended to know what someone’s community background was from their family name or which part of town they came from:

*You wouldn’t go to (name of pub) if you were Catholic because that is Protestant. (Female, Protestant, 25-29)*

In Castledearg, it was also felt by interviewees that the presence of a relatively substantial number of bars for such a small town particularly affected relations within the area at weekends. In Newtownstewart the majority of interviewees acknowledged that there were pubs which would be perceived as Protestant or Catholic but that many young people did not frequent these pubs but went out of the town to socialise:

*There really isn’t enough going on in this town on a Saturday night to hold young people. Ok, if they want a quiet beer, but if they want music or discos they leave. (Male, Catholic, 45-59).*

The greater reluctance to venture into certain parts of Castledearg at night time also impacted on when and where a number of interviewees felt that they were able to access banking and ATM facilities. Many interviewees in

Castledearg noted that there were difficulties in accessing ATM machines, particularly at night and at weekends. This difficulty was based on location with the Bank of Ireland ATM at the north of the town and Ulster Bank ATM towards the south of the town. This was again linked to the perceptions of a north/south split in the town:

*Myself, if I couldn't get money out of the Bank of Ireland, which is my own account, I would try all the machines at the top of the town before I'd go down the bottom of the town. In God's Truth, I wouldn't walk down.* (Female, Catholic, 30-44).

In Newtownstewart there is only one bank, the Northern, and no interviewees indicated a difficulty in accessing the facility or the ATM even at night. A number of interviewees did however highlight that they would bank in either Omagh or Strabane.

## Summary

The research found that the impact of the violence of the Troubles affected Castledearg more than Newtownstewart. The research highlighted a significant amount of residential segregation despite relatively even demographic statistics for the two main communities in both towns. This residential segregation appeared to be even more marked in Castledearg and the mapping exercise indicated that males were more likely than females to perceive each town as containing areas which they felt were 'off-limits' to them.

In Castledearg, a significant number of interviewees referred to feeling that their freedom of movement around the town was restricted at night and linked to their community background. The research documented that in both small, rural towns it was often quite easy to 'tell' an individual's religion. The perceived geographic division in Castledearg specifically impacted upon where some interviewees felt they could socialise, shop and use banking facilities. The majority of interviewees in both towns appeared to base their decisions on where to socialise on their community background, although this effect was exacerbated by the busier night-time economy and greater potential for alcohol related disturbances in Castledearg.

While some smaller shops were designated as being either predominantly Protestant or Catholic, it was generally felt that shopping patterns were increasingly based on convenience and price rather than any factors linked to community background, sectarianism or segregation. Similarly the workplace

tended to be seen as an increasingly safe and culturally neutral environment, although some interviewees still based where they would apply for work on their community background and perceptions of potential discrimination.

One of the main issues apparent in the research in both towns was the segregation of young people during their school years. Several interviewees noted that there was an element of peer pressure against making friends with pupils from the 'other' school. The divisions between Catholic and Protestant young people were manifested through sectarian abuse and occasional violence linked to the wearing of school uniforms and the segregation on school buses by the pupils themselves.

Despite all of these factors, it was believed that relations had slightly improved over the years and there were a number of groups working to improve relations within both areas. However, issues linked to sectarianism and segregation were still impacting on people's perceptions of the 'other' community and tensions, especially during the parades season, were still evident in Castledearg.

## Notes

- 1 Brewer, 1992, p.359.
- 2 McNair, 2006.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Murtagh and Carmichael, 2005.
- 5 McKittrick *et al.*, 1999.
- 6 Strabane District Council, 2007.

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