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SHARED
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A research journal on peace, conflict and
community relations in Northern Ireland

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Community Relations Council

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Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

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Any views expressed in *Shared Space* are those of the authors of the articles and do not necessarily represent those of the Community Relations Council.

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Notes on Contributors

Paula Devine is Research Director of ARK, a joint resource between Queen's University and the University of Ulster which aims to make social science information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience. She is based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast.

Lizanne Dowds is a consultant at ARK.

Laura Fowler Graham recently completed her doctoral research at the University of Aberdeen on evaluating leadership roles and social capital in Northern Ireland's victim support groups. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in Peace and Justice Studies at Tufts University in Boston, MA.

Richard Montague is currently working to complete a PhD study entitled 'Challenging "Hate Crime" in a Divided City - Racist and Sectarian Hate Crime in Belfast', in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast.

Duncan Morrow is Director of Community Engagement and Senior Lecturer in Politics in the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy at the University of Ulster. He is also a member of the Institute of Research in the Social Sciences at the University of Ulster.

Gillian Robinson is Director of ARK and Professor of Social Research in INCORE at the University of Ulster

Orna Young was Research Officer at the Institute for Conflict Research.

Introduction

As efforts continue to deliver a joined up strategy for good relations in Northern Ireland and build a firm basis for a peaceful future we face numerous obstacles and challenges. These range from disputes over flags and parades to how to deal with the legacy of the past. All this results in a mixed picture of our progress as a society coming out of conflict but still unsteady in walking the path of peace. This is reflected in the research articles in this issue of *Shared Space*.

In the first article Paula Devine, Research Director of ARK, explores public attitudes to community relations through the framework of two of the priority areas of OFMdFM's *Together: Building A United Community* strategy (TBUC), namely A Shared Community and A Safe Community. She bases her study on an analysis of data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, particularly the most recent data from 2012.

The picture is a mixed one. In terms of a shared community most people would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood and in most people's experience local areas do not segregate between Protestants and Catholics to go to different shops or use different services. This pattern is supported by the 2011 census evidence, as previously reported by Ian Shuttleworth and Chris Lloyd (see *Shared Space* issue 16), which indicated there has been a decline in residential segregation. On the other hand concerns about safety remain strong particularly in interface areas. Although the NILT survey data was collected before the beginning of the current flags dispute in Belfast, the researchers found that flags continue to be a source of annoyance for about a quarter of the population. This impacts on the TBUC priorities of both shared and safe communities.

The NILT material has also enabled a more longitudinal survey of attitudes over the last twenty years. Commissioned by OFMdFM the research team of Duncan Morrow, Gillian Robinson and Lizanne Dowds have sought to consider if the survey data collected over a 20-year period can play a role in the emerging public policy on improving relations within the community. Their findings are summarised here in *Shared Space*.

The article by Duncan Morrow *et al* argues that measurable progress has been made in improving inter-community relationships over the past two decades. However it also suggests that community relations remain fragile and vulnerable to events and political changes. It makes a number of policy suggestions for creating stability on a sustainable inter-community basis and recommends what community relations policy might usefully focus on. These range from political co-operation to address issues of safety and threat to seeking active opportunities to engage across community barriers especially in areas of violence. To some extent many of these already form part of public policy, so perhaps the challenge is more one of consistent and coherent implementation.

One particular obstacle to good community relations is explored in the next article by Laura Fowler Graham. This is the issue of the renewed divisions over the definition of victims and the concept of a hierarchy of victimhood and suffering. The public debate concerning victims and survivors has spanned decades and remains active. The author's research indicates that the subject causes division both among political parties and victim support groups and is unhelpful in cultivating trust and peace in Northern Ireland. Her conclusion is that politicians and civic leaders should avoid finger-pointing about who is and who is not an 'innocent' victim and that leadership underscoring empathy towards others is more likely to cultivate trust and foster peaceful relations.

The sense of victimhood is also addressed in the article by Richard Montague in the context of 'hate crime'. In particular he examines the impression expressed by members of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) community that hate crimes against their identity, such as attacks on Orange Halls, neither count as hate crime nor are taken seriously by the authorities. Rather, in this view as expressed to the author, loyalist communities are often presented as more racist than their Catholic neighbours.

The author argues that neither community is more racist than the other but that the debate illustrates how the conceptions around hate crime can lead to a 'blame game' between 'them' and 'us'. Instead of 'hate crime' acting as a banner uniting all communities against all forms of bigotry he argues that the term is becoming a divisive and controversial label as a result of notions of unfair treatment between 'rival' identities.

Finally, the article by Orna Young based on ICR research funded by CRC, examines the theme of young people in interface areas and in particular their use or abuse of social media. The research found that young people are employing social media as a means to maintain and develop inter-communal relationships. Social networking sites were viewed as removing barriers between young people while increasing awareness and knowledge of socio-political issues and debates. This is particularly important given the physical barriers at interfaces. However, there are also dangers. Young people have been exposed to sectarian abuse on social media. In addition, rumours and false information on social networking sites, given the immediacy and reach that they have, have impacted on young people in interface areas. The research found that there was a belief that paramilitaries were causing the proliferation of this false information in order to reassert physical and social barriers and maintain the divided status quo. Social media has real potential to improve cross-community relations in interface areas among young people but the risks of abuse need to be guarded against.

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