The struggle to belong: *Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings*

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The struggle to belong when feeling disconnected: the experience of loyalist east Belfast

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Abstract

Northern Ireland has emerged from a protracted, internal armed conflict and entered into its most 'stable' period in recent history, but it remains a fact in Northern Ireland that overt and insidious paramilitary violence and criminality still lurks in both Loyalist and Republican communities. The common perception is that loyalism has not benefitted as much in terms of the peace dividend compared to their Nationalist counterparts. The focus of this research is loyalist east Belfast where high levels of deprivation are experienced. The impact that relative deprivation has on Loyalist communities only serves to magnify the other problems faced in these areas, such as that of an ageing population, high crime rates, high unemployment, low educational attainment, poor housing, poor health, and lack of community cohesion. Loyalist communities are further described as having poor social capital, a lack of community infrastructure and poor access to funding.

Consequently urban disorder is still rife in these areas, mostly orchestrated by disaffected young people who are too young to remember the Troubles; this can manifest itself in visual disorder, traditional sectarian interface violence. However, following the analysis of fifteen in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews and fourteen hours of non-participant observation the preliminary findings of this research suggests that much of this disorder actually stems from feelings of disconnection from the current peace process, exclusion from the city and the perceived loss of local Loyalist identity which is fundamentally important for these communities. Therefore this paper challenges the traditional suppositions surrounding the concept 'urban social disorder' suggesting that it is much more complex in areas where the struggle to belong has been marred by an ethno-national conflict. It also suggests that the current state response to 'managing' this urban disorder is misunderstood and wholly inadequate.

Introduction

After three decades of civil conflict in Northern Ireland, which resulted in nearly 4000 deaths and over 40,000 serious injuries (Morrissey and Smyth, 2001) a peace accord was signed in 1998 by the governments of the UK and the Irish Republic. The agreement, endorsed by the people of NI in a referendum was subsequently called the 'Good Friday Agreement' or the 'Belfast Agreement'. Although the remit of the Agreement is extremely wide ranging, particular attention is drawn to provisions for political power-sharing between the Irish nationalists and British unionists. The Agreement ushered in a democratically elected Assembly 'inclusive in its membership, capable of exercising executive and legislative authority and subject to safeguards to protect the rights and interest of all sides of the community' (The Agreement: 1998: 5). Devolution became a reality in December 1999 when the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive Committee of Ministers assumed powers of self-government under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The institutions were suspended on four occasions due to a number of political difficulties and until stability grew following power-sharing arrangements between the two key political protagonists (Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin) from May 2007 onwards.

Undoubtedly then Northern Ireland as a site of significant conflict and violence has come a long way. Casual outside observers believe that the Northern Ireland 'problem' has for all intents and purposes been 'solved' (Knox, 2010: 13) however whilst political progress has been made and the security issue have shown major signs of improvement the Northern Ireland 'problem ' is far from being 'solved'.

Notwithstanding the significant political achievements in Northern Ireland, it does remain a deeply segregated society. Many choose to ignore the realities of community division, religious segregation and the problems of reconstruction after a peace agreement has been signed (Darby, 2006). Community differentials are more visible in segregated urban areas. Belfast offers the classic example of this. The city accounted for approximately 40% of all deaths resulting from political violence, between 1969-1999 despite containing less than 20% of the regional population (Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011). Its experience is exemplified by the fact that approximately two-thirds of all sectarian killings happened within its boundaries (Morrissey & Smyth, 2001). Belfast is still very much a divided city with around 90% of children attend either Protestant or Catholic schools; more than 70% of social housing estates are 90% single community occupied; and interface barriers between communities, or so called 'peace walls', have multiplied - in Belfast alone there are 88 security and segregation barriers (Community Relations Council, 2009). Furthermore, a Government consultation document (2003) aimed at improving relations in Northern Ireland captured some baseline evidence that reveals the true extent of segregation in the province. Specifically it discovered that violence at interface areas between the two communities continues to affect lives and property, there is little change in the extent of inter-community friendship patterns and that people's lives still continue to be shaped by community division, in sum it states "Northern Ireland remains a deeply segregated society with little indication of progress towards becoming more tolerant or inclusive (OFMDFM, 2003: 4). To add to this culture of segregation and intolerance, racist incidents have increased from 813 during 2004/05 to 1,038 in 2009/10 earning Northern Ireland the title of 'race hate capital of Europe' (Chrisafis, 2004:1). Yet one of the key goals of the devolved government is to work towards 'a shared and better future for all' (Northern Ireland Executive: 2008, 6).

However, it must be remembered that Northern Ireland is only at a stage of what may be termed 'positive peace ', or merely the removal of cultural and structural violence (Blain, 2008) — more aptly described as a 'conflicted democracy'. Whilst the country has now emerged from a protracted, internal armed conflict and entered into its most 'stable' period in recent history, it remains a fact in Northern Ireland that overt and insidious paramilitary violence and criminality still lurks in both Loyalist and Republican communities. These areas are geographically positioned in the 'zone of transition' (Burgess, 1928), or on the periphery of the central business district.

This paper specifically concentrates on loyalist areas because the transition from conflict to peace has been most problematic here. The common perception is that Loyalism has not benefitted as much in terms of the peace dividend compared to their Nationalist counterparts. In fact, there is mounting evidence that Loyalist communities face a number of challenges, for example, some are among the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland with the profile of the Inner East and Greater Shankill areas of Belfast showing evidence of

high levels of relative deprivation. The impact that relative deprivation has on loyalist communities only serves to magnify the other problems faced in these areas, such as that of an ageing population, high crime rates, high unemployment, low educational attainment, poor housing, poor health, and lack of community cohesion. Loyalist communities are further described as having poor social capital, a lack of community infrastructure and poor access to funding.

Following the outlining of the methodological approach this paper is structured as follows: The second section focuses on the feeling of disconnection from elected representatives, the third section considers the feelings of disconnect from the city centre and the final section examines disconnection from engagement in policy-making.

Methodological Approach

It has been suggested that societal reconciliation rests on foundations set in place at the everyday street level rather than what occurs in the public domain of politics (McAuley et al., 2010) because of the void in formal mechanisms of reconciliation set in place by the Agreement. As such, there is a crucial role for people to take the lead at the local level to pursue various methods of reconciliation. However, it is important to investigate who exactly takes on this leadership role in local communities. An important finding from PhD research which investigated the level of social inclusion in planning and regeneration policy making indicated that in loyalist east Belfast certain 'key individuals' attempted to control the views and opinions of 'their' community.

> "It's a hard line to draw between those that have paramilitary connections in a neighbourhood and those who are from older residents groups. But there are still separate identities in many areas between the 'do-gooders' and the 'not-so-do-gooders' who have an agenda of their own" (Interview with east Belfast community worker).

This is something I felt that warranted further investigation and therefore this follow-on research has been performed. As illustrated in the abstract, to date, 15 in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews have been analysed. Fourteen hours of non-participant observation was also performed. The non-participant observation is currently being analysed and as such the findings will not form part of the discussion within this short conference paper, but will be developed at a later date. Further information on the semi-structured interviews is contained within the following table:

Figure one

Type of Respondent	Interest: Community/ Professional/Political	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total Sample
Representatives from community organisations	Community	7	47%
Ex-combatants	Community	5	33%
Politicians	Professional/Political	3	20%

All of the respondents above, reside or work in east Belfast which was the geographical focus of the research. The research was restricted to this geographical area because it was only here that suggestions of certain paramilitary organisations 'controlling' the community were identified. The interviews were undertaken between February and August 2010, all of the interviews were audio-recorded.

The non-participant observation was suggested to me by one of the respondents who was working to resolve interface violence involving young people at a prominent 'peaceline' in east Belfast. Due to ethical considerations I wasn't permitted to become more involved with the young people who were engaging in the violence, primarily because the young people were under 18 years of age and also because of my own safety as some of the violence involved, bricks, bottles and other objects being thrown. In addition some of the young people had armed themselves with various weapons for their own 'protection'. I observed the proceedings at a safe distance in the background and the community and youth workers spoke to me at various intervals to inform me of what exactly was happening. This non-participant observation was undertaken over Friday and Saturday nights between May and June 2010.

The findings from this small piece of research suggests that much of violence and social disorder actually stems from feelings of disconnection, disconnection from unionist politicians and disconnection from Belfast city centre, there is also a feeling that loyalist/Protestant areas have somehow and 'lost out' from the current peace process, exclusion from the city and the perceived loss of local Loyalist identity which is fundamentally important for these communities. Therefore this paper challenges the traditional suppositions surrounding the concept 'urban social disorder' suggesting that it is much more complex in areas where the struggle to belong has been marred by an ethno-national conflict. It also suggests that the current state response to 'managing' this urban disorder is misunderstood and wholly inadequate.

Disconnection from Unionist politicians

As stated above feelings of 'disconnection' came across strongly from the research findings. In particular there was a feeling of disconnection, or sense of loss from the peace process in the sense that local politicians are particularly inept at dealing with local issues that mattered/matter to the working class Protestant community, and that they and their

'identity' had somehow been 'sold out' with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Undoubtedly the failure to cultivate political legitimacy among the Unionist electorate has been a frustrating enterprise for loyalist paramilitaries. This section explores some of these issues in more detail. Before discussing the empirical data however it is important to draw attention to the paramilitary organisations that were, and some would argue still are influential in east Belfast.

There were two paramilitary organisations that were active and had a large following in east Belfast during the 'Troubles'. The first being the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) formed in 1966. The political wing of the UVF is the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) who played a prominent role in the peace process and were supportive of the 1998 Belfast Agreement. The second is the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) which was formed in 1971; it had thousands of members and was the largest paramilitary group. Its 'military wing' was the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF). The Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG) provides advice to them on political matters. Ex-combatants of the aforementioned paramilitary organisations in east Belfast and other community based activists have now found themselves engaged on the political and social issues at a micro level.

At both personal and structural levels there is evidence of former prisoners (or ex-combatants) working to diminish the political tensions that remain as a result of the long-term inter-community hostility that have spanned across three decades of violence. Indeed some commentators have acknowledged that significant political changes have occurred due to their crucial involvement in processes of group transformation (McAuley et al., 2010).

Virtually all loyalist former prisoners groups have members who play an active role in attempting to reduce continuing low level violence at interface areas. In addition to 'policing' the boundaries between loyalist and republican communities they also contribute to youth projects and challenge the attraction of engaging in such loyalist violence. Specifically it has been noted that former combatants can retain "a unique source of credibility within loyalist communities...because they have experienced conflict and are perceived as respected voices" (Cash, 1998: 228). One ex-combatant from the UDA was keen to emphasise that he hoped the local community would see him as someone who is there to work for the community and not against it.

> "I hope people don't see me as a UDA commander, I want people to know me as someone who tries to make the area better and I know that's how the rest of my colleagues see me here".

While there is evidence of strong community leadership on the ground or micro level in east Belfast, the community representatives and former combatants were critical of the unionist politicians who they see as failing at the macro level. The former leader of the PUP the late David Erivine argued "the biggest threat outside the loyalist community is from its unionist leadership and that unionist leadership really does need to wake up and give people hope rather than this sense of dismay" (cited in Rowan, 2005: 170). This has given rise to the view from within loyalism that they are entrapped, economically, socially and in some cases

physically. In essence many local people feel abandoned by unionist politicians. One former member of the UDA commented:

> "There's nobody here that represents the working class loyalist, no one in that big house on the hill [Stromont] represents anyone around here".

He went onto comment about the loss of the PUP leader David Ervine, stating that he was forward thinking, believed in equity and understood that it was important that all cultures live peacefully in society. He emphasised the sense of loss that the community in east Belfast felt and warned about the future potential impact of not having adequate political representation.

> "I hope we soon get that representation and it does need to happen if it doesn't there will be a roll back into conflict, deprivation and apathy, and the way things are going that could happen".

Another former paramilitary respondent, this time from the UVF made a similar statement:

> "Loyalism has went backward since the loss of David Ervine...our community needs one party, it's too fractured love and it doesn't matter if both unionist parties hate each other with a passion. I don't particularly care what, when, why and how it is done, we need unionist unity for our community's sake, back to one party, one direction back to the sort of unity that loyalism needs and not fractured the way that it is"

What was particularly interesting was that there appeared to be a sense of envy that came from some of the respondents, that the nationalist party political machine of Sinn Féin were much more effective in representing working class nationalists. There was evidence from the research that there are stark differences in the political and ideological space that paramilitaries now occupy within unionism and nationalism and it is widely accepted that more often than not Protestant paramilitaries "enjoy less prestige in their community than their Republican counterparts" (Smithey, 2008:53). This was identified by a local community worker from east Belfast who was referring to how effective Sinn Féin operates as a political party, he stated:

> "They have made themselves a better party and they have made their communities better, and they have got themselves a sense of what their identities are, we have lost ours, we have lost our sense of being a community".

The inadequate feeling of political representation goes back to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement whereby many in the loyalist/Protestant community feel they somehow lost out since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement have got a 'raw deal'. The perception held by many Protestants that they lost out to a more politically astute Catholic community. Data collected from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 1999 also shows a growing distrust within the Protestant community (Hughes and Donnelly, 2002) accompanied by increased optimism within Catholic community, illustrating the zero sum nature of politics in Northern Ireland.

A number of respondents also highlighted that some paramilitary members have not moved on from their 'old ways' and that they were still involved in low level criminality. It was felt that if there was adequate formal political representation this would help to flush out the few remaining paramilitaries who are clinging to the belief that they have some official 'hold' over their community. The data revealed that there are still some geographical areas in east Belfast and some small housing estates where paramilitaries are still flexing their muscle and holding local people to ransom. One former ex-combatant from the UVF stated:

> "I'll tell you love there is still that factor in some people's heads within loyalsim, some of these guys in certain areas, in certain estates think that they run them, they have that in their heads"

A similar point was expressed by a former member of the UDA

> "We have domineering people in communities who live like leeches, who live off the people; the major problem is drug dealers, tearing the communities asunder"

All of the respondents who were questioned on continuing paramilitary activity were highly critical of it and felt that this impacted negatively on local people and the local area of east Belfast. Low levels of criminality include intimidation, racketeering and drug dealing. The former paramilitary members were most vocal on this topic and were keen to distance themselves from existing members involved in criminality. One former member of the UVF stated:

> "You cannot be a loyalist if you are terrorising your community, number one, taking money from them, number two, and being a drug dealer number three. You must be working for your community not against them and those three things to me are all working against the communities".

The path from conflict to transition has been far from straightforward for the loyalist paramilitary organisations, with feuds, murders and the aforementioned low level criminality that still lurks in certain areas in east Belfast. Unsurprisingly the political respondents who participated in this research were highly critical of this criminality with one respondent describing loyalism as going through a self destruct mode every so often. This respondent succinctly comments:

> "No longer can there be feuding and murders. That is simply gangsterism masquerading as loyalism" (Interview with Democratic Unionist Party).

In addition to the feeling of disconnection from politicians and the current peace process another theme highlighted from the analysis of data is that many of the working class Protestants who reside on the periphery of the city in east Belfast feel increasingly isolated from the city centre.

Disconnection from Belfast City Centre

Much academic literature has been published on the regeneration of Belfast (Fitzsimons, 1995; Bollens, 1999; Neill, 1999, McAlister, 2009, 2010). This extensive literature highlights that today there is little evidence in the city centre of the violent legacy of the conflict. It is where the conflict has almost been 'air-brushed' out with inward investment and regeneration transforming the city. Belfast is not alone in pursuing such transformation strategies, Harvey (1998) notes that practically all contemporary metropolises contain a similar 'mask' consisting of strategies of redevelopment, where commercial buildings falling into dereliction have been re-used and where areas of the city are designated as cultural quarters. Some commentators are quite critical of this neo-liberal agenda being pursued in Northern Ireland (Nagle, 2009) because the result of such an agenda has been the creation of a 'twin-speed' city (Murtagh, 2008).

There is no denying the growing disparity between the city centre and the outlying working class areas. Shirlow (2006: 10) has commented that "the fate of the city lies somewhere between the uniformity of corporate globalisation and the continual balkanising of social and cultural life". Whilst commentators have sought to expose the veneer of the city centre little attention is focused on the emerging forms of urban regeneration that infuse these districts (Nagle, 2009). This is problematic because as gentrification begins to exhaust the inner city, districts on the outskirts are susceptible to become caught up in the momentum of gentrification, not only does this cause obvious problems of families who wish to purchase property in their locale but also too because territoriality is a particular sensitive issue in ethnically divided cities.

The youth workers in particular highlighted the expense and disconnection of the city centre. However, when probed it was revealed that not only is the city centre financially remote for a lot of young people but also 'geographically remote' in other words there is still a fear factor that it is not 'safe' to enter the city centre for fear of attack from the 'other side' (the Catholic/nationalist community). One youth worker exemplified this by stating:

> "Young people don't get to use the city centre as often as they should, it's so expensive, they would tend just to use local neighbourhood facilities and bars, but there is also that fear factor to you know, I feel fear, I don't like it".

This is an unfortunate situation and almost creates a rather insular community in loyalist east Belfast, where there is little chance of 'mixing' with other communities in neutral space in the city centre. This may serve to deepen feelings of mistrust and fear of the other community. Another community worker observed that it is the middle class young people who live further outside the city are the ones who can afford to avail of the new night time economy because they can get a lift from their parents or can afford a taxi.

Strong feelings were also raised about the redevelopment of the shipyard, now renamed Titanic Quarter – a 'character zone' which it is hoped will facilitate 'cultural regeneration' and promote the local economy. Again the idea of cultural quarters is reminiscent of 'urban cloning' as seen in other cities across Europe (Nagle, 2009). The Titanic Quarter website boasts that the area is one of Europe's largest and most exciting waterfront developments, transforming a 185-acre site on the banks of Belfast's river Lagan into a new mixed use maritime quarter with a mile of water frontage and a range of investment opportunities It

will bring new life to a part of the city that is rich in both history and potential. It is also becoming a major social and business meeting place with hotels, galleries, theatres, parklands and water sports all easily connected to Belfast's thriving city centre (titanic-quarter.com, 2011). From this corporate statement it is difficult to imagine that the local working class community will be able to access some of the aforementioned facilities. What is also interesting to note is that there is no mention that Titanic Quarter is based in east Belfast, rather close links to the newly regenerated neutral city centre are emphasised. This has not gone unnoticed by the respondents involved in this research. One community worker commented:

> "To me it seems like the politicians and developers are keen to throw away the crown jewels of east Belfast. I was raging to see and hear of Titanic Quarter being referred to as being in the city centre. It is in east Belfast and I am proud of that. It may sell better but so what, what are the people in east Belfast getting out of it? There was meant to be 17,000 jobs created, no idea where they went, there was meant to be a road linking east Belfast directly to it, that is on the back burner as is the social housing that we were promised. What did they say, they said sorry look at the economy, times have changed, seems to me there's plenty of excuses and they [the developers] have managed to claw their way out of it".

There was a lot of anger about how Titanic Quarter is being marketed and the fact that it appears that the development will not be an inclusive space even though the regeneration project permeates loyalist east Belfast. Another community worker referred to the fact that this policy almost makes local people feel like "the great unwashed".

But it must be asked to what extent this economic development and regeneration actually improves endemic patterns of ethnic segregation, poverty and social exclusion that underpin violence? The evidence presented here suggests that these policies aren't particularly successful, there is no real prosperity and the new spaces that are being created in the city centre cannot be accessed by those who live on the periphery of the city because they are simply being priced out of the new city that is being created. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Northern Ireland is becoming a less sectarian place; rather feelings of hostility are becoming more entrenched.

Disconnection from Engagement

For many years the term 'weak' community infrastructure' has increasingly been used to describe loyalist areas where civil society is seen as being less developed. Overall it has been observed that Protestant/unionist communities are 'poorly integrated into processes of community development and organisation' (McAuley et al., 2010: 31). It is also noted by Campbell et al., (2010) note that Catholic/nationalist areas have a much longer history of engaging in co-operative social interaction in Northern Ireland. Additionally Boix and Posner (1998) suggest a relationship between a community's co-operative capacity building and the degree of social and political inequality they have historically faced. Because Protestants held the dominant position in society this may have negated against the need for strong social networks (Campbell et al., 2010).

Previous research undertaken by Cairns et al., (2004) has suggested that Protestants as a religious group appear to be more pre-disposed individualistic tendencies of action, possibly stemming from the 'Protestant work ethic' which postulates self sufficiency. It may well be that as a result Protestants may show a greater reluctance to become involved in co-operative behaviour.

This suggests that disadvantaged Protestant communities like east Belfast may require greater capacity building and greater consideration may also be given to the promotion of community participation and shared civic values in Protestant working class areas. This may help with the struggle to belong in transitional society in Northern Ireland and ensure that local people can promote their views and opinions and ensure their voice is heard by the elected representatives for the area.

Conclusions

This paper has presented some interim findings of the 'struggle to belong' in Protestant east Belfast. It highlighted that currently there is a feeling of disconnect in the area. Specifically participants in the research felt disconnected from the politicians that represent the area, from the peace process in general and also from the transformation taking place in Belfast city centre which is right on the periphery of east Belfast. Furthermore, Belfast continues to be a highly divided society. There is little sign that the peace process or economic investment is transforming the deep-rooted problems of poverty and segregated living that afflict some parts of Belfast.

Essentially much more needs to be done by local politicians to assist those people in east Belfast build confidence and promote the area, attract investment and provide hope for the people. In addition the work undertaken by the former paramilitaries needs to be recognised by local politicians too as they are playing a key transformative role in east Belfast. Furthermore, young people and their aspirations for the future must also be taken into account because it is vital that they see the benefits of 'peace' to draw them away from sectarianism and from the allure of the paramilitary groups. It is only by taking a much more broader and imaginative approach to including communities and bringing them together will the east Belfast and wider Northern Ireland problem come anywhere close to being 'solved'.

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