

Teenagers' Perceptions of Belfast as a Divided and/or Shared City

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Introduction

In a 'divided city' such as Belfast the focus is often on what would be classed as the key division of religion and/or ethno-national identity, and this can reinforce assumptions that there are two separate homogenous communities whose use of, entitlement to, interaction in and sense of belonging to place and space is mapped solely and unproblematically along those lines. However in Belfast, as with any city, there are other social divisions such as class, age, gender, that, to greater or lesser degrees, impact upon and are interwoven with perceptions and experiences of ethno-national identity; creating divisions and alliances not only between groups but within groups. It is important, therefore, to gain a greater appreciation of how these social divisions interact with one another if the 'divided city' is to be more comprehensively understood and notions of a neutral/shared/integrated city are to move beyond the rhetorical or conceptual. One of the core purposes of the research reported here was to explore young people's perceptions of their immediate localities and the city centre of Belfast as places of safety or risk and to ascertain whether they attributed meanings of safety and risk to ethno-sectarian or other factors¹.

The research responds to what Matthews (1995) has termed a vacuum in understanding how young people make use of and relate to public space. Matthews argues that by failing to take into account young people's 'ways of seeing' they are positioned as an outsider group. Documenting young people's perception and use of their everyday environments is an essential component to comprehending how cities position young people and how in turn they respond to this positioning. It involves a recognition that while there are likely

¹ This paper is based on an ESRC funded project *Conflict in Cities and the Contested State*, ESRC large Grant RES-060-25-0015 [2007-2012]

to be continuities between adults' and young people's perspectives on local space, there are likely to be discontinuities as well (Scourfield et al 2006). Holloway and Valentine (2000) outline how young people's identities are constituted in and through particular spaces. In exploring the links between spatiality and childhood, their work reveals the myriad ways in which children and young people's daily lives are influenced by their surrounding environment. However, while young people often occupy shared spaces with adults, they often modify adult meanings of place through their interaction with everyday environments.

The research adopted a multiple methods approach aimed at gathering visual and narrative data in ways that would stimulate and engage the young people involved, with the majority of the data being gathered in schools during January and June 2010. Initially a questionnaire was administered by the researchers to 442 pupils attending 20 schools located throughout north, south, east and west Belfast. All the schools were segregated on the basis of religion and the majority were also segregated on the basis of gender. The sample included both secondary and grammar schools. Overall, 57% of young people were from a Catholic background while 43% were from a Protestant background. In terms of gender breakdown, 29% were Catholic girls, 28% were Catholic boys, 28% were Protestant girls and 15% were Protestant boys. Attempts to gain an even number of pupils on the basis of gender and religion proved problematic given different class sizes on the day the questionnaire was administered. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data from pupils from a range of different geographical localities in order to build up an overall profile of young people's experiences of Belfast as a divided or shared city. In relation to location 29% of participants came from north Belfast, 13% from south, 24% from west, 18% from east and 16% outside Belfast, Just under two thirds of the overall sample lived in all or nearly all Protestant/Catholic areas, 25% lived in mixed areas with the remainder unable to specify. One hundred and thirty two young people from six schools also wrote stories on 'what's good and what's not so good about growing up in Belfast'². A further purpose of the research was to focus in more depth on young people who grow up in areas commonly referred to as 'interface' ones. Hence, a number of additional methods were employed in relation to gaining richer data on the experiences of young people growing up in these areas including responses to photographic images representing Belfast's ethno-national 'past' and 'post conflict' future and focus group discussions in order to gain further insight into some of the emerging themes. The data is in the

2 The collection of stories from the young people is ongoing so this number may change in subsequent publications on the research

process of being analysed and for the purposes of this paper, only the questionnaire data and the stories are utilised. While we make no claims in terms of generalisability or representativeness of the data the findings provide useful insights into the experiences and perceptions of this group of teenagers and contribute to and enhance existing research.

The questionnaire was entitled 'Hanging Out in Belfast' and was structured around 7 core sections. The first section was concerned with collecting general background information in order to build up a profile of the sample and included questions on gender, religion, ethnicity, class and neighbourhood. This section also incorporated questions around perceptions of safety in neighbourhoods and attitudes to the police in terms of encouraging young people to feel more or less safe in their areas. The second section was concerned with understanding young people's attitudes to and usage of mobile phones and the internet. Here questions centred on the importance of this technology in young people's everyday lives, the extent to which they made friends through the use of this technology or used this technology to make contact with existing friends. We also asked questions around the usefulness of using the internet to encourage dialogue between Catholic and Protestant teenagers. The third section focused on knowledge of and views on the 'troubles' including attitudes to peace walls, territorial markings of localities and attitudes to cross-community and intra-ethnic marriages. The fourth section focused on how young people perceive they are viewed by adults and how they feel they are perceived and judged by other teenagers including the extent to which these perceptions impact on their daily spatial behaviour. The fifth section was concerned with impressions of Belfast's city centre and young people were asked about how often they used the city centre, for what purposes and if they generally felt safe or unsafe occupying and using city centre spaces. The sixth section of the questionnaire asked young people about their leisure activities including where they spent their leisure time, involvement in sport and other leisure activities and their perception of the relevance of these activities for bringing different groups of teenagers together. The final section of the questionnaire finished with some general questions concerning growing up in Belfast including asking young people to reflect on whether they felt Belfast was a shared or divided city along with their own reflections on the extent to which they felt safe or unsafe using the city. The analysis of the questionnaire data is ongoing and for the purposes of this paper, young people's attitudes to their localities and to the city centre as places of safety and/or risk are outlined.

General Attitudes to Belfast as a place of safety

Young people were asked their general attitudes to Belfast and to reflect on whether they felt it was a good city to grow up in. Over 70% of the overall sample felt that Belfast was a good place in which to grow up and there were no discernible differences between responses on the basis of religion or gender. The teenagers produced a number of reasons why Belfast was a good place to grow up. The most prominent discourse focused on young people's perception that Belfast is made up of very close knit communities and linked to this was an emphasis being placed on family and friendship ties. Some young people felt that because they had been born in Belfast and lived all their lives in the same community, they had built up strong networks and a strong sense of belonging to their locality. Young people were asked if they felt they would still be living in Belfast in five years time 50% said yes, 16% no and 34% were unsure. These positive evaluations of Belfast are reflected in the following quotes:

I love Belfast and I believe I fit in here. I am comfortable and my family is here. I know my way around and know lots of people. (Catholic girl)

For all its flaws it is still a good country full of tradition and culture. (Catholic boy)

I'm not moving while my granny still lives beside me and I don't think she will die within the next 5 years (Catholic boy)

We have a good life here. We have friends, family etc. all living here and we have a lovely house and a pet (Protestant Girl)

We're the greatest city the world has ever seen. (Protestant boy)

I like Northern Ireland all my friends and family live here (Protestant boy)

This reflects other research which suggests that young people often develop strong attachments to place and consider place in terms of friendship and family networks (Morrow 2001).

Young people were asked to name four places in their neighbourhoods where they most often hung about with their friends. Streets and shops emerged as the most popular locations being cited by around three quarters of the overall sample as core places for meeting up. Matthews et al (2000a) argues that streets are important cultural spaces for young people and function as sites where identities can be formed and performed. Several young people

indicated that their immediate localities were vital as social venues. Half of the overall sample indicated that they utilised their own or their friends' houses as meeting places while half also mentioned local parks, football pitches or other public spaces. Around one fifth suggested that they utilised youth clubs or churches as venues for meeting and interacting with peers. In terms of feeling safe in one's neighbourhood, 56% reported that they generally felt safe with 38% saying that they felt safe most of the time and only 6% reporting that they felt unsafe. Place use was collective and many young people indicated that feelings of safety were enhanced when they utilised local spaces as members of groups rather than as individuals.

The city centre also emerged as a key location in the lives of the young people in the study. Nearly two thirds of girls and just over one third of boys stated that they went into the city centre of Belfast at least once per week, generally on a Saturday. Often young people accessed the city centre in groups or met up with friends in the city centre and hung out in shops and cafes. Victoria Square and Castlecourt were identified as two of the most popular locations for shopping, eating, meeting friends and just generally 'hanging out'. Young people indicated how they used these locations to act out teenage identities, to evaluate other teenagers in terms of teen style and at times to use these spaces to attract the other sex. Over 90% of young people suggested that they felt safe using these places and regarded these locations as arenas where religion was not overly important. Indeed the existence of these places was taken as an indicator that Belfast had moved beyond its troubled past as the following quotes indicate:

Many years ago perhaps when my granny was about my age today, Belfast would have been very troubled. Belfast would have been very disturbed with the dropping of bombs, shooting and fighting. Nowadays most of this has cleared although we have the occasional riots here and there. Now that all this has changed Belfast has brought in many shopping centres with all the goods us girls and boys love to buy. Examples of shopping centres are Victoria Square and Castle Court which are placed in Belfast's city centre (Protestant girl)

Belfast has amazing resources and brand new state of the art buildings such as Victoria Square which has lots of amazing shops such as Build a Bear, The Cookie Box, Top Shop and the Odeon (Catholic girl)

Hence for the most part, local and city centre spaces were places where social identities were formed, where opportunities existed for autonomous use of space enabling young people to assert their independence and partially get away from the adult gaze.

General Attitudes to Belfast as a place of risk

Only 6% of the overall sample indicated that they felt unsafe in their locality while 38% stated that they felt safe most but not all of the time. Around a quarter of those who suggested that they felt safe most of the time and about half of those who did not feel safe in their locality attributed their apprehensions to ethno-national divisions and the legacy of the troubles. Young men were more likely than young women to state that they had been involved in violent assaults or rioting and to 'getting jumped' or 'chased' by Protestants/Catholics:

I was standing outside my work having a smoke and two Protestants jumped me. I got badly beaten up for just standing on my own (Catholic boy)

If we go to the Crossroads, we will get chased by Catholics and they have all sorts of weapons (Protestant boy)

However, feeling unsafe in one's locality was not simply reduced to ethno-national divisions but to fears of being victimised by crimes such as general assault, stabbings, burglaries, fights, joyriding and for girls, rape:

People in my area have been robbed, OAPs, youngsters, whatever age it doesn't matter (Catholic boy)

(In my area), there have been two rapes, car crashes, suicide, fights with other people, knife crime (Protestant girl)

In a similar vein, several young people indicated that they felt unsafe in the city centre but produced a wide variety of reasons to account for this rather than reducing fears to perceptions of ethno-sectarian identity. For example while the central shopping areas of the city centre such as Castlecourt and Victoria Square were perceived as being used by the majority of teenagers, others spaces were seen to attract special sub-cultural groups. For example, many young people discussed how the City Hall and Waterfront were frequented by Goths, Emos and skateboarders and young people not belonging to these groups practiced social and physical spatial apartheid by not frequenting these locations.

Other young people discussed how they were suspicious of drunken adults and people that they perceived as being under the influence of drugs. Beggars were another group who were regarded with suspicion by teenagers. There was also a temporal dimension to feelings of safety and risk with many young

people regarding the city centre as safe during the day but less safe at night time. Girls in particular indicated that they were concerned with using the city centre particularly at night time because of the presence of a range of 'suspicious adults':

Because drunk old men walk over and ask for money and all when you're just walking past and it's creepy (Catholic girl)

Especially if it is dark and there are big crowds of boys...and homeless people on the street (Catholic girl)

Walking down entries and streets with alcoholics lying on the ground and people begging for money (Catholic girl)

Hence, in these ways feeling unsafe in the city centre in many cases, was not related to or articulated as ethno-national concerns. This reminds us of the need to move away from reducing identity to a single analytical category. Our data illustrated a variety of ways in which young people's spatial strategies were shaped by gender and this impacted differently on how boys and girls negotiated local and city centre spaces, particularly at night time.

However, at the end of the questionnaire, young people were invited to reflect on whether they thought that overall Belfast was a safe or unsafe place to grow up in. Slightly less than half of the overall group regarded Belfast overall as an unsafe place. Of this group, around one quarter attributed this to anti-social behaviour but nearly two thirds mentioned sectarian violence and rioting:

You can get hurt because of your religion (Protestant girl)

There are always fights, riots and murders reported in Belfast even at sports events and other silly things (Catholic boy)

Because there are republicans who want a united Ireland (Protestant boy)

Protestants are so sectarian they attack people (Catholic girl)

Young people were also specifically asked if they felt that Belfast was a 'shared city' and the interpretation of the word 'shared' was left deliberately vague. Thirteen percent of young people indicated in response to this question that they were unsure what the term 'shared city' meant. Almost two thirds of the overall sample, 62% indicated that they felt that Belfast was a shared city

commenting on it being shared by Catholics and Protestants and in some cases by other ethnic groups. However, 25% of the overall sample disagreed commenting on the continuing relevance of sectarianism:

Areas are still predominately one religion or the other e.g. Falls for Catholics and Shankill for Protestants (Protestant girl)

Because people my age are sticking with people the same religion as themselves (Catholic boy)

Protestants just own the place because the police and council are on their side (Catholic girl)

No chance, Belfast is as sectarian as it used to be. Paramilitaries are still about and beatings are still happening (Catholic boy)

Catholics get more than Protestants e.g. leisure centres (Protestant boy)

There are still areas where different religions would be shot (Catholic girl)

The on-going legacy of the troubles was the most frequently mentioned aspect of ‘what’s not so good about growing up in Belfast’ to emerge in the stories. These viewpoints are reflected in the following quotes:

Another bad point is rioting even though it has calmed down a lot in the past few years. It usually starts up again around the eleventh and twelfth of July. As I mentioned beforehand, I live very close to where rioting would usually happen and when it recently started again, my family and I actually had to leave our house and go to a friend’s house because we felt it was unsafe (Protestant girl)

I think the worst parts of Belfast is its reputation and the sectarianism. I believe that it is portrayed to be far worse than it is but it still has fights and you have to be very careful if you are in the wrong area and that ruins the city (Catholic girl)

Some more bad stuff is that the sectarianism between Protestants and Catholics is a big problem and the reports that it has stopped are wrong as on the Tour de North there is riots and also on the 12th July the riots last for a week (Catholic boy)

I mentioned Belfast has a large population. This population is mixed with Catholics and Protestants so there are usually some fights of sectarianism. It gets more serious when it comes to St Patrick's Day and the 11th and 12th of July where riots begin and the police must try to end it (Protestant boy)

Hence, for some teenagers, Belfast continues to be viewed as a divided city and an unsafe place although there is considerable evidence from the data to indicate that young people often contest and resist the reproduction of everyday sectarian prejudices. Moreover, the data indicated that other social processes are often at work here.

Wearing School uniforms

All of the schools who took part in the research were segregated on the basis of religious identity and therefore the wearing of a school uniform could be perceived as a physical marker of ethno-nationality even if the young person concerned did not subscribe to such identities. Young people were asked their opinions on wearing school uniforms both in their immediate localities and in the city centre. Almost one quarter of the overall sample suggested that at some point they had felt unsafe going to and from school. For many this was linked to perceived or actual sectarian abuse/attacks:

It is hard as a teenager growing up in Belfast because some of my friends live in XXX (Protestant area) but I live at the top of the XXX (adjacent Protestant area). I can't walk through XXX to meet my friends because that is a Catholic area and I could get into an argument or fight. I can't walk home from school either, because they can tell by my uniform what religion I am (Protestant girl)

Walking through XXX (Protestant area) in a Catholic blazer is dangerous especially as there are people from (Protestant school) about (Catholic boy)

Sometimes you have to be very aware of what areas you walk in and what you're wearing. For example I go to the XXXX which is known as a mostly Protestant school, so when I walk home, I have to be very careful about where I go and what other schools I will be walking past. This can sometimes be very frustrating (Protestant girl)

Teenagers were asked if they would feel safe in the city centre wearing their school uniform and overall 42% indicated that they would feel safe. However, just under one third indicated that they would feel safe most but not all of the time while 19% indicated that they would feel unsafe:

The town is mixed and sometimes people have problems with other religions (Catholic girl)

Because people from the other side would tend to start fights (Protestant girl)

There are mixed feelings about Catholics so being in my uniform is like broadcasting that I'm a Catholic which makes me feel a bigger target (Catholic girl)

In case Catholic hoods are there, then they know we're a Protestant school and jump us (Protestant girl)

Cuz Catholics try to jump ya (Protestant boy)

*Because of the feud between Catholics and Protestants (Protestant boy)
Because both Catholics and Protestants go down town and they slabber at each other (Catholic boy)*

Protestants might recognise your uniform as Catholic and attack you (Catholic boy)

However, girls provided additional reasons to account for feeling unsafe wearing a school uniform linked to perceived sexual worries around paedophiles or generally to passing 'strange men' wearing a school uniform. This suggests that other factors are at play based on perceived gender dangers and underline the need to ensure that difference is not solely reduced to perceived ethno-national divisions.

Police and Safety

Young people were asked to reflect on how the police being in their area impacted on feelings of safety. The majority of young people felt indifferent to the presence of the police with 64% saying that it made no difference at all as to whether they felt safer or not. Hence the majority of young people expressed lukewarm attitudes to the presence of the police in terms of creating perceptions of safety. This was partly because young people saw the presence of the police was a common occurrence and therefore their presence did not

necessarily suggest that something untoward had happened as the following quotes indicate:

You don't know why they are looking or what they are looking for so it doesn't make any difference to me (Catholic girl)
You usually see them driving about where I live so you get use to it (Catholic boy)

A quarter of this group felt that the police were ineffective in confronting and dealing with problems in their neighbourhood, hence their presence was an irrelevant factor in reducing crime. A number of young people spoke of the inability of the police to confront problem teenagers in their locality indicating perceptions of crime emerging within communities rather than across communities:

They never do anything that is of benefit to people anyway. They lift the hoods, then they let them back out again and they never charge them with anything (Catholic girl)

To me, it doesn't make much difference because although they may be in the neighbourhood, there are still drunken teenagers running about the streets (Catholic girl)

Only 12% indicated that a visible police presence made them feel safer with slightly more Protestants than Catholics responding in this way. For both groups, the visibility of the police would act as a deterrent to anyone considering committing a crime. Hence the presence of the police in itself was seen as promoting safety in a passive way by simply frightening or discouraging people from committing crimes in case they got caught. However, as the previous section indicated the police were seen as largely ineffective in dealing with culprits once they were caught.

Almost a quarter of the overall sample, 24% indicated that they felt less safe when the police were around because their presence in itself suggested that 'something was wrong' or 'something bad had happened'. Over two thirds of Protestant teenagers and just under half of Catholic teenagers viewed the presence of the police in these terms.

The research produced limited evidence to suggest that attitudes to the police, particularly in relation to feeling safe when they are around, were linked to ethno-religious identity. Catholic teenagers were slightly more likely to imply that mistrust of the police was stronger in Catholic areas compared to Protestant areas because of a perception that the police responded to both

communities in different ways. However, for both groups of teenagers, their identity as teenagers meant that they were regarded with distrust by the police regardless of ethno-religious identity:

The police...are prejudiced against teenagers hanging out (Catholic girl)

Police search teenagers for no reason as they automatically stereotype teenagers as carrying alcohol or drugs (Catholic girl)

I don't like the way the police deal with young people. They always assume that we are up to something bad (Catholic boy)

They discriminate against us because of where we would hang around, be dressed like or our personal habits (Protestant boy)

Teenagers' perceptions of adults' attitudes to them

This latter point emerged throughout our research in terms of how young people felt they were perceived by adults in general. For the most part, young people felt that they were regarded negatively by adults. For example, in gauging how they were perceived in shops and shopping centres in the city centre, 71% of boys and 47% of girls felt that other shoppers were suspicious of them, while 76% of boys and 64% of girls felt that they were regarded with suspicion by people working in shops. For a significant number, 74% of boys and 56% of girls, this suspicion led to them being asked to 'move on'. This created anger and resentment as the majority of young people felt that they had done nothing wrong and that adults made stereotypical judgments and regarded 'normal' teenage behaviour as unacceptable. The most common words that young people drew on to describe how adult shoppers, shop-workers and security guards in the city centre perceived them were annoying, trouble or thieves. The following quotes typify the responses received:

It made me feel as if they thought I was troublesome and less than them. The fact that we were not being rowdy made me feel untrusted and as if my rights were not as important as other people's (Catholic girl)

Last week, me and my friends went into Marks and Spencers to buy a cake and the worker told us to leave except for the person buying something which was all of us so we all had to leave. She was prejudiced (Catholic girl)

It wasn't fair. We did nothing wrong and it wouldn't happen if we were adults. Being treated like this makes teenagers feel low and so they rebel. The 'solutions' actually cause the problems (Protestant girl)

Like I didn't matter and I was causing bother when I wasn't. I simply had been stereotyped as a rowdy teenager (Protestant girl)

I hadn't done anything but looked suspicious because I am a teenager so I get blamed (Protestant boy)

It is really annoying to have shop assistants following you around shops assuming that you are going to steal because you're a teenager. People need to realise that all teenagers aren't going to steal (Catholic girl – from stories)

They think everyone is going to cause trouble but not everybody is like that (Catholic boy)

This supports other research (Matthews et al 2000b: 281-288, Valentine, 1996) which notes how the presence of young people, particularly in groups, challenges 'adult perceptions and ownership of public space... [and] creates a moral regulation of public space that controls access and behaviour'.

Conclusion

The research reported here is a preliminary account of some of the initial analysis of the data which is on-going, hence the conclusions are tentative. Initial analysis suggests that there are grounds for cautious optimism in relation to young people's experiences of growing up in Belfast in terms of the overriding significance of ethno-nationalism as an important marker of identity. Nonetheless, ethno-national concerns and considerations continued to emerge as a subtle subtext in their narratives indicating the fragility of change and the resilience of ethno-national dispositions even in young people who have grown up in a period of relative stability. Moreover, focus group interviews with young people from interface areas suggest that attention needs to be paid to the on-going segregation of localities and the education system. As outlined earlier, many young people continue to see school uniforms as badges of ethno-religious identity and engage in different spatial practices while wearing school uniforms. Moreover, preliminary analysis of the richer interview material from young people who grow up in interface areas seems to support Murtagh's (2008) conceptualisation of post-conflict Belfast as a 'dual' or 'two speed' city with working class areas particularly in ethnic interface areas remaining trapped in local sectarian competition while middle

class populations benefit from post-conflict prosperity. This view is shared by Komarova (2008: 11) who in reviewing policy planning documents around creating a new 'shared future' in the post Good Friday Agreement period concludes that there has been 'little transformative impact on the existing sectarian geography of Belfast, and that the political agreement itself has been unable to affect any real transformation of the ethno-national division in society and politics'. Other young people indicate that they face a range of spatial antagonisms in their localities and the city centre around how they are perceived by other adults. While it is a positive development that young people in Belfast are less influenced by traditional ethno-national identities, creating a 'shared future' for young people necessitates confronting and challenging adults' negative perceptions of teenagers particularly in their use of public space.

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