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## Place, territory and young people's identity in the 'new' Northern Ireland

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### Introduction: the 'Chicago School' and beyond

The ubiquity and inconsistency of the term 'gang' in popular discourse and in diverse academic analyses raise doubts about its usefulness in understanding associations, affiliations and interactions between young people. Taken together, the relationship between 'organisation' and 'disorganisation', the significance of 'place' and 'territory', the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, perceptions of group identity and internal hierarchy, and representations of reputation, constitute defining themes within discourses on gangs. These themes are particularly relevant in developing a critical analysis of the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Before considering the broader context of our primary research, it is important to briefly review some of the key theoretical perspectives on young people – that almost exclusively focus on males – and gangs.

Writing in 1926, Park prefaced Thrasher's (1927/1963) classic, groundbreaking text on Chicago's gangs, noting they 'are not confined to cities, nor to the slums of cities'. Each 'village has at least its boy gang . . . composed of those same foot-loose, prowling and predacious adolescents who herd and hang together, after the manner of the undomesticated male everywhere' (Park, 1963: vii). The domain of 'predatory bands that infest the fringes of civilization' constituted a self-defining 'frontier'. They were simultaneously 'elementary' in organisation and 'spontaneous' in origin, 'grow[ing] like weeds, without consciousness of their aims, and without administrative machinery to achieve them' (ibid. vii–viii). Gangs required understanding in the context of 'their peculiar [unique] habitat' (ibid.). Thrasher (1927/1963: 3) noted that urban space was ever-changing, specifically the 'shadows of the [working-class] slum', and identifiable areas of transition or 'racial ghettos'. Here gangs created 'a world distinctly their own . . . rough and untamed, yet rich in elemental social processes' (ibid.). Their 'delinquencies' were minor yet serious, spontaneous yet institutionalised.

Youth gangs, according to Thrasher (1927/1963: 6), were embroiled in persistent 'feudal warfare . . . disorder and violence escaping the ordinary controls of the police and other social agencies', occupying a world alongside 'wholesome' community organisations. Gang territories were 'regions of conflict . . . like a

frontier . . . a "no-man's land", lawless, godless, wild". The 'great domains' of Chicago's gang 'empire' further projected their existence at the margins of 'respectable' society: 'North Side Jungles'; 'West Side Wilderness'; 'South Side Badlands'. They formed 'interstices' between the central business district and the 'better residential areas' of the suburbs. National identity and ethnic origin mapped gang territory: 'Little Italy'; 'Little Sicily'; 'Polish colony'; 'negro colony'; 'Little Greece'; 'gypsies'; 'Mexicans'; 'Jewish gangs'; 'Lithuanian colony'; 'Mickies' (Irish). Each possessed demarcated districts within which gangs adopted neighbourhood names and tags, their emergence a 'manifestation of the economic, moral, and cultural frontier which marks the interstice' (ibid. 21).

Boys and young men sought to create social order 'for themselves where none adequate to their needs exist' (ibid. 32). Their collective 'association' provided the 'thrill and zest of participation . . . in hunting, capture, conflict, flight, and escape', with inter-gang conflict a key element in that fulfilment. It reflected the:

failure of the normally directing and controlling customs and institutions to function efficiently in the boys' experience . . . indicated by the disintegration of family life, inefficiency of schools, formalism and externality of religion, corruption and indifference in local politics, low wages and monotony in occupational activities, unemployment, and lack of opportunity for wholesome recreation.

(Thrasher, 1927/1963: 33)

Gangs – while contextualised as a 'symptom of disorganization in the larger social framework' – offered members camaraderie, tradition and structure in local neighbourhoods. Collective belonging, exclusivity, hostility towards rivals and the police, solidified gang tradition. Conflict created more profound 'integration' within gangs.

For Thrasher (1927/1963: 46) gangs were 'characterized' by: 'meeting face-to-face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning', thus generating 'the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to local territory' (ibid. 46). While some gangs remained loosely defined and temporary, others 'solidified' through 'extended conflict', became incorporated into mainstream communities or took on the mystery of 'secret societies'. Arising from the immediate 'environment and the patterns it discovers' locally, gang members possessed a 'fund of energy that is undirected, undisciplined, and uncontrolled by any socially desirable pattern' and given the 'opportunity for expression in the freest, the most spontaneous and elemental manner possible' (ibid. 83).

This brief excursion into Thrasher's research indicates how the 'Chicago School' focused on the 'context of the physical processes and the changing shape of the modern city' in early twentieth-century USA (Hagedorn, 2007: 14). In this analysis the roots of crime, conflict and violence were no longer conceptualised as essentialist biological and/or cultural pathologies, rather as consequences of social

disorganisation, community upheaval and social transition. The emphasis on social and cultural context, however nuanced and contested, became central to academic research in the USA and the UK. It laid the ground for a critical approach that placed structural inequalities and societal relations of power at the centre of analysis.

In his groundbreaking research, Patrick (1973: 170) emphasised the 'interlocking network of inequalities' underpinning the inter-generational 'subculture of gangs in Glasgow . . . poverty, inferior education, a lack of even minimum opportunities, and a steadily deteriorating economic situation' resulting in 'feelings of frustration, rage and powerlessness'. In 'choosing violence as their form of adaptation', in becoming 'street fighters rather than drug addicts or political activists' and in not 'retreat[ing] into social despair or fatalistic acceptance of the *status quo*' he noted two responses. First was 'a strong subcultural emphasis on self-assertion and on a rebellious independence against authority as the means of attaining masculinity'. Second was the long history of 'economic hardship, suffered by generations of Glaswegians' that had 'narrowed down the possibilities of action' (ibid.).

By emphasising social, cultural and material contexts, Patrick focused directly on issues of power, authority, legitimacy and the structural inequalities of class. As Hagedorn (2007: 15) notes more recently, the 'human ecology framework . . . minimized the active role of institutions, particularly the political machine, real estate companies, and the rackets . . . the role of the powerful, as well as the powerless, needs to be more fully explored' (emphases added). Wacquant (2007: 35) – reflecting on the 'recent debate on racial division and urban poverty in the United States' – notes three dominant premises constituting an 'academic orthodoxy' derived in 'long-standing American conceptions of the poor – and particularly the black poor – as morally defective, and of the city as a nefarious place that disrupts and corrupts social life'. First is 'simply to designate an urban area of widespread and intensive poverty' as a 'ghetto' without historical understanding or sociological analysis of the 'racial basis and character of this poverty' (ibid.). Second is the unquestioning acceptance of the established 'tenet' that 'the ghetto is a "disorganised" social formation' conceptualised and framed 'wholly in terms of *lack and deficiencies* (individual or collective) rather than by positively identifying the principles that underlie its internal order and govern its specific mode of functioning' (ibid. 34–35). Finally, the ghetto is represented as exotic, 'highlight[ing] the most extreme and unusual aspects of ghetto life as seen from the outside and above . . . the standpoint of the dominant' (ibid. 35).

Addressing the 'contested' and complex realities of 'racial conflict and urban marginality in contemporary America', Wacquant (2007: 36) challenges the portrayal of the ghetto as a 'topographic entity or aggregation of poor families'. Rooted in its particular history, the ghetto is institutionalised. 'Space' and state interventions are objectified by defining processes of 'categorisation, discrimination, segregation and exclusionary violence' (ibid. 37). Responses within communities to concrete manifestations of institutionalised marginalisation are

not haphazard, irrational or disorganised. On the contrary, what operates is organised and reflective – evident in 'collective self-production'. Communities 'endow their world with form, meaning, and purpose', demonstrating 'how the activities of dominant institutions . . . contribute powerfully to organizing the social space of the ghetto', not least its 'destabilisation' (ibid. 41). For the parameters of public services, provision and regulation inhibit the 'situated agency of ghetto residents' (emphasis in original).

Wacquant (2007) argues that the 'trope of disorganization also has reinforced the exoticizing of the ghetto' through which the 'most destitute, threatening and disreputable residents of the racialized urban core are made to stand for the whole of the ghetto' (ibid. 41). The socio-cultural pathologisation of the ghetto, where institutionalised racism meets structural, endemic poverty, is derived in middle-class assumptions that label the poor as 'abnormal, offensive, or unduly costly' (ibid.). As Wacquant (ibid. 42) argues, the categories employed to pathologise communities are influential '*instruments of indictment*', dismissing the '*local social rationality*' adopted and adapted within communities to inform and sustain strategies of survival. He concludes that, '[e]ven in the most extreme circumstances social life is patterned, regular . . . endowed with logic and meaning' (ibid. 44).

These critical developments, focusing on the social and cultural dynamics of communities, their ideological portrayal and opportunist political responses, within historical and material structural contexts provide the analytical framework for our recent primary research with children and young people in the 'new' Northern Ireland.

### Northern Ireland: identities within a divided society

Between 1969 and 1999, a total of 3,636 people died in the Conflict in Northern Ireland; of these, 2,037 were civilians (McKittrick et al., 1999). Of all household respondents in a 2003 survey on poverty and social exclusion, half knew someone who had been killed in the Conflict. Approximately 88,000 households were affected by the loss of a close relative, 50,000 contained an injured resident, 28,000 people were forced to leave work and 54,000 households relocated through intimidation, threats or harassment (Hillyard et al., 2005: 6). Those areas that endured the most serious violence, injuries and bereavement during the Conflict were often the most economically deprived wards – illustrating the 'strong, but complex, relationship between poverty and conflict' (ibid. xx).

The Conflict severely undermined economic investment and development, exacerbated child poverty, and contributed to high levels of mental ill-health resulting in impaired employment opportunities. Poverty remains a significant issue: one in three children live in income poverty, one in ten live in severe poverty (Magadi and Middleton, 2007). Between 2001 and 2004, some 21 per cent of children in Northern Ireland were trapped in persistent poverty, compared with 9

per cent in Britain (Monteith et al., 2008). Given that poverty remains pervasive in areas most affected by the Conflict, children and young people living in these areas experience multiple deprivations. This affects their health and well-being, educational attainment, access to safe play and leisure facilities, opportunities, self-esteem and relationships (McAlister et al., 2009).

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, signed by the UK and Irish Governments, provided the constitutional foundation for devolution of powers to a democratically elected Northern Ireland Assembly. Following its election in 1998, and the establishment of full delegated powers in December 1999, the Assembly went through a protracted and bitterly contested period focused mainly on arms decommissioning. Finally, in October 2002, the Executive was suspended for the fourth time and UK Government direct rule was (re)imposed. In October 2006 the St Andrews Agreement pre-empted the resumption of the Assembly and seven months later devolution returned.

In this context of transition our research investigated the dual impacts of poverty and the legacy of the Conflict on the lives of children and young people. It questioned the claims of progress made by official 'post-conflict' or 'peace' discourse, particularly for communities most affected by political violence. In-depth primary research was conducted with adult community representatives, children and young people in six urban and rural communities, one in each Northern Ireland County. Communities identified as Catholic/Nationalist/Republican or Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. The research report (McAlister et al., 2009) focuses on: images of children and young people; personal life and relationships; education and employment; community and policing; place and identity; segregation and sectarianism; violence in the context of conflict and marginalisation; services and supports; the rights deficit.

Our research confirms the centrality of 'place' and 'space' in establishing personal and community identity. Whatever their limitations, communities provide 'an important source of social recognition for individuals, providing a tangible sense of connection and identity: knowing who you are and where you belong' (Henderson, 2007: 129). In Ireland – given the history of colonisation, partition and conflict – place, space and identity have particular significance. While politicians and academics often refer to Northern Ireland as an international example of conflict resolution and progress towards a sustainable peace, long-standing divisions and tensions remain. The Northern Ireland Office maintains 53 'peace lines or walls' (*BBC News*, 1 July 2009), three times the number prior to the ceasefires (*Guardian*, 28 July 2009). Although cessation of community-based punishment beatings and shootings was central to the withdrawal of paramilitary activity in communities, between 1999 and 2009 there were 1,958 casualties from 'paramilitary-style' shootings and assaults (PSNI, 2009). Between April 2009 and January 2010 there were a further 109 incidents recorded (PSNI, 2010). Threats and intimidation continue to be directed towards children and young people accused of 'anti-social behaviour', particularly in economically deprived urban areas associated with high levels of conflict-related violence.

Physical separation of the two main religious or ethno-national groups (Catholics and Protestants) prevails. Approximately 95 per cent of social housing remains segregated by religious affiliation and over half the population live in neighbourhoods which are over 90 per cent Catholic or Protestant (NIHE, 2006). In 2007–8, only 6 per cent of the school population was enrolled in integrated nursery, primary or post-primary schools (DENI, 2008: 2). Ninety-four per cent attended segregated education in Catholic or Protestant schools. Despite efforts to 're-image' communities, public space remains labelled and politicised – demarcated by flags, murals and symbols in displays of identity, territory and 'ownership' of space. Cross-community contact remains limited for many, with leisure facilities and other services not accessed by children and young people living outside specific local communities.

Exploring the impact of fear at the interfaces between communities, Shirlow (2003: 86) found that many people would not travel through an area housing the 'other community' during the day, rising to 88 per cent at night. In Roche's (2008) research with young people, three-quarters of those living in segregated communities were fearful of the 'other community' or of entering 'other neighbourhoods'. Intimidation (real or feared), abuse, verbal and physical violence reinforce the legacy of 'no-go areas', sustaining exclusivity and maintaining geographical boundaries. Roche (2008) reports young people as 'cocooned' within their community, with few opportunities to mix with those of the 'other community'. From a young age they inherit negative attitudes towards the 'other religion or community' (Connolly and Healy, 2004). In our research, community representatives noted that very young children often sang sectarian songs without understanding the meaning or significance of the words (McAlister et al., 2009).

Sectarian views are subtly transmitted through families, schools, communities and media. Illustrating the power and pervasiveness of sectarian messages, young people spoke of difficulties resisting parental and adult views:

Like, sectarianism, ok it's bad. But it's like the parents are the worst culprits of it because if young people were allowed to do what they wanted, it wouldn't be as bad as it is. It's the older people that are makin' it so bad, like ... what ye have passed down, like, it just stays with ye sorta thing. (Co. Tyrone, aged 14–25)<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to depart from ascribed community identity risks exclusion. Regardless of its strengths, 'the very intimacy of local community can itself be experienced as something oppressive and limiting' (Hall et al., 1999: 510). In Northern Ireland, the Conflict has contributed to the creation of strong and coherent communities but this process also maintains or perpetuates attitudes and activities derived from the Conflict. As Boal (2002: 693) states:

Segregation of Catholics and Protestants in Belfast ... has helped underpin community solidarity for each group, providing an environment for the

intergenerational transfer of cultural tradition, a localised degree of security from physical attack and a modicum of psychological security. On the obverse, segregation ... reduces the possibilities for inter-ethnic exchange.

Since the ceasefires there has been a significant reduction in violent, sectarian incidents. Yet children and young people – particularly those living at 'interfaces' – are exposed to and involved in sporadic outbreaks of violence or 'disturbances'. These include verbal attacks and throwing stones, bottles or fireworks (Hansson, 2005). Leonard's (2004) research with children and young people in Loyalist and Nationalist interface areas illustrates the durability of sectarianism and the consolidation of physical boundaries marked by continuing hostility. Reflecting on day-to-day negotiation of social space and possible cross-community interaction, 'peace ... remained a distant vision' (ibid. 107). Our own research reveals the continued impact of separatism and segregation on the everyday lives of children and young people, and the frustrations of adult community representatives with the political rhetoric of 'peace' and 'post-Conflict' (McAlister et al., 2009). As Connolly and Neill (2001: 124) conclude, all children:

developed and internalized ... a very acute sense of identity grounded in their experiences of the local area ... [which] plays a central role for many of the children in terms of being the key source of their experience and the reference point by which they make sense of their lives.

### 'Youth gangs' or 'youth groups'? Common assumptions, local responses

Many young people interviewed for our research spend much of their leisure-time on the streets of their neighbourhoods. Limited finances and fear of sectarian intimidation restrict social and leisure opportunities. Age-appropriate and accessible facilities are not generally available and the streets offer the least threatening social space. Yet there are risks. Meeting friends and passing time regularly involves alcohol, increasing the likelihood of involvement in violence. 'Trouble' results from negative interactions with the police, community members and paramilitaries, or from 'loss of control'. It is considered acceptable to respond violently to 'someone slaggin' ya'. Standing up for personal reputation, for family, friends and community is part of local culture. It also informs group dynamics and solidarity against 'outside' threats. Yet young people devise strategies for staying safe and avoiding violence.

While 'the street' has been a consistent feature of working-class youth culture, historically it has been less significant in Northern Ireland given the high level of conflict-related violence. Since the ceasefires, however, young people spend more time 'hanging out' in their local communities. In our research this was a major concern, linked to perceptions of a growth in 'antisocial behaviour'. Street groups are labelled 'gangs' and those wearing hoods are considered a threat:

R: 'Say there was a group of young people standin' on the street, what do you think adults might think about them?'

YP1: 'They're gangsters.'

YP2: 'Look at them wee hoodies.' (Co. Antrim, aged 10–13)

Many young people claim they are discriminated against and demonised because of their lifestyle, appearance and age:

YP1: 'It's just the look of us.'

YP2: 'It's your appearance. It's the way you dress – wearin' hoods, whereabouts you hang about – street corners, the types of things you're into – like cars and all this here. You know, they just automatically assume.' (Co. Derry, aged 15–19)

Children and young people criticise the media for fuelling such negative assumptions. Most consider the negative reputation imposed on young people to be unfair and uninformed. The constant pressure of rejection and exclusion, together with direct threats of violence, undermine self-confidence and, simultaneously, provoke angry reactions. While some become introspective, evident in regular comments about suicide, others respond violently – perpetuating the image of the 'violent gang'.

Our research demonstrates the over-simplified application of the 'gang' label. At first glance, many young people appear to display 'youth gang' characteristics. They occupy the 'streets' within clear geographical boundaries. Groups have a semblance of organisation or structure, often with one individual as particularly influential. They wear similar styles of dress and share cultural identity. Their routine includes sporadic 'criminal' and violent behaviour that is territorial. While violence is not integral to group identity, it is ever-present. They risk attack from others and are prepared to fight when necessary. There is no evidence of long-term durability of the groups but, consistent with 'street corner youth' studied elsewhere (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007), the expectation is that eventually they will be replaced by the next generation.

Young people congregate in particular locations for safety, familiarity and belonging. Street-based leisure is about lifestyle, which is 'one manifestation of more fundamental social and economic processes' (Smith, 1986: 92). State regulation of young people's lifestyle, including policies for regulation and dispersal, results in alienation, marginalisation and criminalisation. Invariably it is the poorest and under-resourced communities that are targeted. In Northern Ireland, removing young people from the relative safety of neighbourhood streets puts them at risk of sectarian attack (McGrellis, 2004; Leonard, 2007).

Heightened fears about 'youth gangs' and 'gangland violence' have brought increased surveillance, control, management and criminalisation of poor and 'serially excluded' populations (Hallsworth, 2006). According to Ralphs et al. (2009: 491), being labelled puts young people at risk as 'the police adopted a

proactive method of harassment of people they identified as "gang members". In targeted areas, non-gang affiliated young people also experience increased police surveillance, regulation and control because of the reputation of the place and their associations with others. Hallsworth (2006: 306) argues that, 'what had been created was a production line system for producing serially alienated and angry young men whose distrust of the police and formal authority structures had reached endemic levels'.

In our research, young people stated that the police are often called because they are out on the streets. This creates conflict with the police, whose arrival has become synonymous with rioting:

They [the police] are the problem. It's them that leads to people petrol bombin' and all that and then they just destroy the place. (Co. Armagh, aged 12–21)

Young people give numerous examples of 'police harassment': being continuously stopped, questioned, moved on and threatened with antisocial behaviour orders. They claim that name-calling and ridicule by police officers exacerbates violent confrontations. While violent confrontations are sometimes a consequence of sectarianism, many young people argue that fighting the police is an expression of their resistance to age discrimination. The outcome is predictable: 'Well, if the police are always fuckin' annoyin' ya you're gonna be bad and you're gonna hate the law' (Co. Fermanagh, aged 13–15).

Some young people also experience uncompromising threats of severe punishments from, and exiling by, dissident paramilitaries:

They [adults] blame us for stuff and we get a bad name for it... and there's cops comin' up round here and there's paramilitaries lookin' round all the time and they blame ye. (Co. Derry, aged 15–19)

Lack of trust in the police, experience of intimidation and adults' failure to understand young people's behaviour and use of public space, are recurrent themes. This extends to threats to safety, security and life – within communities through punishments by quasi-paramilitaries and outside communities through sectarian attack.

### My place: local identity and territory

In Northern Ireland there has been considerable debate about the politicisation of space and divisions *between* places as a consequence of residential segregation, 'peace lines' and other symbolic markers of inclusion/exclusion. Minimal consideration has been given to local divisions *within* 'single-identity' communities and their impact on daily life. 'Territory' has become synonymous with the regulation, control and defence of communities with specific ethno-national

identities (Republican/Nationalist or Loyalist/Unionist). Our research finds that, for children and young people, their community and identity corresponds to the spaces they occupy and the facilities they use. In focus groups they are specific about immediate locations: 'my community', 'my street' or 'my part of the estate'. Attachment to place is localised. Their knowledge and perception about places or spaces within the area impact on their sense of self, feelings of safety and movement.

Internal divisions are evident, often visible, in all the communities. Particular neighbourhoods or clusters of streets have developed distinct identities and reputations, with consequences for individual and collective identity. A community representative describes divisions within their community:

The areas are all separate and the people living there have graded themselves in social rank. The road acts like a river, like a natural divide. People won't mix.

The claiming of different and separate identities within neighbourhoods affected provision and use of local services. Within some communities, play parks and local shops are only utilised by those from one part of an estate or neighbourhood, and children and young people are aware of divisions within their communities. In two of the communities, community representatives explain that internal divisions originate in the arrival of families who share the same cultural tradition but have been exiled from their previous homes as a consequence of intra-community feuds. Because they are not local, they are labelled 'outsiders'. Resentment simmers about so-called 'blow-ins'<sup>2</sup> who move into the area, occupy housing 'built for local people' and 'act as if they own the place'.

In another community, adult representatives suggest there are 'different moralities' and cultures within the estate. They refer to a Republican ethos which impacts on the organisation of, and attendance at, particular programmes or events in one part of the estate. Some service providers are acutely aware that their provision has an established reputation based on the local historical context: 'The centre is associated with the Provisionals [Provisional IRA] ... we had to work hard to get the community to realise we are not linked to paramilitaries'. Illustrating the enduring nature of labels and identities linked to local spaces, young people state they would not attend this centre because of its association with 'the boys, the RA [IRA]'.

In Nationalist rural communities, divisions between small towns and strong identities linked to local place are represented as 'football territories'. Not visiting or using services in nearby communities demonstrates loyalty, connection and pride in 'their' community:

There are territorial issues. People won't go to other areas. Young people are separated after school. This is about identity issues not based on religion ... Young people from small rural areas will often never meet because of [Gaelic] football rivalries.

Local, complex and deep-rooted meanings and assumptions attached to space create difficulties for service providers. Because children and young people do not access youth services outside their community and are reticent to utilise those in particular neighbourhoods of their community, mobile services have been established, often duplicating programmes within a community. Occasionally local divisions are perpetuated by adults working directly with children and young people.

While divisions often have their origins in housing policies and population movement prevalent at the height of the Conflict, they remain significant. In children's and young peoples' accounts they are connected to 'reputation'. These include perceptions about the 'good' and 'bad' side of the estate, the 'rough' and the 'respectable', the 'quiet' and the 'trouble-orientated', the 'poor' and the 'more affluent'.

I'm not trying to say that [the other part of the area] is bad or anything'. But [where I live] would be tidier than bits of [the other part] and, like, there's not as many bad people in [my part] than what there is in [the other part]. (Co. Antrim, aged 10-13)

There is, however, considerable disagreement about local divisions:

YP Area A: 'I don't like it [Area B].'

R: 'Any reason you don't like it?'

YP Area A: 'Yeah, it's got nothin' to do.'

YP Area B: 'Sure there's nothing to do in [Area A].'

YP Area A: 'Play rounders.'

YP Area B: 'Whooo, sure you can do that in [Area B].'

YP Area A: 'I come from [Area A] and I feel safe there because there's more places to go, it's bigger than [Area B].'

YP Area B: 'The Area A crew!' [giggles sarcastically]

(Co. Antrim, aged 10-13)

While this exchange reflects apparently petty differences, it exemplifies a shared defensiveness of 'their place'.

Internal community divisions impact on children and young people in various ways. Experiences are markedly different within the same locality. Where they live and play locally affects what they witness and experience at a personal level. Many comment that free time and play is restricted to the street or part of the community where they live as this provides safety and a sense of belonging. Consequently, particular groups 'hang out' in different parts of the estate or attend clubs in 'their part'. The physical location of facilities identifies them exclusively with a particular 'type', group or, according to young people, 'gang':

it's like all the one gang that goes to it, which means there's other gangs in [the area] won't go to it ... they would have all the kind of tough boys among

them which means a lot of the younger, the quieter ones . . . wouldn't go near it . . . if ye go into the community centres you would never see one of the people from [one centre] down at [other centre]. (Co. Derry, aged 22)

The location of services and who 'runs them' affects their use. Subtle and local nuances exclude some young people from local services. A form of territorialism is established, with facilities located in 'their end of the estate' organised by workers who they know, trust and perceive as 'safe'. Others, however, believe they 'wouldn't fit in' and would be made to 'feel like a weirdo'. Explaining why they will not use youth services in nearby villages, children and young people living in rural communities comment: 'We wouldn't be welcome down there because everyone stays in the one place' (Co. Armagh, aged 9–15). As facilities have become synonymous with particular groups, those 'not belonging' are excluded. Expressed as 'territory', exclusion is deeply rooted in the historical division and local meaning of space. The 'choices' and 'rules' made by children and young people regarding access and movement within their area are learned quickly, including 'differences' within their communities and estates. Such awareness represents identity formation at a very local level.

### **Our place: segregation, sectarianism and territoriality**

Ascribing the label 'youth gang' to young people congregating in a specific location, thereby inferring the classic relationship between 'the gang' and its 'territory', has particular consequences in Northern Ireland. In a divided society transitioning from 30 years of armed conflict, youth identity, 'place' and violence cannot be conceptualised without taking into account the pervasive significance of segregation and sectarianism. From 'conflict' to 'peace', the management and negotiation of identity and place are crucial aspects of ideological aspirations, as well as consequences of a political shift. Despite government inducements to re-image communities (particularly the removal of sectarian murals), neighbourhoods and streets remain visibly demarcated through 'cultural symbols' such as flags, murals and memorials. While reflecting a community's cultural tradition, they also transmit messages of inclusion and exclusion. As Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2107) note, 'strong in-group loyalty' can project 'strong out-group antagonism'.

As discussed above, from an early age children identify and understand these markers. They are taken-for-granted in their socialisation, determining their associations and movements. One group, in a mixed but highly segregated community, comments:

Ye can tell from the old flags hangin' on the posts – wherever that's outside, that's that territory. (Co. Tyrone, aged 14–25)

Young people living in a Protestant community consider the flags, flying from lamp-posts leading into their estate, to be an outward expression of their cultural identity. To adults in the community they mark territory – a visual reminder, or threat: 'This is our street, no-one is coming down our street.'

Hall et al. (1999: 509) note that 'knowing where others are from makes it possible to *place* them'. Beyond community boundaries, being 'placed' as Loyalist or Republican creates risk of attack. Regardless of their acceptance or rejection of cultural identity, young people have a clear understanding of 'spaces of risk and threat' (Leonard, 2007: 76). In our research, those living in one small Protestant/Loyalist neighbourhood feel imprisoned in their community, identifying it as the only safe space. While it has no youth or recreation facilities, young people will not access those in the town because, 'you wouldn't be long in gettin' an auld crutch in the face if you used it . . . if you walk up yourself then you wouldn't be seen comin' back out' (Co. Fermanagh, aged 13–16).

Within relatively small towns, local neighbourhoods and estates are perceived to have established cultural traditions. Visual cues also connect to cultural identity. In a society where schools are predominantly segregated by religious affiliation, school uniforms signify division. This extends to football shirts, caps, scarves, jewellery and sports played. Even 'neutral spaces', such as town centres, carry the threat of sectarian abuse or attack with identity ascribed by appearance. Young men negotiate this risk by moving around in groups:

When you're off the estate you're always lookin' where the trouble might come from. Always lookin' over your shoulder . . . you always have to be in numbers. No way would I walk off the estate on my own. (Co. Fermanagh, aged 16–21)

Outside their communities children and young people manage or disguise their identities, often altering their dress. Attacks bring retaliation by family, friends or community members leading to violent exchanges across the religious divide.

Given the unambiguous symbols of religious and cultural difference in Northern Ireland, there is a definitive understanding of cultural identity. Young men protect themselves by staying in groups, being vigilant and expecting attack. They adopt a 'hard man' persona, prepared to retaliate, presenting an open expression and assertion of identity rather than a disguise. In some areas, perceptions of the community and its young people reinforce attachment to place – strengthening identity, group solidarity and cohesiveness.

Further demonstrating the relationship between identity and territory, some young Loyalists emphasise their hostility towards people from other cultures moving into their community. Acceptance is granted to 'people who move in, good people who think like you, are loyal like you'. Those 'not part of your culture' (Co. Fermanagh, aged 16–21) are forced out. For some young Nationalists, those of 'the other religion' are not welcome:

YP1: 'I know boys that know Protestants loads, but if they were seen near the Protestant side they'd get hit.'

R: 'And what about the other way round?'

YP2: 'Aye, if ye seen one [a Protestant] walkin' about here you'd take a swipe at him.' (Co. Derry, aged 16-17)

Clear physical divisions and symbolic markers of ownership map territory defended against 'the other'. As Kuusisto (2001: 59) states: 'Local turf is controlled and formed as a safe haven for members of the community'. Cultural identity, therefore, remains 'clean' and 'uncontaminated', providing long-standing culturally reproduced reasons for the defence and retention of local space.

In divided societies, transition from conflict to peace is slow, not least because ceasefires and arms decommissioning are 'change' moments in time, while commitment to particular cultures and identities remains resilient. In our research, a decade into the 'peace process' and conducted with a 'new generation', limited exposure to those outside their communities and strong beliefs within them consolidate young people's negative attitudes towards 'the other'. Expressing loyalty to 'their own', many children and young people articulate mistrust and hostility towards 'outsiders'. There is also a sense that many communities have been left behind, unprepared and under-resourced for change or to deal with the legacy of the Conflict.

Beliefs about persistent inequalities inform sectarian, and sometimes violent, responses. In Catholic/Nationalist areas, the prevailing belief is that the police offer concessions to the Protestant community: 'the cops . . . take sides' (Co. Derry, aged 16-17) and 'Protestants get all the protection they want, and we get nothing' (Co. Derry, aged 15-19). Young people in Protestant communities, however, consider that Catholics are given preferential treatment. In one community, they had removed Loyalist flags but remain angry and resentful that the Catholic community have retained their Republican flags. This is considered 'favourin' and bias', resulting in 'hatred for the police'. It is 'another example' of how 'Catholics get everything' (Co. Fermanagh, aged 13-16). Their concerns are not restricted to mistrusting the police or defending symbolic expressions of culture. They feel that Catholics have benefited from the 'new' political situation in Northern Ireland to the detriment of Protestants:

Catholics get everything. Everything that goes up in a Catholic area and we don't get nothin'. It's not like they be good to be treated to it, all the spravin', all the burnt-out cars there used to be. (Co. Fermanagh, 13-16)

In this climate of resentment, rioting and sectarian clashes assert identity while symbolising resistance towards perceived inequalities. While some young people find 'enjoyment' in rioting, it is not, as has been claimed, solely 'recreational'. According to Protestant and Catholic young people it is rooted politically in cultural tradition:

If you're out there riotin' and you're not Republican and all this here, you'd have to think, 'What's the point?' So in a way ye have to be kinda standin' up for it . . . we're fightin' for our identity. (Co. Derry, aged 15-19)

While sectarian attitudes and violence are closely allied to cultural identity, there is minimal, informed understanding about 'the other culture'. All Protestants are portrayed as identifying with Britain/Unionism/Loyalism. All Catholics are portrayed as identifying with Ireland/Nationalism/Republicanism. Fighting to retain cultural identity is about fighting to defeat 'the other':

We're not having a united Ireland. I'd be the first away. But that's the way it's goin' and we have to fight for our culture. If the Catholics took over what would you have? Would you want to live in Ireland? We'd lose everything. Everything we've fought for. (Co. Fermanagh, 16-21)

YM1: 'We're fightin' for our identity. It's like they want Londonderry and we want Derry.'

YM2: 'It's Derry not Londonderry. London's got its own place and Derry's got its own place . . . There's no London in Derry.'

YM3: 'If there's any people in Derry want to support the Queen an' all, they can fuck off back to England.' (Co. Derry, aged 15-19)

These mutually exclusive positions reflect a view held by some young people that their communities had 'fought for nothing'. Progress towards equal representation, power-sharing and the de-politicisation of shared space through the removal of sectarian symbols are depicted as 'concessions' to one community and 'punishments' to the other. Young Protestants explain marches, flags and bonfires as meaningful expressions of their cultural tradition. Their curtailment is considered a concerted attempt to 'rip away our culture'. Elected politicians, who previously refused public association with Republican politicians or with the Irish Government, are now negotiating. 'Irish culture' is represented as flourishing, leading to suspicion and fear that 'reverse discrimination' challenges Protestant cultural identity. This compounds a sense of insecurity alongside increased defence of territory and resentment towards 'the other side':

The driving force behind group sectarianism is a commitment to preserving a shared identity during a period of transition. Historically, intimidation and violence have been a means of asserting and maintaining identity, alongside rioting as an expression of resistance. The application of ill-informed labels, without recognising the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland and shared discontent, will further alienate the most marginalised young people. As a community representative states: 'If we are going to say that young people today are very sectarian we need to think about why that is and where they have gotten those messages from. We give it to them, then blame them'.



The perceived 'natural order' of divided space includes hostility towards recently arrived foreign nationals – illustrating the deep roots of exclusive identity regarding space and how segregation has been accepted as a response to dealing with 'difference' or fears about 'the other'. Thus, territoriality and 'ownership' of space extend beyond the religious divide. In the context of historical meaning attached to space and current fears about loss or dilution of identity and culture, a new 'outsider' has emerged as a common threat. The implicit and sometimes explicit racism expressed by children and young people in our research reflects a prevailing history of sectarian divisions, fear and mistrust of 'outsiders'.

### Young men: masculinity and violence

Community representatives regularly comment on how the legacy of the Conflict affects young men – those traditionally brought up to fight for and defend their cultural identity. Since the ceasefires, however, the expectation of paramilitary recruitment has been reversed – the war is over, peace has been agreed. Yet reminders of the past persist through family and community inheritance, images in the form of murals and remembrance events:

At the end of the day, we're goin' by what our grannies and granddads are tellin' us. And they're puttin' it on the news and they're makin' films about it. And what are we supposed to think when they make a film about Bloody Sunday or they make a film about the bombings and what-not? . . . So of course young ones are goin' to fight back – 'Oh, you did this to my one' – you know, war stories you could say it is. (Co. Derry, aged 21)

While young people are constantly reminded that sectarian violence is no longer acceptable, they hear former combatants and politicians 'glorifying the war' and 'romanticising the idea of struggle'. Concerns are expressed across communities about influential adults perpetuating and actively encouraging the continuation of violence. Inevitably, some young people are influenced by the sectarian attitudes of significant adults. Messages, therefore, are mixed:

All those ones that were at the Bloody Sunday [commemorative march] an' all, if you were out riotin' they're all like, 'Wise up, the war's over' . . . They went through all the wars like, they should know how it feels. But yet they still get into us for doin' it. (Co. Derry, aged 15–19)

Working-class young men with strong cultural and community identities experience a shared sense of loss – there are no locally available jobs, they place minimal value on education and there are few alternative possibilities. With paramilitary recruitment waning, young men's identity and place within their communities are uncertain. They are 'disillusioned and alienated from community life'; some responding to this dramatic change by violently asserting masculinity

and sectarianism. Those involved in rioting and violence share stories with their peers and in interviews with great bravado and, no doubt, some exaggeration. This brings status among peers, reflecting the relationship between violent sectarianism and masculine identity (see Harland et al., 2005). But it contrasts with their vulnerability in revealing fears about leaving their community and being attacked by 'the other community'.

Previous research with young men in Northern Ireland noted their explanation of aggression as protection of themselves and their communities, while recognising it was occasionally 'unnecessarily violent' (YouthNet, 1999: 3). It was justified when someone from 'outside' entered the community or attacked friends. While some young women were involved in 'fighting', 'rioting' and aggressive behaviour, violence was most often linked to masculine identity. The relationship between masculinity and violence is particularly significant in Northern Ireland where violence, particularly paramilitary and sectarian violence, has been a defining reality and expectation for young working-class men. It is instrumental in maintaining difference; connecting masculine and 'political' identity.

At a time when the identity and position of working-class young men is uncertain, violence is a complex issue. Youth unemployment is rapidly increasing and young men 'left clinging to unattainable and unrealistic masculine aspirations are alienated from a world that has changed rapidly in the last 35 years' (Harland et al., 2005: 2). Alongside the perceived threat to community stability 'violence is often an expression of young men's hopelessness, frustration, isolation, boredom and energy' (YouthAction, 2001: 13). The violence of rioting or sectarian attacks also reflects a tradition of conflict embodying structural and perceived inequalities between opposing cultural groups. While superficially similar to US gangs, these Northern Ireland groups have not been highly structured or organised. Our research suggests that recent 'recruitment' of children and young people has been by a few adult men locally labelled 'armchair paramilitaries'.

### Conclusion

Within academic literature and popular discourses about youth gangs, the orthodoxy was set by the early twentieth-century Chicago studies briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Haphazard urban growth, 'zones of transition' and social disorganisation were represented as the backdrop to predatory, spontaneous and elemental gangs lacking in purpose and deficient in organisation. They occupied their territories, named their identities and created their meanings as alternatives to a mainstream world of family, school and work from which they were excluded. Further perspectives on subcultures oscillated between 'blocked goals', 'status frustration' and 'differential association' experienced by working-class youth as determinants of their 'delinquency' or 'deviance'. What emerged within some of the earlier research was a more structural connection between the frustration and powerlessness experienced by young people, particularly young men, in capitalist societies and their reactions and resistances to structural

inequalities. These were purposeful responses, based on their negotiation of daily life and the lived reality of marginalisation and exclusion originating in experiences of poverty, racism and sexism.

Working-class communities were, and continue to be, portrayed as inhabited by a 'rabble' classified and categorised as inherently pathological, their families 'dysfunctional'. Yet they are neighbourhoods of collaboration, generosity and survival occupied by people of dignity whose space and place is determined and managed by external forces rooted in long-term economic disadvantage, institutionalised through under-investment and discriminatory practices of state agencies and demonised in popular discourse. This is not to argue that structural conditions over-determine personal volition and social capacity, but they are powerful external forces contextualising action and shaping opportunities.

Our research demonstrates that, for young people, space and identity are imbued with personal and collective meaning not reducible to simplistic portrayals of 'youth gangs'. It reflects a youth studies literature that reveals the complexity of historical meanings attributed to place and identity within communities with strong, socially reproduced cultural traditions. Children's and young people's understanding of place and the meanings attached to specific locations, while not always fully articulated, reinforce affinities. Their demarcation of local space and its negotiation is not concerned only with remaining safe or 'claiming' and 'defending' a space against others. It also involves 'fitting in', belonging and personal identity, derived in the historical and political meaning of local space inherited by children and young people.

While 'territorial' divisions within Northern Ireland's working-class communities are not dissimilar to those in UK working-class, white communities (Goldson, 2003; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; McAlister, 2007; Kintrea et al., 2008 and this volume), our study emphasises the importance of understanding the particular circumstances in which young people ascribe meaning to place and identity. They define particular places as 'their areas', where they invest significant time and energy. They consistently defend their areas against outside, negative criticism. For young men in particular this often involves violence against 'other communities' and the police. Lifting expressions of identity and use of violence from their historical and contemporary contexts, and misrepresenting them as 'a problem of gangs', produces an analysis 'flawed on empirical, theoretical and methodological grounds' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008: 177).

The children, young people and community representatives in our study present unequivocal evidence that youth groups are coherent and consistent. They base their collective understanding of place, space and identity on a shared interpretation of their historical inheritance and contemporary circumstances. Their visible presence on the streets and their confrontations with paramilitaries, vigilantes or the police are part of their negotiation of space and identity in conditions of limited opportunities, particularly relating to schooling and work. In the context of the 'new' Northern Ireland, working-class children and young people are living through a complex process of transition. They experience the

personal dynamics of communities shifting from conflict to peace and the consequent inter-generational tensions, including the long-term impact of trauma. Simultaneously, the promise of new opportunities and fulfilment is denied and frustrated by ongoing structural poverty and social exclusion. Our analysis affirms that the 'view from below' is central to understanding and interpreting how the lived realities of children and young people are specific to time and place. It is also relevant to the broader debate about contextual analysis of the formation of social groups. Rather than accepting dubious claims about 'gang culture' as a powerful social force binding together disaffected children and young people, it is important to place local tensions concerning the occupation and defence of space within the dynamics of structural inequalities, state regulation and societal transition.

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### Notes

- 1 Focus group references give the age range of participants. Quotes reflect the group's agreement unless otherwise stated.
- 2 'Blow-in' is a term used to describe people who have moved into an area.

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