

Understanding the Spatial Dimension of Youth Intergroup Contact in a Postaccord Society

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Understanding how to promote better social relations between groups in divided societies is vital for peacebuilding efforts. Building on the substantial body of research on intergroup contact theory and everyday multiculturalism, the present research aimed to examine how youth in the divided society of Belfast, Northern Ireland, experience social interactions in everyday urban spaces. Ten youth aged 16–18 ($n = 2$ Protestant females, one Protestant male, four Catholic females, two Catholic males, and one mixed religious background male) were recruited to take part in the research. Everyday contact experiences were explored using photovoice, a participatory method. Following engagement with a series of photography workshops and tasks, youth took part in focus group discussions and later, walking interviews ($n = 3$) to discuss the factors that influence their social interactions. Five main themes explaining youth contact experiences in context were uncovered: geographical and socioeconomic constraints on space use; group-based spatial cognitions, emotions, and behavior; lived experience and social discourses; markers of identity; and intergroup norms. Taken together, findings highlight key individual and structural processes through which public spaces become used or not by young people from different community backgrounds. Implications for research and practice for promoting intergroup contact and peace in socially divided societies are discussed.

Public Significance Statement

This article explores the factors that influence whether young people in Belfast, Northern Ireland, choose to interact with people from the other community. Findings demonstrate the importance of both individual (e.g., past interaction experiences) and structural (e.g., aesthetics) aspects of urban spaces in influencing young people's everyday interactions. Findings have implications for the development and use of physical spaces as sites of interaction in socially divided societies.

Keywords: youth, intergroup contact, public space, place identity, photovoice

Youth across the world are experiencing a changing social and political landscape, one in which they are required to negotiate a wide range of interactions with people who are different from them. How to support youth to engage in positive and meaningful interactions is vital, particularly in (post)conflict settings, to prevent the continuation of cycles of political violence. This is because one of the best ways to reduce prejudice between groups is through facilitating cooperative, institutionally supported, equal-status contact in pursuit of common goals (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew

& Tropp, 2006), known as intergroup contact. Much of social life, however, takes place in less structured settings where intergroup contact can neither be enforced nor carefully organized, and where long-standing patterns of mistrust and inequality tend to make it scarce or ambivalent (McKeown & Dixon, 2017). This raises the question of how to “lead the horse to the water” of (positive) contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2013)—in other words, how to reduce segregation in everyday activity spaces, and facilitate more and better youth intergroup contact. Using participatory methods, the

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continued

present research aims to address this question by examining everyday interaction experiences among youth in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Contact, Space, and Everyday Multiculturalism

The question of how to reduce segregation in everyday spaces has led to a growing body of research on the facilitators and inhibitors of intergroup contact (Kauff et al., 2021; Paolini et al., 2018; Turner & Cameron, 2016; Turner et al., 2020). While illuminating, studies that have explored the predictors of intergroup contact tend to have two shortcomings when it comes to promoting peace in divided societies. The first is that some of the variables studied have arguably few implications for practice. For example, extraversion and cognitive ability are highly stable and therefore unlikely to be changed through intervention. Other individual-level variables (e.g., positive attitudes and reduced anxiety) are closely related to the very outcome that contact is meant to bring about, making it difficult to assess whether contact leads to reduced anxiety or reduced anxiety leads to contact. The second is that research on contact engagement usually fails to consider the situational and spatial dimensions of contact. That is, the amount and type of contact between groups are highly context-dependent (McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

One way to address these limitations is to draw on perspectives outside of social psychology such as “multiculture” (Neal et al., 2018) or “everyday multiculturalism” (Wise & Velayutham, 2009) to understand how the makeup of social spaces can influence youth interactions. Research on everyday multiculturalism highlights how people of different races, ethnicities, and religions get along in their day-to-day lives, especially in cities where migrants tend to settle, providing thick descriptions of material environments and social interactions through participant observation and interviews conducted in public and “semipublic” places. One of the most notable findings from this literature is that many urban spaces are voluntarily frequented by significant numbers of diverse users. These places are defined by specific functions (playing, exercising, etc.) that permeate them with a relatively coherent “atmosphere” (Neal et al., 2018), or set of affects and interactions. For example, the hushed, focused, and distanced atmosphere of a library will be far removed from the hustle and bustle of a shopping mall.

Atmospheres are partly a spontaneous product of the activities pursued in a space, but they also have a normative dimension. The nature and enforcement of social norms by authority figures and other space users have an important bearing on place-specific intergroup relations: where abuse is seen as unacceptable and respectful treatment is expected, overt discrimination is likely to be limited despite the persistence of individual prejudices. In contrast, spaces where norms are weakly enforced or supportive of exclusion will remain segregated (Barker, 2017; Valentine & Harris, 2016). The influence of social norms on youth intergroup contact has been most frequently studied in school settings (Neal et al., 2018), but has also been explored in parks, for example, where strangers’ “capable guardianship” can create a feeling of “safety in numbers” (Barker et al., 2019). Youth have, however, been found to hold an ambiguous relationship with social norms, which can protect them from peer victimization and at the same time exclude them from places socially defined as reserved for adults (Gray & Manning, 2014).

While research on everyday multiculturalism portrays interactions in diverse places as generally convivial or at least “civil” (Wessendorf, 2014), it refrains from making claims about their capacity to enkindle friendships or other deep social bonds among strangers. Such bonds may emerge through intense and sustained cooperation in the “parochial realm” (Wessendorf, 2016) of a sports team, for instance (Mayblin et al., 2016), but most of the interactions described by ethnographers are much more superficial, such as making eye contact or responding to a query. A certain amount of negative interaction is also unavoidable; such negative contact may have a greater impact on intergroup attitudes than positive contact, in part because it tends to make social categories more salient and therefore produces strong generalization effects (Paolini et al., 2010). There are good reasons, however, to think that mixed urban spaces can contribute to peacebuilding in conflict societies. As well as enabling the creation of new bonds, these spaces hold the potential to consolidate existing ones by providing contexts for already diverse groups to engage in a variety of activities together. Where these contexts are scarce, any intergroup relationships formed in more structured settings are likely to remain weak and eventually disappear, wiping out the attitudinal benefits of direct and vicarious contact (Vezzali et al., 2014). Understanding how spaces are used and perceived is therefore vital.

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Understanding (De)Segregation: How Spaces Are Perceived

There are several reasons why individuals might choose (or not) to interact in urban spaces connected both to the physical nature of the space and feelings about the space. Proximity from home and school, for example, makes some informal urban spaces easier to access for some youth compared to others, and where large socioeconomic disparities divide groups, the cost of accessing some places can also reinforce separation. However, even places that are conveniently located and affordable can still be systematically shunned by some groups. It is therefore essential to also consider place identity, in other words, how “memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 60) influence how people feel about the spaces around them.

The cognitions associated with place identity can be either positive, generating feelings of “place belongingness,” or negative, leading to “place aversion.” Place cognitions are not only about physical environments but also about the social activities and relations unfolding in these environments and can dictate meaning and value toward places as well as their use among different groups. The connection between place and other identities is established early in life through located forms of socialization within particular social groups and roles. Place identity is underpinned by power relations, including, for example, a willingness to consolidate a given group’s control over certain spaces. In this sense, it has an inescapable political and ideological dimension (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). We argue, therefore, that how spaces are understood by young people will inevitably determine whether they choose to interact within them as well as shape how such interactions are perceived. To our knowledge, little research has been conducted among youth to explore these dynamics, but studies among adults have shown: (a) how White and Black people attribute radically different meanings to a recently desegregated South African beach (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004); (b) how residents of Lviv and Wrocław hold interpretations of their city’s history that are nationally specific (Lewicka, 2008); or (c) how Belfast residents’ movements around the city are shaped by both visible and invisible boundaries delimiting Catholic and Protestant areas (Dixon et al., 2022).

The Present Research

Building on established research on intergroup contact theory, everyday multiculturalism, and place identity, the present research aims to understand how youth in the divided society of Belfast, Northern Ireland, experience interactions in everyday urban spaces. Unlike the social networks and messaging apps, where many unstructured interactions also unfold, these spaces are shaped in part by local authorities and thus hold special interest for peacebuilding interventions. We adopt a participatory method called “photovoice” to reveal the lived experience and foreground the views of youth by asking them to take photos of specific aspects of their everyday lives and using the photos as prompts to discuss these themes (Wang, 1999). We focus on Belfast because youth growing up in this setting are experiencing a fragile peace. Despite the signing of the 1998 Peace Agreement, Belfast can only be characterized as a “postconflict” city in a qualified sense (Shirlow, 2006). The city remains segregated both physically and psychologically with

continuing tensions following 30 years of ethnoreligious conflict locally known as the “Troubles,” which made more than 3,500 victims. The dispute largely revolved around the constitutional status of the island of Ireland, with those who wished to remain part of the United Kingdom typically labeled as Protestant and those who supported the reunification of the island of Ireland labeled as Catholic (McKeown, 2013). Religious doctrine per se was a relatively minor factor in the conflict (Cairns & Darby, 1998). Today, the city’s residential neighborhoods in the West are over 90% Catholic, whereas most of the East is over 90% Protestant. Dozens of so-called “peace walls” continue to separate predominantly Catholic and Protestant areas, due to widespread fears of attacks from the other community (Donnan & Jarman, 2017). At the same time, however, promoting better relations in Northern Ireland is a government-level priority. Initiatives such as Shared Education, for example, focus on bringing together the two communities together for formal and informal learning, and Belfast City Council’s Good Relations Program centers the importance of positive and meaningful intergroup contact. Despite this increased focus on promoting contact in Northern Ireland, to our knowledge few studies to date have explored youth everyday interactions in context using participatory methods, and yet such an approach is vital if we are to better understand the use of social spaces and how to promote intergroup contact and peace in divided societies.

Method

Participants

Ten youth aged 16–18 (two Protestant females, one Protestant male, four Catholic females, two Catholic males, and one mixed religious background male) who lived or had grown up in Belfast and who regularly visited to study, work, or meet friends and relatives were recruited to take part in the research. All participants were enrolled in a cross-community vocational training program and were approached through the training provider. They voluntarily signed up to collaborate with researchers as part of this training.

Materials and Procedure

Data were collected over a 3-week period in February and March 2023, following ethical approval from the University of Bristol. Participation involved 2 × 2-hr photography training workshops; a 2-week period during which young people took photos of the spaces in Belfast (“photomission”) that made it easy or difficult to meet people from different ethnoreligious backgrounds; another 2-hr workshop to select, edit, and caption their five favorite photos; and a 1-hr focus group to discuss the meaning of these photos. The workshops were hosted by the organization that delivered the vocational training program and were jointly facilitated by the first author and Stephen Wilson, a Belfast-based photographer with experience in intergroup relations projects.

At the beginning of the first workshop, youth were informed about the purpose of the research and the conditions of their participation. This included instructions to focus their “photomission” on places they visited regularly and where they felt safe, and to avoid taking photos of identifiable people. After giving written consent, each participant was provided with a preconfigured mobile phone fitted with apps to take, store, caption, select, edit, and share photos during

the workshops and the photomission. Participants were given the freedom to write more descriptive or creative captions and to modify or embellish the photos if they wished. In practice, not all photos were captioned or edited. At the end of the third workshop, all phones were returned to the researchers so that they could transfer the selected photos and captions to a secure server and print them out in preparation for the focus group discussions.

Two ethnoreligiously mixed focus groups with four and six participants, respectively, took place at the same location as the workshops. This group size was considered sufficient to probe different perspectives on particular photographs, which was done successfully, and not so large as to hamper speaker identification during transcription. All participants were given a chance to discuss their photos in turn and prompted to describe their interactions with friends, acquaintances, or strangers of different ethnoreligious backgrounds in the places depicted. At the end of the focus groups, youth were offered the option of further developing their views in the context of an individual 1-hr walking interview with the researcher. This method has been described as a challenging but effective way to investigate place identities in Belfast (Hocking et al., 2018) and was seen as mitigating the limited time available for each young person to express themselves in the context of a focus group. Three participants, two male Catholics and one female Protestant, accepted the invitation. The walking interviews were recorded with lapel microphones connected to separate mobile phones held by participants and the researcher. They were an opportunity to visit and discuss more deeply and openly the places represented in the photos, especially those in and near the city center, but the conversations also broached other places that were significant in participants' lives. The route was decided by the participants themselves.

At the end of the project, youth were able to choose between receiving the phone they had been given for the research or a £100 gift voucher (Love2Shop or Amazon) as compensation for the time devoted to the project. Written consent was provided separately for the walking interviews, which were compensated with an additional £25 Amazon voucher.

Data Analysis

All focus groups and walking interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Salient themes and subthemes relating to spatial perceptions and experiences were developed inductively through a close reading of all transcripts and subsequently used to code the transcripts in NVivo. As most data units (or transcript excerpts) were coded to more than one subtheme, the strength of their association with one subtheme or the other was used as a criterion to structure the argument of the present article. Only the themes backed by sufficiently rich data, often raised separately by various participants, were retained. All the data collected during the project was treated confidentially, and potentially identifying information was removed. Given its direct relevance to the study, the community background of participants is noted alongside their views.

Findings

The photographs taken by youth as part of the photomissions covered a relatively large geographical area, including Belfast's city

center, East, West, and North Belfast, as well as some towns and cities in the surrounding region. They depicted a broad spectrum of places, such as streets, parks, buses, shops, restaurants, nightclubs, and community centers. Some youths took great care in portraying the spaces they frequent in a good light, making effective use of composition, color, and contrast. Other photos were more prosaic. None of the photos retained for discussion contained any direct reference to Protestant and Catholic identities. It was only during the focus groups and walking interviews that the group-based meanings attached to places came to the fore, sometimes spontaneously, at other times in reaction to prodding by the facilitator.¹

Since the walking interviews were a continuation of the focus groups and since both used space-related visual prompts and open-ended questions to stimulate the retrieval and expression of place meanings, the insights they yielded will be discussed together. These insights fall within five main themes: geographical and socioeconomic constraints on space use; group-based spatial cognitions, emotions, and behavior; lived experience and social discourses; markers of identity; and intergroup norms.

Geographical and Socioeconomic Constraints on Space Use

Proximity played an important role in youth use of different spaces. The streets, parks, and green spaces they photographed were mostly situated near their homes, predominantly ingroup areas, while other spaces, especially commercial ones, were in the city center and accessible to both communities. Because their daily lives were mostly spent between their neighborhood and the city center, the juncture between these two areas was described as a strategic site of intergroup interactions. One Protestant female participant explained she often met Catholic friends at Divis Tower, where West Belfast meets the city center, before either taking a bus further west or walking across the West Link, a busy road, to the city center.

It is important, however, not to overstate the role of geographical constraints, as youth proved able and willing to venture further away from their own neighborhoods when they had good reason to do so. A Catholic male participant, for example, regularly took the bus with other Catholic friends to Mo Mowlam Play Park near Stormont, in the predominantly Protestant East. That park was described as particularly attractive due to its "twisty" slides and because of its space that enabled engagement in a wide range of recreational activities. Young people noted that travel between the West and East, and the other way around, had been made much easier since the introduction of the rapid and frequent "Glider" bus in 2018. The fact that several bus lines now connect with the Glider, which can be caught effortlessly from early morning to late evening, means that many people use it. This illustrates the importance of public transport in overcoming geographical constraints on intergroup contact.

While frequenting attractive spaces far from home, youth avoid closer, unattractive spaces. The participant who traversed large parts of the city to get to Mo Mowlam Play Park, for example, said it was a contrast to nearby Dunville Park, which was seen as a less desirable site of recreation and interaction for several reasons. For example, its fast slide for older children had been burned, "so they

¹ Some of the photos can be found in the photovoice exhibition booklet here: <https://sharedspacesproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Shared-Spaces-Belfast-Exhibition-Booklet.pdf>.

had to knock it down, take it away, and leave it as an empty big space.” Another Catholic participant noted the park used to have a big water fountain which was now out of order. The lack of amenities was described as a significant drawback that meant less time was spent in the place. In addition to infrastructure issues, local parks were sometimes shunned due to the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse. This was highlighted as a problem both in Dunville Park and in Falls Park, also located in West Belfast. Similarly, Orangefield Park in East Belfast was described by a Protestant male participant as “a little rough” around summertime and a place to avoid after 7 p.m. due to public drinking. Hence, considerations of safety, which were not necessarily group-related, turned out to be significant determinants of participants’ overall use of public space.

Socioeconomic factors were also found to influence youth use of space with low-cost activities being particularly important. Youth reflected on, for example, strolling in the streets around iconic and aesthetically pleasing buildings, such as the City Hall. Another young person recounted having picnics or smoking near a bright yellow fountain on a public square, or watching boats pass by in the harbor. Of the two main shopping malls in central Belfast, Castle Court, the more affordable one, emerged as a hangout of choice. Preferred restaurants also tended to be those which specialize in low-price offers or were used to have a drink before heading elsewhere for food. Strategies such as these allowed youth to spend significant leisure time in the mixed city center, qualifying academic portrayals of this space as inaccessible to the working-class communities living in segregated areas (Gusic, 2020). This is important since the city center seemed to attenuate the intergroup dimension of interactions, as suggested by the absence of Catholic and Protestant identities in youth depiction of their social life there.

Group-Based Spatial Cognitions, Emotions, and Behavior

In addition to geographical and economic factors, youth highlighted how group-based spatial cognitions connect to their understanding and use of urban spaces. The distinction between Protestant and Catholic areas, for example, is illustrated in the following quote from a Catholic male participant:

The West has always been a Catholic area. There are some small Protestant estates in it, but it’s mostly dominated by Catholics—same as the East. I don’t know who takes over ... who’s mainly in the South and North. I think North is Protestant, South is Catholic, but it could be the other way round, I’m not really sure. I don’t really go to either of them.

The casual, though quickly rectified, use of “taking over” to express a community’s demographic predominance shows that segregation in some areas is not only perceived as a by-product of history or individual preferences but as a matter of power and control over space. In addition to the broad division between East, West, North, and South, smaller areas such as the Short Strand (East), the Shankill (North-West), Ardoyne, and Ballysillan (North) were also recognized by the young people to be allocated to one or the other community.

The nature of such segregation is important because it can be associated with deep-seated fears that often prevent residents from venturing into areas seen as “held” by the other community (Shirlow, 2003). Youth accounts suggest that this fear is sometimes

rooted in direct negative intergroup experiences. One Protestant female participant told how she had come to steer clear of West Belfast’s smaller streets after being assaulted:

In the Divis estate, I got chased out before. Obviously, because they knew I was a Protestant, I got chased by people like ... they were throwing stones and they had bats and stuff—me and my friends got chased out ... but that doesn’t happen all the time. It’s just happened like ... it has happened a couple of times, so I just don’t really go into the actual estate.

One Catholic male participant was approached by a group of three to four people while walking with friends around the mainly Protestant city of Newtownards, 15 km east of Belfast, and was told to leave the area. Even though his Protestant friends were able to “talk it out,” he “took the warning and left,” describing the altercation as “frightening.” Even isolated incidents of this type can make a lasting impression and have a long-term impact, including the avoidance of shared spaces (Dixon et al., 2020).

Portraying segregation as a neighborhood-scale phenomenon would be too crude, however. A degree of contact, both negative and positive, can be found in specific streets and commercial spaces in predominantly Catholic and Protestant areas. For example, getting chased on the estates of West Belfast did not prevent the Protestant female participant cited earlier from transiting through and meeting friends on its main roads, where “nothing will really obviously happen.” A Catholic female participant described the Wetherspoon’s pub in Newtownards as a place where community affiliation did not matter much and anyone could easily fit in:

I’m pretty much in there all the time. ... It’s just a good place to go. I just moved to Newtownards, so I don’t really know that many people there. But um ... just to go there, have a wee drink and then. ... I don’t know, conversations, you meet all sorts of people, mostly Protestants, and like I’m Catholic ... so I just get to connect, and we pass our differences and just have a wee giggle, a wee laugh and wee drink ... so yeah I’ve made so many friends in Spoon’s.

Another Protestant female participant says the bar she goes to on weekends, located in a mainly Protestant area of North Belfast, hosts both Catholic and Protestant customers, and that community identities neither matter nor provoke any fights there. She contrasts this favorably with other bars in the Shankill, also mainly Protestant, where Catholics would not want to go: “I don’t know what would happen, probably a fight will start.”

The idea of conflict was a recurring theme, and youth provided detailed accounts of where and when fights between group members were most likely to break out. While they sometimes mentioned them in a light-hearted tone that harked back to the notion of “recreational rioting” (Jarman & O’Halloran, 2001), place associations with frequent fights were mostly framed as a reason to stay out. For example, a Protestant female participant living in North Belfast referred to a street adjoining a peace wall near her home as a good place to walk the dog. However, she also described it as a place where large groups of Catholic and Protestant youth often fight “for fun” at night: “During the day it doesn’t bother me, but at night if I see a big group of people like I refuse to go down there, because I don’t want to get hit on my head with a brick or something.” While research on negative vicarious contact remains limited (Vezzali et al., 2021), the impact of positive vicarious contact on intergroup anxiety and perceived in- and outgroup norms (Vezzali et al., 2014)

suggests that witnessing such fights could have similar effects as direct victimization on the desire to stay within ingroup territory.

Lived Experience and Social Discourses

The relationship between the state of intergroup relations in a given space and youth attitudes toward that space is not a direct one. To begin with, their lived experience of spaces is shaped by several individual factors, including group identity but also social networks, and patterns of space use. For example, one participant explained how her use of social media had made her very well known among young people from both communities. While most of her online interactions were positive, her “celebrity status” meant that she could easily be identified, and thus sometimes targeted, when she ventured into outgroup territory. At the same time, her frequent visits to certain bars had enabled her to build trust with other regulars and, therefore, to develop a sense of belongingness in those places.

Understandings of space are also influenced by processes beyond lived experience, for example, the narratives shared by others. This form of social knowledge emerged repeatedly in accounts of “fights,” described as a long-standing and somewhat normalized pattern of interaction in interface areas. Most of these accounts were stimulated by the sight of peace walls and were deployed to justify the erection and maintenance of those walls. A typical example is the pithy history of peace walls elaborated by a Catholic male participant:

So really the peace wall is where ... you would see it in between the Springfields and walking off the Shankill ... it was made to divide the areas. Whenever that was ... there was lots of fights that happened and lots of people lost their lives. So people decided just to build a wall and have it closed, so it was just to keep it divided.

Peace walls thus activated intergenerationally transmitted memories of negative contact, catalyzing a desire to avoid intergroup contact more generally. The casual way that modes of fighting near peace walls were narrated suggested stories that had been heard and retold many times: “The Protestants would throw stuff over, like petrol bombs and stuff over to the Catholic side, and the Catholics would throw like the same stuff back over to the Protestant side” (Protestant, female). The protective bars installed on the windows of houses in some interface areas also prompted memories of fighting in the recent past: “There was always trouble, their windows would get smashed all the time. So the Council came and put the guards over all their windows just so they didn’t get their houses wrecked.”

Other, exceptional stories of intergroup violence were more specific and were likely to be informed by media discourses. One of these related to the hijacking of a bus on Lanark Way, near a peace gate bordering the Shankill area. The participant correctly remembered the incident taking place in 2021, involving dozens of masked Protestant residents of the Shankill and culminating in the bus being petrol bombed. Beyond this, however, there were discrepancies between her description of the events and newspaper accounts (O’Carroll & Carroll, 2021). While the latter asserted the bus did not carry any passengers, the participant mentioned the bus was “packed” and that assailants “told everyone to get off” before setting fire to it. This suggests a blending of information proceeding from the media and less formal sources. Another highly mediated event that was recounted in a radically altered way was the death of Noah Donohoe, a 14-year-old boy who was last seen cycling in

North Belfast and whose body was found 6 days later in a storm drain. While the police ruled out “foul play,” rumors quickly spread about the teenager being abducted and murdered (Morrison, 2020). In her account of the tragedy, one participant presented them as indisputable facts, explaining that the Catholic boy was beaten up by paramilitaries for passing through a Protestant area. The police then “covered the whole thing up” due to fear of retaliation from paramilitaries.

Stories of both routine and exceptional intergroup violence play an important role in sustaining the “geography of fear,” but young people also display a capacity to put them into perspective (Leonard, 2017). Commenting on the bus hijacking, a Protestant female participant qualified that “it’s not always like that, people see stuff like that on the news and they think ‘oh, Belfast is horrible,’ but it’s actually a good place.” She also distanced herself more broadly from the intergenerational transmission of stereotypes: “I was brought up to think that they’re horrible people and they’re just out to hurt you. But like we’re all the same, we just have different religions.” A Catholic male participant echoed this sentiment:

Whenever I was brought up, they were heavily influenced of what they grew up with. In the older days, there was something called the Troubles ... so as you know, it was like a war I’d say, the Protestants and the Catholics. So it was a different time back then, and they tried to teach me and raise me about that and try to get me converted to one side. But over the years, I’ve realised that there’s no really fuss over it. Why just stay to one side when you can be happy with both, you know what I mean?

Hence despite the weight of history and family ethnic socialization, some young people remained keen to interact across divides, highlighting their potential role as peacebuilders in conflict-affected societies (Taylor & McKeown, 2019).

Markers of Identity

In addition to personal recollections and socially influential discourses, youth draw on a range of identity-focused cues to assess whether they can safely enter urban spaces. Much has been written about the prominence of large sectarian murals, often painted on gable ends or peace walls, as a way of “marking out” group identity in segregated neighborhoods. Such visual displays can contribute to creating a sense of belonging and even pride among residents. A Catholic male participant, for example, livened up when asked to explain the meaning of his favorite murals:

Um, let me see. There’s one of a man called Bobby Sands. Bobby Sands was a man who took part in something called the hunger strike, which was for prison rights back in the day. I think it was the 60s or the 70s it happened. But my granny was a friend of Bobby Sands, they grew up together somewhere in the West. And they knew each other since birth, and just all the way up till he was sent to prison. And the hunger strike was basically a bunch of Irish prisoners who starved themselves to death for our rights in prison, because we were getting treated differently, because the prisons were mainly by the British, so we were trying to get rights.

The reference to family connections to Bobby Sands shows how intimate memories of the Troubles can be even for youth born after the peace agreement. How historical episodes were selected and recounted also suggests why the very same images can trigger opposite feelings among the other communities. In addition to

Bobby Sands and the hunger strike, this participant dwelled on a mural representing the Easter Rising of 1916 (“unfortunately we lost, but we got some rights from it, but a lot of people died”), and a female Catholic peer expressed her appreciation for murals naming those who had died during the Troubles. Taken together, such modes of representation tend to reinforce perceptions of ingroup heroism and victimization, which have been identified as a significant barrier to reconciliation in Northern Ireland (Jankowitz, 2018).

Apart from murals, bilingual English/Irish street signs, loyalist music played in bars, and especially the flying of flags were spontaneously mentioned as indicators of group territorialization. One Catholic male participant pointed out that flags did not only express national allegiance to Ireland (the Tricolor) or the United Kingdom (the Union Jack), but also international support for Palestine or Israel, for instance. He also explained that not all flags necessarily conveyed a message of complete exclusion toward the other community, and that a distinction should be made between those representing a country and the paramilitaries:

If you start seeing those kind of flags ... like UDA [Ulster Defence Association, a loyalist paramilitary] flags and all ... if you're a Catholic it's most likely a place where you shouldn't be. Because usually it could be a place where you don't want to go.

Yeah. Whereas like a Union Jack not necessarily, it could still be quite safe.

It could just be people who are proud of who they are and you see them hanging outside the houses.

Hence, the potential for negative interaction was perceived to be higher in areas marked out with paramilitary flags than with national ones. Despite the view that the latter did not necessarily signify outgroup exclusion, which mirrored how the mixed background participant (who identified as not religious) lightly talked about churches “looking nice,” young people said it was rare to see Catholic and Protestant symbols displayed in the same place. The unease this would cause was illustrated through the controversy that had flared up several years ago over a Catholic request to fly the Tricolor alongside the Union Jack over City Hall, in response to which the Union Jack was removed instead. The decision led to weeks of Protestant protests, which one Protestant female respondent attended as a child with her mother. This erasure of ethnoreligious identities reflected the overall trend prevailing in the city center, and young people seemed to associate the absence of group symbols with shared spaces:

No, you don't see that [Catholic or Protestant symbols] in the city centre, it's very much mixed. Unless there's like a wee Irish bar, because you do have some Irish bars in the city centre, you will see an Irish flag. But apart from that you won't see it anywhere. Which I think is a good thing because it's a lot less conflict and ... yeah. It's all about conflict resolution nowadays. (Protestant, female)

Intergroup Norms

Youth also hinted at the influence of place-specific norms on intergroup experiences. Two participants, for example, noted how the kindness of waiters and salespeople in some city center restaurants and shops created a sense of welcome regardless of community background. One Protestant female participant recalled

her long conversation with an employee in a shoe shop, whose enthusiasm and visible love of his job had convinced her to buy a pair of trainers. Prompted to guess whether he was Protestant or Catholic, she paused and then said his accent sounded Catholic, but group differences clearly lacked relevance in the context of this interaction. It could be argued, however, that the norms of customer service (courtesy, cheerfulness, and casual conversation) can catalyze positive relations between employees and clients, and this might have knock-on intergroup effects. Yet this positivity of commercial services in the city center does not necessarily extend to smaller venues in segregated neighborhoods, which can be inclusive or exclusive spaces depending on “where you are” and “who runs the shop” (Protestant, female). A Catholic male participant reckons that “there's like IRA [Irish Republican Army, a paramilitary] bars, you would call them, where it's all Catholic people, also, there would be like Republican people as well.”

This passing reference to the Irish Republican Army, and the earlier account of Noah's death, show that paramilitary groups are still perceived as powerful enforcers of spatial segregation. One Protestant female participant claims they are “a big reason why Protestants and Catholics don't mix,” as she learned as a child when her older sister's Catholic boyfriend moved in with her family. According to her testimony, paramilitaries pulled her mother on the street and threatened to set the house on fire if the boyfriend did not leave. Previous surveys have demonstrated that fear of punishment by their own community, not only the other community, prevents many Belfast residents from trespassing territorial boundaries (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006).

A “safety in numbers” effect also applies to the Belfast context, as illustrated by the perception of main roads as more trustworthy than small streets and alleyways, even in segregated neighborhoods (see Davies et al., 2019). Several participants expressed their feeling of safety in parks by observing that they were visited by families and dog walkers. Yet this changed in the context of community celebrations when norms in favor of segregation reemerged and crowd-based (as well as alcohol-fueled) violence became likely:

On 8th August they have a concert in the Falls Park, and all my friends go but obviously I don't, because I'm a Protestant and ... it's like an Irish festival thing. And they ... my friends wouldn't be bothered, but because the park is obviously filled with people, there will be people there that know I'm a Protestant and with a few drinks in them they might obviously be rude. ... It's the same in the Protestant areas as well, like on 11th and 12th we have the bonfires and we've got the big parade, and you wouldn't see many Catholics at those, because ... well, obviously, people with a few drinks in them, the worst comes out.

An otherwise good-humored and measured Catholic male participant instantly lost his cool when the topic of annual marches was broached: “Every time we march there's trouble. Right? And every time they march there's trouble as well because they're insulting us.” The exacerbated territorialization of urban space during the marching season transpires in the use of sectarian symbols, with flags multiplying or being burned on bonfires. For approximately a week before and after key dates in the Catholic and Protestant calendar, a zero-sum mentality (i.e., the assumption that everything that the opponent side receives is a loss for one's own side) sets in and the space for mixing becomes largely reduced to the city center.

Discussion

Extending research on intergroup contact theory, everyday multiculturalism, and place identity, the present research explored how youth in the divided society of Belfast, Northern Ireland, experience interactions in urban spaces using innovative participatory methods. Through a detailed analysis of youth narratives, we highlight some of the key structural processes and individual factors through which public spaces become used or not by young people from different community backgrounds.

First, our findings demonstrate that public spaces such as shopping centers and parks must be accessible and affordable if they are to facilitate interaction between groups. We also find that the potential drawbacks of distance and high prices associated with commercialization can be offset by efficient public transport and by youths' capacity to enjoy the amenities of middle-class areas such as the city center in creative and inexpensive ways. Well-maintained and useful amenities encouraged young people to interact in spaces and see them as shared. Views of such spaces, especially parks, were also shaped by perceptions of safety, often linked to the use of alcohol and drugs rather than to any group-specific factors. As such, the physical makeup of everyday spaces can play an important role in shaping intergroup contact.

Second, our findings demonstrate the influence of group-based space-specific cognitions, emotions, and behavior on youth interactions in the highly divided context of Belfast. More specifically, we see how young people's sense of connection to space and associated group identities may lead to differentiated patterns of space use. In contexts where the salience of group identities regularly triggers abuse, harassment, or violence, youth develop complex cognitive schemas predicting where and when such acts are likely to target them and their peers, and adjust their behavior accordingly. Such cognitive schemas do not only derive from direct victimization but also from narratives of routine or exceptional incidents, recent or historical, transmitted through the media, peers, and family socialization. Journalists, parents, and young people should therefore be made aware of these stories' long-term impact on segregation and mixing, for instance through formal education in schools and universities as well as during Good Relations Week and community events.

Cognitive schemas also emerge through identity symbols and their interpretation. Flags, music, and place names, for example, signal whether certain groups are welcome in a space. Youth indicated how those symbols influence their choices of where to interact and how their absence from the city center, flowing from decisions made by local authorities and larger businesses, can create a perception of the space being open to everyone. Based on young people's accounts, it is unclear whether a similar result could be reached by displaying Catholic and Protestant symbols side by side. Since identity symbols may signal discrimination regardless of its actual occurrence, these must be used with caution for a place to be perceived as safe by all groups. This is particularly important in conflict and divided societies where feelings of safety are central to peace processes.

Finally, our findings suggest encouraging overlaps between the conditions for intergroup interactions and the facilitators of prejudice reduction through positive contact. "Institutional support" and "equal status" featured prominently in Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and subsequent research (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and

the present research shows that social norms in favor of intergroup civility, even when primarily designed and enforced by adults (for instance, on the streets and in professionalized customer service), can multiply opportunities for contact as well as make it more effective at improving attitudes. Another of Allport's conditions, the presence of common goals, also seems more likely to be found in attractive places that unite young people around a shared purpose, be it dancing the night away in a bar, racing down a slide, or taking in the sights and sounds of the city center. With respect to negative contact, the research underscores that, in addition to canceling out the benefits of positive contact, it also makes it less likely to occur due to spatial segregation.

Limitations and Future Directions

While our research makes an important contribution by exploring youth contact experiences in a postaccord context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, despite the effectiveness of our participatory methods to investigate place meanings, the associated costs and time commitments mean that our sample is small and slightly skewed in terms of ethno-religious identity. Further, all participants were enrolled in a mixed vocational training program and self-selected to work with us, meaning that it is difficult to generalize findings. Future research should aim to work with a larger group and wider age range, including students in segregated schools, as experiences of space may also vary across areas of the city and between different age groups. Second, because we steered youth photomissions toward familiar places, most (though certainly not all) attention was given to spaces that were perceived as inclusive rather than exclusive in the narratives. Future studies may seek a greater balance between both forms of spaces, although this comes with ethical implications. Third, while our work adds to contextual understandings of contact, the specificities of Belfast may make it qualitatively different from the cosmopolitan cities usually studied by theorists of everyday multiculturalism. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the influence of researchers' positionality on data collection. While the team included researchers from Northern Ireland, the conversations about the photos were facilitated by a white male immigrant to Britain with an interest in the Northern Irish conflict but limited prior knowledge of Belfast. This may have encouraged a positivity bias and a degree of self-censorship in young people's accounts, particularly during the mixed focus groups, where there was sometimes a reluctance to directly address intergroup relations.

Conclusion

Taken together, our findings demonstrate how both structural and individual factors play an important role in youth intergroup interactions in everyday life spaces in Belfast. In doing so, we point to the need to incorporate these aspects in future research on the predictors and facilitators of intergroup contact. We hope that our findings will act as a stepping stone for the development of new theoretical approaches that consider how distal factors such as time (of the day, week, year, or history) or place functions/types can indirectly influence opportunities for contact through their impact on group norms, discourses, and symbols.

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