

# KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

## SEMINAR SERIES



### Young people's attitudes to 'peacewalls' in Belfast

Professor Madeleine Leonard, Queen's University Belfast:

[m.leonard@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.leonard@qub.ac.uk)

#### 1. Research Project Overview

This presentation is part of the findings of a five year research project entitled *Conflict in Cities and the Contested State: Everyday Life and the Possibilities of Transformation in Belfast, Jerusalem and other divided cities* ([www.conflictincities.org](http://www.conflictincities.org))<sup>i</sup> A team of researchers from three UK universities, Cambridge, Exeter and Queen's Belfast, are leading the project which aims to analyse how divided cities in Europe and the Middle East have been shaped by ethnic, religious and national conflicts. While Belfast and Jerusalem are the main cities studied an international network of academics and practitioners, are working on the divided cities of Brussels, Berlin, Mostar, Nicosia, Berlin, Beirut, Tripoli and Kirkuk.

#### 1.2 Research Aim

The aim of this element of the research was to understand how young people living in or attending school in interface areas of Belfast viewed the peacewalls that continue to divide communities. The focus is timely given current discussions around 'bringing down the walls'. The presentation illustrates the importance of incorporating young people's 'ways of seeing' into the policy framework. Importantly, as members of the 'post ceasefire' generation their insights draw attention to continuity and change in attitudes and perceptions and signpost issues that require consideration if effective policy recommendations on 'bringing down the walls' are to be introduced.

### 1.3 Research Methodology

The data was collected using a range of methods:

#### Questionnaire:

- 20 schools from across Belfast chosen to reflect gender, religion and class dimensions.
- 442 young people aged 14/15 completed the questionnaires.
- 7 sections: demographics; use of mobile phone and Internet; the 'troubles'; adults and teenagers; Belfast's city centre; leisure; Belfast as a safe and shared city
- The final page was blank and participants were asked to imagine it as a blank wall dividing the two communities upon which they could draw or write messages for the other community to see.

#### Photo Prompts

- 6 schools/125 pupils in interface areas or whose catchment included such areas.
- 11 photographs of 'old' and 'new' Belfast – 2 city centre; 2 parades, 2 wall murals; 2 youth groups; 2 'dividing' walls; 1 iconic building
- Question sheet for each photograph

#### Focus Groups

- Group interviews based on the 11 photographs with 125 pupils

This findings discussed below draws on data from all three methods described above.

## 2. Research Findings

| <i>6 Interface Schools Questionnaire – Do you Feel the Troubles' are Over?</i> |            |              |            |
|--|------------|--------------|------------|
|  | Both %     | Protestant % | Catholic % |
| YES  | 7% (16%)*  | 3% (9%)*     | 12% (19%)* |
| NO   | 48% (45%)* | 66% (54%)*   | 29% (39%)* |
| HOPE SO  | 45% (39%)* | 31% (37%)*   | 59% (41%)* |

\*Figures in brackets are for remaining 14 schools

An analysis of the written responses to the written questions on the photo prompts and the focus group data revealed that young people's attitudes to peacewalls could be classified in six ways. However, it should be emphasised that their responses did not neatly fit into each of these categories. Rather the same young people expressed contradictory views, at times demonstrating support for ongoing division of areas into single identity localities, at times challenging these traditional divisions and at times reflecting cautious optimism while also expressing anxiety that the 'troubles' may not be over and hence walls and barriers were still needed 'just in case'.

### **2.1 Inclusionary Walls**

One of the recurring discourses to emerge was an attempt to redefine territorial claiming of place in more positive terms. Many young people demonstrated pride in their community, its history and the kinship connections that crossed generations. Peer group friendships tended to reflect wider territorial divisions so that one's friends came from one's own community. This positive territoriality manifested itself in discourses which defended the walls as positive features of the Belfast landscape bringing tourists to areas that under normal circumstances would be bypassed because of the surrounding deprivation. The barriers provided young people with a way of marking their territory through establishing the boundaries of their own and other communities. While not attempting to gloss over divisions among young people within specific localities and acknowledging that young people at times were located in opposing internal peer groups, nonetheless, the peacewalls also produced feelings of internal security reinforced by the knowledge that within the barriers one was likely to only encounter others from the same ethno-national group.

### **2.2 Exclusionary Walls**

For some young people, fear continued to impact on spatial practices and resulted in localised geographies aimed at excluding distrusted groups. Because of residential and educational segregation, the majority of young people in interface areas experienced low levels of social interaction with the other community. In the absence of meaningful contact, they produced a localised knowledge of safe and unsafe places and used discourses of fear and victimhood to influence each other's movements through the area. In this vein, space was often politicised into 'our territory' and 'their territory'. Hence the various barriers that separate Catholic from Protestant areas formed a defensive architecture which facilitated inward looking tendencies and reinforced ethno-national identities. The presence of clearly defined boundaries assisted young people in identifying safe and unsafe spaces and, as these barriers are often physically marked with sectarian imagery, they enabled young people to develop 'a geography' of knowing unknown places.

### **2.3 Necessary Walls**

A number of young people expressed insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty regarding whether the 'troubles' were over and if Belfast could be fully regarded as a 'post-conflict' city. In this respect, the peace walls were considered a necessary feature of the landscape. Many also felt that Protestant and Catholics had not reached the point where they could 'get on together' and, as such, without the walls

there would be fighting and rioting on a more regular basis. It is worth mentioning here that during the period the research was carried out, Northern Ireland experienced a resurgence of incidents from dissident republican and loyalist paramilitary groups.

#### 2.4 Ineffective Walls

Another theme that emerged in the data was some young people’s perception that the walls did not deliver in their primary objective of stopping Catholics and Protestants in interface areas from attacking each other. This led to debates about whether or not the walls should stay up or come down since they were ineffective in delivering on their primary purpose. These discussions, however, were often placed within the previous context where there was concern expressed about whether or not the troubles were fully over. These feelings of apprehension were a common theme across the focus group discussions and while as the following theme demonstrates, there was some optimism expressed about the walls being temporary structures, for the most part, young people were cautious in their optimism.

#### 2.5 Temporary Walls

While there has been considerable focus on adults’ views on the removal of peace lines, particularly those living in interface area in Belfast (Community Relations Council 2009)<sup>ii</sup>, less attention has been paid to the attitudes of young people living in or attending school in interface areas. Hence the young people who took part in the research were asked to consider what they felt was a reasonable time frame for the peace lines to be dismantled.

| <b>6 Interface Schools Questionnaire – What is a reasonable for the peacewalls to come down?</b> |           |            |           |
|--|-----------|------------|-----------|
|  | Both      | Protestant | Catholic  |
| RIGHT AWAY   | 9% (11%)  | 11% (8%)   | 7% (13%)  |
| 2 – 5 YEARS  | 35% (38%) | 22% (38%)  | 49% (37%) |
| 10 YEARS   | 22% (26%) | 26% (21%)  | 18% (29%) |
| NEVER  | 34% (25%) | 41% (32%)  | 26% (21%) |

\*Figures in brackets are for remaining 14 schools

Overall, as the above table indicates, only 9% felt that they could be removed right away while 34% felt that they should never be removed with, in this group, Protestants being the most pessimistic with 41% feeling that they should never come down compared to 26% of Catholics. However, the majority of young people expressed cautious optimism about the removal of the peace lines with 35% overall stating that they could be removed within a 2-5 year time frame and 22% feeling that they could be removed within a 10 year time frame.

## 2.6 Invisible Walls

Some of the young people's responses were garnered from answers to specific questions on the questionnaire on peacewalls and responses to the photo of a peacewall and focus group discussions on this theme. In this sense, the young people's attention was drawn to peacewalls in that the theme was introduced by us. However, during focus group discussions, it became clear that some young people did not see the barriers as impacting overly on their everyday lives and, therefore, they did not think about them. The normality or invisibility of the divided landscape was a recurrent feature.

## 3. Policy Implications

The preceding discussion illustrates the core themes that emerged in the research regarding attitudes to peacewalls in Belfast. As the research highlights it cannot be assumed that because young people have grown up in a period of relative peace segregation and sectarianism are no longer relevant. While contradictory sentiments often characterised their discussions, these indicate dynamic rather than static attitudes to peacewalls and suggest that there is space for negotiation around attitudes to barriers in Belfast. Their differing attitudes to peacewalls highlight how the dismantling of physical walls and barriers will only be effective if underlying mental and symbolic boundary making processes are also addressed. Key points for consideration:

- Young people often constructed their sense of place in terms of relationships between the two communities so that often discourses were punctuated with notions of 'here and there', 'our side and their side' and 'us and them'.
- Local space continues to be used in segregated ways and physical, mental and symbolic barriers often framed the way they understood and organised their everyday spatial movements resulting in a 'street literacy' (Cahill 2000)<sup>iii</sup> which transformed some local places into contested spaces.
- Some young people followed spatial practices that reproduced parallel spaces facilitating almost no engagement with other young people from adjoining localities. Thus many argued that removing the peace walls would not necessarily promote cross community relationships.
- 'Shared Spaces' remained for the most part parallel spaces.
- The limited geographical mobility and lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement with the 'other community' fuelled the intergenerational transmission of traditional territorial cultures.
- The invisibility and normalisation of the walls meant that some young people expressed no curiosity about those living on the other side of the wall; they were physically and mentally absent from their everyday lives.
- Yet there was some evidence for cautious optimism and indications that boundaries were perceived as neither fixed nor natural.

- Some young people wanted opportunities to transcend sectarian spaces and engage in more meaningful terms with adjacent peers.
- While the schools the young people attended engaged in cross community activities, often these were often restricted to a few pupils chosen to represent the whole school and were too intermittent to provide for meaningful contact.
- Sectarian attitudes still not confronted by the education system
- Discussions regarding the removal of the walls were animated and young people saw a core role for themselves in facilitating future co-operation. They discussed the possible formation of cross community youth clubs, joint events and celebrations whereby young people could take the lead in fostering collaborative ventures.
- Many choose to write messages of peace on the imaginary peace wall placed at the end of the questionnaire or drew images showing the uniting of hands across the divide.
- Young people's 'ways of seeing' are still not incorporated into public policies. Hence, young people often become invisible users of urban landscapes, only becoming visible when their land-use is problematic.
- Collectively the responses suggest that Belfast still has a long way to go to bring Catholics/nationalists/republicans together with Protestants/unionists/loyalists, particularly in interface communities.
- As the future generation, young people need to play a key role in bringing the peace process forward. This necessitates understanding how young people accomplish their own micro-geographies (Matthews et al 1998)<sup>iv</sup> and facilitating their inclusion into debates and policies around challenging taken-for-granted uses of segregated space.

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<sup>i</sup> *Conflict in Cities and the Contested State* ESRC Large Grant RES-060-25-0015 [2007-2012]

<sup>ii</sup> Community Relations Council (2008), *"Towards Sustainable Security: Interface Barriers and the Legacy of Segregation in Belfast"*, Belfast: Community Relations Council.

<sup>iii</sup> Cahill, C. (2000), "'Street Literacy: Urban Teenagers' Strategies for Negotiating Their Neighbourhood", *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 251-277.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthews, H., Limb, M and Percy-Smith, B. (1998), "Changing Worlds: The Microgeographies of Young Teenagers", *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol. 89, No. 2, pp. 193-202