Spatial and Social Segregation / Mixing: National Conflict, Ethnic Division and Social Networks in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Much of the literature on segregation focuses on quantitative analysis of census data. This relies on static residential patterns which do not deal fully with the implications of activity patterns and social relations.

Residential patterns have been used to paint a bleak picture of segregation within Northern Ireland.

This research seeks to explore the links between residential patterns and social mixing in Belfast.

Methodology

The project uses quantitative approaches to build on existing work on residential segregation.

Subsequently, qualitative in-depth interviews provide information on activity patterns, social networks, attitudes, and the nature and depth of cross community relationships.

Interventions were carried out among residents from areas perceived as Catholic, Protestant, Working Class, Middle Class and Mixed.

Key informants such as community leaders, church leaders and politicians were interviewed to gain an overview of social relations among residents of the areas.

In addition, interviews with shop stewards and trade union representatives will present a picture of social mixing within the workplace.

Finally, two case studies of overcoming segregation will be investigated.

An exploration of how couples in mixed relationships have overcome segregation.

The use of the internet in overcoming spatial barriers.

Social networks and other social milieu

For some, social networks based on the workplace and clubs and societies are more important than the residential sphere.

The workplace is a major setting for cross community contact and the development of mixed relationships.

For many, relationships with colleagues are purely functional and are not continued outside the workplace.

In the last decade, spatial mobility has increased while fear has decreased.

Mixed leisure spaces, particularly in the city centre, provide the opportunity for mixed relationships to develop.

Social segregation and mixing

Dissimilarity index figures for the 2001 census show a high level of residential segregation within Belfast.

Segregation is however, localised in parts of the city and there are areas of the city which are becoming increasingly mixed.

New housing developments (particularly apartments on brown field sites) may be countering the segregated patterns of residence in Belfast.

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Summary

Social segregation and mixing is much more complex than data on residential segregation alone would suggest.

Since the paramilitary ceasefires and the Belfast agreement, decreased fear and increasing mobility for many people has enabled greater opportunities for mixing.

Mixing occurs in the workplace, in clubs and societies, and in mixed leisure spaces. However, the extent to which cross community contact translates to meaningful relationships depends strongly on individual attitudes and upbringing.

Changes in society and ‘normal’ social processes means that ‘traditional’ social interaction within residential communities has been threatened.

For some groups the place of residence does not strongly influence social networks, although this differs greatly according to age and socio-economic status.

References


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