Mapping the Spaces of Fear: 
Socio-spatial causes and effects of violence in Northern Ireland

KEY FINDINGS

What impact does fear of sectarian violence have on people’s everyday lives in the divided city of Belfast? Is fear of sectarian violence patterned, and if so, according to what categories? What coping strategies do people adopt to reduce risk of attack? How do service providers respond to concerns about the safety of their clients and their own staff? What light does a comparison of fear of homophobic violence cast upon the dynamics at work within these two forms of stranger-directed violence?

♦ The perception of violence and the fear it engenders tends to be spatially specific (e.g., concentrated in working-class areas, ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’; or identifiable ‘gay’ spaces around particular bars); and patterned in time (e.g., daytime, and school term time are safer; bar closing times, and summer holidays associated with sectarian displays and ‘recreational rioting’ are high risk periods).

♦ Fears are gender and age specific (males, mid-teens to late thirties, are the main targets of sectarian violence; younger men of homophobic violence).

♦ Individuals see themselves as ethnically identifiable through their use of public space and visible behaviour within it (e.g., dress or mannerisms). Local knowledge and appropriate use of space are crucial in minimising vulnerability, and so too is the avoidance of risk-increasing behaviour when in unsafe territory (e.g., walking home alone under the influence of alcohol).

♦ Fear of stranger-directed violence produces strong patterns of behaviour regulation and coping strategies which structure an individual’s activity patterns and relative visibility. Such structuring is reinforced by wider group norms and processes.

♦ Violence impacts on the management of the city in a two-fold fashion. For one, managers have to continuously assess the risk their users incur when accessing services, and to develop measures to increase their safety. Secondly, managers must design strategies which minimise the risk faced by their workforce in providing services on the ground.

RESEARCH TEAM

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Research issues in three arenas

- The perceptions of residents (selected to cover different class, gender, age, and other categories) who face complex time-space configurations of threat and fear; how these impinge on their daily activities; and their various coping strategies.
- The responses and strategies of managers in the public and private sectors who have to manage the 'spaces of fear' or provide services within them.
- A subsidiary focus on homophobic violence and the fears experienced by people identified as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender (GLBT), as an example of non-sectarian violence for a comparison of two modes of 'stranger-directed' violence.

Research design

To capture the complexities of fear and their social effects, the research was 'multi-method' and 'multi-level' in character. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used on a range of material including Census data, crime figures, media reports, in-depth and focus group interviews, and participant observation. Analyses were conducted at Belfast and local area levels, with most attention being given to detailed qualitative work in a sector of mainly working-class, inner-city study areas in East and South Belfast, close to the city's main re-development zone. Altogether, over 150 respondents yielded 116 semi-structured interviews (with interviews lasting from one hour up to six hours), and 9 focus-group discussions. In addition to study area interviewees, the respondents included individuals who are GLBT, and managers and service providers operating across the Belfast Urban Area (BUA).

Quantitative research results

The quantitative analysis underlined the deprived character of the majority of study areas. They displayed strong patterns of residential segregation, and high proportions of public housing, high unemployment and low car ownership. Their demographic dynamics differed, with 'Catholic' districts having a relatively young population, while 'Protestant' areas have high proportions of elderly residents. Comparison of the 1991 and 1999 figures shown below indicates population decline in 'Protestant' areas (e.g. Area 1) and population growth in 'Catholic' ones (e.g., Areas 2 and 7). For further comparison, two 'mixed areas' (Areas 4 and 5) were selected, both including long-established Protestant working-class communities but with increasing student and young professional populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>BUA</th>
<th>Area 1</th>
<th>Area 2</th>
<th>Area 3</th>
<th>Area 4</th>
<th>Area 5</th>
<th>Area 6</th>
<th>Area 7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>475903</td>
<td>7352</td>
<td>2449</td>
<td>1140</td>
<td>6541</td>
<td>2039</td>
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<td>1043</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population (1999)</td>
<td>495691</td>
<td>6174</td>
<td>2913</td>
<td>1266</td>
<td>6685</td>
<td>2612</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Catholic</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td>% age 0-15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 0-15 (1999)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>% pensioners</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% pensioners (1999)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>% households with a car</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% owner occupied housing</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>% public housing</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>% unemployment</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
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Source: Census 1991 unless otherwise stated. [1999 figures were calculated from data supplied by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. See http://www.nisra.gov.uk. Figures rounded to nearest whole number.]

We also examined patterns of spatial movement to schools and places of employment against the background of a segregated city. Notwithstanding the importance of other factors, fear seems to contribute significantly to the choice of employment location. We found a strong positive relationship between the religious composition of a ward's residents and of those who worked in the ward. Nevertheless, some wards - particularly in the city centre area - attracted 'mixed' workforces, but there are marked variations in the degree of religious mixing by occupation and gender. An analysis of the catchment areas of individual employers endorsed these findings. Newer employers have more 'mixed' workforces, while longer-established firms tend to have more segregated workforces (see Map 2 below for an example). Religious division is even more pronounced in schooling. The highly segregated nature of Northern Irish schools means that many pupils have to criss-cross the 'other's' ethnic territory whether by foot or bus (see Map 1).
Qualitative results: fear of sectarian violence

Residence in and detailed knowledge of 'spaces of fear' is very unequally distributed across the city. Working-class people have a higher tendency to live within 'sanctuary-space'. Essentialising identity by ascribed religion, politics and residential location means that for individuals who come from working-class communities with reputations as paramilitary heartlands, spatial freedoms are severely curtailed. These individuals negotiate their daily life-choices through a complex body of information about the relative dangers of particular spaces. This 'text of fear' or 'boundary rule book' takes account of a variety of factors, whether gender, age, time of day, season, or wider political events, and it dictates a highly specific use of local space (e.g., using particular sides of a road). People manage their own behaviour, reducing or increasing their levels of visibility depending on how dangerous or safe a place is felt to be. While visibility within the sanctuary is desired, invisibility in the external arena is the safest strategy. The basic premise, which can be seen to underpin sanctuary-residents' daily negotiations, appears to be a belief that an individual's ethnic identity is highly visible, and as a result 'blending in' is rarely a viable option in neighbouring districts. In contrast, people take precautions to mask their identity when moving in wider city spaces.

Catholic woman, early forties: My youngest daughter is 9 and she goes to the school on the Falls Road (Catholic district) and her name is Maebh (Catholic name) and I have never, ever once said to her that she had to take her school uniform off, or explained it, but she always knew that if she was going to Connswater Shopping Centre (located in a Protestant district) with me she couldn’t say her name was Maebh, and she had to put a coat over her to cover her school uniform.

Since achieving an invisible presence is not an option in situations of (impersonal) social interaction such as socialising in the city centre, people have to employ other coping strategies. Such methods include being vigilant to those around you, censuring your conversations and monitoring those of others.

Protestant male, mid-thirties: …when you're in the town [socialising in the city centre] it inhibits your conversation because you're always wary of what you say, places that you mention. I know from experience that you're listening to people round you and you're always wary about what you're saying. So you can never relax. Well even talking about different areas you’re going to and the type of work you do. People invariably listen and pick up. To try and determine what they are and where they're from.

In situations of direct personal interaction, such as within the workplace, masking identity is virtually impossible, given ethnic identification by name, residential area, school attended or sport followed. Hence many people reject or do not even consider employment opportunities within the territory of the 'other' ethnic group.

Protestant male, late twenties: I honestly think fear is a factor, who I’m working with, there’s a suspicion. I really do think, if you’re born and bred in Belfast, I truly believe there’s a suspicion. It’s almost a gene! “Right, you can’t work in North Belfast”, “you can’t work in West Belfast”. It automatically clicks in and then the fear starts and you’re sweating. I remember going for an interview in the Upper Springfield and Jesus, that was the worst day of my life.

Some who do take up employment in the 'other's territory feel they need to adopt strategies to offset the risk of attack, trying to reduce the predictability of their movements to and from the workplace for example.

Given the shared nature of the 'text of fear', the various forms of self-regulation are augmented by the judgements made by others about particular spatial decisions. Attributions of 'naivety' ensure that group censure acts as another way in which sectarianised spatial practices are reproduced.
Qualitative results: fear of homophobic violence

Our research into homophobic violence indicated that people follow comparable patterns of harassment-avoidance. Similar reference is made to the essentialised nature of categorisations, in this case 'gay' and 'lesbian', despite the individuals' sense of their own multiple complex identities. A recurring theme in this research is the need to manage visibility in a variety of life situations. Respondents speak of leading compartmentalised lives where they are 'out' in some sections but not in others. While an individual might be 'out' with friends, they may not be with their family, work colleagues or neighbours. Managing the various 'compartments' involves a stressful juggling operation. While common codes and cues operate between those who face the similar fear of being 'outed', those 'straight' individuals who are seen to be increasingly frequenting 'gay' space pose more danger.

Male, early-thirties: And then all of a sudden it's all over work that 'Oh, did you know so and so is gay? I saw him in the Parliament [local GLBT venue] last night'. It's OK for a straight person to go there, whereas somebody who wants to keep a very discrete lifestyle and they want to delineate that social aspect from their professional life. And all of a sudden that segregation has been broken down. I choose not to go to the Parliament. And that is based on the fact that so many straight people go [there]. And because I'm not really out at work, there would be certain fearfulness of being 'outed', being recognised.

Female, early forties: I would always be over-aware of safety. If any of my friends would ask me to go down to these bars to meet them, I would get a taxi into town, but not get the driver to leave me off outside the front door. There's no use provoking people. I'd simply walk down. I would not identify the actual places that are gay, no way.

Individuals who suffered attacks en-route home after a night out are blamed for being too 'camp', too drunk, or not sensible enough to know the dangers. People who behave in ways which are judged too 'butch' or too 'camp' are reproached for bringing some of their misfortune upon themselves. As in the case of avoidance of sectarian attack, there is an expectation that individuals should regulate their behaviour to ensure their own safety. In addition, processes of group regulation serve to impose censure on actions which are viewed as likely to attract violent attention.

Qualitative results: managing in the divided city

The everyday reality of sectarian geographies and sectarian violence in the city moreover constitutes an inescapable framework for the provision and use of services. Unlike activities such as shopping or socialising, using certain public services (e.g., claiming benefits) does not allow residents to make spatial (and sometimes temporal) choices by themselves. They depend on the responsiveness of service providers to enhance their safety in accessing these services. The research revealed that key service providers are aware of the risks which specific groups of customer's experience, and pre-emptive and ad-hoc measures are implemented to reduce the predictability of their clients’ movements. This means that managers effectively come to play an important part in the daily coping mechanisms of residents.

The city's sectarian geography is also inescapable for staff engaged in providing services on the ground. Managers employ a wide range of proactive coping strategies to enhance their safety. Strategies of segregated staff allocation contrast with policies of deliberate mixing. Yet other managers adopt a 'blind eye' approach, acting only in response to individual incidences by re-allocating staff to other areas. Moreover, as in the case of residents, perceptions and behavioural responses show temporal variations. Most managers perceive the need to employ special safety precautions for ground staff during the summer months (e.g. providing mobile phones, sending out staff in teams rather than individually, requiring staff to report back to the office regularly). Such managerial coping strategies are complemented by the ground staff themselves (e.g., changing their names, and alternating routes and arrival times). Finally, the research revealed that in some situations informal networks between communities and service providers convey safety assessments to ground staff, especially during the summer 'marching season' of unionist parades. Communities thus come to play an important role in the coping strategies of the staff providing them with services.