Beyond divided territories: how changing popular understandings of public space in Northern Ireland can facilitate new identity dynamics

Stevenson, Clifford

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND DIVIDED TERRITORIES: HOW CHANGING POPULAR UNDERSTANDINGS OF PUBLIC SPACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND CAN FACILITATE NEW IDENTITY DYNAMICS*

The sectarian geography of Northern Ireland, whereby the majority of the population live in areas predominated by one religion or the other, is typically assumed to straightforwardly reflect the territorial identities of local residents. This conflation of place and identity neglects the role of place in actively shaping and changing the behaviours occurring within them. The present paper uses new developments in the area of social psychology to examine three case studies of place identity in Northern Ireland and explore the possibilities for change. A large scale survey of the display of flags and emblems across Northern Ireland demonstrates the extent of visible territorialisation, but also the relationship between understandings of space and the acceptability of these displays. Secondly, analysis of interviews with the Orange Order and nationalist residents concerning the Drumcree dispute illustrates how different constructions of space are used to claim and counterclaim rights to display identity. Finally analysis of media and interview accounts of the St Patrick’s Day event in Belfast illustrate how new understandings of shared space can negate territorial identities and facilitate coexistence in the same place and facilitate good relations.

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Clifford Stevenson is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Limerick. His research examines how national identities are represented in talk, interaction and collective behaviour. His current projects include an IRCHSS funded examination of public displays of Irish national identity in Belfast and Dublin (with Professor Orla Muldoon, UL) as well as Northern Ireland Office funded research into the phenomenon of flag flying in Northern Ireland (with Dr Dominic Bryan, QUB).
INTRODUCTION

Psychological approaches to the Northern Ireland conflict have typically taken for granted the stable and enduring nature of the identities of both communities. On this basis the geographical segregation of Northern Ireland into Catholic and Protestant areas has been assumed to be a direct reflection of the nature of the sectarian divide such that “Catholic” or “Protestant” areas are assumed to straightforwardly reflect the identities of those living there. As a result less attention has been paid to the role of understandings of space and place as constitutive of identity and to the variability of peoples’ behaviour as they move between different spaces. In effect if people are likely to behave very differently in Loyalist or Republican heartlands than in more “neutral” space, then the focus of attention should arguably focus on changing understandings of place as well as of identities. The present paper takes three case studies to illustrate the dynamics of territorialisation in Northern Ireland: the construction of territorial space in identity conflicts; an instance in which place identity has been reconfigured to facilitate good relations between communities.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The dominant paradigm for the understanding of the Northern Ireland conflict within social psychology is the Social Identity model of intergroup relations (Cairns, 1982; 1987). Against a background of previous psychological research suggesting the conflict was due to a small number of psychopathic individuals, the Social Identity approach illustrated that the conflict was in effect the outworking of normal cognitive and intergroup processes operating under exceptional circumstances.

These processes include categorisation, whereby the social world is divided along various axes such as gender, race and class; identification, whereby individuals learn to place themselves into some categories but not others; comparison, whereby one’s own group is systematically contrasted with others or “outgroups”; and differentiation whereby the valued differences between one’s own and other groups are exaggerated in order to increase the esteem felt by virtue of belonging to the ingroup (Tajfel, 1978). These processes are all posited to contribute to the part of the self concept which is derived from the group, the “social identity” of that group, such that for people who have a strong investment in their group membership, their cognitions and behaviour will be shaped and directed by this identity.

The intergroup processes within the Social Identity model specify the circumstances under which conflict emerges. In cases where there is perceived inequality, an ille-
gitimate difference in status between groups and an unstable political framework, the Social Identity model predicts that a minority group which sees itself as unfairly treated will take action to change its position and that a dominant group will act to preserve the status quo (Tajfel, 1978). Again this generic paradigm has been used to explain the emergence of the troubles in Northern Ireland.

This model has had much success in explaining the extent of religious categorisation in Northern Ireland along with the learning and manifestation of sophisticated telling cues, as well as the levels and manifestations of sectarian prejudice by both communities and their perceptions of their status relative to the other group. In addition, the processes of comparison and differentiation are used to explain the wide range of opposed political, cultural, linguistic and religious practices with which each side mirrors the other with persistent accuracy. In effect the situation in Northern Ireland is largely viewed within social psychology as an identity conflict (Gallagher, 1989; Whyte, 1990).

However, the application of the Social Identity model has faced the persistent problem of defining the nature of the identity of each. Faced with a proliferation of national, political and religious labels, early research in this area chose to simply define each community in terms of a single ethno-political identity. This has been problematised by subsequent research indicating that identities are multidimensional, that each identity can be multiple and contested within each community and that even in terms of which group is a majority or minority in the conflict, there are multiple competing versions used in political discourse (Trew, 1992; Cassidy & Trew, 1998).

Moreover in the wider social psychological literature there has been a move away from conceptualising identity as a stable enduring aspect of the individual to examine the contextual specificity of identity and identity-related behaviour. Researchers in the Self Categorisation tradition posit that people possess multiple alternate identities which become salient or “switched on” according to the social context in which they find themselves. In turn the interaction within the local context and in particular with other groups will shape and transform identities. Hence to describe a community as possessing single immutable enduring identities is to elide the different possible manifestations of identity in specific circumstances as well as to preclude the many alternative competing identities that may also be responsible for the behaviours of these community members. As Trew (1992) pointed out, inconsistencies in survey and experimental research conducted with different populations across Northern Ireland may in the end simply reflect the variety of different experiences and manifestations of identity at the local level.

In sum although the Social Identity model has had much heuristic value in explaining the conflict in Northern Ireland in general terms, it has tended to provide a static enduring general representation of what in effect is a dynamic and variable situation. This has neglected, among other things, the ways in which the manifestation of identities varies systematically across different places.
PUTTING IDENTITY IN ITS PLACE

The outworking of this paradigm for the understanding of place and identity in Northern Ireland has been that the role of place in shaping identity has been largely overlooked by social psychology. As individuals are assumed to possess a stable and enduring identity, so their areas of residence are assumed to unproblematically reflect and express their collective self concept. While religious segregation and the impact on peoples’ lives is well documented elsewhere in the social sciences (Shir low & Murtagh, 2007) the psychological dynamics of the sectarian geography of Northern Ireland remain uninvestigated as it is implicitly assumed that territory simply reflects identity.

This is perhaps surprising given the central role that space has played in Northern Ireland as the regulation of public space has been a key dimension to the conflict. In addition to the construction of peace walls to separate neighbouring Catholic and Protestant communities, the display of identities though flags and murals has operated as territorial markings throughout the region (Bryan & Stevenson, 2009). Moreover, the conflict accompanying public displays of ethnopolitical identities has led to the exclusion of crowd events, and in particular nationalist events, from town and city centres. Consequently key events over the course of the conflict including the civil rights marches, disputes over Loyalist parades, as well as riots and commemorations have typically involved some element of struggle over rights of access to and control over public space (Bryan, 2000; Jarman & Bryan, 1996).

The conflation of identity and territory in Northern Ireland is at also odds with a growing body of literature within social psychology which points to the importance and influence of different places upon peoples self concept. Building on the theoretical work of Proshansky (Proshansky, 1978 Proshansky et al., 1983) researchers have shown that place is not simply a neutral backdrop to social behaviour but has meaning for social actors and will provide the context for the understanding of their actions. In terms of the relationship between place and identity, Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) illustrated that the symbolic significance of Irish landmarks in Dublin varied systematically according to the interpretation of Irishness held by participants. Similar studies have demonstrated the relationship between place identity, felt attachment to the local community and evaluations of the environment (Breakwell, 1999; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Pretty et al., 2003) as well as the continuities and discontinuities of place identity over time and the impact on self perceptions as a result of transition between places (Chow & Healy, 2008). Currently the concept of place identity is one of a dynamic evolving relationship between community and the environment (Smaldone, Harris & Sanyal, 2005), closely paralleling the emphasis on fluid dynamic identity processes in the social identity literature.

A more fundamental conceptualisation of the role of understandings of place as constitutive of social behaviour has been developed in order to explain specifically how people interact in civic spaces. Creswell (1996) posits not only that places provide the contextual meaning for the interpretation of an action, but also that specific places often determine the appropriateness of behaviours which take place there. Thus behaviour can be determined by location rather than transcontextual identities.
Dixon et al., (2006) studied how the shared understandings of the behaviour appropriate to civic space were used to justify or exclude social groups from town centre space. Focusing on the issue of public drinking, they illustrated that the depiction of this behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable was contingent upon the construction of space that participants invoked. Civic space as an arena for the expression of freedoms was used to justify street drinking, while civic space as requiring moral restraint and respect for others was used to argue against this behaviour. Moreover, respondents also demonstrably negotiated ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) of freedom and control surrounding this issue. In line with the work of Lefebvre (1976) in which civic space is theorised to provide an arena for the expression of group interests and rights, individual rights to public space were constantly renegotiated in relation to the rights of others to expression and coexistence. From this perspective civic space is both an arena for the expression of difference and a site of contest for the power to define the space in accordance with one’s own beliefs.

The implications for the study of identity in Northern Ireland are threefold. Firstly while the sectarian geography of Northern Ireland is typically assumed to be the result of the conflict, a natural consequence of antithetical identities moving apart, the focus of attention can now be turned to how places themselves (rather than identities) shape and constitute individuals behaviour. Secondly, if we assume that different spaces, such as community space and civic space, afford different patterns of behaviour between individuals, we can explore how the behaviour of the same individuals can vary according to how they understand the space they occupy. Consequently, changing the way that space is understood will lead to a change in identity related behaviour. Thirdly, this focus on place identity affords a transformative approach to identity dynamics in Northern Ireland. If places are constitutive of behaviour then some places will be more conducive to positive intergroup relations than others. In effect, by understanding the different meaning that identities have in different places, a space for positive good relations between groups can be identified and developed.

**Case Study One: Flags and Emblems Survey 2006**

The public display of flags and emblems in Northern Ireland forms part of the wider identity dynamics of the conflict (Bryan & Gillespie, 2005; Bryan & Stevenson, 2007). Loyalist and Republican murals, flags, painted kerbstones and lampposts are frequently used to designate a local community as belonging to one side or the other. Over the highpoints of both Loyalist and Republican commemorative calendars, thousands of flags and emblems are erected on buildings and lampposts across Northern Ireland, on public thoroughfares as well as within local community areas. These are typically considered part of the commemorative ritual and, while technically breaching laws protecting public property, are usually tolerated by the local authorities.

However the emblems that remain on display outside of these commemorative periods and in particular the small proportion which are paramilitary in nature are viewed more negatively by the local and regional government. Permanent displays are clearly interpretable as territorial markers and can also inflame tensions be-
tween neighbouring communities of different religions (or indeed between vying
groups within the same community). Furthermore, some emblems are defined as
inherently illegal if they unequivocally represent proscribed groups. As such the
presence of unregulated or illegal flags is taken by the government to be a negative
indicator of relations between communities at local level.

The present research concerns the prevalence of these symbols, evidence that they
are being regulated at local level and ways in which the understandings of local
space can facilitate or inhibit the regulation of these identity displays. As part of a
programme of research into this phenomenon, recordings of all political symbols
displayed on arterial routes across Northern Ireland, surveys of attitudes towards
the public display of flags and emblems as well as interviews with local community
members and government agents involved in flags disputes were conducted (Bryan
& Stevenson, 2007).

THE EXTENT AND MEANING OF DISPLAYS

The sheer volume of political symbolism in public space is reflected in the totals of
symbols counted in the yearly surveys. In July 2006, there were 4,136 flags, arches,
bannerettes, murals and other political symbols along arterial routes across North-
ern Ireland. This represents an average of almost 160 per local government district,
though this varied widely between 13 and 996 indicating considerable geographical
variability in the intensity of symbol display. Given that our survey only captured
symbols along arterial routes, while our ethnography indicated heavier concen-
trations of displays within some residential areas, this figure can be considered the tip
of the iceberg of the actual volume of display.

The meanings of the displays are less straightforward. At that time, 3,725 of the
items were Loyalist while 394 were Republican (the remainder classified as non-
sectarian symbols), reflecting the peak of the loyalist marching season at the start of
July. The vast majority of displays were of flags (88%), predominantly Union Flags,
often interspersed with Northern Ireland flags. Hence of all the symbols: 44% were
national (Union Flags or Irish Tricolours); 34% were regional (e.g. Northern Ireland,
Independent Ulster, Four Provinces); 6% were commemorative (e.g. Battle of the
Somme, Hunger Strike); 6% were Loyal Order (Orange Order, Apprentice Boys),
5% were paramilitary (e.g. UVF, UDA, LVF, UFF, IRA, INLA); 3% were sports flags
(e.g. soccer, GAA).

However from a social psychological and social anthropological perspective, the
meaning of the displays cannot be read straightforwardly from their content. A Un-
ion Flag displayed from a courthouse will have different implications from one han-
ging from a private house or one from a paramilitary mural. Likewise disputes sur-
round some Ulster Volunteer Force emblems which make reference to the 1916
World War One battle of the Somme and the 36th Ulster division (formed largely
from the original Ulster Volunteer Force). Those displaying the emblems argue that
they are historic in nature, ignoring the implications of the symbol in present day
Northern Ireland. However if we are to take seriously the role of social and spatial
context in giving meaning to the display of symbols, then at the very least the popular perceptions of these items in their local context must be considered alongside the asserted intentions of those displaying them. Our first point then is that these symbols taken their meaning from the social context of their display.

**POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF FLAGS**

Accordingly the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 2006 carried items designed to elicit popular perceptions of public displays of flags and emblems. 1,230 respondents were asked a variety of questions pertaining to their perceptions and experiences of flags and other political symbols. As expected, more Protestants (70%) than Catholics (7%) endorsed the flying of the Union Flag from government buildings. However, more interestingly, when asked if they do (or would) support the flying of flags in their own neighbourhood, 85% of Catholics and 75% of Protestants said that they do not. Moreover, when asked who was responsible for the display of Union Flags from lampposts (given the options of councils, political parties, cultural groups, isolated individuals or paramilitary groups) 51% of Catholics and 59% of Protestants said that they thought paramilitary groups were responsible (with the next largest proportion indicating isolated individuals: Catholics 26%, Protestants 24%). Likewise for the Irish Tricolour, 45% of Catholics and 62% of Protestants thought paramilitaries were responsible (with the next largest proportion again indicating isolated individuals: Catholics 30%, Protestants 24%).

For present purposes, the spatial implications of these findings are that people are regularly faced with a variety of symbolic displays in their environment that are largely attributed to paramilitary groups. When asked if they had felt personally intimidated by political symbols over the past year 20% of Catholics and 13% of Protestants reported having felt intimidated by Loyalist symbols while 14% of Catholics and 24% of Protestants reported having felt intimidated by Republican symbols. The most obvious consequence is that people do not wish to expose themselves to these symbols, with 56% of Catholics and 24% of Protestants less willing to shop in areas with Loyalist displays and 30% of Catholics and 53% of Protestants less willing to shop in areas with Republican displays.

**THE ACCEPTABILITY AND REGULATION OF SYMBOL DISPLAYS**

The majority of respondents do not however desire the total absence of political symbolism in public. The acceptability of displays of flags appears to be to some degree contingent upon the purpose of the displays and the length of time the display occurs. For Union Flags: 2% of Catholics and 4% of Protestants thought it was acceptable to have flags flying on main streets all year round; 30% of Catholics and 58% of Protestants thought it was acceptable to have flags flying for a few weeks around special events and 46% of Catholics and 20% of Protestants thought it was never acceptable. For Tricolour flags 4% of Catholics and 2% of Protestants thought it was acceptable to have flags flying on main streets all year round; 29% of Catholics and 58% of Protestants thought it was acceptable to have flags flying for a few weeks around special events and 46% of Catholics and 20% of Protestants thought it was never acceptable.
weeks around special events and 43% of Catholics and 51% of Protestants thought it was never acceptable.

Given this popularly accepted contingency as well as unofficial government acceptance of the legitimacy of non-paramilitary festive or commemorative displays, the extent to which symbol displays were actually regulated over the Loyalist marching season was examined in the flags census. In 2006 we found that of the 4,136 items in place in July, 2,689 had been removed, with an additional 1,052 displayed leaving a total of 2,499 at the end of September of that year. This reflects a high degree of flux in symbol display over the summer months, though in part this was due a large number of symbols erected by Republicans to commemorate the 1981 Hunger Strike as well as an increase in sporting flags around specific sports events.

However, focusing on the items displayed from the start of the summer, specific patterns in the rates of removal were evident. The greatest rates of removal were for Loyal Order items (77%) and the lowest for paramilitary groups (17%). Additionally those items displayed from private houses (64%) were regulated substantially more effectively than the majority of emblems from lampposts (44%). In other words it would appear that those groups and individuals who ostensibly were commemorating the marching season (rather than making an explicitly paramilitary statement) and those who are identifiable as responsible for the display of symbols (rather than the majority of unidentifiable displays from lampposts) were those who regulated their displays most effectively.

The reasons behind this differential regulation of symbols were investigated in the interview and ethnography strands of the research. When talking to those involved in flags disputes as well as those from the local areas concerned a range of concerns emerged. For those community representatives involved in the unofficial display of flags from lampposts and in particular paramilitary symbols, the main concern was the right to display the emblems within specific territories against challenges from the authorities and other communities nearby. As such the issue of the right to display one’s identity was a matter of principle as well as local politics. Hence the motivation for the limit and regulation of these displays was largely absent.

For others living in these areas, the issues were more complex. Some talked of respect for the national emblem, such that leaving flags to blow to tatters throughout the year was dishonouring the emblem. Others talked of weathered symbols as giving an untidy appearance to their area. As such they understood their locality in terms of environmental rather than territorial concerns. Alternatively the impact of paramilitary displays in particular on house prices and business was raised, thus recasting the locality in economic rather than territorial concerns. In other words the motivations to regulate displays would appear to come from reconsidering the nature of the community space and the significance of displays within this context.
Case Study One: Summary

In sum, the investigation of the flags issue in Northern Ireland raises three important issues. Firstly, the display of symbols across Northern Ireland, though a widespread phenomenon, varies considerably in terms of the variety of items displayed, their prevalence in different areas. Furthermore, the meanings of these displays are not self-evident, but depend upon a range of factors including the local context of the display (on a public route, within a homogeneous community or at an interface area as well as the nature of accompanying symbols) as well as how they are popularly perceived in terms of their purpose and who is responsible for their display.

Secondly, the meanings of these symbols within specific spatial contexts have behavioural consequences for those exposed to them. Over and above straightforward preference for some political symbols over others, people may be deterred from particular areas because of the meanings and motivations they associate with identity displays. At the same time, they may be willing to countenance the same displays if they feel that the manner of their regulation (in particular time-limited to specific events) reflects a celebration rather than a territorial marking.

Thirdly, the reconceptualisation of local space away from territory and towards other concerns may facilitate different identity-related behaviours for those engaged in displaying political symbolism. Insofar as the debate around flags remains focused on the right to display identity, there is little motivation to limit or regulate these symbols or to take into account their negative impact upon others. However, by reconceptualising space in terms of civic pride, environmental responsibility or economic prosperity, limiting the display of political symbols becomes a desirable outcome. It also implicitly encourages the display to take into consideration the perceptions and interpretations of others.

Case Study Two: The Drumcree Parades Dispute

As noted above, contested rights to access public space have been at the centre of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Indeed disputes over loyalist and nationalist parades in Ireland have a history as long as the marching tradition itself, but in the late 1960s and early 1970s loyalist marches and civil rights marches in the city of Derry/Londonderry are widely recognised as marking the beginning of the Troubles (Bryan, 2000). Throughout the duration of the violent phase of the conflict, nationalist and loyalist marches often led to confrontation, but the phenomenon of marching and the parades dispute only came to a head after the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994. By 1996 almost 3,500 parades were held annually in Northern Ireland, the majority of these by loyalist groups (Jarman & Bryan, 1996). By this time, nationalist resident groups protesting at the procession of these parades though their communities had arisen in Derry, Portadown and Belfast. Dunn (1996) suggests that this marked the transition of the conflict from a violent struggle to a largely symbolic arena of confrontation in which the right to display identity was pitted against the right to veto such displays.

The most significant dispute was that surrounding the Drumcree 1 July parade in Portadown. In the 1980s this parade had led to violent conflict and been rerouted
away from a nationalist area in the town. By the early 1990s the parade exited the main town of Portadown via an uncontested route, but returned through an area populated mainly by nationalists. By the mid-1990s local nationalist residents had mounted a successful protest against the parade and by 1998 the police annually prevented the parade from progressing along its intended route (for an account of this dispute see Ryder & Kearney, 2001). Despite widespread protest and disruption across Northern Ireland within the loyalist community this situation remains to the present day.

The present research examines interviews conducted with politicians, Orangemen and Residents groups during the years 1999-2002. In total, seven politicians from across the political spectrum in Ireland (including five MLAs and two local councillors) 20 Orangemen and five members of residents groups were interviewed about their opinions of marching in general and the current disputes in particular. Analysis of this data was conducted using a discursive approach, whereby the manner in which interviewees used identity resources to construct their arguments was examined. For present purposes the ways in which interviewees constructed place to argue for or against the Drumcree parade will be examined.

The first extract is characteristic of the manner in which Orangemen described parading when asked in general terms, as a display of national and religious identity:

**Extract 1: Faith and Britishness**

Int: A very ahm broad general question why do you think that parading specifically is so central to the Orange Order?

Resp: Well it’s one of the ways one of our demonstrations of both our Faith and our Britishness… Ahm by coming out on to the street in that way, that is more the public sign of what we are and what we stand for. And or that reason that’s why we consider that parading is important to us.

This account shares with most others two core features. Firstly, parading is argued to be a necessarily public affair. A distinction is made between the monthly business of the Lodge, which occurs in the privacy of their meeting hall, and the public act of parading. The purpose of the parade is therefore to display identity to others and to have this recognised.

Notably geographical referents are used to describe this occurrence, here “out onto the street” (line 4) and this is often used to invoke arguments concerning the right of access to public space. In effect Orangemen, like all other individuals and organisations, are presented as having the right to have their presence facilitated and acknowledged in this physical public arena. In contrast, these accounts of the principle of parading typically lack any mention of an audience, supportive or otherwise, to which the display is directed. In other words while the characteristics of parading are that it conveys a message in a space open to all of society, this social context and the potential observers of this display remain unspecified.
Secondly, parading is typically presented as a “traditional” expression of identity, rather than a strategic act designed to have a political impact. Orangemen are presented as ritually expressing their identity as a matter of habit rather than engaging in behaviour which may have consequences. In effect, although these interviews took place during the marching seasons of 2001 and 2002, in which intense media attention was being paid to the Drumcree conflict, these accounts of the principle of identity display were typically dislocated from the political context of their occurrence.

In effect accounts of the principle of marching claimed to be a public expression of religious and national identity but presented this as divorced from the politico-religious context of its occurrence. This decontextualisation of parades from the space of their occurrence could also be made explicit as in the following extract:

**Extract 2: “It’s just that tradition”**

I mean I go down to some services in the country and they the parade (heh heh) they meet at the church and they walk about 300 yards down a road, where there’s not even any houses and they all swing round and sort of wave to each other as you’re swinging round the bend (laughter). And then you go back and walk up again y’know...It’s not really offending anybody or meant I think you pass two houses where you turn the bend you don’t actually go by you have to skirt them to go back again y’know? But it’s a you think to yourself well like how can anybody ever be offended at that? And you wonder what you’re doing sometimes but it’s just that tradition

On first inspection this account differs from that above in that the emphasis on public display of Faith and nationality is largely underemphasised. However this extract is taken from a longer account of parading in the order in which the speaker contrasts the normal or typical parade to the events at Drumcree and we can see more clearly how the spatial aspects of argumentation are implemented. The speaker selects a rural setting for the account, thus placing parading outside of the urban environments in which conflict between different communities over parading usually arises. This depopulated environment is emphasised by the lack of residences “not even any houses” (line 3) and even where there are a small number of people living nearby “two houses” (line 6) these are not affected by the procession “don’t actually go by, you have to skirt them”. Indeed the absence of an audience is used to comic effect “and they all swing round and sort of wave to each other as you’re swinging round the bend” (lines 3-4).

The purpose of this account is therefore to present parading in its pure form, as inherently inoffensive and mildly amusing. In this way, by removing the potential significance of the location and audience of parades, the speaker is able to contrast this harmless ritual with the offense taken by groups opposed to parading “how can anybody ever be offended at that?...it’s just that tradition” (line 8). As Bryan points out, this use of tradition operates to place parading outside of its contemporary political context and hence relieve the proponents of the responsibility of their actions.
Here we can see this occurring specifically in relation to the spatial context of the parades.

On the other side of the parades dispute, members of nationalist community groups opposed to parades also mobilised constructions of space in their arguments.

**Extract 3: “It’s what Unionists call culture”**

Y’know the Orange Order isn’t just a benevolent organisation being charitable organisations it’s not really like that it’s very maintaining ah Protestant supremacy over Catholics in this Northern Ireland state that’s what it’s about. And marching is kind of the physical, physical manifestation of that. Marching I mean is something that that we as Sinn Fein we support the right of Orangemen to march right? We are not against Orangemen marching per se ahm… but y’know there should be certain conditions on that just like the Ku Klux Klan should be carefully monitored if they want to march somewhere y’know if they're going to go into a black area of of the southern states of America and try and tramp over people’s rights they should be monitored and curtailed. But again there are thousands of marches which happen here every year and nobody objects because it’s what Unionists call culture and ah but there there are disputed marches and it’s all about the host communities not giving their consent or not being asked for their consent.

Here we can see a republican politician employing the converse arguments to those in extracts above. The Orange Order and their parades are presented as essentially political in nature and as immersed in the context of the present day Northern Ireland conflict “maintaining ah Protestant supremacy over Catholics in this Northern Ireland state” (line 2-3). The principle of displaying identity in public is acknowledged “we support the right of Orangemen to march” (line 6) but this is contrasted with the political impact of their actions. Specifically a parallel is drawn with the Ku Klux Klan, an organisation widely acknowledged to be inherently racist and defending unjust hierarchical privilege in the United States.

For present purposes, the spatial dimension of the argument is of particular interest. KKK marching is placed in its spatial context “a black area of, of the southern states of America” (lines 9-10). In this way the notion of public space as a neutral arena for the expression of identity is undermined and an alternative understanding of public space, as owned by the people residing within it, is offered. Thus, the right to express identity is argued to be subject to the agreement or the consent of the people living in a particular area. Moreover, the notion that marching is a traditional apolitical act is undermined though ironising the claim that marching is cultural “it’s what Unionists call culture” and in contrast a distinction is drawn between areas in which the population accepts and those in which they reject this activity. In effect all of the arguments presented in extracts 1 and 2 above: that parading is an apolitical expression of identity, a right of access to neutral public space and not contingent upon local circumstances are countered through this equating of space with identity.
While previous interrogation of the arguments concerning parades in Northern Ireland have focused on the legal, political, anthropological and philosophical dimensions of these arguments, none have examined the psychological dimension of place identity. Moreover within psychological investigations of the conflict in Northern Ireland it has been assumed that the segregation of residential area has led to a conflations of place and identity such that place, along with the wide array of cultural, political and religious symbolism and behaviour in Northern Ireland has been incorporated into the identities of the two main communities. In contrast the analysis above suggests that the relationship between space and identity itself is a matter of argument for the people living in Northern Ireland. In some circumstances, public space can be constructed as a neutral arena for the expression of identity, in others public space can be presented as territorialised as the property of those who live within it.

While this of course reflects broader ideological projects concerning national claims to territory in Northern Ireland, at the same time it does indicate that (even within the most intractable of disputes) public space is amenable to interpretation in different ways. Consequently, there is the possibility that space can be reinterpreted in such a manner to facilitate the display of identity without concomitant identity conflict. This is explored in the next case study.

**Case Study Three: St Patrick’s Day in Belfast**

The present case study takes as its focus the St Patrick’s Day celebrations in Belfast from 2006-2008. In a city divided geographically, politically, culturally and religiously (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006) the St Patrick’s Day event has been promoted by the city council as a potentially inclusive cross community event. Before the current phase of the conflict in Northern Ireland, St Patrick was commemorated by both main denominational groups though, since the “Troubles”, St Patrick’s Day celebrations have been largely the preserve of the nationalist community. In Belfast the main event traditionally occurred in the nationalist are of West Belfast, though the organisers of that event continually petitioned to have it located in the city centre. In 1998, Belfast City Council facilitated the first St Patrick’s Day carnival in the city centre, organised by members of the West Belfast community. While the event was well-attended, the preponderance of nationalist political symbolism as well as the Irish national flag served to alienate the unionist community and thereafter funding for the event was withdrawn. In 2006, Belfast City Council once more attempted to facilitate the event in the city centre, this time passing the organisational role to an independent carnival company. Though there was some political and media controversy surrounding the event, it was deemed as success and the event has been held in a similar fashion each year since.

The present case study reports some results from an ongoing investigation of this event (Bryan, Stevenson, Gillespie, Nagle and Muldoon, 2006). Since 2006, investigators have collected the media coverage of the event, conducted extensive ethnographic investigation and collated a large number of onsite interviews with people attending the event itself. The core findings of this research are that increasingly, St Patrick’s Day in Belfast is progressing towards its goal of becoming a cross-
community good relations event. While there are many reasons underpinning why this should be so, the present analysis focuses on the role of changing understandings of Belfast city centre as a civic space in which people have the right to express their identity, but also have the responsibility for the impact of this expression on others.

**A PLACE FOR ST PATRICK’S DAY**

To interpret contemporary understandings of Belfast city centre as a place for St Patrick’s Day it is necessary to return to the 1998 event, to examine how people interpreted the original celebration of this event in the space. Taking two examples of the more extreme reactions to the event we can see how unionists and nationalists construct space to present the event as either a success or a failure. The following article is from the *Republican Andersonstown News*:

**Glorious Green Gridlock**

The tens of thousands who turned Belfast city centre black with green on Tuesday were doing more than scribbling footnotes, more than even contributing chapters to our history. They were shredding the pages of past wrongs, binning the Belfast of the pogroms and second-class citizenship, erasing the painful memory of too many Twelfths on the wrong side of the swagger stick... and proudly painting their own prologue: we’ve arrived.

We’ve not forgotten how just a few short years ago, we were banned from our own city centre. Didn’t this very paper record how, in the searing agony of the 1981 hunger strike, a handful of protesters were beaten by the RUC for daring to attempt to march to City Hall. (On Tuesday a pus as long as Royal Avenue on every RUC man’s face—not to mention the absence of even a single sprig of shamrock on their caps—told its own tale of changed times). (Mairtin O’Muilleoir, *Andersonstown News* 21 March 1998)

The gist of the article is that St Patrick’s Day celebration was a success because it evidenced the Republican community’s ability to display their identity in the city centre. Belfast city centre is thus presented as a political space in which the intergroup dynamics of Northern Ireland are reflected. Previously Unionist domination meant that Republicans were banned from the space, attempts to access it were violently suppressed and more generally the sectarian geography of Belfast is taken to reflect persecution of the Catholic population “of the pogroms and second-class citizenship”. Moreover the object of attention in the city centre is the City Hall, the seat of governance, rather than the streets themselves.

By constructing Belfast city centre as a territory for political conflict, the display of Republican identity in this space is a protest on behalf that community. Against a background of injustice (being banned from their own city centre) St Patrick’s Day becomes a victory against the forces of the opposing community “a pus as long as Royal Avenue on every RUC man’s face” who clearly are not part of the celebration.
of the day “not to mention the absence of even a single sprig of shamrock on their caps”.

The Unionist critical response to the event also characterised it as a political statement, but argued that this was inappropriate and undesirable. Unionist politicians objected to the symbolism of overtly political issues, including political prisoners and the Irish language, and claimed that the event had been “hijacked” by the Republican political party Sinn Féin (BT 16/3/98). Specifically in relation to the issue of space, one unionist politician argued that the event had been an excuse to have a Sinn Féin rally in the city centre. “I think they wanted to move the parade away from their own areas and into the city centre.” In effect Belfast city centre was presented as under threat from an external political agent.

Even the more moderate coverage in the Unionist press drew attention to the political nature of the event and the one-sided participation:

Thousands joined the Falls Road feeder parade, led by 20 black taxis sporting Tricolours and orange, white and green balloons. One taxi driver said that he hoped members of both communities would be attending today’s parade. And many children were dressed in green, some wearing shamrocks and many others carrying Tricolours. There were also many large puppets dressed in traditional Irish costume.

Hundreds joined in the south Belfast parade from Cromac Square in the Markets to the city centre. The parade was headed by a young flag-bearer carrying a Tricolour, who was followed by a youth flute and drum band from Short Strand playing a selection of Irish tunes. They were cheered along Castle Place to the sound of The Fields of Athenry [including the lines ‘Against the famine and the Crown I rebelled they cut me down’] and St Patrick’s Breastplate. (BT 17/3/98)

Again the spatial aspect of this account is worthy of note. The “feeder” parades are reported as originating in Republican areas of the city (the Falls Road, Short Strand and Markets areas). The national flag is presented as occupying a prominent position and the republican nature of the songs played is mentioned along with the popular support of the onlookers, specifically in the heart of the centre of the city (Castle Place).

Notably absent from this description is any mention of the political background of the event (that it had been banned until this point) or the perceptions of the city centre by the paraders. This depiction therefore works to present the city centre as an otherwise neutral space being occupied by a political demonstration.

In sum, the constructions of Belfast city centre in the media coverage of this event bear marked similarities to those noted in the previous case study in relation to parading disputes. In order to present the event as a meaningful political statement, the Republican press drew attention to the historical struggle over access to space in the city, arguing that St Patrick’s Day reflected the social change in their position. Unionists on the other hand depicted the city centre as neutral space under threat
from political forces and hence objected to political symbolism at the event. As such different constructions of civic space are being used to make political arguments.

**ST PATRICK’S DAY 2006**

The St Patrick’s Day event in 2006 was preceded by much negative media coverage. Both Unionist and Republican press ridiculed attempts to regulate political symbolism and predicted that the event would be a repeat of the overtly political parade of 1998. However, in the aftermath of the parade, press accounts were a mixture of positive and negative. For the Unionist press, the event was again a failure:

**Threatened Neutral Space**

Tricolours and sectarian symbols had been banned from the event but while the parade began with little sign of the rules being flouted, their numbers soon grew as did those of Celtic football shirts…Mrs Dodds said ‘It would be good to have a cross-community event in the city, one where unionists and nationalists can feel safe, but it is clear that republicans cannot cope with that’ *(BT 23 March 2006)*.

Here we see once more the criticism of the event on the basis of the presence of political symbols. Also, the space of the event is depicted as circumscribed by rules which, though accurately reflecting the city council recommendations for the day, depicts the city centre as a neutral venue where the expression of identity is unwelcome. Thirdly, the event is presented as a security threat to this neutral space though an appeal to the perceived safety of those in the city centre at the time “where unionists and nationalists can feel safe”. In effect the depiction of Belfast city centre as a neutral space threatened by political expression facilitates the construction of the event as a failure.

The Republican press again adopted the counter position, but this time two rather different strands of argument were present. Firstly, as in the article by O’Muilleoir above, the expression of political identity through this event against a backdrop of oppression was sometimes presented as an accomplishment:

**Political Space**

There is still no official recognition from the Belfast City Council or any branch of the northern state for the Irish national flag, the Irish national anthem or the Irish national language. If the Irish flag was flown side by side on the top of the Belfast City Hall on St Patrick’s Day, then there would be no need for people to carry their own version to the parade *(NBN 25 March 2006)*.

Again St Patrick’s Day is presented as part of a wider struggle for the acknowledgement of the Irish nationalist population and as such the event is a political protest rather than an apolitical celebration. This of course forms part of a wider political debate about the recognition of both nationalities within Northern Ireland, but
here operates to present the event as reclaiming representation within the city centre.

However, alongside this trope of political space was another republican argument, that the expression of Irish national identity is a natural occurrence on St Patrick’s Day:

Empty Space: St Patrick’s Day everywhere

It was great to see people wearing shamrock in the city centre and that people can be Irish in this city just like others throughout the country. The scenes in Belfast were repeated throughout Ireland as thousands of people attended parades and carnivals organised in honour of St Patrick (DI 18 March 2006).

Here in contrast, the particular political and historic background to the city centre is elided. Belfast city centre is presented as a normal apolitical space, like any other across Ireland, in which displays of Irishness (in this case the Shamrock) are natural and desirable. In effect St Patrick’s Day is decontextualised from the political space of the city centre.

It is worth noting that this trope bears much in common with the Orangemen’s defence of Orange parades described in the previous case study. By removing the significance of St Patrick’s Day from the context of Belfast city centre, the political significance of the event and its impact upon others who also occupy that space is ignored. While the term “tradition” is not explicitly used in these accounts, we can see that the concept of a decontextualised identity display operates to undermine opposition to the event as a political statement.

A further line of argumentation in the press represented as small conciliatory midground. Those supporting the event as a cross-community occasion acknowledged the limitations of the day, but suggested that this was progress towards a more inclusive event in future.

Midground: small steps towards shared space

Pat Convery said that the festival has ‘mainly’ achieved its cross-community aim but acknowledged there was still a lot to be done. He added: ‘It is a small step forward in a divided city. There are a minimal number of tricolours and Celtic shirts on show, but we are living in a free society and we can’t dictate to people what to wear. We hope that the diversity of our city will be able to be included in this parade and concert every year’ (Mirror 18th March).

This type of argument, in line with Unionist opposition, still presents political displays at the event as undesirable, but in line with Republican arguments retains the concept of the right to express identity. In this way space is constructed as a matter of freedom, but also of responsibility. Individuals are free to wear what they want, but there will be an impact upon others attending this event. Thus public space is characterised in much the same terms as Dixon and colleagues description of nor-
mal civic space in England: characterised by the dilemma of facilitating free expression but acknowledging the rights of others also present.

SUGGESTIONS OF A POPULAR MOVE TO THE MIDGROUND: 2007

While media analysis shed light upon the official political and press understandings of events such as these, it does little to illuminate everyday understandings. Against a more positive media background to the event in 2007, our researchers conducted a number of onsite interviews with people attending the event to explore the relations between the official and vernacular accounts of the day. In general we found that many of the press arguments were rehearsed by people present at the event. Some objected to the display of political symbols, others expressed the opinion that the display of these symbols was appropriate. The following is an example of the use of the “empty space” argument as noted in the Republican Press above.

Interview 1: St. Patrick’s Day parades all over the world

Int: And what do you think about the issue of flags [on] St. Patrick’s Day?
R: I think a flag is you know Ireland you know what I mean it’s Ireland so the tricolour can mean that. I don't think there should be a (.) St. Patrick’s day parades all over the world seeing tricolours so I don't see why it should be any different in Northern Ireland.

The participant evidences some interactional difficulty expressing his ideas, but in effect he presents the Irish national flag as unproblematically associated with St Patrick’s Day. This is reinforced by an appeal to the prevalence of St Patrick’s Day celebrations elsewhere and the display of the flag at those events. In line with the Republican press noted above, the participant effectively decontextualises displays of national identity from the location of their occurrence.

At the same time it was particularly notable that the new discourse of rights and responsibilities was also evident, even among the most unlikely respondents. The following interview was conducted with a group of three very boisterous teenage girls (R1, 2 & 3), sporting green face paint and scarves, who announced early in the interview (off microphone) that they were Catholics:

Int Do you think that people should be able to bring their tricolours here?
R1 Yes
R2 Yes they should
R3 They should
R1 I mean it is St Paddy’s and you should-
R2 But it does cause trouble as well
I Right?
R2 If Protestants and all are looking at them-
R1 Yeah
Alright so it could cause trouble. Do you think that this year, if there were people who were like Protestant, if they were here would they feel comfortable?
R1 No
R2 No
I You don’t think so? Why not?
R1 Cos of the flags and stuff [all talk at once]
R2 But Protestants should come here anyway cos like they believe in the same thing too
I So St Patrick is their Saint too?
R2 Yeah

This interview is particularly interesting because it evidences respondents regulating one another’s accounts. Unlike one-to-one interviews in which it is often difficult to discern what the respondent considers to be significant in their accounts, here the girls correct and contradict one another, making it explicit what they consider to be the key parts of their story. While all the respondents initially agree that people should have the freedom to bring their own flags respondent 2 in line six interrupts her friends to state the down side of political symbol displays. When prompted she spontaneously mentions the feelings of the Protestant community and goes on to give an account of their investment in St Patrick. In effect, this respondent is behaving in Belfast city centre in a manner congruent with an understanding of the space as necessitating a consideration of the rights of others as well as the expression of one’s own freedoms. While this provides limited evidence for the prevalence or indeed influence of such arguments in facilitating, it does provide an indication that developments in the argumentative arena of the media which promote good relations though the construction of public space as inclusive to all communities have some resonance at the level of the individual spectator.

DISCUSSION

The present paper draws upon three related case studies of displays of identity in Northern Ireland to make a single simple point: that the meaning of identity displays depends upon the spatial context in which they occur. In terms of the study of the public display flags and emblems, this is fairly obvious: a national flag has different connotations when flown from a public building than when attached to a paramilitary mural. Likewise parades in Northern Ireland are overwhelmingly uncontentious, but disputes occur where a display of religious and national identity is opposed in specific locations. Finally the political significance of St Patrick’s Day celebrations differs according to whether it occurs in republican territory or the civic space of the city centre.

While this point may seem self-evident, is has been largely overlooked in the social identity literature in Northern Ireland. It has been conventionally assumed that displays of identity reflect the deep, stable and enduring feelings of members of the two main ethnopolitical communities regardless of the environment in which they
find themselves. It has also been assumed that different places simply reflect and express the identity of those who live there and if residents were to move elsewhere, they would take their portable transcontextual identities with them and express them in a similar fashion in their destination. This has in no small part been fostered by the use of methodologies such as identity and attitude questionnaires, which typically treat the individual in isolation from their environment (Dixon et al., 2005).

The neglect of the constitutive quality of space, in giving meaning to identity displays, has led to the neglect of a number of important implications. Firstly, space can be understood in a variety of different ways which can underpin group differences in perceptions of the environment. Most obviously in relation to St Patrick’s Day, if Unionists view civic space as neutral territory which should remain free from political displays while nationalists view this as political space for the expression of identities and the change of social relations between groups, then impasses will inevitably arise. By attending to this spatial context of identity disputes, the arguments of each side can be better understood.

Secondly, given these different interpretations and the arguments that they facilitate, the definition of space itself is evidently a matter of contest. This is especially evident in relation to arguments over Orange parades, where the right to march or the right to prevent unwanted marches were underpinned by very different constructions of public space. Both Orangemen and protestors were very aware that how they described the location of the march would determine the success or otherwise of their argument. In other words, space becomes actively constructed and deployed by group members rather than simply being a neutral backdrop to identity behaviour.

Thirdly, given the variety of possible interpretations of space and its active and constructed nature, the potential exists for the transformation of the meaning of public space and hence the display of identity within it. With regard to flags, construal of the local area in terms of respectability and attractiveness leads to a concern for the regulation of old faded emblems or those blown to tatters by the wind. Economic concerns will suggest the need to regulate threatening or sectarian emblems which will devalue local property or deter custom to the area. Environmental concerns will lead to a concern for the upkeep of long-term displays and the removal of faded ones. There has already been considerable success in transforming the issue of local community bonfires on the night before the 12 July Orange Order celebrations from a sectarian to an environmental issue. In terms of flags and emblems it is apparent that there are a variety of alternative conceptualisations of the spatialisation of identity displays that recommend alternative courses of action. Likewise in terms of St Patrick’s Day, the reconstrual of Belfast city centre as a place where everyone has the right to express their identity (rather than a place of identity repression) removes the felt need to protests one’s national identity and defiantly display political symbols.

Finally, different understandings of space can not only facilitate different ways of expressing and regulating identity, but also potentially facilitate coexistence be-
between opposing groups. Recasting the flags and emblems issue as one of the attractiveness of the area leads people to consider how identity displays in their area is viewed by others and to take responsibility for their regulation. Likewise on St Patrick’s Day, recasting the city centre as a space in which all can express themselves while being mindful of the views of others recommends that participants regulate their identity displays in the light of potential audiences. In other words, the understanding of the centre as a place for civil behaviour actively shapes the type of display deemed appropriate there. While further investigation is necessary to examine how prevalent, enduring and generalisable this understanding of public space becomes, at the very least St Patrick’s Day has provided some space for co-existence.

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