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The Everyday Dynamics of Belfast’s ‘Neutral’ City Centre: Maternal Perspectives

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Editorial note
This working paper relates to Research Module B5 ‘Public Space in Belfast City Centre’. The paper considers the significance of the city centre as a neutral space that may act as an important site of social change in the post-conflict era.

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The Everyday Dynamics of Belfast’s ‘Neutral' City Centre: Maternal Perspectives*

Lisa Smyth and Martina McKnight

Abstract

City life carries contradictory associations, both as a site for individual distinction and an area of social complexity where ‘differences are lived in social spaces, often in unreflexive and inadvertent ways’ (Tonkiss, 2003: 300). In particular, city centres are characterised as sites of neutral and/or shared space (albeit that the meanings of these terms are neither straightforward nor evident) and, as such, offer a promise, or perhaps bear a legacy, of enhanced social cohesion and civic outcomes. These suppositions are of particular significance in cities, such as Belfast, that are characterised as ‘divided’ in ethno-national terms. Drawing on data gathered from a qualitative study of the everyday lives of working class inner city mothers in that city this paper considers the extent to which Belfast’s regenerated city centre is perceived and experienced by them as a neutral and/or shared arena where the ethno-national divisions still evident in their neighbourhoods can be left behind. It engages theoretically with the Bourdieusian theory of practice and broader urban sociological perspectives on indifference in cities (Simmel, [1950] 1969; Tonkiss, 2005) and complex forms of civility (Sennett, 2005) contextualising these within a framework of everyday life which emphasises the ‘interaction between individual practices and social structures, between different kinds of action and different levels of consciousness’ (Vaiou and Lykogianni, 2006: 735). In doing so, it explores and problematises how the dynamics/strategies of indifference/neutrality/sharing in the city centre are understood, embodied and enacted by these women, often at pre-reflexive levels, and the potential of this for generating or supporting social change. Moreover, while the research focus in the ‘divided’ city is often on ethno-nationality, this approach highlights how the experiences, behaviours and actions of everyday life reflect and (re)produce other, often interlinked, social divisions, particularly those of social class and gender.

Key words: mothering, habitus, Belfast city centre, class

Introduction

Belfast City Centre [...] performs a very important strategic role acting as the principle [sic] ‘shop window' for Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Planning Service, 2004:16).

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...the entity that is the city is, overall, an imagined space. The ways that cities are imagined and envisioned and the epistemes that accompany these ways of seeing produce the material and lived space of the city (Rooke, 2007:233).

City centres are often characterised as, potentially at least, signifying spaces for expressions of commonality, common identity and civic practices. In particular, the public spaces of the city centre can be seen to carry a promise, or perhaps a legacy, of civic, cultural and political vibrancy and the possibility of enhanced social cohesion. These attributes often take on particular significance in the context of a ‘divided city’ such as Belfast, where the promotion of ‘good relations’ and ‘a better future’ are often discursively, or indeed physically, moulded in the guise of neutral and/or shared spaces and a regenerated city centre. This may be understood as the case in Belfast as detailed in A Shared Future (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), 2005), which set out the following three overarching policy recommendations:

- Developing and protecting town and city centres as safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life.
- Creating safe and shared space for meeting, sharing, playing, working and living.
- Freeing the public realm from threat, aggression and intimidation while allowing for legitimate expression of cultural celebration (2005:21).

The question arises as to how these policy aims relate to, or translate into, ‘the actual practices of sharing space at the level of everyday life’ (Komarova, 2008: 4), and the degree to which a regenerated ‘neutral’ city centre might be important in redressing the social and economic legacies of violence and provide a platform for reducing the significance of ethno-nationality in the city. This paper is concerned with exploring the extent to which the city centre is perceived as offering a neutral everyday arena where the ethno-national divisions characterising residential areas can be left behind, and consequently considering whether this offers any possibilities for wider social change in Belfast.

As Komarova (2008) succinctly notes, the notion of what is encompassed and understood by
different actors under the umbrella terms ‘shared’ and/or ‘neutral’, when describing the social character of space, must be carefully interrogated and placed within the context of the practices, processes and discourses that are embodied and enacted, often at pre-reflexive levels, in ways that give meaning to space in everyday life. This has particular resonance given that cities, despite an assumed order and rationality, may be conceived as imagined spaces, through a ‘multiplicity of imaginings and meanings’ (Watson, 2005: 598). Following from and building on this notion, Bourdieu’s ‘logic of practice’ (1977) provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding how, through the specific practices and interactions of everyday life, space can take on both symbolic and material meanings, creating ‘both a sense of ‘place’ and a sense of one’s place in the social hierarchy’ (Dovey, 2005: 283).

The complexity of Belfast’s social divisions, and the ways in which ethno-nationality intersects with gender, class and ‘whiteness’, provide the focus of attention in what follows. This paper draws on material gathered from a qualitative study of the everyday lives of mothers in contemporary Belfast, a city undergoing significant post-conflict political and economic transformation in the wake of the paramilitary ceasefire and a major reduction of sectarian violence as a result of a relatively successful political settlement. Bourdieu’s logic of practice, in conjunction with broader urban sociological perspectives concerning indifference in city life, are employed to consider the extent to which the post-conflict changes affecting the city centre, including the changes in security and redevelopment of buildings and commercial activity, might also produce changes in the everyday dispositions of those who live close by, in territorially divided working class neighbourhoods, historically situated at the heart of the conflict. While the city centre is used by a variety of people, including office workers and middle-class shoppers, mothers provide the focus of attention in what follows, not only because of their important economic and social position as routine consumers in commercial contexts, but also as key actors in the reproduction of collective identities over time, as well as in their willingness to transgress social norms in the interests of their children. While, the growth of ‘consumption citizenship’ (Bannister et al., 2006: 933) in a regenerated city centre can convey powerful messages of inclusion and exclusion that may be understood and implemented differently by specific groups, this study focuses more specifically on working class inner city mothers of young children, in an effort to focus on the everyday lives of those living in areas most exposed to the conflict, many of whom continue to live in ‘interface Belfast’ (O’Dowd and Komarova, 2009), who at the same time are within easy reach of the city centre as a neutral venue for
shopping and leisure\textsuperscript{ii}.

**Theoretical Framework**

As stated above, in seeking to explore the tensions at play in the apparent neutrality of Belfast’s city centre, and the significance the city centre may have in generating or sustaining wider changes in the everyday life of the city, we are drawing on Bourdieu’s theorisation of social reproduction and social change. Consequently, everyday life is understood as driven not by the calculated pursuit of self-interest, but by non-conscious efforts to feel ‘at ease’ in specific social contexts\textsuperscript{iii}.

From this perspective, feeling ‘at ease’ depends on maintaining harmonious relationships between the resources we have at our disposal (i.e. symbolic and material forms of capital), our dispositions and orientations (‘habitus’\textsuperscript{iv}), and the ‘field’ or context of action we find ourselves operating within:

> [p]eople are comfortable when there is a correspondence between habitus and field, but otherwise people feel ill at ease and seek to move - socially and spatially - so that their discomfort is relieved. ... Mobility is driven as people, with their relatively fixed habitus, both move between fields (places of work, leisure, residence, etc.), and move to places within fields where they feel more comfortable. Mobility and stability are hence reciprocally inter-related through the linkage between fields and habitus (Savage \textit{et al.}, 2005: 9).

The embodied and territorially situated character of everyday life is of central importance in this way of understanding the complex dynamics of stability and change. Dispositions and orientations are necessarily embodied and associated with specific places and situations and, as Callaghan (2005: 4) suggests, ‘[they] are embodied in the individual and, in part, underpin their actions, but [their] source is [also] a set of collective understandings drawn from beyond the individual’.

Despite criticisms of this perspective for over-emphasizing social reproduction (e.g. Bottero, 2009; King, 2000), the value of Bourdieu’s work lies precisely in its demonstration of the
slowness and complexity involved in generating social change, providing, as McNay puts it, ‘a corrective to certain theories of reflexive transformation which overestimate the extent to which individuals living in post-traditional order are able to reshape identity’ (1999: 113). From this perspective, the habitual and the creative, or routine practices and the possibility of change, are held in constant tension, with change operating not as an alternative to habits and routines, but as an aspect of the habitual (Dalton, 2004). Thus, change does not come about through the reasoned evaluation of alternatives by individual and collective actors, but instead through an often non-conscious sense of dissonance between the dispositions and orientations we carry, the range of resources at our disposal, and the context within which we find ourselves operating. Social action is understood as the outcome not of the rational choices of detached agents, but of the often non-conscious sense of ‘fitting in’/ being at ease, or not. Recognising these habitual pre-reflexive rhythms of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ conceptualises agency ‘not in one-sided terms as an exogenously imposed effect but as a lived relation between embodied potentiality and material relations’ (McNay, 2000: 16). This approach offers a way of understanding social activity in ways not shaped by the dualisms of social structure versus individual agency, or public versus private life, instead allowing us to take seriously the complex array of forces involved in shaping everyday life (Sweetman, 2003: 532).

Mapping Social Change in the Commercial City Centre

As already indicated, this paper focuses on the everyday significance of Belfast's city centre as an arena where ethno-national neutrality might open up interesting possibilities for generating complex forms of what Sennett describes as ‘civility’ (1976; 2005), namely an ability to live ‘side-by-side’ (Tonkiss, 2005: 10), facilitated by the wearing of ‘social masks’, ‘which protects people from each other and yet allows them to enjoy each other’s company’ (ibid., 1976: 264). In seeking to understand the potential value of Belfast city centre’s ethno-national neutrality for generating social change, we recruited women living on its margins, in what might be termed the ‘inner city’, to a qualitative study of the significance of the city centre in their everyday lives. In so doing, we may have been influenced by the powerful narratives of the inner city that Tonkiss identifies, believing that, as she puts it ‘[t]hose spaces that lie in the shadow of downtown promise to tell the real secrets of the city’ (2005: 82). Nevertheless, we were interested in exploring how those living on the margins of the city centre, in a divided if relatively peaceful city, might be situated within processes of change.
Of particular interest to us were the possibilities offered by the newly redeveloped commercial space of the city centre for those who use it to re-imagine their city, and their everyday practices within that city. This approach to analysing social change through processes and practices of consumption is not new, as social scientists have perceived the growth of cities, through industrialisation, precisely in terms of the development of commercial consumerism at the expense of more self-sustaining ways of life. Thus, city centres are important sites of consumption, not only in representational but also in practical terms, as arenas of social activity, where divisions, including those of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationhood and ‘race’, are actively and routinely reproduced, not least through the design of shopping places, as well as the marketing strategies and spatial organisation of producers and retailers.

In the re-development of Belfast as a ‘Renaissance City’ following the move towards peace, the Metropolitan Area’s *Regional Development Strategy* includes the aim of ‘strengthening the distinctive role of Belfast City Centre as the leading regional shopping centre’ (Northern Ireland Planning Service, 2004: 17). Thus, the city centre has been re-developed, following the neglect and devastation associated with the conflict, as a central site of shopping and office space, with the aim of promoting mixing and sharing across the ethno-national divide (ibid., 2004: 16). Indeed, this mirrors the aims of, for example, the Greater London Council, and Haringey Council in the 1970s, as they embarked on shopping centre development as a means of addressing sharp social divisions particularly around ethnicity and ‘race’, albeit without much success (Miller *et al.*, 1998).

Given the significance of shopping as an important everyday aspect of city centre life, and the local planning interest in developing this core city centre activity as an important aspect of urban re-development, this study focused on mothers living within walking distance as those most likely to regularly use the new commercial centre of the city for shopping. Miller *et al.* (1998) have described shopping as a non-reflective, identity producing everyday practice, which is strongly gendered. Shopping is mostly carried out by women, and often on behalf of others. The assumption that women’s more active involvement in shopping is recreational, they argue, is largely over-drawn, since most of the shopping women engage in tends to be pragmatic, and mothers of young children in particular tend to shop in ways that are driven primarily by concerns with thrift and social responsibility.
The women in this study were mothers of pre-school-aged children, and were of interest not only because we assumed that their proximity to the neutral city centre might play an important and telling role in their use of it and the significance they attribute to it as a changed commercial arena, but also because they continue to live in deeply divided neighbourhoods, often bounded by ‘peace’ walls at the interfaces with the ‘other’ side. Thus, the women in this study live in areas that have been historically situated at the centre of the conflict, yet within walking distance of the ethno-nationally ‘neutral’ city centre.

Furthermore, mothers of young children were of interest because of their active role in socialising young children, a practice which often draws them into transgressions of social norms, for example through engaging in loud as well as intimate practices which contravene social conventions (Goffman, 1963; Sennett, 1976). The symbolic and practical significance of motherhood in reproducing collective identities over time, while at the same embracing change in the interests of their children, places this group in an important position, particularly in a city itself undergoing important political changes. Thus, the orientations and dispositions of mothers of young children, living close to Belfast’s city centre, provide the focus of analysis in what follows.

In seeking to understand the extent of social change as it relates to the city centre, we were interested in what we describe as the ‘inner city’ as the field of action. This enabled us to consider the relationship and tensions between the city centre and some of its neighbouring, well-established, residential areas. We regard the inner city as a ‘field’ since everyday life in this spatially distinct area, at least for those who are ‘born and bred’ in it (Edwards, 2000; Savage et al., 2005), has required a detailed familiarity with the social ‘rules’ structuring safe physical movement, social interactions, use of services, etc. The circumstances within which these ‘rules’ operate have indeed undergone change in the wake of the peace process, not least as the area has seen significant reductions in military and paramilitary activities, and a reduction in security measures. These changes affecting the field led us to ask whether the habitus of those carrying distinct and relatively unchanged volumes of material, symbolic and social capital, namely long-established working class inhabitants of the ‘inner city’, may consequently have undergone change. We were particularly interested in the connections, tensions and overlaps between
ethno-national, maternal and working-class elements of the inner city habitus, as it became apparent to us through the research.

We sought to gauge the degree of change both through assessing the value respondents place on being able to access the neutral and re-developed city centre, often no more than a mile or so from where they live, as well as by analysing the extent to which their movements through local, sharply divided neighbourhoods, and their routes into and out of the city centre, may also have changed, signalling changes in the habitus, which, as Bourdieu points out, are surprisingly organised: ‘... social agents have, more often than one might expect, dispositions (tastes, for example) that are ... systematic...’ (2000: 64, original emphasis). Tracking changes in the habitus, as they are related to changes in the inner city field, would, from this perspective, indicate more general changes in the social life of the city.

The Inner City Field of Action

In assessing the importance of the city centre as an arena where everyday life in Belfast might be re-imagined, we found that it plays a surprisingly marginal role in the imagined spaces of the inner city, at least for working class, inner city mothers of young children, themselves largely engaged in full-time mothering. While there are important differences between how the city centre is perceived and used (Lefebvre, 1991: 39) during the day and at night, in general the neutrality of the space was neither a significant attraction, nor a significant driver of social change. The city centre is not, in fact, used ‘every day’ by these inner city women, although, in comparison to other UK city centres, it is used relatively frequently, with most respondents indicating that they visit it fortnightly, on average. Thus, the use of the city centre by these inhabitants, despite their proximity to it and the potential it offers for moving into a non-sectarian space, is not unlike what Savage et al. found when they studied Manchester:

[r]ather than urban centrality, with the urban core being the essential hub of life, this denotes a rather different meaning of the city centre in which it is available for special purposes, but the day-to-day business of life goes on elsewhere (2005: 116).

Nevertheless, the relative frequency of access indicates that the city centre in Belfast does figure as a space which is marginally significant in the everyday lives of many inner-city
One important exception to this was women living in a small, bounded neighbourhood on the edge of the city centre, surrounded by people from the ‘other’ side. During the ‘Troubles’, these women developed routines of shopping on a daily basis in the city centre, for reasons of convenience and safety, which they continue to practice in this new context, albeit no longer exclusively.

The ways in which the mothers in this study accessed the city centre’s neutral spaces illustrate an awareness and appreciation of a change in the inner city field, as the security measures characteristic of the years of conflict had been significantly reduced. For example, Annette commented:

Annette  I think [it’s changed]. It’s the buildings and stuff like that, it’s more like a city. Belfast’s more like a city than it ever was – more hotels, more tourism and even like different races and things; where years ago you didn’t [see other races] and you’d be like ah there’s a black fella when you did see [one] but now it’s normal.

Martina  And do you think that’s a good thing?

Annette  Yeah I think that’s a good thing as well.

(26, Catholic)

Similarly, Jennie reflected on the changes as follows:

Jennie  Yes it’s grown but at the same time as there’s shops going up there’s shops closing down, you know, but it is changing.

Martina  For the better?

Jennie  Yeah, I think it’s trying for the better. Like you know, goodness knows they’re trying, at least.

(32 Catholic)

For a number of the mothers the perception of the city centre as a space for everyone was not something that they regarded as particularly new. Nonetheless, as the preceding comments highlight, there was a feeling of positive change, with Belfast becoming more like other cities in
some respects, especially if judged in terms of greater diversity and consumption opportunities. However, as will be discussed in more detail below, the majority of the mothers in the study did not use these new shopping developments. Rather, ‘old habits and rhythms of use lingered’, (Amin, 2007) and for some the increased diversity in the city engendered often difficult to articulate feelings of unease and suspicion. In general, the city centre was perceived and used as a neutral space, and mostly instrumentally to buy special items or visit particular stores, notably Primark, that are not available in their local shopping centres. However, while not negating the benefits of a somewhat safer, more diverse city centre, any presumption of greater sociality or changes in dispositions ‘through meaningful prosaic encounters with the stranger’ (ibid.) requires close scrutiny, and these suppositions must be placed in the context of the embodied and performed practices, discourses and processes of the various actors who use it.

Women in this study perceived the move to a post-conflict city centre, no longer characterized by high levels of security, as an important relaxation in the atmosphere. Thus, changes affecting the field were recognized and appreciated, and did indeed lead to some changes in the ethno-national habitus, as new routes were sometimes taken when walking to and from the city centre. Indeed, the women’s reflections on the city centre underlined the shifts in the dynamics of fear in Belfast, as they pointed towards the decline in fears of violent conflict or disruption and the emergence of more ‘ordinary’ urban fears associated with a perceived risk of being ‘mugged’, or being confronted with what they perceived as potentially hostile teenagers or aggressive beggars.

The Logic of Everyday Practice in the City Centre

I wouldn’t have a fear of the city centre. (Carol, 32, Catholic)

Given our primary interest in processes of social change, this study was interested in the extent to which inner city, working class mothers could be said to be at ease in the city centre, as a way of assessing the significance of the city centre in generating a change in the sectarian dynamics of ethno-nationality in Belfast. We found in general that their ethno-nationality did not present any problems in using the centre of the city, so that in this respect, they could be understood to be comfortable in freely moving about this space. There was little sense from any of the mothers that moving around in the city centre itself posed any risk of sectarianism, and
this was reflected in the maps they used in interviews to indicate where they would usually go. There was no sense of discomfort about using specific streets or shops during the day.

Their sense of the risk of sectarian encounters was slightly raised when discussing routes into and out of the city centre, which is unsurprising given the territorially divided character of the surrounding streets, although there was a lot of variety in how women perceived this. For instance, Jackie felt that sectarianism is no longer a risk, either in the city centre itself or in getting there on foot. Her comment also highlights the divisions that continue to exist where using a particular side of a road is a marker of identity, with a number of mothers referring to ‘our side of the road’ and ‘their side of the road’:

... years ago when you used to go in [to the city centre] you used to be afraid of Catholics knowing that you were a Protestant, or if you were walking into the town across the bridge there, if you were on the left hand side of the road then the Catholics on the other side knew you were a Protestant and you’d be crapping yourself even if you were walking back […], but now it just doesn’t bother me at all. (23, Protestant)

This practice that Jackie refers to here of ‘telling’, or identifying whether someone is Catholic or Protestant, is long established. As Burton described it in the late 1970s,

[t]elling is based on the social significance attached to name, face and dress, area of residence, school attended, linguistic and possibly phonetic use, colour and symbolism […]. While the efficacy of the various signs fluctuates, telling as a category of thinking remains constant (1978: 37-8).

Jackie’s indication of a reduced concern with ‘telling’, or being identified as a Protestant in her case, points towards an important decline in sectarian fear in the inner city. Similarly, Jade felt that the risk of sectarianism during the day had all but disappeared, although it could re-emerge in encounters with groups of teenagers. Her perceived sense of change in the inner city field had encouraged her to adjust her behaviour. Nonetheless, the fragility of this change in habitus is evident:
Martina: If you are walking do you have any sense that you would go one way and not another because you might be worried about your own safety, say would you avoid [names an area]?

Jade: No, not now, no. Now as I say if there were lots of kids running about maybe then 'cos they would know where you were coming from. During the day there when I’m walking into town no, not really. (25, Protestant)

However, Petra felt differently, and continued to observe well-established patterns of territorial division when walking to and from the city centre:

Petra: ...if you’re on your own and there are crowds of them and there are young fellas, maybe 15 or 16, you know yourself, you don’t know what they’re up to, you know what I mean, and with a pram and a buggy and bags and everything else... It’s easier for me to stick to the other side and even though that’s only across the road you still feel a wee bit more secure.

Martina: So is that partly to do with being a woman with a buggy and partly due to religion?

Petra: Oh aye, it’s to do with both of them, you know yourself women would be probably more over cautious about them things anyway, but certainly ... I’ve seen quite a lot of bother there at the interface... (37, Protestant)

Thus, ethno-nationality and divided territories, reinforced by gender and maternal concerns, continue to affect Petra’s ‘feel for the game’ of getting to and from the city centre safely. Nevertheless, there was some interesting evidence that this feel for the game is changing, as the sense of risk, even for women with young children, was declining. Kathy, for example, talked about taking a route into the city centre which involved crossing into the ‘other’ side’s territory for the first time:

I think it’s 'cos everybody’s doing it now, so what’s the difference in you doing it than anybody else, like you know what I mean? Like walking through [Catholic area] going straight into the town, that’s no bother, 'cos you’ve the Police Station and all there, but the Police Station being there would never have made me feel any more safer five years
ago, it just wouldn't have done, but now I don’t see it as being a big problem, during the day. (23, Protestant)

So, although partially felt, there is some evidence that the inner city habitus is changing as some women are prepared to take new, more convenient routes into the city centre, through the ‘other’s’ territory, sometimes for the first time in their lives. The significance of ethno-nationality in residential areas remains important, but during the day, at least, there is some indication of a declining sense of risk of sectarianism. By contrast, in the city centre itself, both ethno-nationality and sectarianism generally cease to matter, and other social divisions, more ‘ordinarily’ urban, take over.

*From Neutral to Divided Space*

While there was a general perception of neutrality with respect to ethno-nationality in the city centre, this wasn’t fixed, and tensions could become significant at particular points in time, for instance when communal festivals are being celebrated, or parades or football matches are in progress.

For example, although the Unionist *Orangefest* in July is overtly political, marked by the display of flags and emblems, the City Council has sought to de-politicise the St Patrick’s Day parade in March, by banning political symbols such as the Irish flag (the green, white and orange tri-colour), from the city centre venue and instead distributing the officially sanctioned green and white shamrock flags. While our observation of the parade would suggest that the Council have been largely successful in this, the comments of the mothers in the study highlight how their perceptions of the parade remain unchanged, remarking that it wasn’t ‘for us’. Thus, for the majority of the Protestant mothers, their dispositions as Protestant/British precluded them from participating in what continues to carry meaning as a Catholic/Irish festival, despite the toned down political symbols involved.

Laura No I wouldn’t go to that, I would never go in like.
Martina And is that because you don’t feel safe or don’t feel it’s for you?
Laura Both, ’cos I don’t feel safe and ’cos I don’t feel that it’s part of our culture really. (25, Protestant)
Tina: I wouldn't go into it. I know that there was funding last year ... for the community ... and the women's group they done Prods [Protestants] and Prams... and they marched around with the St Patrick's Day parade but no way would I do that.

Martina: And is that because you would feel unsafe?

Tina: Yeah definitely

Martina: And do you think people would know that you are a Protestant?

Tina: Yeah, well obviously. If we're not going to be in with the Celtic tee shirts [signalling Catholicism] and our kids aren't waving the tricolour and stuff about, definitely.

(30 Protestant)

Thus, at points in time such as this, ethno-nationality and sectarian tensions take precedence in shaping social life in the city centre, and the space is perceived as ‘not for the likes of us’.

Clothing

Nevertheless, the general sense that ethno-nationality should be and indeed is treated as a matter of indifference in the city centre was particularly evident from the way the mothers talked about how they manage displays of visible symbols of difference when in the city centre, as distinct from when in neighbourhoods or other shopping centres. Whether or not to dress children in football shirts associated with one side or another was a matter of conscious decision-making, illustrating an awareness that not playing by ‘the rules’ of neutrality, in this regard, would, or should, result in significant discomfort:

Molly: I’d be ... weary [sic] of wearing a Rangers football shirt [signaling Protestantism] in town, but not up at the shopping centre.

Martina: And why would that be?

Molly: Because in town you know it’s Catholics and Protestants [together] where[as] if you’re up in the shopping centre you know it's Protestants
that all live round the shopping centre so you’ve no need to be weary [sic] of it, but you are in town. (32, Protestant)

However, the ‘rules’ of whether or not to mark ethno-nationality in the city centre’s neutral space were very much open to interpretation. For some, this meant that difference should be a matter of indifference, and so could be openly displayed without consequence:

A couple of years ago no [I wouldn’t wear football shirts in the city centre] but now it wouldn’t worry me, [although] you do get the wee hoods running about the town ... and they wouldn’t think twice about saying something. (Kathy, 23, Protestant)

For others, displays of difference were perceived to be disrupting the assumed neutrality of the space, introducing instead a sectarian orientation:

I wouldn’t put it [a Celtic team supporters’ shirt, signalling Catholicism] on her [daughter] ... I think you are only antagonising. It might start something ... you want to go out and not have anybody looking. (Jennie, 32, Catholic)

This concern with ‘not having anybody looking’ reflects the value Jennie places on everyday indifference in the post-conflict city centre, what Tonkiss describes as ‘a certain kind of freedom in the city, the lonely liberty of knowing that no one is looking, nobody really is listening’ (2005: 22), at least in respect of ethno-nationality. Thus, despite assumptions that the city centre is a neutral and/or shared space, how this is understood and negotiated can require the management of embodied practices in particular ways.

**Class and the Urban Imaginary**

While ethno-nationality did not, on the whole, produce a sense of discomfort for these mothers when in the city centre, in other respects they were much less comfortable. Thus, mothers talked about needing to manage their classed maternal respectability (Skeggs, 1997), particularly by avoiding being treated with suspicion by shop staff, as well as trying to avoid being perceived as ‘bad’ mothers whose children misbehave. They also talked about the difficulties posed by having access to limited resources, especially money and transport, in
using the city centre. The physical difficulties of getting to and around the city centre with small children was an important barrier to its use, as was the general sense that women with buggies and small children would be resented, getting ‘in the way’ of other shoppers. Thus, the symbolic and material capitals available to these mothers when in the city centre produced a sense of not being entirely at ease, as they expressed concerns about being judged in classed and maternal ways as they shopped there.

This was particularly evident when discussing their orientations towards the new, up-market shopping centre, Victoria Square (pictured above), which many had visited once or twice, but ultimately concluded that it was not a place ‘for them’. As Maggie reflected,

[w]ell I suppose [it’s] better for the people that can afford it, like the Victoria Centre, but I couldn’t even afford to buy anything out of there (sighs). Like I’ve been in it once just to have a nosey but that’s it. (24, Protestant)

Thus, the unease generated by low levels of material and often negative symbolic capitals held by working class inner city mothers was an important factor shaping their orientations towards shopping in the regenerated city centre, whereas ethno-nationality and fears of sectarian encounters were not.

The regeneration of the city centre tends to be perceived as one of the key indicators of
change in Belfast, and urban planning clearly reflects this: ‘[t]he improving fortunes of the city are most clearly seen in the City Centre’ (Northern Ireland Planning Service, 2004: 16). The showcase Victoria Square shopping centre is indeed often presented as epitomizing the progress the city has made. However, Abbey’s photograph and comments on this is telling.

I always think of the City Hall when I think of the city centre. I just think all the new buildings I don’t go in [to them]. Say the likes of Victoria Centre that new big one, I’ve never been in it because the shops that are in it all seem to be for people with loads of money and the parking’s expensive in it. I don’t class it as the city centre – that’s [pointing at photo] the city centre to me. (30, Protestant)

This highlights the ways in which her classed disposition makes Abbey uncomfortable with the new developments, which are not perceived as ‘for her’. She is much more comfortable with the
familiar, long-established view of the City Hall as a focal point of the city centre, taken from what has, until recently, been the main city centre shopping street, Donegall Place. The contrast between the openness of this view of Belfast’s historic city centre from the perspective of a busy, open thoroughfare, and the more managed, controlled and ‘modern’ setting of the Victoria Square shopping centre, is striking, and doubtless not insignificant in shaping Abbey’s urban imaginary. This particular shopping street and the old City Hall provide a context for shopping where her dispositions as an inner city woman can guide her actions in a relatively unproblematic way.

New ‘Others’

While ethno-nationality was treated largely as a matter of indifference in the city centre, the increasing visibility of non-white people was not, and indeed was perceived as an important change that for some reduced their sense of being at ease in this space. As Miller et al. argue, ‘the discourse of contemporary consumption is often expressed in highly racialised terms, from the scale of the neighbourhood to the nation...’ (1998: x).

The distinctly classed ways in which inner city working class ‘white’ mothers felt ill at ease in some city centre shops was then further reinforced by a sense of being uneasy as they were faced with a fear of being confronted by unfamiliar migrants, triggering associations, however inappropriate, with risk and crime:

I do find myself in the city centre I would be more clutching [my child] by the pram ’cos there’s just so many different cultures and stuff going about. I would say from that wee girl Maddie [Madeleine McCann] disappeared it really affected me and I became very self-conscious in the town and public places and stuff where I would have give[n] [my child] the freedom to come off the wristband and the pram, I would’ve give[n] him the freedom and taught him to stay close to me, stay beside the pram but there’s just so many about in the town there now I would say that safety-wise, that way, you know, personal stuff, carrying it, the kids, I wouldn’t feel one hundred percent safe. (Trisha, 30, Catholic)
This way of associating a strong sense of unease, interpreted as a feeling of being at risk in the city centre’s streets, with the presence of new migrants, was often expressed, as Trisha above does, in maternal terms: the idea that people from ‘different cultures’ pose a particular threat to young children, and that ‘good’ mothers will therefore be concerned about encountering such people in crowded urban spaces. Similarly, criticism was aimed at migrants who regularly beg in the city centre, again framed in classed and maternal terms:

... them ‘uns with The Big Issue [current affairs magazine sold by homeless people], they annoy me. Sitting with their babies and it’s freezing cold and whatever and sitting with no rain covers on them. They just annoy me ‘cos like, you just don’t put your kids through that, no matter how skint you are. (Wendy, 27, Protestant)

This criticism of the ‘bad’ mothering of poor migrant women begging in the city centre, in comparison to poor local women, portrayed as equally poor, was even more forcefully articulated by Cindy:

I remember walking into the town and seeing this girl sitting with a sign […] ‘Have you got any money’ ‘I’m hungry’ or something like that, and she walked into McDonalds and was sitting eating a MacDonalds and her sitting eating it and she wasn’t even giving her child anything! No, I just don’t believe that they’re poor. If it was a genuine poor person and you knew yeah you would give but them ‘uns, they really annoy me (21, Catholic).

These sorts of comments interpret the presence of ‘Other’ women begging in the city centre not as a threat to the safety of local children and adults, but as generally dishonest, devious and uncaring – as much a threat to their own children as to ‘ours’. Thus, these mothers were comfortable expressing their ‘white’, maternal and classed habitus in condemning immigrant mothers who beg, illustrating their sense of ease in the city centre, at least in contrast with migrant, begging women. It is also interesting to note how a working class ‘white’ maternal habitus carries symbolic value when compared to ‘non-white’, migrant mothers begging on the streets of the city centre, the ‘shop window’ of the region.

Nevertheless, articulating these concerns could be difficult. Some of the mothers indicated their discomfort both in voicing these anxieties, perhaps wary of how they might be judged by
the researcher, and in having such reactions. Trisha’s reflections on an incident in the city centre are telling:

I was in the town a couple of weeks ago and there was a couple and they were mixed race they were foreign of some nature [...] and it was choc a blocked [sic] and [...] this lady squealed and [she] automatically thought [...] that [her] bag was gone, but the couple had only brushed her to get past. [...] I felt bad for my way of thinking and I was like [...] “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it was an accident” you know. So there’s just sort of finding a wee in-between of finding the trust on who you’re with and accepting different people into the community... (30, Catholic).

The Inner City by Night

Orientations towards the city centre at night were somewhat different to those expressed in relation to day-time use. Although the city centre was an infrequent destination at night, with many preferring to socialise in their neighbourhoods, it was used for special occasions, often ‘girls’ nights out’.

As with day-time shopping, the women’s orientations towards night-time entertainment in the city centre were not framed in predominantly ethno-national terms, but instead tended to be organised in relation to gender, sexuality and ‘race’. There was a heightened wariness of general violence such as fighting in town at night, and a particular fear of gendered or sexual crime:

Well for me being a woman I would be afraid of being attacked or that. Cos you hear so many stories at the moment of people being raped and everything so I would be weary [sic] of that (Jessica, 25, Protestant).

These sorts of fears, along with the difficulties and cost of getting to and from the city centre at night by taxi, when walking was considered too dangerous, resulted in women tending to socialise more in local neighbourhoods, although there was some indication that before having
children some would have used the city centre more often at night, and for two of the women who didn’t have partners, this was still the case.

However, for those relatively infrequent nights out ‘in town’, taxis were considered essential for getting home. It was when discussing how to get home safely at night that concerns about sectarianism emerged as significant:

You would walk in during the day but you couldn’t walk home at night, you’d definitely have to get a taxi home. Now my brother was beaten up badly coming home when he was 23 and he died 18 months later so you would have that fear. […] And it’s a pity that there’s still that fear, you know. (Megan, 38, Catholic)

Thus, Fiona’s sense of how to move through the inner city safely at night is still shaped by sectarian fears, perhaps unsurprisingly, given her family history. Given that during the day Fiona is involved in cross-community work, the strength of her night-time concerns for her safety is noteworthy. Others expressed similar orientations:

Martina I take it then you would never walk home at night?
Dawn From town [sounds incredulous]? No, no, no, never, never!!
Martina And that’s not a new thing, that’s been for years?
Dawn Yeah, […] maybe somebody [would] recognise you and know, where you come from it could be that, or it could be that you’ve a chance of getting beaten or raped or anything could happen to you. You feel as if you are exposing yourself.

(38, Protestant)

The direction from which people walk has served as an important marker of ethno-nationality in a context where ‘telling the difference’ depends not on visual cues such as skin colour, but more often on behavioural patterns indicating where a person lives and consequently what their allegiances are. The ongoing importance of taking care to avoid detection in potentially risky situations, such as walking home at night through divided territories, is clear from Dawn’s observations.
Thus, while the city centre was not frequently used for night-time entertainment, when it was used ethno-nationality was not regarded as important in shaping how the women behaved or where they could go. What was perceived as more important was their ability to avoid sexual assault or attack while 'in town'. However, ethno-nationality, and sectarianism more specifically, were important in their orientations towards getting home from the centre at night, something that distinguishes night-time from day-time life in the inner city. The sorts of changes in routines and dispositions in walking to and from the city centre were limited to daytime, illustrating the limited extent of changes in the city.

Conclusion

While, as Bryan (2008) indicates, Belfast city centre continues to be an important stake for those seeking to secure and represent substantial socio-political change in the region, its significance as a neutral or indeed shared space is unstable, not least as a result of the instability of the peace process itself, and the ongoing importance of ethno-nationality to those living in the city and beyond. Thus, sectarianism can re-emerge, for example in response to times of year and the staging of particular events, such as football matches or communal celebrations.

This raises an important question concerning the capacity of this central neutral space, employed as it is to mark progress across the region, to serve as an important driver of broad change. As Savage et al. comment, '[a] model of urban analysis [...] which links places to their roles in a bounded urban system with a clear centre of gravity is of very limited contemporary value' (2005: 129). The significance of Belfast's city centre as an important arena driving social change in the everyday life of the city is indeed extremely limited, as this study of inner city working class 'white' mothers indicates. The city centre may be the 'shop window' of the region from an urban planning and marketing perspective, but its role beyond that, as an important arena of social change, is questionable. The orientations towards the city centre demonstrated by the mothers who participated in this study, and the ways in which they were disposed to behave in that place, do not indicate that it plays an important role in reproducing or changing the ethno-national aspects of the inner-city habitus. While participants clearly value the impact the peace process has made on their circumstances, their feel for how to play the game of
everyday life in the inner city has not been thrown into question by their easy access to a neutral city centre.

Instead, orientations towards the social dynamics of the city centre suggest that maternal, classed and indeed racialised everyday practices remain significant in that arena, in ways which tend to reinforce these social divisions. While commercial norms and practices shape the city centre in ways which have over time produced routine patterns of use, affiliation and expectations from the working class mothers in this study, their sense of ease with these patterns has been disturbed by the presence of newly visible migrants. The ways in which they have responded to this disturbance in the dynamics of ease, whether through reflective efforts to actively re-conceive the city as a more diverse place, or by offering negative moral judgements of migrants framed in maternal and classed terms, reveals the complex range of ways in which the variety of capitals available to them can be deployed in different ways as the field changes, in an effort to reinstate a sense of everyday ease. Thus, the city centre itself is less a driver of change than a context where social life plays out, through dynamic interactions between agents and wider socio-political and economic forces.

The neutrality of the city centre, and the ways in which it is instrumentally accessed by those living in its shadow, within easy reach of its shops and entertainment venues, does not appear to extend beyond ethno-nationality. Instead, other deeply entrenched social divisions, not least those of class, ethnicity and gender itself, are actively in play in the city centre, shaping the orientations of shoppers both towards each other and their environment. The centre of Belfast is perceived, conceived and experienced primarily as a commercial arena, where financial exchanges and risks take priority over political concerns. Encounters with non-familiar others in this context are both minimal and refracted through commercial norms which allow ethno-nationality to be treated as insignificant while at the same time drawing on other social divisions and identities as primary marketing strategies. Thus, while the city centre may be a non-sectarian arena which is quite distinct from the surrounding neighbourhoods, its commercial character ensures that other social divisions continue to shape the everyday orientations of its shoppers, not least since these are primary tools in marketing, within and beyond the local context. Nevertheless, ethno-nationality remains important in the everyday life of inner city residential neighbourhoods, which form the core of participants’ sense of everyday ease and belonging.
Notes


ii. Further studies are needed to explore how these other groups perceive and use the city centre following regeneration. For example, young people’s strategies in negotiating the city centre would provide an interesting contrast to the material presented here, as research highlights how they may seek to appropriate and colonise public spaces in ways that differ from adults, with their presence often being perceived as threatening or disturbing.

iii. As Bourdieu explains, ‘[t]he theory of habitus has the primordial function of stressing that the principle of our actions is more often practical sense than rational calculation, or, against the discontinuist, actualist view which is common to philosophies of consciousness (of which the paradigmatic expression is found in Descartes) and to mechanistic philosophies (with their stimulus-response model), the past remains present and active in the dispositions it has produced.’ Bourdieu, P. 2000. Pascalian meditations. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. Pg.63-4

iv. Habitus is defined as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions [...] principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules...’ Bourdieu, P. 1977. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg.72.

v. While the Inner North of the city consists of patchwork of Catholic and Protestant areas, the Inner East is more homogeneously Protestant, but does contain a distinct small Catholic neighbourhood. These inner city areas have been heavily affected by the Troubles and remain deeply divided, with a significant number of ‘peace wall’ and sectarian interfaces.

vi. We recruited 39 mothers of pre-school children to this study (19 Protestant, 18 Catholic and 2 ‘Other’). Respondents were on average aged 26, with two children. Seventy-five percent of respondents were full-time mothers not involved in paid work; 17% were in part-time and 8% were in full-time paid work, which tended to be in the community, caring and retail sectors.

vii. For example, Savage et al (2005:116) reported the use of Manchester city centre as follows: ‘... over half the respondents never visited the centre to shop at all, and only a quarter visited it on any kind of a regular basis, though this would often not amount to more than three visits a year.’

viii. Interestingly, when asked about whether they used the city centre often in interviews, most of the mothers said they didn’t, but when asked to specify how often it was generally about once a fortnight.
While these women indicated that over the past three years their wariness of accessing their local shopping centre had decreased, their habitual use of space continued and the city centre was often used on a daily basis.

Pseudonyms are used for all participants throughout this paper.

The degree of change noted reflected that age of the interviewee, ranging from 21 to 38. Some of the younger women have only vague memories of the city centre during the Troubles.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this point, it is important to note that these concerns applied both to the city centre and to residential neighbourhoods. Undoubtedly, similar concerns would be voiced by inner city mothers in other cities. However, what is particularly interesting in this context is that some of the strongest perceptions of risk of sectarian trouble were associated with young people who have grown up in a period of relative peace.


This again illustrates the association often made by women in this study between groups of teenagers and the possibility of sectarianism.

While these quotes present the attitudes of the mothers to immigrants in quite stark terms, they do not capture the complex array of attitudes expressed in relation to the new groups of migrants which were more evident in relation to neighbourhood interactions, albeit that many of the same feelings of distrust were evident.

References


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