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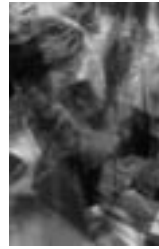
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Teenagers Telling Sectarian Stories

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the socially constructed nature of the story telling process by drawing on an example from one locality in Northern Ireland. The research draws on focus group interviews with teenagers from polarized working-class communities in North Belfast. The overall locality is divided into Catholic and Protestant areas and a recurring feature of the data is the tendency for each group to define themselves in opposition to the other. Throughout the focus group interviews, the teenagers produced four types of stories and the article assesses the relevance of each type to producing, reproducing or challenging sectarian divisions. The first three groups of stories, First-hand stories, Second-hand stories and Collective stories reflect individual and group attitudes to distinctions between 'us' and 'them' while the fourth, Alternative stories, questions the homogeneity of the in-group and the immutability of these divisions. These stories verbalize the internal recollections of both individuals and groups and rely on real and imagined memories. The thrust of the article illustrates the ways in which sectarian identities are constructed, shaped and diluted through these narrative encounters.

KEY WORDS

Northern Ireland / sectarianism / story telling / teenagers

Introduction

We are likely to hear stories on a daily basis. Stories form a key part of our interactions with others. Through stories we represent and reconstruct the past. Some research suggests that identity is generated and maintained through the process of story telling (Crites, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988).

As Somers (1994: 606) puts it 'people construct identities (however multiple and changing) within a repertoire of emplotted stories'. We tell stories to others and we listen to others' stories. Throughout our everyday lives we are likely to tell and hear a wide range of confirming and contradictory stories. Some stories we may choose not to tell. Others we may tell to some people and not to others. In our telling and retelling of stories we may add further details or leave some elements missing. Each airing of the story may change aspects of it and yet at each stage we may assume that we are giving an accurate account or indeed we may choose to deliberately embellish or fabricate elements of the story. The process of doing research is part and parcel of this practice. Any sociological account of the world that is empirically based relies on the stories of subjects and as sociologists we add our own stories to the interpretation and analysis. The process of doing research will produce many stories, many voices, some validating and some refuting the search for common themes. The relationship between researcher and subject and the authenticity of whose voice is heard in written accounts of research findings is a methodological issue that has provoked heated debates for decades. Over recent years, history has been accused of presenting the stories of the powerful, the educated, the articulate and leaving silenced the voices of the weak, the poor, the incoherent. Yet, in attempting to reclaim history in the name of the powerless, oral historians have downplayed the extent to which the narratives of the powerless have the same problems of authenticity as those of the powerful. How then are we to make sense of stories? One solution is to move from the story itself to the telling of the story. Sacks (1992), for example, suggests that the most interesting sociological aspect of stories is what is heard rather than what is said and his work has produced fascinating accounts of the common sense understandings listeners apply to the hearing of stories. Plummer (1995) moves further away from actual texts and argues that production of stories should be investigated in its own right rather than stories functioning as resources to draw upon.

Real and Imagined Memories

The stories on which this article is based rely on the memories of storytellers. Stories verbalize the internal recollection of the individual and in their telling and retelling become group rather than individual recollections. Often story telling is viewed as something passed on from generation to generation. Stories are told by adults to children and their telling enables children to internalize distant memories important to group identity and reproduce them in the stories they tell their own children. However, the 'successive generations' aspect of story telling put forward by Smith (1999) as crucial to the formation of collective identities is criticized by Bell (2003) for their tendency to produce collective myths rather than collective memories. This is because memory often draws on real events selected by the storyteller. The events may be remembered incorrectly or reproduced in a distorted vein, but they exist as real occurrences in the

mind of the individual. They are based on experiences that 'the individual has been exposed to or immersed in at some earlier stage; they cannot jump from generation to generation'. In other words, memories die with the individual. What remains are not real memories but stories that blur distinctions between real and imagined events. As Halbwachs (1992: 38) puts it '[memories] are recalled by me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them'. The importance of direct experience is further elaborated by Halbwachs (1992) in his distinction between autobiographical and historical memory where he argues that the former is richer and more personally meaningful than the latter.

In a similar vein, sociologists often link memory with history and illustrate how history often prioritizes the views of the powerful and articulate and as a result the stories of the oppressed tend to be silenced (Foucault, 1980; Walton, 2001). Oral histories often challenge this domination in the name of oppressed groups (Leydesdorff et al., 1996; Thompson, 1988). In societies that have experience protracted conflict such as Northern Ireland, one way of verbalizing the stories of the oppressed is through truth commissions (see Rolston, 2000). However, often these stories are specifically concerned with public telling. They are told in order that they will be retold and not forgotten. They are told in that in their telling they can be recorded and shift from verbal to written histories. They provide excellent examples of how competing groups produce competing stories. However, in their telling, in-group processes of contestation and resistance may remain hidden. By focusing on how in-groups recall and manage collective stories I intend to highlight some of the challenges that come from within.

Because of the long-term focus of memory studies, the recollections of children to events in their own lifetime remain muted. Rather, children are commonly viewed as receptacles of adults' memories. Yet, as Shils (1981) points out, new generations often define themselves in opposition to their elders and this renders problematic each new generation's relationship to the previous generation's memory of the past. In challenging the marginalization of children's memories, I draw on the 'new sociology of childhood' which prioritizes the active agency of the child (Prout and James, 1990). This approach challenges the tendency to see children not so much as different to adults but as lesser than adults. As Waksler (1986: 174) argues, 'in everyday life we adults take for granted that children as a category know less than adults, have less experience, are less serious and are less important than adults'. Hence in everyday life and academic research there is a tendency to ignore children's own experiences and understandings of the world. In response to this neglect, the new sociology of childhood emphasizes children's competency, acknowledges them as actors in their own right and recognizes the level of sophistication that children demonstrate in managing their own time and space (Alanen, 1990; Qvortrup, 1994). In this vein, children like adults actively engage in recreating their past. Indeed, in applying Mannheim's (1952) theories on generations to different age cohorts, Schuman and Scott (1989) argue that adolescence is extremely important in developing individuals' repertoire of political memories and later memories are

best understood with reference to these earlier periods. As Mannheim (1952: 296) puts it, only memory 'personally gained in real situations sticks'. The empirical example presented here provides an illustration of how memories are constructed and reconstructed in one local setting. Memory is considered here as a process, in which stories are recounted, supported, disputed and changed. The example illustrates how Catholic and Protestant teenagers represent and produce stories of past events in order to justify and sometimes challenge current and future sectarian divisions between the two groups.

Background to the Research

The article focuses on the story telling process that emerged during focus group discussions. Focus groups were not the only method used in the research. Teenagers were asked to produce written accounts of growing up in North Belfast and to construct geographical maps of their typical movements in a typical week. These methods preceded the focus group discussions and informed some of the topics discussed within focus groups. However, this article will draw solely on the verbal stories produced by teenagers during focus group discussions. The teenagers took part in focus groups on two occasions and groups ranged from four to eight participants. The discussions took place within the schools the teenagers attended (without the presence of any teachers). However, this environment may have impacted on the stories produced. Twenty pupils¹ from four schools participated in the research. The schools reflected the religious, gender and class composition of teenagers in the area. All the teenagers were working class and attended schools segregated on the basis of gender and religion. Hence, the four schools comprised a Catholic boys' and girls' school and a Protestant boys' and girls' school. While at times the researcher acted as a facilitator during focus groups, the key intention of the research was to create an environment whereby teenagers would discuss in general terms what they would define as the good and not so good aspects of growing up in North Belfast. The researcher presented herself as a mother who lived in a different area of Belfast and who had a teenage son or daughter and was considering moving to North Belfast and wanted their advice on what it was like to live in the area. Teenagers produced complementary and conflicting accounts of the nice and not so nice aspect of growing up in their respective localities and a key aspect of their stories concerned placing themselves in opposition to the other community. In recalling events to support their stories or refute the stories of others, teenagers recounted events that happened to them or to others. However, for the purposes of this article, I intend to focus on stories produced by teenagers that rely on actual events drawn from their own lives, although I acknowledge that these may depend on real or imagined memories. I am less interested in the authenticity of these stories than on the social processes involved in the telling of the stories.

Before discussing the four types of stories on which this article is based, it is necessary to introduce some qualifications. The stories that this article is concerned with were not the only ones produced during focus group discussions. Teenagers recounted many stories relating to different aspects of their everyday lives including stories of romance, hopes for the future, sometimes supportive and sometimes strained relationships with adults and the pressures of being a teenager growing up in economically disadvantaged communities. In these ways their stories resembled other accounts of adolescence in societies not affected by political conflict. However, many of their stories reflected the specificity of the locality in which they lived. The teenagers live in one of the most politically contested spaces in the North of Ireland. Their community is divided by peace walls and other symbolic boundaries. They live in areas segregated by religion and attend schools segregated by religion, class and gender. Within such spaces identity becomes closely bound up with in-group and out-group affiliations. While the focus group discussions were centred around the 'nice and not so nice aspects' of growing up in North Belfast, it became clear that the teenagers' everyday lives were situated with reference to the 'other' and stories of 'us' and 'them' were recurrent features of the stories produced within and across all focus groups. According to Woehrle and Coy (2000) for a collective identity to flourish members need to notice how much more they are like the other members of the group than they are like people in a different group. The wider political division that characterized the area in which the children lived tended to encourage notions of two monolithic groups with religion serving as a neat marker of deeper more complicated ethnic divisions. While groups are always in the process of reifying their collective identity, the perception of an external threat often results in groups highlighting their internal similarities and ignoring or underplaying their internal divisions. In the process, the creation of the in-group becomes intricately linked to the identification of an out-group, in other words one cannot exist without the presence of the 'other' and increasingly each group is defined through negative stereotyping of each other.

First-hand Stories

During focus group discussions, some teenagers initiated stories about the 'other' in order to demonstrate that interaction with the 'other' is generally problematic. I term these stories first-hand stories. Within the setting of the focus group, this was the first time the story was recounted by the narrator. The story may have emerged in other settings and the narrator may have told the story many times, but from the questioning of the narrator by other members of the focus group, this was clearly its first airing among the narrator's surrounding group of peers. Most of these stories reflected common themes; concerning demonising the 'other' and recalling instances where the narrator faced direct threat or actual physical violence from brief interactions with the 'other'.

The following is an extract from a focus group discussion with a group of Catholic boys:

- Boy 1 Sure one time, I was like trying to get out and like there was a big crowd of them in this here wee blue Fiesta and they kept circling round and like I couldn't get out and every time I tried to get out they just kept circling so I had to run back into the school.
- Boy 2 When did that happen?
- Boy 1 The other week
- Boy 3 And what did you do?
- Boy 1 I near crapped myself
- Boy 2 Did they get you?
- Boy 1 Nah but one of them shouted out the window 'You're dead'

The second extract from a group of Protestant boys reveal a similar problematic relationship with the 'other':

- Boy 1 I got into a fight in the Odyssey (leisure complex in Belfast)
- Boy 2 What did you go to see?
- Boy 1 Me and some wee taig (derogatory name for Catholic) were fighting like we'd only seen the film and like my da went to the toilet and like I had a jumper on and like the collar had an English top and like underneath the jumper I had a Rangers (Scottish football team largely Protestant) top on and somebody seen it and he said 'aye you're a fucking hun' (derogatory name for Protestant) and he came over and started
- Boy 3 Who won?
- Boy 1 Like he had a mate with him and me and him were sitting fighting
- Boy 4 Did you dig his brains in?
- Boy 1 Nah like some wee man like I don't know, like he came over and like he pulled us apart and like he got up and run away with his mate and like my da came out and like my knuckle was all busted and like this wee man starting going on at my da and said like 'them wee lads were slabbering to him'
- Boy 4 You couldn't trust them, they're everywhere.

Both these stories are examples of a recurring sub-genre of stories that draw on individual experiences of negative encounters with the 'other' that resulted in verbal or physical abuse. While I have drawn on two examples from male respondents, females recounted similar stories although here there was a tendency to recount more incidents of verbal rather than physical abuse. The stories perform a number of functions. Firstly they are based on real rather than

imagined threats. I am not suggesting here that the events portrayed are unquestionably accurate but they are presented as actual rather than perceived threats. The banality of these events is illustrated in the second extract by Boy 2's interest in the film rather than the incident, although as the extract reveals, the storyteller does not respond to his question as the main purpose of the story was to illustrate a negative interaction with the 'other'. In verbalizing and sharing these memories, individuals begin the process of moving subjective experiences to the realm of the group. As Halbwachs (1992: 38) reminds us 'it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories'. Hence while it is individuals who remember they often do so in groups.

Second-hand Stories

Of course the researcher can never be fully aware of the impact of interviewer affect and there is always the possibility that rather than general everyday stories being told, subjects deliberately select events that fit in with their assessment of the researcher's pre-conceived interests. Hence, the telling of sectarian stories may have been for my benefit rather than an indication of individual or group beliefs. However, second-hand stories provide some evidence that sectarian stories predate the researcher's entry to the field. I use the term second-hand stories to illustrate incidents where group members asked narrators to retell stories.

The first example concerns a discussion between the interviewer and three Catholic boys:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Boy 1 | Hey M. he was beat up by the huns (derogatory name for Protestants), tell her. |
| Boy 2 | Aye I was |
| Interviewer | Were you on your own when it happened? |
| Boy 2 | No someone else was with me |
| Interviewer | Were you hurt? |
| Boy 2 | Aye like I wasn't a hospital case or anything, but a beating is a beating, like I was lying on the ground and they were kicking me. |
| Interviewer | Who were they? |
| Boy 3 | They were from Hesketh (Protestant area) |

The second extract is drawn from a group of Protestant boys:

- | | |
|-------|---|
| Boy 1 | Tell her what happened to you last year |
| Boy 2 | I was on the bus and they (Catholics) were trying to pull me out the window and my mates were trying to pull me back in and I got cut with glass and I had to go to the hospital and get five stitches. |

- Boy 3 Show her your stitches
- Boy 1 They're bastards, he's maimed for life 'cause of them

In both these examples, the boys at the centre of each story did not volunteer the information but only recalled the story on being prompted by others. In the first example, Boy 1 was aided in his recollection by the input of Boy 3 who was able to recount the specific area the Protestant attackers came from despite not being present when the original incident took place.

Second-hand stories suggest that the peer group have been effective listeners during the first airing of these stories. The stories have begun their journey from the mind of the individual to the mind of the group. The listeners still give priority to the individual, in that, the origin of the story is seen as an event or memory possessed by the individual. However, in asking the narrator to recall the incident that is now being mutually remembered, listeners began to appropriate the stories as their own. Over time the group may co-opt the story as one that could have happened to any one of them and in the telling and retelling of it, the link between the actual and imagined incident may become increasingly blurred.

Collective Stories

The first two types of stories rely on individual memories. While second-hand stories have the potential to become group memories reflecting group experiences, in reality they rely on individual experiences which may through time come to be taken over by the group. I use the term collective stories to move from these individual experiences to examining memories that rely on incidents that happened to groups. Again I am relying on actual experiences here. However, for groups to have collective memories, they do not necessarily need to be experienced personally. Many groups have widely shared memories of past events. In the communities in which the young people live, dominant collective representations of key events in Irish history such as the 1916 rebellion or the Battle of the Boyne serve to collectively represent each group's past and influence each group's future political orientations. These collectively created stories play a powerful role in individual remembering. They provide a framework for linking the individual to the group. They provide individuals with ready-made recollections of a shared past. They enable individuals to know who they are, why they are here and where they are going. As Eyerman (2004: 162) points out 'All nations and groups have founding myths, stories which tell who we are through recounting where we came from. Such narratives form "master frames" and are passed on through traditions'. Yet, Sontag (2003: 5–6) reminds us 'Strictly speaking there is no such thing as collective memory – part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. But there is collective instruction. All memory is individual, irreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that

this is important, and this is the story about how it happened'. Yet within their own lifetime individuals often experience collective events. Hence, while collective stories are linked to collective memories, I am using the term here to refer to individual memories concerning a personally experienced collective event. This means that while individuals may remember a collective incident differently, through time they may produce a dominant narrative of a collective event.

The following extract concerns a discussion among a group of Protestant girls in relation to school cross-community events

- Girl 1 Member the time we were at that community thing
- Girl 2 Yeah we were at this community thing the other day and there was a wee girl shouting over to her (points to another girl in the group) 'watch yourself'
- Girl 3 No she didn't say it to just me, she said it to all of us
- Girl 1 Yeah she said 'yous may watch yourselves'
- Girl 4 Here's me 'what I'll not be watching myself, you may watch yourself'
- Girl 1 See anytime we're with them (Catholics) there's always one of them wanting to start something

The extract is one of many whereby groups collectively recalled incidents where as a group they were under attack from the 'other' community. Like the previous examples, the attacks were both verbal and physical. In this extract, Girl 2 attempts to individualize the threat that the group experienced but this was refuted by Girl 3 as an attack on the whole group rather than on any individual member of the group. These events help unify the group by providing a narrative framework which locates the individual within the membership of the group. These collective experiences enable individuals to emphasize their commonality with members of the in-group and highlight their differences compared to the out-group. Through these stories, a collective identity is constructed. While groups commonly engage in processes to reify their collective identity, this becomes all the more transparent while faced with an external threat. The collective stories recounted by the group provide the justification for reinforcing existing boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. The identification of an out-group enables the in-group to emphasize their internal similarities and thereby strengthens group cohesiveness. The in-group possesses the ability to act in a unified manner. Stereotyping and negative labelling are part of this process.

Alternative Stories

The three types of narratives outlined so far suggest that group dynamics play an important role in individual remembering. However, to some extent they over-simplify the process whereby narrators and listeners individually and as

part of groups tell and receive stories. I use the term *Alternative Memories* to describe messier accounts of individual and group memories. Alternative memories are sub-divided into five main types. The first concerns recollections that challenge the dominant accounts that emerged in the three types of stories outlined in the previous paragraphs. Throughout the outing of first hand stories in particular, many listeners questioned the 'facts' presented by the narrator. As an example, during one focus group discussion, a Catholic girl was recalling how she was attacked by Protestants who hurled a concrete brick at her when travelling home from school sitting in the upper deck of a bus. Some listeners questioned whether the laws of gravity would permit the heavy concrete brick thrown from below to reach the upper window of the bus. While this was hotly debated for a few minutes, the girl's account was eventually accepted by the group because it fitted in with pre-conceived notions of the destructive nature of the 'other' side. Through time, those who dispute individual and group stories may come to cooperate in their dissemination. Second-hand stories were less subject to contestation but this may have been due to the fact that this was not the initial airing of these stories and it is possible that aspects were challenged during the first outing of these stories and subsequently modified.

The second type of *Alternative Stories*, refer to memories which present a less favourable image of the in-group. One of the most recurring types of stories concerned those which positioned the in-group as victims reacting to negative encounters with the 'other' side. Hence, each respective in-group could claim to be acting in self-defence rather than initiating acts of verbal or physical intimidation. Such stories enabled a positive image of the in-group to be kept intact. However, often in recounting these interactions, groups would often argue over who exactly was responsible for initiating negative encounters. Occasionally it was accepted that the in-group itself was the initial aggressor. These accounts provide a less favourable image of the in-group or at least acknowledge that the in-group may be responsible for some of the antagonism between the groups. However, often the most likely outcome of these alternative versions was the acceptance of stories implying that one side is as bad as the other.

The third type of *Alternative Stories*, refer to those which question the homogeneity of the in-group (see also Shirlow, 2003). These stories referred to problematic relationships with paramilitaries in their respective communities. Because many of the teenagers tended to spend their leisure time 'hanging around' the streets, this often brought them into direct contact with paramilitaries. Occasionally, paramilitaries tried to police their negative interactions with the 'other' and discourage verbal and physical intimidation as it gave each community a bad name. Paramilitaries would also on occasion encourage teenagers to orchestrate negative encounters to suit their own agendas. However, separate from interactions concerning the 'other', many teenagers experienced problematic relationships with paramilitaries within their own community. Some stories involved being hassled on the street by paramilitaries. Protestant teenagers in particular recounted stories concerning the in-fighting between loyalist paramilitaries that had torn friends, neighbours and families

apart. Some Protestant teenagers spoke of being frightened of paramilitaries and in a minority of stories they were perceived as a far greater threat than that presented by the out-group.

The fourth example of Alternative Stories concerns individual memories that clash with the dominant 'historical' memory of events. I want to illustrate this by an example which relates to personal versus 'official' recollections of the Holy Cross dispute.² While the reasons for the emergence of the dispute are subject to highly conflicting interpretations, national and international interest in the story resulted in intense media reporting of the incident. As a result, a visual, almost step by step portrait of the children's journey to and from school made its way on to the front pages of many newspapers and television screens. The incident caused international outcry because of images of 'innocent, blameless' children sobbing with fear as they journeyed to school amidst adults shouting abuse. The Protestant community in North Belfast have had great difficulty in coming to terms with the dominant stories that have emerged concerning the incident. Rather than focus on what actually happened during the Holy Cross incident, Protestant accounts try to focus attention on the complicated (and indeed contested) root causes of the incident. Some of the Protestant boys who took part in the research lived on the street where the Holy Cross incident took place and were able to draw on personal memories to challenge dominant stories. This is illustrated in the following extract:

- Boy 1 And they're (Catholics) dead slinky. They start riots just so they can get the cameras out.
- Boy 2 Aye, they love the cameras. It gets people to feel sorry for them but it's them that starts things
- Boy 3 I know. They even build their schools in Protestant areas just for badness.
- Interviewer Maybe the areas were mixed when the school was first built
- Boy 3 No. I don't think that's right. Even if it is, they should all move now
- Boy 4 I live in Glenbyrne and you know the way it was on the news because of the Holy Cross, well I saw them holding their kids faces up to the cameras
- Boy 2 Aye they were making their kids cry and then pushing their faces up into the cameras just to make us look bad

This story was widely accepted and endorsed by the group despite an absence of visual evidence to support the interpretation. Boy 4 lived in the actual street and his personal memory was considered superior to official photographic images by the narrator's peer group. His story was sanctioned by Boy 2 yet during subsequent discussions it emerged that Boy 2 did not live in the area nor did he have any relatives or best friends in the area, thus making it unlikely that he could have been present during the dispute. Boy 2 implies that he is relying on personal recollection and his memory is not challenged by Boy 4. These stories

are similar to Foucault's (1977) notion of 'counter-memory' which he used to refer to memories that are different from and often challenge dominant accounts. The example illustrates the importance of context. Within this setting, there is a community of listeners waiting to hear such stories. As Plummer (1995: 204) eloquently puts it 'for narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear: for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics. The one, community, feeds upon and into the other, story'. These stories are political acts and they perform political tasks.

The final type of Alternative Stories, refer to more positive experiences of the out-group. Some children harked back to a golden age when relationships between the two groups were less problematic. Others recalled incidents when they had met the 'other' on holidays outside Northern Ireland and in this different environment had interacted on friendlier terms with those defined as the 'enemy'. As one Catholic girl referring to Protestant teenagers she met in Greece put it:

Like see the Protestants there, there was nothing wrong with them.

A minority referred to their parents having a mixed circle of friends:

My mummy has Protestant friends and all and they're alright

Like my mummy works with Catholics and like they're dead on.

These types of alternative story call into question taken-for-granted assumptions about the 'other'. They begin to dismantle generalized images of a disreputable 'other' locked into an antagonistic relationship. They enable the 'other' to be seen in more individual rather than group terms. However, on the whole these stories were infrequently recounted. Nonetheless, they suggest that conflicting and competing stories continue to coexist with more exclusive closed stories.

Conclusions

Two themes underlie the structure of this article. The first is to provide a grounded example of the social processes whereby individuals and groups tell and listen to stories based on real and imagined memories. This is because there has been a dearth of studies which focus on the processes whereby memories are produced and managed by narrators and listeners. As Walton (2001: 30) points out, most accounts of collective memory are not 'grounded accounts of how historical actors and narrators actually behave, how they interact in real situations, how they construct history'. The second is to begin the process of putting children's memories on to the research agenda as worthy of study in their own right that is in the here and now and not as adults recounting childhood memories.

The article demonstrates the important role that memory plays in the construction of common identities (Eyerman, 2004; Olick and Robbins, 1998). Memories are often recalled in the form of stories. Hence stories play a crucial role in the production of collective memories. According to Tilly (2003: 607), once people begin constructing shared stories about 'who they are, how they are connected, and what has happened to them', stories and identities begin to intersect. This process becomes highly potent in situations where boundaries emerge to separate us from them and where a set of stories exists about the boundary and the relations within and across the boundary (Tilly, 2003). The four types of narratives outlined in this paper illustrate how the past and present are intertwined. They reflect consensual and contested narratives producing by teenagers in a particular space and time. Both types of memories are by no means fixed but are likely to change as individuals form new groups in new spaces and across new times.

The article suggests that children's memories are a valuable source of data in their own right. There has been a dearth of studies which reflect on children's own memories. Rather the tendency has been to ascertain how memories are reproduced across generations. Much of this literature has focused on how children make sense of stories told to them by the adult generation. This approach neglects children's own memories and own story telling processes. It reflects the general tendency to understand children as in the process of becoming and not yet complete (Blitzer, 1991). As Alanen (1990: 16) points out 'The child for social theory, remains negatively defined: defined not by what the child is but by what he or she is not but is subsequently going to be'. An example of this form of thinking is evident in approaches which focus on adults' memories of their childhoods (see for example Schuman and Scott, 1989). However, these interpretations are based on adults' understandings of memories of childhoods and leave unacknowledged children's memories of childhoods.

It is not possible to predict which stories will survive and which will be lost. In this particular setting, it is also not possible to determine whether negative or more positive images of in-groups and out-groups and their relationships with each other will prevail. Stories do not exist in isolation. As Plummer (1995: 85) reminds us 'stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story tellings'. Communities operate on a number of different levels. They may be local, national or international. Some stories may remain at the level of the group. They cannot remain at the level of the individual because to emerge as a story in the first place they have to be recounted to at least one other person. In some cases, they may die at this level of exchange while in other instances they may be retold to further individuals or groups. At the level of the local community, in the short term, the stories that are more likely to survive are the ones that the community wants to hear although communities themselves are not static but likely to change and as they change this may pave the way for more dissenting stories to emerge. Indeed it is possible that dissenting stories themselves may encourage community change.

However, children have greater problems in having their stories heard compared to adults. While Trouillot (1995) argues that general accounts of collective memories often obscure the role of power, this trend is much more pronounced in relation to children's marginal and dependent status in society compared to adults. It is only recently that the stories of oppressed groups are being heard. Sometimes oppressed groups can appropriate dominant narratives and give them new meaning in their struggle for legitimacy. Eyerman (2004) discusses how American blacks reinterpreted the concept of 'race' and in the process enhanced their standing in society. However, he points out 'those more powerful "representatives" of a marginalized group can exert a discursive influence in seeking to define how their groups should be represented' (Eyerman, 2004: 162). In most societies including Northern Ireland, it is competing adult groups that struggle to produce the dominant stories that will be told to future generations. A number of recent childhood studies have suggested that modern societies are based on silencing the voices of children (Christensen and James, 2000; James et al., 1998). Indeed, the UNCRC through Article 12 has attempted to set up a framework whereby children's voices should be a central concern in matters relating to their everyday lives. Yet despite the emergence of this strategy a number of commentators suggest that while adults might listen to children they do not necessarily hear what they say. One of the most interesting features surrounding the Holy Cross dispute was the dominance of adults' accounts of how children were being affected by the dispute. A range of adults from parents, to teachers, to religious leaders, to community representative and politicians produced the dominant national and international stories concerning the dispute. Under the justification of protecting children, their voices were silenced. These children may have to wait until they reach adulthood before their voices are heard and their memories listened to.

The teenagers who recounted the various stories presented here may reach different adult audiences. Some though may remain within the realm of the peer group. The term 'recreational rioting' has recently been coined to describe the problematic relationship between Catholic and Protestant children in North Belfast (Jarman and O'Halloran, 2000). The term implies that children engage in contentious relationships with the 'other' out of boredom and the approach denies any political legitimacy to participants. Rather children themselves are positioned as the problem and links between the children's actions and the wider political environment are often downplayed. In such a climate, some of the stories told here may not reach the ears of adults particularly those in positions of authority such as teachers or youth leaders. Alternatively the stories may be used by some adults in the community as justification for the recruitment strategies of paramilitary groups. In the wider context of the portrayal of Northern Ireland as a post conflict society, some of these stories may also fall on deaf ears. Cuts and bruises of children engaging in 'senseless rioting' are no match for bodies being flown home to various countries from Iraq. The wider Northern Ireland community appear to be engaged in collective forgetfulness concerning the saliency of sectarianism and stories concerning racial attacks

now dominate local headlines to such an extent that racism is now considered as the new sectarianism (BBC News Report 8 September 2004). Within this environment the sectarian stories recounted here have no place, particularly when they relate to the experiences of children rather than adults. Rather the peace process phase provides a more conducive environment for listening to some of the alternative stories outlined here concerning positive cross community interaction. While these stories were less prevalent than those demonising the 'other' group, the example illustrates how the wider political framework may work against dominant local frameworks so that some stories are told and others are forgotten or silenced.

Notes

- 1 The numbers of pupils taking part in the research varied according to school attendance during the periods the research was carried out.
- 2 The Holy Cross dispute took place over an 11-week period in 2001 and involved residents from a loyalist area in North Belfast picketing children and their parents at a local Catholic primary school. Incidents of verbal abuse and violence occurred at the pickets and there was widespread associated disorder throughout North Belfast for the duration of the dispute.

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