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► **To cite this version:**

Andrea Campbell, Joanne Hughes, Richard Jenkins. CONTACT, TRUST AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THREE MIXED COMMUNITIES. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2010, PP (PP), pp.1. 10.1080/01419870.2010.526234 . hal-00643461

HAL Id: hal-00643461

<https://hal.science/hal-00643461>

Submitted on 22 Nov 2011

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CONTACT, TRUST AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THREE MIXED COMMUNITIES

Journal:	<i>Ethnic and Racial Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	RERS-2009-0162.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Relations, Social Capital, social networks, Collective Identity, Conflict

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In a recent paper, Robert Putnam (2007) challenges the contact hypothesis by arguing that ethnic diversity causes people to ‘hunker down’ and essentially withdraw themselves from society. Drawing on qualitative data collected from three mixed communities in Northern Ireland, this paper explores the extent and quality of contact experienced by Protestants and Catholics in their everyday lives. Themes emerging from our data are generally consistent with the contact hypothesis. There is also some support for Putnam’s theory that mixed environments can induce ‘hunkering down’ and that inter-group trust may be compromised. However, our data challenge Putnam’s argument that these responses are a consequence of ‘anomie’ or ‘social malaise’. Rather, we find that withdrawal from social activity in the neighbourhoods we observed was a calculated response at times of threat, often aimed at protecting existent positive inter-ethnic relations.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic conflict, Ethnic relations, Social capital, Social networks, Collective identity, Conflict

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3 More than a decade has passed since the historic 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Peace
4 Agreement. Supported by the majority of residents in Northern Ireland, the
5 Agreement was viewed by many as signifying the beginning of a more peaceful
6 era in a jurisdiction that had endured more than thirty years of violent conflict.
7
8 In addition to outlining the systematic steps needed for paramilitary
9 decommissioning and the reestablishment of a power sharing Executive
10 (McAuley and Tonge 2009), the Agreement intended to embed an ethos of
11 cultural recognition, respect, and tolerance in both intercommunity and interstate
12 relations.
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Despite these macro-level developments, sectarian conflict remains a problem (Community Relations Council, 2010) and segregation between Protestants and Catholics is a persistent feature of life in Northern Ireland. Today, more than ninety percent of children attend separate schools, and it is estimated that approximately 35-40 percent of the population live in completely segregated neighborhoods (see Hewstone et al. 2004). The possibility that the residential and social separation of the two main communities in Northern Ireland may contribute to inter-group tensions has long been recognized (Shirlow 2003). Darby, for example, has postulated that there might have been many more deaths, were it not for opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland for Protestants and Catholics to meet and forge relationships (1990).

Consistent with the contact hypothesis, first developed by Gordon Allport in 1954, Darby refers to 'controlled contact' (where Protestants and Catholics interact whilst retaining own group allegiance) and 'functional integration' (where members of the two groups work together in pursuit of common

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2
3 objectives) as conflict attenuating mechanisms that 'reduce and manage the
4 effects of sectarian differences' (1990, p.5).
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8 Endorsing the value of contact, and juxtaposed with efforts to reach the
9 political settlement that culminated in the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday
10 Agreement, a central plank of Direct Rule government effort during the conflict
11 years was a community relations policy agenda that aimed to tackle the problems
12 of sectarianism and division through the promotion of greater inter-ethnic contact
13 (for a review see, for example, Knox and Hughes 1996).
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22 Cross-community contact work has not, however, been without its
23 detractors. A prevailing view is that it tackles the symptoms of conflict, such as
24 segregation and division, rather than conflict's root causes, such as structural
25 inequality and disadvantage (Hughes and Donnelly 2003). Reflecting this
26 concern, progress on reaching political consensus on a policy for relationship
27 building in the wake of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has been slow. As
28 the current Northern Ireland Executive seeks to deal with the legacy of the
29 conflict and ongoing sectarianism, the debate about how best to resolve the
30 problems of division has been beset by disagreement between the main political
31 parties as to its causes (Knox 2008). This has apparently contributed to a long
32 delay in the release of a policy for 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration', promised
33 in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (2008).
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50 Concurrent with some soul searching in Northern Ireland about the value
51 to community relations of contact, the value of contact in generating more
52 positive inter-ethnic attitudes has been challenged in a recent study by Putnam
53 (2007). The paradigm-shaking results of this study suggest that there are
54 significantly lower levels of social trust in ethnically diverse neighborhoods,
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3 compared to more homogeneous communities. Against this background, and in
4
5 the current policy hiatus in Northern Ireland, this paper draws on qualitative
6
7 research to explore the issue of contact and trust in three heterogeneous
8
9 communities in Northern Ireland.
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11

12 13 14 15 **Contact Theory**

16
17 The Contact Hypothesis proposed by Allport (1954), maintains that interaction
18
19 between two opposing groups under optimal conditions should lead to reduced
20
21 prejudice. Specifically, Allport delineated four key prerequisites in order for
22
23 optimal contact to occur. First, there should be equal status among the groups,
24
25 who meet. Secondly, the situation in which inter-ethnic contact occurs should
26
27 require co-operation between groups or offer common goals to both groups.
28
29 Thirdly, cooperation between the groups involved should be encouraged. Lastly,
30
31 the contact situation should be legitimized through institutional support.
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36 As contact theory has evolved, attention has moved from establishing
37
38 conducive conditions to a focus on identifying the mediational (why contact
39
40 works) and moderational (when contact works) mechanisms involved in
41
42 successful inter-ethnic contact. Five key mediating processes have been
43
44 suggested, involving functional relations between groups, behavioural responses,
45
46 affective reactions to out-group members, and the two cognitive factors of
47
48 'learning new information' and 'social representation' (Dovidio, Gaertner and
49
50 Kawakami 2003). According to Dovidio et al. Allport's aforementioned optimal
51
52 conditions, along with personal interaction and friendship, generate these five
53
54 mediational processes, which in turn lead to a reduction in stereotyping and more
55
56 positive other-group attitudes. Within this framework, these attitudes are
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3 generalised from an individual to the other group as a whole with both cognitive
4 and affective factors regarded as contributing to generalisation.
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7
8 In relation to moderating mechanisms, research suggests that group
9 salience is an essential part of whatever it is that causes the effects of inter-ethnic
10 contact. There is a general consensus in the literature that, in order for contact
11 effects to generalise from the individuals experiencing contact to the other group
12 as a whole, the salience of group membership must be maintained during a
13 contact situation (Hewstone and Brown 1986). Conversely, however, the
14 salience of group membership tends to be associated with negative emotions
15 such as fear, anxiety, and discomfort (Stephan and Stephan 1985). In an attempt
16 to eliminate potential negative effects of contact, Pettigrew (1998), suggests that
17 category salience should only be increased over time: interpersonal interaction
18 should take precedence, followed by increased category salience and the
19 subsequent positive generalisation of other-group members. Pettigrew also
20 suggests a third step, involving re-categorization, in which group memberships
21 are replaced by a common own group identity (cf. Gaertner et al. 1993) or dual
22 identity (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). However, the most valuable contribution
23 of Pettigrew's 3-stage approach (1998) may be the emphasis he placed on cross-
24 ethnic friendships: repeated contact with an other-group friends, involving
25 affective ties and self-disclosure, facilitates the development of his three stages
26 (Paolini et al. 2004).
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55 **Conflict Theory and Putnam**

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57 Conflict theory, in direct opposition to contact theory, argues that other-group
58 attitudes and prejudices are so deeply ingrained that contact inevitably leads to
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3 inter-ethnic conflict. More specifically, according to the theory, diversity fosters
4
5 other-group distrust and own-group solidarity. In a recent article on diversity
6
7 and community, Robert Putnam (2007) suggests that most empirical research
8
9 appears to support conflict theory, and cites evidence from a variety of countries
10
11 and settings indicating a negative relationship between diversity and solidarity.
12
13 In addition, however, he argues that diversity is not only associated with lower
14
15 levels of other-group trust but that it also impacts negatively upon own-group
16
17 trust. He argues that diversity seems to activate a sense of anomie or social
18
19 isolation within communities causing people to '*hunker down*' and withdraw
20
21 from society. Putnam calls this perspective 'constrict theory' and adduces a
22
23 significant amount of evidence in its support. For example, he argues that there
24
25 is an association between a lack of social trust and systematically lower
26
27 confidence in political leaders, news media, and government and so on. In
28
29 addition, he suggests that in diverse communities people tend to avoid social life,
30
31 participate in fewer civic organisations, and feel more helpless within their
32
33 communities. In sum, heterogeneity lowers trust, at least in the short to medium
34
35 term (Putnam 2007).
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43 Putnam's research findings derive from his analysis of data from the
44
45 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey. The survey, conducted in 2000,
46
47 involved a sample of approximately 30,000 people, representing an
48
49 amalgamation of a national sample of 3000 and a community-level sample
50
51 representative of 41 distinctive communities across the United States. These
52
53 communities ranged in size from small rural areas and towns to large
54
55 metropolitan centres, with huge disparity in their ethnic diversity. The survey was
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3 conducted simultaneously with the 2000 census, which enabled Putnam to match
4
5 each respondent to census tract and community characteristics.
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8 Putnam's findings have, however, been criticised on a number of
9
10 grounds. For example, in a recent critique Dawkins (2008) points to the
11
12 methodological and conceptual limitations of the study. Among his primary
13
14 concerns are the failure to distinguish between diversity and residential
15
16 segregation, potential biases resulting from aggregation across racial and ethnic
17
18 groups, technical problems with the specification of the regression model, and
19
20 selection bias, which he considers to be more problematic than initially
21
22 acknowledged by Putnam. Furthermore, he argues that Putnam fails to provide
23
24 any explanation that might explain his most controversial finding, that 'diversity
25
26 leads to lower trust in both the in-group and out-groups' (Dawkins 2008). It is
27
28 important to note, however, that Putnam's data only indicate this antagonism
29
30 between diversity and social trust in the short-term, the argument being that this
31
32 antagonism is amenable to change in the long-run. At the same time, in the
33
34 absence of any empirical evidence, this argument is more speculative than
35
36 definitive.
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43 Alongside these weaknesses, there are problems inherent in extrapolating
44
45 research findings from the United States to elsewhere (Giddens, 2007).
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48 Putnam's hypothesis has stimulated much debate since its first
49
50 formulation, not least because it appears to oppose directly the contact
51
52 hypothesis. Taking account of this, we set out to explore inter-group relations in
53
54 three Northern Ireland neighbourhoods with roughly similar proportions of
55
56 Protestant and Catholic residents. Analysing the extent and nature of cross-group
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3 contact experienced by residents, and the prevailing social climate, we examine
4 responses to the 'other community'.
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10 **The Empirical Studies**

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12 The three areas selected for this study are amongst the most ethnically mixed in
13 Northern Ireland according to the most recently available 2001 census data. The
14 first area, A, is situated in Limavady and has an estimated population of 1679: 49
15 per cent Protestant and 49 per cent Catholic. The area was ranked 78 out of 890
16 wards on the 2005 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, positioning it
17 within the 'most deprived 10 per cent' band. The second mixed community, B,
18 is in Ballymena and has a population of approximately 2611: 49 per cent
19 Catholic and 46 per cent. Area B was the 118th placed ward on the Nobel
20 indicator for multiple deprivation. The area falls just outside the top 10 per cent
21 most deprived wards and is ranked within the 'most deprived 20-30 per cent'
22 band. The last area, C, is situated in South Belfast and has an estimated
23 population of 5115: 58 per cent Catholic and 37 per cent Protestant. Area C was
24 ranked 429th for multiple deprivation. The statistics reflect class disparities
25 between the first two areas and area C, highlighting the complexity of the
26 relationship between class, community and ethnic identity. It is important to bear
27 in mind, however, that statistics that are expressed at ward level can be
28 misleading, suggesting greater heterogeneity than actually exists: during data
29 collection we found evidence of segregation on a block-by-block, and street-by-
30 street basis within these apparently 'mixed' communities.
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57 Data were primarily collected during in-depth semi-structured interviews
58 with residents of these neighbourhoods. In each area access to individuals was
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3 gained through community groups and organizations, then through a process of
4 snowball sampling; fifteen interviews were undertaken in each location (45 in
5 total). The age of our interviewees ranged from 16 to 91 and the majority of
6 those interviewed were female; this was not a deliberate policy, it was simply
7 that women appeared to be more willing to be interviewed. It is possible that the
8 sample drawn from this form of recruitment represents a particular sub-section of
9 the population in each area. This should be taken into consideration when
10 assessing the views presented. At the same time however, this method provided
11 a means of entry to a sample that we would otherwise have difficulty accessing.
12
13 The area in which respondents were drawn was taken as an indicator of social
14 class. The interviews dealt with social identity; community membership and
15 association; contact with, and experience of, the other community; and own-
16 group/other-group attitudes and responses.
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37 Findings

38 The themes emerging from our data are generally consistent with the contact
39 hypothesis, supporting the contention that positive contact between members of
40 divided groups can reduce anxiety and promote better inter-ethnic relations.
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42 There is, however, also some support for Putnam's argument that ethnically
43 mixed environments can encourage 'hunkering down', which compromises inter-
44 ethnic trust. Having said that, our data challenge Putnam's argument that these
45 responses are a consequence of 'anomie' or 'social malaise'. Instead, our
46 interview material indicates that withdrawal from social activity in the
47 neighbourhoods we researched was a calculated response at times of threat, often
48 intended to *protect* positive inter-ethnic relations. Related to this, we offer an
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3 interpretation of own-group and other-group trust that relates to the local
4 character of direct and indirect contact between Protestants and Catholics.
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8 Dealing first with evidence in support of contact theory, the following
9 section considers the nature and extent of inter-ethnic relations in area A, B and
10 C, the value of cross-ethnic relationships in challenging stereotypes and
11 promoting mutual understanding, and the mediating processes that seem to
12 generate the positive contacts that encourage empathy and trust. Finally, we
13 consider the implications of our findings for Putnam's theory, particularly as they
14 relate to his arguments about alienation and isolation in ethnically diverse
15 contexts.
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29 *Contact and inter-ethnic relationships*

30 Interviewees, without exception, had inter-ethnic social relationships, which
31 were often strong ties that had developed as a consequence of sustained and
32 intimate contact. In the majority of cases, respondents identified some close
33 friends and/or family members as being from the 'other' community. Indeed the
34 proportion of those who were in a mixed marriage/relationship, or were the
35 product of such a union, was proportionately much higher than the usual
36 estimates of the prevalence of such unions in Northern Ireland. Maximum
37 estimates regarding such relationships are typically between nine and ten percent
38 (Niens et al. 2003). It was also clear that the opportunity for contact presented
39 by a mixed environment was a facilitating variable in the development of these
40 relationships. Some residents spoke of strong personal friendships with
41 neighbours, some spoke of having met and forged friendships through
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3 community groups/activity, and some identified their neighbourhood as the place
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5 where they were able to 'really get to know' members of the other community.
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8 In line with the results of a substantial body of empirical research on
9
10 contact (Kenworthy et al. 2005), in our interviews self-disclosure and
11
12 perspective-taking were highlighted as important processes in the development
13
14 of inter-ethnic relationships. However, it appears that there is a temporal
15
16 dimension to these processes. For example, a Protestant woman, speaking about
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18 relationships that she had developed with Catholic women in her neighbourhood,
19
20 alluded to the well-documented avoidance norms that often characterise inter-
21
22 ethnic relations in Northern Ireland during the early stage of contact (Shirlow and
23
24 Murtagh 2006).
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32 When you get comfortable with people after you know them for a while
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34 you can start to talk about politics and religion and stuff. It wouldn't be
35
36 appropriate to talk about religious beliefs or how you think about things
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38 when you meet someone for the first time. (Female, Protestant, 49, area
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40 C).
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46 She proceeded to describe how her friendships had reached the point where
47
48 discussion of controversial issues was possible, and she gave examples of how
49
50 ethnic stereotypes held by both her and her neighbours had been challenged:
51
52 '...one of the things we could talk about was their view that because I was a
53
54 Protestant I would be supportive of the Orange Parades'. Intimacy, characterised
55
56 by self-disclosure and trust, was key to the exploration of potentially tension-
57
58 inducing issues such as responses to loyalist parades.
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3 The strength of inter-ethnic ties and positive experiences of the other
4 group was also evident in the mitigation that such relations seemed to offer when
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7
8 people in a mixed environment had negative or hostile experiences of the other
9
10 group.
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15 Q: To what extent is sectarianism a problem?
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20 A: The highest. I would always be aware of it and try to keep my wits
21
22 about me. It's just one of those things - you can't let your guard down. I
23
24 don't feel completely safe. I was chased by a crowd of masked men.
25
26 Apparently they were UYM (Ulster Young Militants) that had come up to
27
28 the estate from Harryville. But I have Protestant neighbours and they
29
30 have been brilliant. (Male, Catholic, 23, area B)
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39 In areas A and B, the latter a place where sectarian attacks are common and there
40
41 appears to be an ever-present sense of danger and threat, it is noteworthy that
42
43 positive relationships not only flourish, but seem to moderate the impact of
44
45 hostile, sectarian experiences. One woman, who had moved to a mixed street
46
47 from an area of the estate where she and her family had been subject to sustained
48
49 sectarian abuse and attacks (including having the family car shot at), described
50
51 how the support she had from (other-group) friends and family underpinned her
52
53 commitment to remaining in a mixed environment. A key dimension of the
54
55 mitigating effect of positive inter-ethnic contact is respondents' ability to
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3 differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' within their own and the other
4
5 community, thereby allowing more nuanced understandings of each:
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10 To me there are two types of Protestant and two types of Catholic.

11
12 Catholics and Protestants who want to get on with their lives and those
13
14 who are bitter and want to cause trouble. (Male, Catholic, 23, area B)
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18
19 This more critical and 'objective' stance has been highlighted by other research
20
21 on contact, which points to a greater tendency for people in segregated
22
23 environments to homogenize the other group (Hughes et al. 2008). Explanations
24
25 have focused on the idea that those living in segregated areas have few inter-
26
27 ethnic encounters and therefore have little knowledge of the diversity among
28
29 other group members (Turner, Crisp and Lambert 2007). Shirlow's (2003) study
30
31 of an interface area in North Belfast corroborates this viewpoint. Shirlow's
32
33 research included interviews, where, amongst other characteristics, he
34
35 distinguished between pensioners and non-pensioners, and sectarians and non-
36
37 sectarians. Among the former group, it was found that majority of pensioners
38
39 had a history of cross-community relationships, forged prior to, and maintained
40
41 through the recent conflict. Under these circumstances and consistent with our
42
43 data on the effects of contact, Shirlow (2003) noted a greater propensity to
44
45 concede the involvement of both communities in sectarian behaviour. Similar
46
47 findings were observed among the non-sectarian group who were also capable of
48
49 rationalising the reasons for Catholic and Protestant animosity towards each
50
51 other. This is in contrast to the sectarian group where the conflict is
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3 unequivocally understood through ‘a uni-dimensional ethno-sectarian logic’
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5
6 (Shirlow 2003, pp. 86).
7

8 We also found that recognition of the variability of ‘goodness’, based on
9
10 experiences of members from both own and other groups, informed willingness
11
12 to trust:
13

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17 There’s an element on both sides that I wouldn’t trust, but the majority of
18
19 decent, honest Protestants and Catholics I would trust. (Male, Catholic,
20
21 70, area C)
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26

27 This discerning attitude also extended to analyses of ‘own-group’ culture
28
29 and tradition, where the ability to understand the perspective of the other,
30
31 generated by close relationships with members of the other group, led to a re-
32
33 assessment of own-group cultural norms and values, which might otherwise not
34
35 have been challenged:
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41 At the local Primary school they were having an exhibition to celebrate a
42
43 big anniversary. My eldest son was at the school and my husband and I
44
45 went up to see the exhibition. There was a lot of Royal photographs and
46
47 red, white and blue I thought. It was really the first time that I ever went
48
49 into that school and thought of it as a Protestant school, not a State
50
51 school. It really projected things from one side of the community and not
52
53 the other. (Female, Protestant, 49, area C).
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3 This woman is currently married to a Catholic. Her previous husband was a
4
5 Protestant and children from her first marriage attended the school in question.
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7 She describes her perceptions as having been modified by the relationship with
8
9 her second husband and his family and friends, casting a new light on taken-for-
10
11 granted aspects of her own culture, which she has come to see as denigrating the
12
13 culture and tradition of the other community. The reference she makes to the
14
15 school as 'Protestant' rather than 'state', reflects a long running debate about the
16
17 status of state-controlled schools that claim a 'Christian' rather than a
18
19 specifically Protestant ethos (Wardlow 2006).
20
21
22
23

24
25 In some cases, the more critical position evident in the above analysis
26
27 also extended to an apparently more objective and moderate understanding of the
28
29 orientations of Protestants and Catholics towards sectarianism and the conflict:
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33

34 Catholic people definitely have higher tolerance of other people and races
35
36 who are different. I feel that Protestant people feel threatened [by other
37
38 groups]. It is not through badness, it is through fear. It is through fear of
39
40 things changing. The fear that they are going to lose a grip on stuff or
41
42 that somehow life will be awful for them. My heart goes out to them, but
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44 you have to look back and think how awful it must have been the other
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46 way round. (Female, Protestant, 46, area C).
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53 This woman attributes positive characteristics to the other group, and, while
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55 acknowledging the sense of fear in her own community, contextualises it by
56
57 referencing the pain that had been experienced by the other group on the
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3 receiving end of discrimination. The ability to empathise with the out-group has
4
5 also been found in other studies of inter-ethnic contact (Batson et al 1997).
6
7

8 Finally, in these mixed communities we found a strong appreciation of
9
10 different cultural traditions and the need to celebrate diversity, to the extent that
11
12 some residents were willing to participate in, or lend support to, the staging of
13
14 events/celebrations that are normally associated with the other community:
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20 Everybody in this street [i.e. Catholic and Protestant] would celebrate the
21
22 Twelfth of July. It's not about religion. It's just a bit of *craic* (Female,
23
24 Catholic, 40s, area A).
25
26

27 This readiness to engage in 'other-group' celebrations was more apparent
28
29 in area A and B, where such events occur more frequently. (In the more affluent
30
31 areas, like area C, cultural celebrations and obvious expressions of identity are
32
33 quietly discouraged (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006)). However, consistent with a
34
35 more empathetic understanding of the other group, some interviewees
36
37 acknowledged that such events could also be provocative, and were at pains to
38
39 draw a boundary between 'acceptable' celebrations, and cultural displays that
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41 might threaten good relations:
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48 I don't think there should be flags up all year. I don't think there's any
49
50 need, it's to do with sectarianism. Sports wise, certainly, Saint Patrick's
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52 Day, certainly, Twelfth of July, certainly. Each side has their own
53
54 fun...but for other times of the year, I don't think there's any need. I
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56 think it makes people ill at ease and people can't live properly with it.
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59 (Male, Catholic, 46, area A).
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6 This respondent is voicing a widely held view that flags not removed after an
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8 acceptable interval following an event, can transform in a community psyche
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10 from legitimate and acceptable cultural expression, to territorial markers that
11
12 symbolise a power struggle, as one community seeks to assert its dominance over
13
14 the other (Jarman and Bryan 1998). The appeal to boundary maintenance in the
15
16 above quotation is made with a view to preserving the positive relations that
17
18 currently exist between the two communities. At the same time, it challenges the
19
20 avoidance culture in Northern Ireland that seeks to neutralise mixed
21
22 environments (Hughes et al. 2008).
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27 This section has presented qualitative data that lend weight to the
28
29 argument that contact, particularly when it is sustained and close, may ameliorate
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31 anxiety and lead to more respectful and empathetic understandings of the ethnic
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33 Other. In the next section, we explore data from these ethnically mixed
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35 communities in the context of Putnam's argument that diversity equates with
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37 'hunkering down' and diminished social capital. We also raise some conceptual
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39 questions about what it actually means to trust, and particularly to trust ethnic
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41 others, in situations of ethnic diversity.
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48 *Diversity in mixed neighbourhoods*

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50 Like Putnam, we used census data to define the most ethnically mixed wards in
51
52 Northern Ireland when selecting our case study areas. Unlike him, however, our
53
54 qualitative approach was keen to explore 'personally defined' neighbourhoods,
55
56 which exist in the lived experiences of residents. From this perspective, we
57
58 found considerable variation in terms of opportunity for contact with the other
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3 community. Although in area C residents reported widespread mixing, area B
4
5 and A are, demographically, patchworks of sectarian interfaces and mixing,
6
7 sometimes on a street-by-street basis. Most residents have narrowly-defined
8
9 spheres of affiliation, with many indicating an attachment to their immediate
10
11 surroundings and the people within them, rather than to the estate or wider
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13 community:
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20 There's no trouble in this area. I know there would be trouble across the
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22 street, but it never comes to this street. This street is mixed but across
23
24 there it would be Catholic. (Female Catholic, 40s, area A)
25
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28

29 Hence, at sub-ward level, which is not picked up by the census, there may be
30
31 considerable variation in the extent of and opportunity for mixing. This finding
32
33 reinforces a point made by Amin (2002) who, advising caution against statistical
34
35 indicators of integration, argues that it is not inevitable that ethnic groups actually
36
37 'mix' in mixed areas. Although we focused on those who had a significant
38
39 degree of contact with the other community, it was clear that many in area B and
40
41 A had limited opportunity for contact and, living at what are effectively mini-
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43 sectarian interfaces, had generally hostile experiences of the other community.
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48 In his work, Putnam recognises the potential difficulty in using the census
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50 tract as a proxy for 'neighbourhood':
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55 The real neighbourhoods in which people experience their daily lives
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57 likely vary from census tracts. Obviously no nationwide survey could
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3 gather contextual data on personally defined “neighbourhoods” for all
4
5 respondents, so it is difficult to address this issue empirically. (2007: 10)
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10 However, Putnam goes on to argue that, insofar as the error introduced by the
11 mismatch between objectively and subjectively defined neighbourhoods is more
12 or less random, the net effect is that his results underestimate the real effects of
13 diversity. Our data suggest, however, that neighbourhoods at sub-ward level are
14 not just subjectively defined, they are objectively real and measurable alternative
15 units of analysis that challenge the use of census tracts or wards as proxy
16 measures of neighbourhood diversity. The fact that these alternative units are
17 mixed or segregated is concealed by even small-scale aggregate census data, but
18 has important implications for policy and planning, and for perceptions of the
19 present state of peace and conflict in Northern Ireland. Not least, our
20 understanding of ‘sectarian interfaces’ (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006) may require
21 some considerable rethinking.
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38 Our observation that in Northern Ireland neighbourhoods *within* census
39 wards may be mixed or segregated, and experienced as such, challenges some of
40 the assertions that Putnam makes on the strength of his argument that distinctions
41 at this level are more or less irrelevant. The next section explores our data and
42 Putnam’s in relation to his arguments on the correlation between diversity,
43 hunkering down, social capital and trust. The material we present is interpreted
44 according to the subjective reality of neighbourhood experience as articulated by
45 respondents.
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'Hunkering down'

Fear and sense of threat in the mixed areas that we studied can sometimes lead to 'hunkering down', described by Putnam as 'pulling in like turtle':

Community relations wouldn't be the best. There's a divide. I just don't bother with anybody because I don't want to get dragged into anybody else's business. I don't bother with anybody. I don't have conversations with anybody on the street. I just basically say hello. I would never stop to have a conversation with anybody about the way things are up the street...I just don't get into conversations with people. (Female, Protestant, 45, area A)

However, in direct contrast to Putnam, we found that this 'hunkering down' is often a temporary response to external events (such as, for example, sectarian attacks, the other group's parades and commemorations, or canvassing by political parties at election times). In this sense it is a device employed to preserve inter-ethnic relations that already exist, rather than, as in Putnam's argument, a consequence of the absence of such relations. In the above quotation the interviewee is married to a Catholic and reports many Catholic friends and family members.

Alongside some evidence of hunkering down, and in conflict with Putnam's finding that diverse communities are characterised by anomie and social isolation, we found considerable evidence of residents from mixed neighbourhoods who were willing to extend themselves or to take risks on behalf of friends and neighbours from the other community:

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6 This would be quite a close-knit community. Last year a number of
7
8 youths put up Irish flags. Do you see the complaints I got, they were all
9
10 from Catholics who didn't want to offend their Protestant neighbours.
11
12 We have Protestants round here and some of them have lived here longer
13
14 than us. They have a right to live and they have a right to live in peace.
15
16 They shouldn't have to look out of their windows at flags. Believe it or
17
18 not, that's what the case was. The Catholic residents wanted the flags
19
20 down so as not to offend their Protestant neighbours. So between me and
21
22 my daughter, and another girl we got the flags down. We spoke to the
23
24 children and got a couple of older ones to help us – people who had
25
26 grown out of all that carry on. We approached them and they helped us
27
28 talk to the children. So we got them taken down. We had to talk and
29
30 talk. (Male, Catholic, 46, area A)
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39 Efforts like these to tackle sectarianism and offensive behaviour were
40
41 commonplace and are examples of drawing on social capital that exemplify
42
43 norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, which Putnam sees as intrinsic to the
44
45 concept. Moreover, to use Putnam's term, they are manifestations of 'bridging
46
47 capital' between Protestant and Catholic community members. This evidence for
48
49 bridging social capital resonates with previous research that has explored the
50
51 concept in Northern Ireland (see for example, Acheson and Milosky (2008);
52
53 Cairns, Van Til and Williamson (2004); Campbell et al. 2008).
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57 In contrast to Putnam's argument that ethnic diversity challenges social
58
59 solidarity and inhibits social capital (2007: 2), our data suggest the possibility
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3 that in Northern Ireland, diversity, and its attendant inter-ethnic hostility, may,
4
5 where relationships of trust have been established, encourage shared social
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7 action.
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10 11 12 *Inter-ethnic Trust*

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14 Putnam found lower levels of trust in diverse neighbourhoods. In contrast, we
15
16 found that trust is a complex concept which cannot easily be measured by an
17
18 item on a questionnaire that asks respondents to indicate 'how much' they trust
19
20 members of other (ethnically-defined) groups. The following interview extract
21
22 reveals the multilayered dimensions of trust in an ethnically divided context:
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29 Q: Thinking about your close friends what factors would you consider
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31 important in terms of friendship?
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36 A: Well religion doesn't figure at all. Things like loyalty and shared interests
37
38 and something in common. Sense of humour...Someone who I trust.
39
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43 Q: You mentioned trust. Do you think you can trust a Protestant and a
44
45 Catholic equally?
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51 A: To be honest, I'm not sure. I guess there's probably part of me that trusts
52
53 Catholics more, either because I know them better or I know their
54
55 background better. I mean I couldn't deny that's true. It's not a huge part
56
57 but there is that kind of wee notion that I understand the Catholic better. For
58
59 instance take a Protestant and a Catholic friend of mine...I kind of
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1
2
3 understand the Catholic better because I understand, well I feel I understand
4 their experiences more than I understand the Protestant experiences....but it
5 wouldn't be trust in that I wouldn't trust their [Protestant friend] advice or I
6 wouldn't trust them to look after my children. It would be more, kind of,
7 trust of their interpretation of something. I would probably be more inclined
8 to trust the Catholic version of something over the Protestant version if I had
9 to make a choice. I guess there is always going to be that difference of
10 backgrounds that may become an issue under certain circumstances.
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12 (Female, Catholic, 34, area C).
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27 This woman articulates subtle differences in the trust that she might have for
28 Protestant and Catholic friends. Hence, whilst she would trust Protestant friends
29 to look after her children, she might be less inclined to trust their interpretation of
30 an event or issue that relates to inter-ethnic division in Northern Ireland. Her
31 reference to the fact that differences in background may become an issue under
32 certain circumstances resonates with the views of other respondents. Some of
33 those who claimed to trust implicitly their friends from the other group also
34 stated that at times of threat from the other group, trust could be challenged.
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46 These data suggest a relationship between perception of trust and identity
47 salience: where cross-cutting, non-ethnic identifications are prioritised (such as
48 female, mother, carer, friend) trust is implicit. However, when ethnic
49 identifications become salient, trust responses are more variable and conditional.
50
51 In asking his respondents to indicate how much they trust whites, blacks,
52 Hispanics etc., Putnam is unlikely adequately to capture the levels of trust that
53 may exist in circumstances where ethnicity is not the most salient consideration.
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3 Finally, Putnam found lower levels of own-group *and* other-group trust in
4 ethnically diverse communities. Our research also suggests the possibility that
5 trust levels might be generally lower in mixed communities. However, there is
6 little evidence in our data that this might be attributable to disengagement or
7 anomie. Rather, as noted above, we found respondents to be more discerning
8 about who they trusted in both their own *and* the other community because
9 experience of both groups in the divided context underlined the perceived
10 potential within *each* group for good and bad.
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25 **Conclusion**

26 Our data lend support to the idea that opportunities for sustained and intimate
27 contact afforded by an ethnically mixed context have implications for promoting
28 ‘better’ inter-ethnic relations. In sum, and consistent with a significant and
29 growing body of empirical and theoretical literature, we find evidence that
30 sustained inter-ethnic contact, can promote perspective taking and acceptance of
31 and respect for difference. We also found that residents who reported significant
32 inter-ethnic contact also demonstrated ‘other-group empathy’ and a more critical
33 and nuanced response to both their own and the other group. One manifestation
34 of these positive ‘contact effects’ can be seen in the support received by victims
35 of sectarianism from members of the other group, and in the willingness of
36 people to extend themselves on behalf of Others. Hence, rather than weak social
37 capital characterising mixed neighbourhoods, our data at the sub-ward level
38 suggest that positive inter-ethnic relations, in the context of an ethnically-divided
39 broader social context, may serve to galvanize some people to action that
40 challenges sectarianism and inter-ethnic hostility; in Putnam’s words,
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4 'Enabling...participants to accomplish goals they could not accomplish without
5
6 that network' (2007: 138).

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8 More generally, though, the response to inter-ethnic tension is to
9
10 withdraw; 'keeping yourself to you' is the Northern Ireland colloquial equivalent
11
12 of Putnam's 'pulling in like a turtle'. However, although the response is the
13
14 same in each case, our data suggest that it may have other antecedents and
15
16 causes. 'Hunkering down' in Northern Ireland is more often a calculated
17
18 response to threats that emanate from beyond the boundaries of the mixed
19
20 neighbourhood, than a consequence of social malaise or anomie. It seems - and
21
22 this may be to state the obvious - that more positive inter-ethnic relations are
23
24 more likely to prosper in non-threatening situations and/or when the particular
25
26 threat has been removed. A more significant issue in the Northern Ireland
27
28 context may be the nature of threat in the eyes of its victims; understanding this
29
30 is likely to be important for efforts to ameliorate ethnic conflict and division in a
31
32 lasting fashion.

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38 Finally, there is some continuity between our argument and Putnam's
39
40 'constrict' theory, in that residents of our mixed neighbourhoods showed
41
42 themselves to be discerning about *who* they trust. In particular, they appear to be
43
44 less trustful of 'own-group' members than might be expected. Diversity does,
45
46 indeed, seem to have a moderating effect on trust relations in some
47
48 circumstances. In trying to interpret this, we speculate that in neighbourhoods
49
50 where segregation and mixing occur on a street-by-street basis, residents may be
51
52 more attuned to the potential for positive and negative inter-ethnic relationships
53
54 and responses. In this respect, it could be that negative experiences of
55
56 'unknown' other-group members are tempered by supportive relationships with
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3 other-group friends and neighbours. Similarly, witnessing sectarian acts
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5 perpetrated by members of one's own group on other-group friends may
6
7 undermine trust in one's own group.
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10 Our data also suggest that we should not assume a blanket trust response
11
12 towards the other group that applies in all situations. In harmony with contact
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14 theory, we observed that when cross-cutting identities based on common
15
16 interests (for example, community development, sports, arts etc) or shared roles
17
18 (for example, mother, social club member, community worker etc) became
19
20 salient, negative trust, which was apparent when divisive identities were salient,
21
22 diminished somewhat. Interestingly, Putnam himself acknowledges the power of
23
24 'reconstructed' identities to break down ethnic tensions:
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32 In particular, it seems important to encourage permeable, syncretic,
33
34 'hyphenated' identities; identities that enable previously separate ethnic
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36 groups to see themselves, in part, as members of a shared group with a
37
38 shared identity. (Putman 2007: 161)
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43 Whilst Putnam accepts that cross-cutting identities and 'superordinate' group
44
45 goals promote better inter-ethnic relations, his explanation of the change process
46
47 seems to conflict somewhat with his dismissal of the contact hypothesis. For
48
49 example, 'reduced social distance' (p.159), the 'undoing of past segregation'
50
51 (p.161), the relaxation of ethnic endogamy (p.162), and cultural assimilation
52
53 (p.162) are all presented by Putnam as mediators of inter-ethnic trust and social
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55 capital in the US. He avoids the obvious questions of *how* and *why* these
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57 processes evolve: 'Recounting exactly how that happened would require another
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3 article longer than this one' (p.162). However, and accepting the complexity of
4 ethnic change and the myriad of influencing factors (legislative change, policy
5 intervention, the revision of social and cultural norms, etc.), there can be no
6 question that inter-ethnic contact is a contributory factor. To state the obvious,
7 for example, increased inter-ethnic marriage (explicitly mentioned by Putnam) is
8 unlikely to have happened in the absence of intimate relationships between
9 members of different ethnic groups who, at some level, acknowledge their ethnic
10 group memberships.
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22 Our data, although small-scale, suggest a possible alternative to Putnam's
23 argument that ethnic diversity causes lower trust and encourages 'hunkering
24 down'. Instead, in a shift of emphasis, we argue that, rather than being an
25 obstacle to increased inter-ethnic contact, lower trust and social withdrawal may
26 actually be a necessary consequence of it. Nor do we see more discerning trust
27 responses and withdrawal from potentially conflictual situations as necessarily
28 negative strategies; rather, they may be ways of protecting inter-ethnic
29 relationships that already exist.
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41 Finally, Putnam found that, in general, civic engagement and social
42 capital are negatively correlated with ethnic diversity. One notable exception,
43 when social capital did appear to be higher in diverse neighbourhoods, was
44 attachment to social reform groups. Again, this harmonises with our evidence
45 about Catholic and Protestant neighbours and friends demonstrating commitment
46 to tackling division and sectarianism through cross-community effort. Without
47 wishing to labour the point, such initiatives are often borne of positive contact.
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57 According to Putnam, other measures of social capital are lower in
58 ethnically-diverse areas; this may also be true in Northern Ireland's mixed
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neighbourhoods. For example, the reality of sectarian micro-interfaces in
apparently mixed neighbourhoods (where mixed and segregated streets exist
side-by-side) may make 'community' activity risky and is likely to militate
against the kind of collective activity that is perhaps characteristic of more
ethnically homogenous neighbourhoods. Similarly, residents of divided areas in
Northern Ireland are indeed likely to perceive a lower quality of life and
experience less happiness (cf. Putnam 2007: 150), as they are faced with an
ongoing sectarian threat to their own safety and that of their property (Jarman
2005).

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Interestingly, the implications of our findings for public policy in
Northern Ireland differ little in essence from Putnam's proposals for encouraging
a 'successful immigrant nation' in America. Indeed, the central tenets of his
argument seem very apposite in Northern Ireland and, taken together with a
political settlement and equality legislation, could easily offer a template for
relationship building during the transition from conflict to peace. To summarise,
he advocates the strengthening of shared identities, the creation of more
opportunities for meaningful interaction across ethnic lines, national aid to the
most divided communities, and the promotion of 'bonding social capital'
(referred to as 'single identity work' in Northern Ireland) as a prelude to the
development of secure 'bridging social capital'. In other words, he is arguing for
the encouragement of relatively safe and stable inter-ethnic contact as part - and
only part, it should be emphasised - of a long-term strategy of political and social
change. So are we.

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