



# The landscape of differences: Contact and segregation in the everyday encounters



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## ABSTRACT

The article examines everyday life in Northern Ireland's segregated communities and focus on a neglected empirical dimension of ethnic and social segregation developed within the socio-spatial relations between people and their built environment. It shows how the everyday urban encounters are reproduced through negotiating differences and the ways in which living in divided communities lead to social inequality and imbalanced use of space. The article employed qualitative research methods with individuals and community groups from the Fountain estate, a small Protestant enclave in Derry/Londonderry. Their stories were replete with cases of injustice and insights into the daily struggles that have generally occurred within theories of contact and social segregation as a whole. In fact, people in the Fountain presented their own *intertextual* references on what was more significant for them as a matter of routine survival and belonging, which allowed them to be more constructive about themselves. While segregation has persisted for multiple decades; time is believed to be the factor most likely to change it, as it is hoped that the younger generation will provide lasting change to Northern Ireland and eventual peace between currently segregated communities.

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## Introduction

'The undivided city is a myth and a utopia at the same time'  
[Ronald van Kempen (2007:15)]

The urban landscape of cities is unavoidably changing; social division spread throughout the world under a number of conflicting circumstances, such as migration, the increase in mixed ethnicity and diversity, and the clashing of civilisations. This, however, is not new; for example, the history of the nineteenth century shows how communities were reshuffled in São Paulo according to housing type, which increased social gaps between the upper class living in the centre and the poor living in the periphery (Caldeira, 1996a, 1996b). Also in South Africa, policy acts governed where citizens could dwell or work and dictated social and daily communication with the *Other* (Dixon, Tredoux, Durrheim, Finchilescu, & Clack, 2008:1550). In all cases, the in- and out-flow of divided populations will continue to grow, whether differences are marked by race, colour, age, or religion, and over time these groups will tend to display their own communal history, structure, culture, and behaviour, or even the cause of division. Urban living and social interaction in the public realm are shaped by these divisions, which become dichotomies that are strongly associated with divided cities, societies, and, ultimately, urban spaces (Wong, Lloyd, & Shuttleworth, 2014).

Research on segregation in divided cities was reinvigorated in the 1980s following the publication of *Ethnic Segregation in Cities*, by Ceri Peach, Robinson, & Smith (1981). Segregation, in their terms, produced a state of socio-spatial exclusion, polarization, and isolation between social groups and became highly associated with a series of opposing cultures that brought societies into ethnic and racial conflict (Anderson, 2008; Sibley, 1995). Recent literature comprises chronicles of conflict reinforced by critical investigations of lived spaces encounters (Boal, 2002; Hepburn, 2004; Hirst, 2005; Weizman, 2007). Paddison and McCann (2014), for example, investigated contemporary conflicts and contradictions inherent in the social experience in cities that are undergoing neoliberal restructuring, grappling questions about diversity, equity, and justice. Sophie Watson (2013) also conducted ethnographic studies on how difference is performed between the boundaries of the public and private, noting that negotiation helped to draw new boundaries when tension became relatively absent or invisible. This does not negate the existence of communities where integration has collapsed or where desegregation has made noticeable progress, but the core of the matter is its spatial scale. In a sense, aired images of *overrepresentation* and *social concentration* widely frame social domination in communities (Kempen & Ozueren, 1998:1632), with politicians voicing concerns about discourse that acknowledged these groups living fragmented lives while being dragged into political struggle;

these groups also became victims of urban planning agendas that trapped them into *fortified enclaves* to consolidate their safety and reduce crime (Weizman, 2007).

On the practical level, social psychologists gathered evidence on the mental and emotional benefits of *desegregation*, which improves levels of anxiety, positive mixed emotions, and increased tendency to form inclusive identities in which *they* become *we* (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In the early 1960s, Jane Jacobs celebrated diversity and complexity in the city, where streets allowed strangers to 'dwell in peace together' (Jacobs, 1961:72). Sennett (1970), following her tracks, discussed the sanity of low-level conflict in potentially shaping new hybrid cultures and ways of living together with differences. Others tended to push the socio-spatial logic beyond Jacobs' conceptions of informal practices and guided behaviour (Sandercock, 1998), but it is unknown how this is realistically achieved (Bridge & Watson, 2002). While the city is now celebrating a *cosmopolitan turn* for forging diverse engagement and cultural contact, an opposed version emphasizes a different world of 'distanced interaction', tied to the increasing flow of information and global basis relevant to the analysis of segregation (Giddens, 1991). One example, as Sennett suggests, is the impact of *flexible work* in drawing the future of social relations in the city (Sennett, 2005, p. 47). As argued, this 'flexible order' increases the salience of distant relations and a mentality in which people withdraw forms of public interaction (Slevin, 2000). Nevertheless, such urban diversity was accused of neglecting the *Other's* values, resulting in inequality and absence of social justice (Schiller & Irving, 2014), or even becoming a source of intolerance that intensifies discrimination (Forbes, 2004). Feminist scholars, for example, claim that gender or ethnic differences lead to space-time constraints affecting activity-travel patterns from a *time-geographic* perspective (Kwan, 2000). This view was supported by research on time and fixity constraints, analyzing the characteristics and impact of their everyday use of activity spaces, such as visits to work sites, household need, and social activities, in different subgroups. In a way, underprivileged groups seem to suffer from negative experiences faced with socio-spatial barriers through their daily encounters (Kwan, 2009).

Northern Ireland has been no exception to this debate. Various working-class neighbourhoods, shaded by lofty concrete walls, are features of urban and social segregation as physical embodiments of fear, threat, and conflict. Living spaces on both sides are controlled and monitored while lacking consumption and leisure facilities. The population perceptions flow beyond the politicization of land embodied in the lines of separation on maps and charts; yet there are serious ramifications of how public life is shared and used, raising crucial questions of how human activity and communal contact become a catalyst for conflict. I therefore engaged with the contact hypothesis literature, developed in the 1950s by Gordon Allport, and scholarship that investigated integration in the public realm and its role in mediating differences. I argue that segregated ethnic groups reproduce their individual cycles of contact and closed interaction in a way that ties with their political and social preferences. In building a closer view, interviews reflected the everyday encounters of the minority Protestant community living in the Fountain Estate in Derry/Londonderry in relation to the security barriers and explained how they influence the use of spaces. I then shed light on a relatively neglected empirical dimension of segregation and ways that could build up an intercultural dialogue, exchange of socio-spatial relations, and new urban citizenship that could be celebrated or perhaps needs closer attention.

#### Revisiting the contact theory: segregation and the everyday ...

There are various conceptions through which stereotyping and prejudice become eroded through the everyday contact. Gordon

Allport's theory in *The Nature of Prejudice* introduced in the 1950s remains the most prevalent work that instigated debates on what is branded the 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954). He advocated that interpersonal contact between different groups would potentially lessen prejudice and increase positive attitudes toward the unknown *Other*, which would reduce conflict and anxiety in return (Allport, 1954). People usually feel uncomfortable and anxious about the *Other*, and therefore fear the encounters of difference. Similarly, contact produces a sense of familiarity that engenders insights of predictability and control (Allport, 1954). The appreciation of contact shifted in the 1980s to focus on its impact on minority groups, paying more attention to their experiences, recognition, and rights. This thesis of mutuality and understanding, however, has not gone unchallenged; the debate developed as an appreciation of emotional, rather than reasoning, approaches towards contact, expressing that not only could the majority groups develop mature and close bonds with the formerly *Other* (Kwan, 2000), but indirect interpersonal contact also increases constructive attitudes between groups. Thus, little knowledge about the minority subject could endorse positive behaviour towards them.

Recent theories disclosed that contact between groups is not adequate on its own to produce respect and reduce conflict (Valentine & McDonald, 2004). Different everyday interactions in the city are sometimes not even reliable as encounters; rather, they turn out to be more quantifiable. In a social interaction study, Schnell and Yoav (2001) provided a scale to measure segregation through a set of *socio-spatial isolation indices* that paid attention to uneven distribution of unlike groups in the public space by calculating the average interaction within groups who share the same vicinity. They uncovered that there was no correlation between the territorial and the interactive dimensions of socio-spatial isolation; in fact, minority groups retained high rates of intergroup isolation, regardless of their geographical location (*ibid.*). Urban parks and gardens are also not far territories of separation. Studies theoretically disclosed that good contact and interaction emerges in open landscapes like public parks, streets, and shopping malls (Dines & Cattell, 2006), where diversity and mutual respect are expressed through behavioural patterns (Low, Taplin, & Scheld, 2009). Architects also backed this appreciation by designing urban spaces that sought to promote interaction encounters (Fincher, 2003; Sandercock, 2003). But in practice, mixed-use gestures like these hardly function in the way they were designed to and are 'not immune to re-segregation through users' practices and therefore become sites of increased conflicts (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011:720) where the diverse groups fail to interact and are accused for neglecting the presence of *Other* (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Sennett, 2005). Even in moderate cases of division, interaction becomes extremely driven by policy-making agendas that, in a way, enchanted the social and physical voids of division (Abdelmonem & McWhinney, 2015).

A fundamental voice in this debate is Giddens' thesis of structuration on the human agency and social structure dichotomy (1986). His proposition formulates the methods in which social structures empower the dichotomy of 'deterministic views of structure and voluntaristic views of agency' (Schnell & Yoav, 2001:624). Both the structure and the agency act as spatial and temporal tools in solemnizing social interactions tied to place identity and layered history in confined vicinities. This simply situates groups of ethnic or cultural backgrounds, for example, to face challenging everyday life encounters mostly driven by the historical confines and rooted mental structures of conflict and social organisms. One example is the deficiency of direct interaction within these spatial and temporal territories to practice routine travels or distanced ones, while hybridization of culture in public space is still promoted (Valentine, 2008). Therefore, segregated groups

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