Sectarian Interface Violence: Is it ‘Hate Crime’ or ‘Anti-Social Behaviour’?

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This article explores contrasting definitions of sectarian interface violence in Belfast as either anti-social behaviour or as a particular strand of hate crime. Stakeholders – i.e. individuals from various groups and agencies working to challenge hate crimes – who take the former view suggest that interface violence is recreational rioting and not underpinned by hatred per se. Conversely, other stakeholders define the problem as hate crime given the damaging impact interface violence has on communities. Sectarian interface violence is about more than bored youths simply looking for a thrill if it is underscored by deleterious notions of the ‘Other’. In this way, the paper is concerned with the apparent downplaying of sectarian animosity within a city marked by a legacy of conflict. Despite the ‘recreational rioting’ observation, interface violence characterises a pernicious divide between communities in Belfast and has the potential to exacerbate intergroup conflict.

Introduction

This article forwards the view that sectarian interface violence is a form of hate crime as provided for within the Criminal Justice (No.2) (NI) Order 2004. Hate crimes are formally recognised by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) as "any incident, which may or may not constitute a criminal offence, which is perceived by the victim as being motivated by prejudice or hate" (PSNI 2010: 3). Antagonistic behaviour at interfaces across Belfast, however, is conceived by some stakeholders (particularly community workers and members of statutory organisations) as not being motivated by hatred per se, but by other factors such as boredom and the desire for thrills. To this end, this article draws from qualitative interviews with stakeholders, gathered during the author’s doctoral study on hate crime in Belfast. Stakeholders suggest that hate or prejudice is not always the key factor driving the

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commission of criminal acts witnessed at interfaces. Such views advocate the contested ‘recreational rioting’ conception of interface disturbances (Jarman and O’Halloran 2001: 2). This shows that there are contrasting views on interface violence in Belfast and demonstrates how such violence is arguably being diluted in definition as anti-social behaviour - and therefore not treated as sectarian crime. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 formalised the term ‘anti-social behaviour’ and defined it in law as "acting in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household" (Home Office 2011: 7). Sectarian interface violence may well be a form of anti-social behaviour, as a deviant act contrary to wider social norms within post-conflict Northern Ireland. But it is also underpinned by pernicious notions of difference and hostility towards the ‘Other’.

To explore this proposition further, the proceeding sections of this article empirically explore conceptions of sectarian interface violence as either hate crime or anti-social behaviour. What makes hate crime unique from anti-social behaviour is that that the former has the potential to create significantly more harm for both victims and the wider community. This can be demonstrated within those interface communities in Belfast which have been devastated by inter-communal violence and conflict.

**Empirical Review: Sectarian Interface Violence as ‘Hate Crime’ or ‘Anti-Social Behaviour’**

In the context of Belfast as a divided place, Rodney² (statutory sector) states that peace walls erected in response to "physical changes in housing and demographics" have perpetuated antagonism between communities on either side. These physical barriers of division at interfaces "seem to be a magnet for that sort of sectarian anti-social behaviour," states Rodney. These are an interesting choice of words – Rodney defines interface violence as anti-social behaviour rather than hate crime. The reason Rodney conceives interface violence as anti-social behaviour and not hate crime, is because since young people today "haven’t been a part of the Troubles", they do not necessarily hate each other; "but because they’re living in divided communities they just see each other as the enemy." Despite acknowledging how division reinforces inter-communal hostility, Rodney’s view here makes a simplistic

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²All interviewee names are anonymized in the data for ethical reasons. All interviews cited herein took place between March and June of 2012.
assumption that because the Troubles have largely ended, people do not really hate each other anymore. Other stakeholders from the community-level (such as Barney, Daniel, Jim and John), would refute this view by arguing that sectarian enmity is endemic in interface areas and has not subsided since the Troubles ended; indeed, more interfaces have emerged during the peace process than ever existed before (McVeigh and Rolston 2007: 9).

Barney, a community worker based at the Short Strand interface in inner-east Belfast, asserts that the police regard sectarian interface violence as anti-social behaviour rather than hate crime. Indeed, he states: "we have asked them [the police] to report it as hate crime but they refuse to recognise it – they count it as anti-social behaviour…but to me and the rest of the community, we count it as hate." By his use of ‘we’, it is important to point out here that Barney is referring to how sectarian violence should be treated as hate crime when it is committed against either of the two communities, i.e. Catholic Short Strand and Protestant inner-east. The police, however, are arguably ignoring the wishes of the community and their representatives, such as Barney, to treat interface violence appropriately – that is, as an expression of hatred towards the ‘Other’ community. As a community worker based in a particular interface area, Barney therefore defines interface violence as hate crime in antithesis to the ‘recreational rioting’ label applied by other stakeholders.

**Recreational Rioting**

I asked Thomas (PSNI) if he viewed sectarian interface violence as hate crime. He replied: "Well, a lot of it is recreational rioting..." As a senior member of the PSNI and involved in key official strategies to challenge hate crime in Belfast, Thomas’ view of sectarian violence as recreational highlights how stakeholders are labelling sectarian violence as a form of thrill-seeking, not specifically underpinned by hatred. David (community worker) also supports this position saying: "I would see it [interface violence] as an anti-social thing. If kids are going down there to fight on interfaces [it’s] because they’ve nothing else to do; it’s something to do with their leisure time...its recreational rioting." By emphasising the recreational aspect of interface violence, this arguably ignores the wider divisive context in which interface violence occurs. That is, interface violence is not simply recreational – it is sectarian; and, therefore underpinned by some form of bigotry, hatred, or prejudice towards the ‘Other.’ For instance, the violence which occurs in places such as Ardoynne or Short Strand – particularly during the summer months (marching season) when community tensions are high – is arguably about much more than just bored youths looking for thrills.
Brian (west Belfast community worker), when talking about his work in engaging with young people from both sides of a particular interface in west Belfast, claimed: "we thought at the start that one side is trying to free Ireland and the other is trying to defend Ulster; but none of them had a clue about that: it’s the thrill they’re looking for!" This account also suggests that interface violence is devoid of any political or religious context. Brian claims that interface violence in the area he works within is "more about anti-social behaviour…it’s more recreational rioting that’s going on." Nevertheless he also acknowledges that "in north Belfast it would be different because there’s always been an enshrined sectarian hatred." This reflects the socially constructed nature of the term ‘hate crime’ relative to a given social context. That is, in the post-conflict era in Northern Ireland, the advent of the relatively new concept of hate crime is a way of labelling and challenging old problems of sectarianism within a particular framework. However, the anti-social conceptions of interface violence downplay sectarian hatred between divided communities, hence the construction of interface violence as merely recreational.

Crawford (community worker) also provides a view of sectarian interface violence as thrill-seeking, which he suggests is analogous to anti-social behaviour such as football hooliganism. Converse to Barney’s views, Crawford claims – from his experience engaging with young people involved in rioting at the Short Strand interface – that the young people in question knew each other, had each other’s mobile phone numbers, and would both mutually participate in the organising of a riot. Ted (west Belfast youth worker) also claims experiences of a similar nature, whereby youngsters who apparently were friends with each other from across different interface areas, texted each other to ‘organise’ a riot. Ted thus claims that in some cases interface violence is recreational and is not always underpinned by intense enmity towards the ‘Other’. In this way, Crawford questions whether hatred is the key motive underpinning interface violence: “So my thinking is – is this based around sectarianism, or just anti-social behaviour?”

Crawford states that he does not like the diminutive term ‘recreational rioting’ to describe interface violence; but he nevertheless argues in favour of the anti-social behaviour debate stating that: “some people like the excitement of rioting, it doesn’t mean they hate the people they are rioting against; they just like to riot." Crawford argues that there is "a culture of violence" in Belfast which he feels underpins the recreational aspect of interface rioting.
Harry (PSNI) would agree with Crawford’s analysis of interface rioting as being underpinned by a culture of violence. Harry suggests that owing to the legacy of the conflict in Belfast, violence became the norm within particular communities whereby it was seen as a legitimate means to exercise grievances. Hence Darby argues that a culture of violence became the norm in Northern Ireland owing to the nature of the conflict, whereby "the routine procedures for maintaining law and order failed, and society largely accepted violence imposed by sub-groups within its boundaries" (Darby 1997: 111). However, in the post-1998 Agreement era, sectarian violence is no longer the norm and greatly undermines notions of a shared future and a peace process. It is problematic that sectarian interface violence is being constructed as anti-social behaviour or recreational rioting because this serves to downplay the extent of sectarianism in Belfast at present.

Perhaps for some stakeholders, hatred is too strong a word to describe what occurs at certain interfaces in Belfast. Some stakeholders in particular areas stress the anti-social inclinations of rioters as not motivated by hatred; while others, such as John (community worker), suggest that hatred and division fuels interface rioting – it all depends on the level of hostility between both communities within a given social context and how it is perceived and interpreted. Nevertheless, defining it as merely anti-social or recreational ignores the dynamics of tension, rivalry and hostility at interface areas. Barney therefore challenges such notions of recreational rioting or anti-social behaviour by stressing the hate-motivation in interface violence:

_The reason they’re attacking the other community – I work with mainly the loyalist community – when they throw stones in at the Short Strand, they’re attacking them because they hate Catholics; they’re not attacking them for any other reason than that you know!_

Labelling the problem as recreational, then, side-lines the antagonistic context of division which arguably perpetuates interface violence, in both Barney and John’s views. Indeed, the use of the term ‘recreational rioting’ to describe interface violence is vehemently rejected by John: "I detest the term recreational rioting…I think the term recreational rioting feeds into the notion that sectarian interface violence is not really a hate crime."
The Harm and Impact of Interface Violence as Hate Crime

This section offers quite a converse view to the notion that interface violence is merely recreational rioting. Indeed, by looking particularly at the harm hate crime has caused in the Short Strand area of east Belfast, this is in contradistinction to Crawford’s aforementioned assertions that interface violence is an anti-social activity not motivated by enmity. Thomas (PSNI) suggests that:

...even if it [interface violence] is recreational rioting, it can still quickly turn into something more serious if windows are smashed or if somebody gets hurt, and if something goes on for two or three nights...it could easily explode into something bigger.

Thus Thomas acknowledges the harms which ensue from interface violence and the consequences of it escalating into a wider conflict. Thomas’ views appear to contradict the view that recreational rioting is devoid of any context or hostile motives. If interface violence has the potential to exacerbate wider social-political conflicts, as Thomas suggests, then it must be underpinned by much more than recreational rioting (which is usually undertaken by bored youths seeking thrills) and therefore can be considered a hate crime. Hate crimes greatly affect communities by threatening social cohesion. On a wider societal level hate crime has the potential to: exacerbate conflict between ethnic groups; polarise communities; deepen divisions; and reinforce antagonistic attitudes and behaviour towards the ‘Other’ (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino 2002: 222; Craig 2002: 87; House of Commons 2005: 9; Perry 2001: 17).

Jim (east Belfast community worker) provides a first-hand account of the serious impact that the sectarian riots in inner-east Belfast during the summer of 2011 had for both communities:

There was about 200 people, and armed with baseball bats, bricks and bottles, and they attacked the homes here on the right-hand side here [Jim points to nearby houses between the Albert Bridge road and Castlereagh Street3]...and that’s where it [the riots] all started. It escaladed, and it moved from here onto

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3This data is from ‘a walking interview’ the author did with Jim whilst being shown around the Short Strand interface in inner- east Belfast, June 2012.
the lower Newtownards Road, and all hell broke loose down at Saint Matthew’s chapel and Bryson Street [Catholic/nationalist area in Short Strand]. It was like the fucking pogroms of 1972, or 1971, that’s how bad it was.

Jim illustrates the damaging impact sectarian hate crime has for escalating wider conflicts and greatly damaging community relations. From his experience working within the Short Strand area, Jim argues that interface violence is a pernicious expression of sectarian hatred. He suggests that most people living on both sides of the interface want the violence to stop; but there is a small minority of perpetrators who commit sectarian hate crime. Thus Jim defines interface violence as hate crime, not anti-social behaviour.

During an interview, Jim took the author to Saint Matthew’s church (a Catholic Church on the Protestant/loyalist Newtownards Road, inner-east Belfast) to illustrate the visible damages of sectarian hate crime on an interface: there was sectarian graffiti daubed on the church and the remnants of paint-bomb attacks could still be seen on its walls and roof. Moreover, during the disturbances surrounding the summer riots of 2011 on the Newtownards Road, Jim recounts the pernicious nature of interface violence: cars in the area were damaged and burnt during bouts of sectarian hostilities; and:

...young republican youths actually came up here and attacked these houses [points to houses along the lower Newtownards Road] with baseball bats and broke the windows; they [local residents] then put up grills there in their windows every night [for protection].

These examples, which highlight the harm and negative impact of interface violence upon communities, lend to the argument that it is a form of hate crime: there is evidently a sectarian-based motive in attacking the ‘Other’ community which has resulted in criminal damage. The harms created by sectarian hate crime at interfaces in the Short Strand area of inner-east Belfast are also highlighted by Barney. Barney claims that despite local residents reporting "that their houses are being hit by stones or their property is being damaged, the police don’t recognise it as a hate crime." Barney therefore argues that the police, by way of following the official definition and related legislation, should define interface violence as hate crime: the community view it as hatred (therefore it satisfies the requirement that “it is
perceived by the victim as being motivated by prejudice or hate”), and innocent victims (i.e. local residents) have been impacted by criminal damage arising from sectarian tension and violence. Stakeholders working on other interface areas of Belfast also account for the damaging impact hate crime has for both victims and the wider community. John argues that "interface violence makes life a misery for people on both sides of the interface…they live in fear, they live in a completely disorientated nervous state most of their lives." Thus John views sectarian interface violence as a pernicious form of hate crime which has damaging emotional and psychological impact for victims. In this way, it is much more than simply recreational rioting.

Conclusion
There is a significant downplaying of sectarian interface violence in Belfast, particularly when it is conceived of as recreational rioting. Due to the varying conceptions of interface violence, there is a need to properly identify and distinguish that interface violence is an expression of deleterious sectarian animosity. One implication of defining violent sectarianism as anti-social behaviour is: when stakeholders adopt this view, they are arguably failing to address sectarian hatred among young people by not exploring fully the nature of sectarian conflict at interfaces. Nevertheless, other stakeholders argue that sectarian interface violence is very much underpinned by rivalries and hostilities between divided communities and therefore do treat interface violence as hate crime. This article has argued that sectarian interface violence is a form of hate crime. This point is underscored by two key factors: first, interface violence requires definitions which match the harm and damage it creates for people living within such areas. Sectarian violence at interfaces is therefore criminal behaviour, largely motivated by intergroup enmity; which in turn creates physical damage to property and heightens anxiety and uncertainty within communities. Secondly, interface violence undermines wider norms of a peace process and a shared future in its potential to exacerbate intergroup conflict. Not treating it as hate crime arguably renders the point and purpose of the 2004 hate crime legislation a meaningless by-product of failed attempts to address sectarian hatred in Northern Ireland.

Following the advent of hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland in 2004 through the passing of the Criminal Justice (No. 2) (NI) Order 2004, hate crime is defined as criminal acts perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated by prejudice or hatred (PSNI 2010).
Bibliography


