Growing up in Northern Ireland

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JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

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This report gives insight into the lives of a group of 18 young people from Northern Ireland during a period of profound economic, social and political change, from the mid- to late-1990s to 2010.

The young people featured in this study were part of a larger, long-term project and this study draws on their biographies and shows the impact of youth-relevant policies on real lives. It also identifies gaps and weaknesses in policies and service delivery.

Using case studies, the report looks at:

- the role of mobility in young lives;
- the legacy of the 'Troubles' on transitions;
- the factors influencing young people's response to critical events in their lives, and the impact on their mental health and wellbeing;
- how young people connect to and participate in different communities (including local and family); and
- how the messages from these stories could be used in policy and practice.

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Executive summary

This report describes a study that revisits a group of young people in Northern Ireland who have been interviewed up to seven times since 1997. Together with young people in four other sites in the UK, they form part of the Inventing Adulthoods study (see Appendix). The report discusses the aims, method and findings of the Growing up in Northern Ireland research in relation to a decade of social and political change in the province and to policy for young people over this period. The broad concern of these longitudinal studies is the construction of adult identities through time.

Ten long case histories present the full biographies of these young people and these are the primary source for our findings. Shorter case studies have also been produced for all of the young people in the study and some of these are drawn upon in this report. The case studies provided here are intensely individual but reflect the broader issues drawn out across the young people's accounts. The report contains a snapshot of changes since the last interviews in 2004/05 and an account of the latest interviews, revealing a picture of young adults moving between college and university, between work and unemployment and training, leaving and returning to home and country, with shifting relationship status and caring responsibilities.

Mobility played a central role in young people's sense of self, and in their transitions to adulthood. The ability (or not) to access an independent social life, to travel abroad, to leave home for work or education, or to set up an independent home all featured in young people's narratives of identity and adulthood. In the earliest interviews (1997–1999), young people's accounts emphasised the importance of place and of negotiating local and community spaces and boundaries on an ongoing basis. For some, education and more middle class backgrounds acted as passports to geographical and social mobility. For others, local networks embedded in working class communities facilitated links with a cosmopolitan and global community via the Irish diaspora. Typically, these were important for young men who retained connections with their Northern Ireland community.

The case studies for Donal and Maeve illustrate how access to the possibilities of mobility acts as a resource for young people, both in growing up and in their relationship with their families over time. By keeping close links with families, yet making their own personal and physical journeys, young people at times juggle competing forces that can hold them within the home and familiar patterns but can also allow them to escape and transform by building their own networks and ultimately their own sense of who they are.

In the context of Northern Ireland, the concepts of security and risk take on meanings that are historically and locally specific, associated with conflict, policing, paramilitarism and territorialism. Although the ceasefire remained in place, sectarianism and paramilitary activity continued to have a significant impact on the lives of young people, particularly those living in working class areas. Their experience of space, place and mobility is often coloured by the fear or threat of violence or sectarianism, or the legacy of such experiences in their community. How they are able to use and move through the spaces and places of their local environment is central to their coping and survival strategies while growing up, and – as data from this project suggests – early experiences of conflict and sectarianism can influence future transitions.[1]

Close-knit communities and extended family networks fostered a strong sense of belonging and protection. Young people who encountered challenging life events such as bereavement, unexpected pregnancy, paramilitary expulsion, education- or work-related stress, debt, job loss, relationship break-up, or depression often retreated to the shelter of familiar spaces in communities or families. The darker side of some close-knit communities also emerged, however, as young people who flouted community rules found they were rejected for wanting more out of life or to live outside the locally defined community boundaries.

Sectarianism and discrimination influenced housing and education pathways for a number of young people, as did relocation, the death of a parent, and reconstituted families for others. The case studies of Adele and Cynthia attempt to capture how young people experience and manage some of the many facets ofrisk.

Without casting their stories from the shadows, repeated accounts of stress, depression and despair created a composite narrative that suggested increased psychological pressure and vulnerability among these young people. This created concern for their mental health and emotional wellbeing and we observed that

many struggled on their own without accessing support. The report discusses mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people and briefly reviews statistics and policy strategies. There is clearly a need for both targeted and generic services, and it is a critical part of the picture to create access to and raise awareness of such support services. Barriers to help can be as much cultural as practical.

Although young women in the study experienced and talked about stress, feeling down and depression, the number of young men who did so was particularly striking. Their coping strategies and lack of knowledge about support and resources were also of interest. Case studies for Luke, Adrian, Danny, Neville and Joss highlight the impact of major life events on young people's pathways, and on their mental health and wellbeing.

Young people's personal and family relationships are worked out within the broader frame of the political and social environment in which they live, and woven into the fabric of their local community, with its own distinct identity and values. Intercommunity relations within Northern Ireland remain an issue for the government and the population as a whole, whether between Catholic and Protestant or between local communities and those that have settled from other countries.

Priorities for the young people we spoke to this time were family, work, housing, and their children's education, where relevant. But these priorities continue to be shaped to a greater or lesser extent by Northern Ireland's recent troubled history. With consideration of the broader historical and political context for Northern Ireland over the period of the study, the case studies of Sheila and Alice illustrate the many different aspects of community as lived and experienced by the young people in that time, and the variety of their relationships with community and significant others.

'Single mother' is a well rehearsed public and policy identity label. The 'single father' is perhaps less common but, unusually and unexpectedly, young men account for three of the five young people in the current study who are parents. Luke, Adrian and Patrick have four children between them and all have become single parents in complex circumstances. There have also been some difficult legal battles in relation to their children. All have invested heavily in their role and identity as a father, one that each has found both challenging and rewarding.

In Chapter 7 of the report we discuss major areas of the young people's lives and draw out the policy implications. This covers education, employment and training, housing, mental health and emotional wellbeing, participation and citizenship, and community and relationships.

1 Introduction

This report gives voice to the life stories of a diverse group of young people from Northern Ireland who generously participated in a qualitative research project over a twelve-year period. Their most recent contribution to this process was facilitated by support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) between 2008 and 2010 and comprised in-depth interviews with 18 participants, now aged 25 to 33 years. The data from these interviews adds to a rich collection of information generated during a period of significant political, economic and social change in Northern Ireland. The opportunity to re-interview this particular sub-group, after a gap of four or five years, has greatly enriched an already unique dataset which is currently being archived as the Inventing Adulthoods project with the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) Qualidata service (McGrellis, *et al.*, 2001, Thomson, *et al.*, 2002, Henderson, *et al.*, 2007).

The Inventing Adulthoods study

The Inventing Adulthoods study started out as a three-year project to capture and describe the moral landscapes of young people, aged 11 to 18, across five different sites in the UK including Northern Ireland. Further funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) over the next eight years allowed us to follow a sub-sample of this group, across the five sites, on their own personal journeys to adulthood.[2] This produced rich insights into the tapestry of young people's lives over time. Throughout the study, data from the Northern Ireland site gave witness to the particular challenges and opportunities faced by the first generation of young people to grow up in a post-ceasefire (1994) post-Agreement (1998) society. Falling between two generations in terms of experience, culture and history, as well as age, this group of young people journeyed into adulthood during a period of significant political, economic and social transition. Buoyed by what appeared to be a new dawn that offered new opportunities, they sought to realise their desires and dreams in different areas of life, including education, work, leisure and consumption and domestic life. (See model of adulthood in Appendix.)

The longitudinal approach allowed us (and the young people) to observe and reflect on 'critical moments' in their journeys and the consequences of these on different spheres in their lives over time (Thomson, *et al.*, 2002). Young people identified a wide range of situations, events and experiences as critical or influential. These included family-related events, such as moving home, illness and bereavement; education-related events, such as leaving school; starting work; engaging in different leisure activities and moving into different social spaces; and significant moments in relationships. How young people responded to such events, including those over which they had no control (such as illness, bereavement and family disruption), depended on the resources available to them, the timing and if and how they changed their lives in the light of such events (Henderson, *et al*., 2007). Critical moments feature heavily in the narratives presented in this report. In addition, this most recent round of interviews allows us to document the effects of the economic recession as felt by this generation, and how their resilience and resources have been tested.

Method

In the previous round of Inventing Adulthoods interviews in 2004/05, 27 young people from Northern Ireland took part in individual interviews. Of these, 18 were re-interviewed for the more recent study. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed.

The digital revolution has aided research by enabling us to keep in contact by text message, email or phone in the interim period which makes the possibility of another interview four or five years later a little easier. In some cases, the interval was even longer. On a few occasions contact was re-established by the young person via an invitation to connect on Facebook. Alerted to the possibility of 'tracking down' others through this medium, the Facebook site was searched and contact was made with people who had otherwise been lost to the project.

The interview schedule was developed with input from the rest of the Inventing Adulthoods team and the Project Advisory Group and included all the main areas covered in previous interviews.[3] Young people were invited to give an update on education, work and training, family and relationships, housing, community, health and leisure. Specific questions were also asked in relation to politics, security and policing. Although the interview schedule was used, each interview followed its own course dependent on the individual journeys young people had taken since the last meeting. The key aspects or critical moments in these intervening years very often steered the direction of the interview, for example in the case of a family death or trauma, or an active decision to change the course of their lives. Some young people approached the interview with a need to 'off load' and some admitted that the interviews constituted a form of 'therapy'.

Part of the focus of this wave of the project was to consider the link between policy and practice, and how policies affected young people's lives over the past decade or more. Focus group participants (representing those delivering and informing youth policy) responded to a condensed case study of a young person who had been interviewed seven times between 1997 and 2010.[4] The group was invited to consider the policy context in which the young person journeyed to adulthood, and to identify structures and interventions that supported and worked well and those that perhaps failed or were missing.

A decade of social and political change in Northern Ireland

The young people from the Northern Ireland site are now in their mid-20s to early 30s and have grown into adulthood during a significant period in the political and social history of Northern Ireland. Although not by design, the data collection for this study coincided with significant moments in the recent political history of Northern Ireland, including the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the Referendum (May 1998), the establishment of the devolved government (1999) and its subsequent suspension (2002) and re-introduction (2007). While politicians and those in positions of power and influence negotiated, re-negotiated and thrashed out settlements and deals, sectarianism and violence continued in the streets and in the communities where the young people lived. The ceasefire remained largely intact but the process of moving towards an inclusive and peaceful society was, and continues to be, delicate.

Policy and practice

Devolved government was set up in Northern Ireland in 1999 but was suspended again for five years between 2002 and 2007, during which time direct rule applied. The key policies and initiatives relevant to young people growing up at this time therefore came from both central and local government. A research and policy mapping exercise was carried out as part of this research (McGrellis, 2009) and gives details of the main policy initiatives, action plans and strategies. A summary of the policy context follows.

Education

In education, the main debates and initiatives over this period included: changes to the transfer system from primary to secondary school and the end of the 11-plus test; the implications for education delivery of the Review of Public Administration; the future of integrated education; the inclusion of citizenship education and the community relations agenda within the formal education sector; and concerns about the high numbers of young people leaving education with no formal qualifications and poor literacy and numeracy skills. The Education Maintenance Allowance was introduced during this time, encouraging some young people to remain in education beyond the age of 16. A major review of the Northern Ireland education system was conducted in 2006 (Bain, 2006) which had implications for the delivery of education in many of these areas.

Employment

Updated statistics from the Labour Force Survey, ONS UK (The Poverty Site), suggest that around one in twelve 16–18 year olds in Northern Ireland is not in education, employment or training (NEET), a somewhat

lower figure than that of any other region but a rise in recent years. While unemployment figures for Northern Ireland are comparable with the UK average, a much higher percentage of those aged between 18 and 24 are registered unemployed. Of the 24,000 in 2009 who were newly registered as unemployed, 37.5 per cent were aged between 18 and 24. In 2010 the unemployment rate for 16–24 year olds was 19 per cent, more than three times the rate for older workers, representing a sharp increase from 12 per cent on 2008 (The Poverty Site).

Policy responses to youth unemployment in Northern Ireland have largely followed Westminster government initiatives. New Deal, for example, was introduced in 1998 as a training to work scheme for those in the 18–24 age group who had been unemployed for more than six months. This was replaced by the Steps to Work programme in 2008, aimed primarily at 18–24 year olds, and the Training Success programme for 16–18 year olds. The Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills (NIAES, 2010) has developed a series of proposals to help address the current unemployment trend and high level of economic inactivity. These proposals include a plan to strengthen state intervention and to improve links between departments, agencies, employers and local agencies that are responsible for welfare to work policies.

Emotional and mental health

In relation to emotional and mental health, the Northern Ireland government responded to increasing evidence of the serious mental health problems suffered by children and young people with reviews such as the Bamford Review (Bamford, 2006), and with the Children and Young People Funding Package (CYPFP, 2006). The latter paid particular attention to counselling, mental health services and marginalised young people. The mental and emotional health of children and young people was a key part of the Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2003–2008 (PHA, 2003) and the Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan 2006–2011 (DHSSPS, 2006b) was the outcome of a taskforce set up in 2005 in response to the increase in the number of young people dying through suicide. For the most part, progress in implementing the recommendations of the Bamford Review has been slow and resource allocation to this area has been limited.

Alcohol

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety launched an Action Plan in July 2009 (DHSSPS, 2006a) in response to concerns about the use and misuse of alcohol by children and young people in Northern Ireland. High consumption levels, the prevalence of drinking to excess and alcohol-related anti-social behaviour steered the actions and measures outlined in the plan. This followed the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006–2011 (DHSSPS, 2006a) which was launched in 2006. The new government strategy and other studies have identified young people who are homeless, excluded from school, looked-after and those from lower socio-economic groups as most at risk from alcohol and drug misuse.

Housing

The social and political history of Northern Ireland has left a segregated housing legacy, with almost 100 per cent of public housing in Belfast segregated along religious lines. This pattern extends across the province to a lesser but still significant degree. Northern Ireland is also the only part of the UK that does not recognise the specific needs of young people aged 16 and 17 by awarding priority to this group under homelessness legislation. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that there is a disproportionate number of single person households on the housing waiting list. The scale and nature of housing need among young people in Northern Ireland is particularly marked and the recent findings from the Youth Speak young people's housing charter underlined the 'need for more information across all housing options and a more flexible approach encompassing low-level support' (Kelly, 2010). The review of policy and research in this area continues to illustrate the effects of segregated housing in terms of the delivery and uptake of services (health, leisure, education, employment), and attitudes and behaviour.

Looking at the data through time: context of the Northern Ireland study

This study of young people in Northern Ireland is embedded in the Inventing Adulthoods study, in which these young people were interviewed up to seven times since 1997, along with young people in four other contrasting sites in the UK. This longitudinal study has produced a wealth of rich data on a diverse group of young people across the UK growing into adulthood at the turn of the 21st century. An archive of the data is currently being prepared for secondary use, through Timescapes (Timescapes Archive, University of Leeds) and ESDS Qualidata, and data from the Northern Ireland site will be part of that archive. It is not possible in this report to represent fully the richness and complexity of such an extensive dataset. Detail is inevitably lost in the interests of highlighting key themes (see Appendix).

2 The big picture

The young people in the Northern Ireland site were last interviewed in 2004/05 when 27 young people took part in the project. We hoped to re-interview up to 20 of this group in the current JRF project. In the end, 18 full interviews were completed and telephone conversations were held with three others. For some, this constituted their seventh interview.

Table 1: Statistical comparison of 2004/05 and 2009/10 interviews

Status	2004/05 No. of people	2009/10 No. of people
FE college	3 (11%)	0
University	10 (37%)	1
Part-time study	1	1
Full-time work	5 (18.5%)	10 (55.5%)
Part-time work	8 (27%)	2
Unemployed	9 (33%)	5 (28%)
Living with parent(s)	13 (48%)	7 (39%)
Sharing with gf/bf	2	5 (28%)
Sharing with friend	9 (33%)	4 (22%)
Living on own with child	2	1
Living on own	1	1
Single	16 (59%)	10 (55.5%)
Couple relationship	11 (41%)	8 (44%)
Parent	2	5 (28%)
Stayed in NI	17 (63%)	8 (44%)
Studying outside NI	9 (33%)	2
Working outside NI	1	3
Returned to NI	0	5 (28%)
	n = 27	**n = 18**

A snapshot of change from 2004/05 to 2009/10

Table 1 summarises the changes in the status of the group as a whole in terms of relationships, education, work and housing/mobility.

Not all the young people interviewed in 2004/05 were re-interviewed in 2009/10 and it is therefore not possible to compare the two sets of information directly. However, we know that three young people who were unemployed (or in training schemes) in 2004/05 were again unemployed at the most recent meeting. One person had completed university and was now on incapacity benefit, and another had lost work as a result of the slump in the construction industry, making the total of five unemployed in 2009/10. Seven young people were living with parents and this is a smaller proportion of the total than in 2004/05. Only three of this group had consistently lived with parents between 2004/05 and 2009/10. Four others had left home for work or study and have since returned. Five of the young people are now parents, four of whom became parents since the last meeting. In terms of geographical mobility, eight of the young people were still in Northern Ireland, five of whom had left for work or education and returned. One had returned and left again, and five continued to work or study outside Northern Ireland.

Common themes

The personal biographies behind these figures give an insight into the meaning and motivation, consequences and outcomes of situations, events, critical moments and choices for this small group of young adults. Although each individual's path has been different, there are common themes across the group. They have all grown up within a relatively homogeneous geographical space, and yet their experience, interpretation of and relationship to that space are also highly individual.

An account of the overarching themes (Chapters 3 to 6) to emerge from the data gives a sense of young people's connection to social space and local place, as well as a description of their physical and social mobility over time. It outlines the changing nature of risk in their lives, and identifies key and critical moments and their impact on health and wellbeing. The final part of Chapter 5 considers the significance of intimate family and wider community and social networks, and how these interrelate and feature over time. The significance of these themes is illustrated by brief cameo case studies.

Chapter 7 considers the findings of the research within the context of pertinent policy areas.

3 The local and the global

Mobility, space and place

Travel, mobility, space and place have featured strongly in the narratives of young people from Northern Ireland. From the outset, their relationship to the spaces they lived in, bordered on, had links to and aspired to suggested a community both embedded in and restricted to local spaces but aspiring to and focused on the 'outside' or alternative spaces (McGrellis, 2005). A complex and paradoxical relationship gradually unfolded over the years in which the young people were both fixed and fluid in relation to place and each individual biographical account created new insight into this complexity. With the benefit of a longitudinal method, we observed and considered how access to and use of social, cultural and material resources influenced patterns of mobility, and how critical moments, and responses to these, propelled people on their personal journeys. The conditions for 'getting on' in life, achieving social mobility, did not necessarily follow or depend on a particular set of circumstances or events. As well as being influenced by the availability and use of resources, and social and cultural capital, 'getting on' and 'getting out' had as much to do with the pull of relationships, with communities and their values, and with class and gender, as they had to do with an individual 'can do' ethos (Thomson, *et al.*, 2003).

In Inventing Adults we were interested in the relationship between the local and the global. For example, to what extent and how were aspects of youth culture available in media and via the internet on a global basis incorporated into local youth cultures. Accounts of their personal journeys showed us how young people relate to local and global spaces. We observed the central role that mobility played in their sense of self and in their transitions to adulthood. The ability (or not) to access an independent social life, to travel abroad, to leave home for work or education, or to set up an independent home featured commonly in young people's narratives of identity and adulthood. Some young people displayed strong affiliation and identity with their local community and neighbourhood, and thrived on the recognition and respect they garnered from within very boundaried geographical areas. Others only achieved this recognition and respect by moving beyond their home and local area and establishing an identity based on new roles and responsibilities developed in new places and different spaces. For example, a number of young men, in particular, achieved success and re-invented their identities through work abroad, none of which transferred easily on their return to Northern Ireland.

In the early interviews (1997–1999), the young people presented biographical accounts that depicted the centrality of place and described the significance of the local spaces and boundaries they negotiated regularly. For some, this meant avoiding certain neighbourhoods and streets; for others, it meant changing out of school uniforms before visiting relatives in a neighbouring street to avoid being identified as one religion or another. Gender, class and ethnicity mediated access to and relationships with areas and boundaries, and some young men acted as guardians of territorial spaces and 'policed' boundaries, 'defending' their communities at interface areas (McGrellis, 2005). Over time, we heard how young women took tentative steps across these boundaries in pursuit of a growing leisure industry, making connections and friends and, in some ways, re-evaluating their own strongly held attitudes and prejudices. At this early stage, the young men from working class communities merely watched as 'their girls' moved into other spaces, 'plucking up the courage to move over the town'.

Young men who exercised more freedom and choice were those whose mobility was licensed by class. Coming from more middle class backgrounds, as teenagers they travelled across community and territorial boundaries to pursue niche interests and hobbies. It is interesting to note that these young men continued to travel across boundaries and in turn left Northern Ireland to pursue higher education and work.

For some, education and more middle class backgrounds acted as passports to geographical and social mobility. For others, locally based networks embedded in working class communities facilitated links with a cosmopolitan and global community via the Irish diaspora. Unlike those who travelled for education, young working class men who left Northern Ireland for work in the construction industry, for example, hooked into

and identified more strongly with diasporic communities that provided a connection with and an extension of their communities and place of origin. The linkage and flow between local (communities and place) and global (spaces, networks, ideas, communication) enabled an easier return to their communities of origin for these young men when, for example, work opportunities evaporated abroad.

Case studies

The two condensed case studies below, Donal and Maeve, illustrate how access to the possibilities of mobility acts as a resource for young people both in terms of growing up and in their relationship with their families over time.[5] By keeping close links with families, young people at times juggle competing forces that can hold them within the home and familiar patterns but can also allow them to escape and transform by building their own networks and ultimately their own sense of who they are. Families and local communities can hold and protect but can also facilitate mobility through extended networks and the provision of social, cultural and material resources (Thomson and Taylor, 2005).

Donal

The local and global economies of labour and mobility, sociality and networking are all visited in Donal's biographical account. On the surface his is a story of 'being stuck' – of immobility and cyclical unemployment, combined with a medley of courses, government-sponsored training schemes, volunteering and engagement with creative arts initiatives. At another level, his story is about change and gives an account of the impact of the Celtic Tiger boom and the subsequent economic bust, and of a traditional Ireland that sees an influx of migrant workers who influence the shape and meaning of local spaces and challenge attitudes. His story gives witness to the impact of technological change and how social networking sites, for example, lead people virtually and physically beyond the confines of their narrow local spaces.

For a number of years, Donal was deeply embedded in a world that both nourished and stifled him. Local networks and relationships provided an important sense of belonging for him and gave access to a community. But it was these very same networks (gay scene, creative arts connections) that gave him permission to remain where his quest for fulfilment was thwarted. Donal was one of the oldest participants in the project. We met him through an outreach project when he was 23 years old and he had by that stage already experienced the formal and informal education sector as well as periods of unemployment and training.

Donal had come from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland to find work and follow his dream of a creative lifestyle. As a young gay man from rural Ireland, he found that the city he arrived in offered him the opportunity to become closely involved in an emerging gay scene and to take part in numerous arts projects. The sectarian backdrop that so coloured the biographical stories of other young people growing up in this city, and their limited use of space, was less evident in Donal's accounts. His concept of social space was more crucially determined by the level of perceived risk of homophobic abuse and attacks. After moving to the city, he quickly became involved in the local gay support group and then became involved with Bob, an established figure in the gay community. This relationship defined his experience of locality to a large extent. Registered unemployed for the majority of the first six years he was involved in the project, Donal's sense of adulthood was mostly played out in the domestic arena (Thomson, *et al.*, 2004). His relationship with a key player in the local gay scene allowed him to feel competent and recognised, his sense of identity and adulthood intricately linked to a partnership relationship.

Although this relationship gave Donal a huge amount of security and a sense of self, his quest for adventure and perhaps for an independent life saw him restless. By the third time we met, Donal had been in the relationship for four years, had been on various government training schemes, including New Deal, and was questioning where his life was going in the longer term. Donal's sister was working in Asia. Given an opportunity to break the cycle, Donal capitalised on her contacts and, with financial support from his parents and partner, he left to take up a one-year teaching post abroad. His return to Northern Ireland marked a change, if not a total break, in his relationship with Bob and within a year of his return they had split up. He now experienced life as dull and unfulfilling, regretted coming back and became disheartened as he registered unemployed again and started the cycle of short-term courses and training schemes. One of these six-month

schemes, Work Track, took him to America for a couple of months. Although it was enjoyable, aged 27 he felt old among the rest of the group and became even more disheartened on his return with just another certificate 'to stick on the wall'. This empty-handed return to Northern Ireland sent Donal on a downward spiral. 'Back in this situation again', he became a 'bit depressed'. He was somewhat isolated and spent hours on Gaydar, the gay social networking site. Following up friendships and potential relationships initiated on this site, he travelled back to America to meet a man who offered much in addition to marriage. This adventure was short and sweet and was the first time Donal had considered a relationship since he and Bob broke up. The ease with which the journey was contemplated and taken casts light on the link between the local and global, and how worlds both shrink and expand in this networking medium.

The role of family in Donal's life, and the presence of his family base, was less obvious in early interviews. He had already left home when we met him initially and his family featured primarily in relation to how they accepted his sexuality, as well as providing a place of retreat to recover and unwind. His parents, and particularly his father, had found it difficult to accept his sexuality. In later interviews, particularly the last, we learn more of how his family facilitated his physical mobility. His siblings supported him with the benefit of their travel and work experience, providing introductions to work and social networks when he travelled as well as accommodation abroad and in Ireland. His parents and their home remained a constant resource throughout his many journeys and moves. A period of unemployment brought him back to the shelter and security of the parental home. A new opportunity to participate in a training course abroad was only made possible with financial support from his parents, and moral support and encouragement from his siblings.

The significant role of family is also evident in Maeve's story. Her experience of leaving home is simpler than Donal's in that she left for university. Although she returned to visit her parents, she regarded this 'leaving' as a significant time, or critical moment, in her transition to adulthood. While dependent on her parents for ongoing financial support throughout her university career, this was an agreed and expected part of this physical and psychological transitional journey.

Maeve

Maeve is a young woman whose path and relationship to place and space contrast with Donal's in many ways, and yet there are some fundamental similarities. Her story unfolded in a consistent fashion over the years, with the benefit of middle class support and resources which she used to good effect. She had access to and made use of substantial social capital. Adulthood for Maeve has been closely entwined with place and with her relationship to both local and global spaces. She was brought up in Northern Ireland by middle class parents from a mixed community background. Like Donal, religion and religious identification did not define her upbringing or identity. However, her sense of Irishness made her proud of her heritage, language and 'Irish' looks. From our first meetings with Maeve, it was clear that she envisioned her journey to adulthood in a relatively straightforward and uncomplicated way. She approached this journey in chunk-size pieces, scoring off GCSEs, A-levels, leaving home and university in an ordered and measured way.

Her use of local spaces (e.g. the city centre, pubs and clubs) as a teenager growing up in a divided city was mediated by middle class currency and, when worn, by the uniform of her integrated school. Her uniform confused people in that Catholics thought she and her school friends were Protestants and Protestants thought they were Catholics. Pupils from secondary modern schools regarded them as snobs and those from grammar schools viewed them as 'stokes' (gypsies).[6] Maeve and her friends, however, moved where they wanted to, socialised in the city centre and in each other's houses, worked in part-time jobs in local stores, holidayed abroad and travelled in and out of the country with bands, orchestras and sports groups. Territorial boundaries were unseen, and posed no barrier to what was a journey of purpose, and one that embraced a 'cosmopolitan' orientation (Henderson, *et al.*, 2007).

Maeve's family's experience was one of geographical and social mobility. Her sister left home to study in a prestigious university shortly after we first met Maeve and subsequently settled abroad. Her parents moved out of the city she was brought up in just before she started university, having semi-retired from successful careers. Maeve envisioned moving away from home to university as a significant step up the ladder of adulthood. She did not feel 'completely adult' but 'sort of on the brink of it' with the 'world as [her] oyster'. Her choice of career made it possible for her to travel extensively and in her professional capacity she has subsequently worked and lived in Australia for a year.

Maeve rarely returns to the city where she was brought up and, like Donal, finds it dull and boring when she does. All her close friends from school also left home for education or work. As a highly mobile group, they maintain contact and get together at least once a year in some part of the UK, Ireland or Europe. While Maeve plans to stay in the Republic of Ireland – a country that has become increasingly multicultural over the years – she is mobile in attitude and prepared to live wherever the best job opportunities exist for her and her boyfriend. While she is confident that work will be available for both of them in the Republic of Ireland, on her return from working abroad in 2008 she was shocked and concerned by the effects of the economic downturn and saw the country as both depressed and depressing. Maeve admitted that the concept of unemployment and recession was not part of how she or her generation imagined their future. The sense of insecurity and depression in the country concerned her. People stopped 'flashing the cash', immigrant workers returned home and the dole queues lengthened.

While living at a distance from her parents, Maeve stays in close contact with them and with her sister. The closeness of the family is maintained not by geographical proximity but by a mutual investment and vision that allows them to build and draw on a shared social capital.

The two compared

Some aspects of these two paths can be usefully compared. While Donal and Maeve were both able to avail themselves of family resources (both economic and social capital) to facilitate different stages of their journey, Maeve drew this down methodically for a project that had a defined outcome. The financial support she received from her parents, and indeed loans she took from the bank, were all part of a long-term larger plan to facilitate social and geographical mobility. Although not as obviously, Donal too had access to resources that facilitated movement. His parents, partner and siblings were at various points able to support him both financially and in kind with housing, work and travel opportunities. While his early vision was perhaps as well formed as Maeve's, in that he talked about doing a degree and pursuing a career in the arts, his path was staggered and circular. Only after extended periods of unemployment, employment training schemes, travel, and a three-year period of work in community development, did Donal finally take steps to pursue his original dream. That he twice did not follow through opportunities to attend university contrasts with Maeve's focused approach.

In his most recent interview, Donal admits regret but also acknowledges that 'part of [him] wanted to have that regret in [his] life' and that having it made him 'feel comfortable'. In this reflective mood he also acknowledges how long-term relationships with older men cultured a sense of dependency where he perhaps 'leant on partners', needing to 'be looked after', and used the fact that he 'never got to go to college' as a reason to expect such attention.

This thinking contrasts with Maeve's approach to relationships. While still at school, she engaged in her first serious long-term relationship. She and her partner met when she was 16, and a year and a half later they were still together but had a pragmatic plan to split when he left for university, believing it was unfair on them both to continue. Maeve's sister reinforced this plan, confirming that such relationships do not last. While Donal used his relationship as a reason to delay or forgo further education, Maeve used education as a reason to forgo a relationship.

Mobility and gender

The relationship between mobility and gender, and the ways in which narratives of space and territory are gender-specific, were considered in McGrellis (2005). Early data suggested that young men in particular were territorially confined to spaces that they marked and defended. As the night time economy grew in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland, we saw evidence of young women 'plucking up the courage' to 'cross over' into spaces that they previously regarded as unwelcoming or beyond their own boundary lines. The young women, in this case from a Protestant community background, embraced and colonised leisure spaces in ways that "none of the fellas" felt able to do. Six, seven, eight years later, these social spaces have evolved and changed and are no longer as familiar to this cohort. One young man, Adrian, remarked in his most recent interview in 2010 that the "young people's changed". The risk of sectarian attack has been trumped by a violence that he

associates with drugs and general lawlessness. He fears a situation where stabbings will be as commonplace in his city as they are in places like London. Even now, friends of his “wouldn’t go out for beers and socialising and that. They’d rather just have them indoors now, at home”. When asked what has contributed to this change, he identifies drugs as the biggest problem, and thinks there would be “less drugs in [the town] if there was more work for young people”.

4 Security and risk

Risk is a given part of life and is perhaps an acknowledged and expected part of growing up. In a Northern Ireland context, however, it takes on meanings that are historically and locally specific, associated with conflict, policing, paramilitarism and territorialism. Although the ceasefire remains in place, sectarianism and paramilitary activity continue to have a significant impact on the lives of young people, particularly those living in working class areas. Such young people's experience of space, place and mobility is often coloured by the fear or threat of violence or sectarianism, or the legacy of such experiences in their community. How they are able to use and move through the spaces and places of their local environment is central to their coping and survival strategies as they grow up, and data from this project suggests that early experiences of conflict and sectarianism can influence future transitions.

Young people's narratives illuminate many elements of risk and how these are mediated and managed over time. Their accounts highlight the sources of security they seek out to counterbalance and recover from exposure to challenging life events. Working at the biographical level, the concepts of risk and security can be regarded as a filter for observing individual transitions and the complexity that exists within these transitions – all of which can inform a wider youth policy agenda.

Close-knit communities and extended family networks fostered a strong sense of belonging and protection, and acted as sources and generators of social capital. Young people who encountered unexpected and challenging life events very often retreated to the shelter of familiar spaces within communities or families. In the face of bereavement, unexpected pregnancies, paramilitary expulsion, education- or work-related stress, debt, job loss, relationship break-up or depression, young people journeyed back to families and familiar communities. However, the darker side of some close-knit communities also emerged as young people, such as Adele (see below) and others who flouted community rules, found that wanting more out of life or wanting to live outside the community boundaries resulted in loss and rejection at a fundamental level.

A sense of loss and risk applied also to a small number of young people who searched for security in relationships that inadvertently stifled or restricted their mobility or project of self (see Appendix). Some young people invested in consumer-based leisure such as dance, drugs and alcohol. Others courted risk (and sought security) in sexual encounters and some, like Joss, below, sought security through the body and through her own and society's acceptance of her sexual and gender identity.

All of the above elements are in interplay with and circumscribe pathways for education, work, housing and so on. For example, sectarianism and discrimination influenced housing and education choices for a number of young people; relocation, the death of parents, and reconstituted families did the same for others. The case studies below attempt to capture how some of the many facets of risk are experienced and managed by young people.

Case studies

Adele

Adele's story is that of a young woman who is attracted and enticed by communities of difference and opportunity, is rejected and attacked by those that she dares to challenge, and is restricted by the boundaries of places and spaces she inhabits. First contact with Adele in 1998 introduced us to a 'spirited' 16 year old, intent on leaving the restrictions of her home town for bigger cities, brighter lights and greater opportunities. She described the place she came from as a "wile rough area" full of gangs, drugs and 'rackets'. The murals at the entrance to the estate ordered its inhabitants not to "bring Fenians into the estate", and not to "tout on the paramilitaries". She talked about "young fellas getting their knees done", and on one occasion about a young man who "got nails put into his knee cos they thought he was a drug dealer".

At this stage, Adele saw herself as different and a 'risk taker'. She envisaged her passage out of what she saw as small spaces and small mindedness in terms of a career in hairdressing. However, her defiance of the territorial rules of her local community at this point played a significant role in shaping her future. Despite

the blatant reminders emblazoned on walls, and indeed the staunch unwelcoming position of some members of her family, Adele brazenly walked her first Catholic boyfriend into her estate and her home, fully aware of the risk she was taking. Although she knew people who had been "put out of their houses just for being Catholic or having a Catholic friend" and was conscious that "it's not just yourself you think about, especially with a wain in the house", Adele professed a certain bravado – "if I get a hiding, I get a hiding".

Adele's prediction of her own fate was not entirely wrong. She left school to take up a college training course as a means of fulfilling her dream of becoming a successful hairdresser, working in a fashionable salon in a big city. This move took her beyond her own tight-knit area and introduced her to people from different community and cultural backgrounds. Adele "partied like mad". Distracted and attracted by a social life that was previously unavailable to her, she gradually fell away from her studies. Alcohol was a big part of the social scene and her mother feared she was also taking drugs. Adele admitted to smoking cannabis. Arguments led to her increasingly staying out of the family home and she eventually came to a decision to apply for Housing Executive property, which she at that point regarded as her only option. In order to qualify, she made herself homeless and left the hairdressing course. At this stage, she was in a steady relationship with a young Catholic man but admitted to the interviewer that at times, especially when it came to marching, she felt "wile violent towards them [Catholics], it's always there, you always come back to your own".

Coming 'back to her own' was not to be for Adele. Registered homeless, she was housed in another Protestant estate. Within a few weeks she was intimidated out of this house by masked men who broke her windows and threw paint bombs on her walls. Her relationship with a Catholic was not tolerated. Forced out, Adele applied for a house in a predominantly Catholic area and this move placed greater distance between her and her family. Over the years her relationship with her parents has weakened, to Adele's disappointment.

Adele felt both isolated and welcomed in her new location. Her life became less structured, she received state benefit and her social life increasingly revolved around house parties and drugs. In her fourth interview in 2009, aged 27, she reflected on eight years as a drug user. She got to the point where she was "fed up with a fried head" and stopped taking drugs in 2007. The drug scene, as Adele witnessed it, evolved over the years. Cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamines, cocaine and heroin all became progressively and increasingly available locally: "there used to be all this ecstasy and dope, where now it seems to be coke … at quite a young age … it is scary."

At 27, Adele still wants a better future for herself and any children she might have but sees her choices as limited. Having left school without any qualifications, no formal work experience (bar cash-in-hand service jobs) in nine years, dependent on housing benefit and too old to qualify for free college training courses, Adele feels trapped and uncertain where to turn. With the country in a recession and job opportunities limited, she feels even more disadvantaged and at risk in terms of building an independent future. She wants to 'stay away from drugs' but is aware that it may cost her relationship and social life to do so. She acknowledges the risk she faces by remaining in a social circle that revolves around drug use. She is also dependent on social security and housing benefits. To give these up for an unskilled, low paying job would cost her home and security. She talks about returning to education, but again cannot see how she could manage this financially. At a crossroads of sorts, Adele is unable to identify sources of help or guidance.

Cynthia

Cynthia, another young woman in the study, grew up in the same estate as Adele. While she was equally aware of the risks and restrictions of living where she did, part of her also valued the security of living in a very defined segregated space where a certain order was imposed by paramilitaries. Like Adele, she also had great ambitions and aspired to leave home and to leave Northern Ireland, but in fact was still living in the parental home when we last met. Her sense of security within her family and community, and her loyalty to them, are as complex as Adele's.

Young people have varying levels of control over decisions and events that affect their pathways and transitions. Having freedom of choice over exam subjects can, as we have observed over the course of this study, influence future pathways and options. Cynthia is a young woman who, from our first meeting, felt that she had little control over or contribution to make to major life decisions, and yet these decisions shaped and steered her life, often in directions that she was not happy to travel.

We had seven interviews with Cynthia over an eleven-year period. We first met her when she was 13 years old and had been living in Northern Ireland for just three years, having moved there with her family from Scotland. Being uprooted from a close extended family, a large network of friends and an environment that she idealised, Cynthia found her new life in Northern Ireland hard. She was different and was loud and outspoken. While this worked in her favour at times, in terms of attracting friends, it also made her feel isolated and misunderstood. As a strong Scottish nationalist who supported Rangers Football Club, she found the community and sectarian politics of Northern Ireland confusing. She learnt that she could not be both a nationalist and a Protestant, she could not be a loyalist and dislike the English, she could not be a Rangers supporter and wear the club strip on a Saturday in the centre of town. As she remarked: "nae wonder I don't like it here."

Cynthia moved from a free yet close-knit community to a place where the rules of engagement were unfamiliar and where a sense of safety came from identifying with and living within the boundaries of an exclusionary and homogeneous space. Despite the paramilitary ceasefires, sectarian violence continued to be an issue when we first met Cynthia in the late 1990s. She told how she and her family felt safer and "a lot more protected" once they were housed in what Cynthia described as a purely Protestant area. She felt secure knowing that loyalist paramilitaries ran the estate they lived in, making sure there were no drugs or 'bad seeds'. She acknowledged their presence when she walked home and came to accept the 'policing' they provided.

Over the years, Cynthia professed and maintained a detached stance in relation to the community politics and sectarianism that surrounded her. It was not until she witnessed such activity more closely, and became more intimately familiar with it, that she appreciated the personal and community cost. In the latest interview in 2009, Cynthia expressed distaste for the growing number of punishment activities, saying "they take their legs" to keep the members in line, and "they think they are untouchable". Bitterness still seeps through communities and young men are interested in joining paramilitary groups because, as she sees it, sectarianism is still rife. Parents are still 'teaching their children' to hate Catholics or Protestants: "old men sit in pubs telling young boys stories about the good old days when they used to do this and do that. And their boys are just lapping it up, thinking 'that's where I want to be in 30 years'". Cynthia has personally witnessed how naive and impressionable young men are 'built up' and 'railroaded' and "before you know it you're all the way in". She has also witnessed how the consequences and risk of this spill out to affect family and friends.

Throughout early interviews, Cynthia mourned the loss of Scotland and her family and friends who lived there. She talked about her plans to return to pursue higher education and to live and work in Scotland in the future. In all our meetings, the move from Scotland explained all that was negative about her life. Falling outs or misunderstandings with friends, arguments with her parents and trouble at school could in some way be linked to the ill timed and unwanted move to Northern Ireland. Over time, however, and particularly in her latest interview, she has resigned herself to living in Northern Ireland in the short term at least. It is in some ways ironic that her resolve to stay in Northern Ireland coincides with an increase in the sectarian violence and paramilitary activity she has experienced – the one thing that her parents said would reverse their decision to move to Northern Ireland.

Getting on better with her mother, in particular, and content in a small but trusting social circle, she has in some ways reduced her expectations of life and set aside some of her earlier plans and ambitions in relation to travel and work. The anger and discontent that Cynthia expressed in earlier interviews was at times directed at herself. Binge drinking to the "point of black out", casual sex and unhealthy eating contributed to a level of risk that Cynthia courted and acknowledged at different points in her life. Aged 25 in her latest interview, she reflected on such activity and commented on how she "grew up overnight". Although professing to have no regrets, she thought to herself "what are you doing?" and settled into living a much quieter life.

A deep sense of loss is tangible at every stage in Cynthia's narrative, whether emanating from moving house and country, a change in friendship circle, a loss of trust or a death in her extended family. Like many of the young people in the study, Cynthia has experienced multiple bereavements over the years she has been involved in the project. There has been significant variety in responses to death, in the resources available and in the coping strategies employed, but death and bereavement have represented a critical moment for all young people negotiating their pathways to adulthood. The impact of personal bereavement on young lives is discussed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Cynthia, Adele and others experienced and negotiated various types and levels of risk while growing up. Despite the ceasefires, the paramilitary organisations continued to have a pervasive influence on the lives of young people, and on their actual and perceived sense of safety and security. Living in areas where paramilitaries continued to exercise a level of control, and where sectarian attitudes were openly displayed, affected the life journeys of both young women. A growing drugs culture and a culture of binge drinking, fuelled by the energy of an expanding night time economy, compounded the perception of and reality of risk for many in this generation of young people. Cynthia and Adele attended the same secondary school. Cynthia went on to take a degree but Adele's ambitions for success were curtailed by a series of events that saw her drop out at 16 and become increasingly disengaged from mainstream society. At 27 years old, she was unsure how she could get back into education, find work and get off social benefits. Although Cynthia secured temporary employment after her degree, the recession was already having an impact and job security evaded her. At our last meeting she had already experienced job loss twice over.

These two young women, Adele and Cynthia, each experienced risks and setbacks related to sectarianism. Adele seemed almost to seek them out in her bold rejection of the "small spaces and small mindedness" of sectarianism, which so affected her housing experiences, and over time in her partying and drug using lifestyle. Cynthia was plunged into the situation by her parents moving to Northern Ireland, tearing her from a comfortable extended family and home life to a place she saw and experienced as dangerous, with tensions and loyalties that she found hard to grasp and even harder to accept. The impact of historical and social circumstances in Northern Ireland has had a specific impact on the young people in the study and echoes through their biographies.

5 Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Life events and resilience

Life is a journey of many ups and downs and this small group of 'ordinary' young people offer testament to that. Without casting their stories from the shadows, repeated accounts of stress, depression and despair made for a composite narrative that suggested increased psychological pressure and vulnerability among young people. The equally notable and ultimately concerning observation was that many struggled through on their own without support. The internet and social networking sites provided an outlet for Donal and Joss (below) and both used specific internet sites to 'talk' about their feelings, as did Mal, another young gay man. Two young men who feature in this chapter, Adrian and Luke, described periods of stress in their lives that led to feelings of depression and anxiety.

Northern Ireland has one of the highest suicide rates in the UK, with reports noting a rise of more than a third in the number of young men taking their own lives since the end of the 'Troubles' (Bennett, 2007). Statistics from Northern Ireland's Public Health Agency as quoted in *The Guardian* (O'Hara, 2011) show that deaths from suicide remained relatively static over the second half of the 20th century but rose by 64 per cent between 1999 and 2008. These more recent figures also suggest that suicides among the 15–34 age group accounted for the greater part of this rise. Given such stark statistics, there is a strong argument for targeting mental health services and support at this age group. Northern Ireland's Protect Life Strategy (DHSSPS, 2006b) included both a broad population approach to addressing issues of mental health (through a public information campaign promoting a culture in which people seek help, for example) and a targeted approach aimed at those identified as most at risk of suicide and self-harm. The targeted action plan recognised the need to address the mental health needs of young males with outreach programmes specifically aimed at this group. The strategy was informed by findings from the World Health Organization (2010) that suggested 16–24 year olds were least likely to say they would contact their GP.

Developing emotional resilience from a young age is increasingly regarded as a priority area and there is an emphasis in the school curriculum on promoting emotional health and resilience learning. The importance of equipping children to deal with the challenges of modern life was strongly advocated by the Young Foundation on the basis of findings from a three-year pilot study on emotional resilience (Bacon, *et al.* 2010). As well as promoting emotional resilience learning within schools, the authors recommended a holistic approach to enhancing wellbeing within communities so that, driven by central and local government initiatives and policies, for example, elements of 'psychological fitness' would be included in youth training and apprenticeship courses (Bacon, *et al.*, 2010).

There is clearly a need for both targeted and generic services and, as Neville's story highlights, creating access to and raising awareness of such support services is a critical part of the picture. Barriers to help can be as much cultural as practical. In a study for the Northern Ireland government, Dunn and Morgan (2001) reported on the barriers to essential services that participants in the study identified. These barriers included the way that information was advertised, presented or made available, often linked with community identity and religion. Stigma was identified as a barrier to accessing mental health services in particular. In an effort to make services more accessible to young people, the Public Health Agency has been involved in setting up one-stop-shop pilot projects in a few areas across Northern Ireland to provide information, support, advice and signposting for young people affected by substance misuse, mental health issues, suicide and self-harm (Northern Ireland Executive, 2010). Critical moments and life events can have an impact on young people's ability to cope and can have a profound effect on their identities and sense of self, as is evident from the stories below.

A series of significant life events including multiple bereavements, job loss as the construction industry collapsed, parenthood, relocation and a return to education overwhelmed Luke, who in the latest interview, aged 27, was carving out a new and demanding life as a single father. At the start of this interview he set the scene by indicating that he was "probably going through a bad patch at the minute". He talked about his

tendency to “try and ignore things ... try and put things over your shoulder, but things start to get heavy now and again”. When things got particularly ‘heavy’, Luke did not want to talk to his family but went to his doctor who offered him anti-depressants. Luke refused these, reflecting that he just wanted “a bit of advice or something like that”. This brief opportunity to express his feelings acted as a release valve for Luke: “as soon as I walked out of there I felt a lot better, after talking, for some reason”.

Adrian was another young man whose work and personal circumstances changed dramatically over the space of a few months. He worked hard in the construction industry in England and elsewhere, earning and saving significant sums of money. An unsuccessful business investment saw him lose money in equal measure. This loss coincided with a halt in building projects and he too became unemployed and fell into debt. The gravity of his situation found him “going to bed thinking about it, waking up thinking about it”. He was depressed and “feeling down a lot”. He had never been in a position of debt before and felt hopeless because he couldn’t get a job and was unable to pay back what he owed. Unlike Luke, Adrian talked to members of his family; he got some of his debt written off and recently started work again after almost a year of unemployment. In his view, “things were looking up” for him again, although he did not underestimate the difficulties that lay ahead as he tried to secure scarce work opportunities and save to provide for his two young children. Adrian is also a single father and elements of his story are told in more detail below.

Unemployment also featured in Danny’s narrative – a young man who successfully completed his degree and enjoyed a lucrative job in the City of London. High earnings, a ‘high life’ and high expectations were all brought to an abrupt end when his employing company folded as the markets collapsed.

Danny had experienced a period of depression when he was at university. He described then how he became severely depressed for about six months. He distanced himself from his friends and did not want to “get out of bed, eat, talk or socialise”. At that time he did not talk to friends, family or a doctor. His most recent experience of depression, related in his last interview, was linked to the end of a relationship and coincided with unemployment and loss of status. Danny described himself as “a wreck” and a “disaster”. He tells us that he did not cope well, lost two stones in weight in a short period, and “couldn’t see any of [his] friends”. While Luke found talking helpful, this is not one of Danny’s coping responses: “talking about emotional problems doesn’t really help for me, because I talk too much and it just goes on and on and on. I get into loops and cycles and nothing gets resolved. I don’t really resolve things by talking them through. I just have to stick it out then it goes away.”

Although young women in the study also experienced and talked about stress, feeling down and depression, the number of young men who experienced emotional stress and feelings of depression was particularly striking. Their coping strategies and their knowledge or otherwise of ways to access support and resources were also interesting. Neville, whose story is told below, employed a variety of different strategies in an effort to cope with the sudden death of his mother when he was just 19. More than ten years after her death, he reflects poignantly on the fact that he has not coped well, that his school education did not equip him to deal with life events such as this, and that he had little knowledge of what help might be available to him or how he might access it.

Case studies

Neville

At the age of 17, Neville’s primary aspiration in life was to succeed in his chosen career. His determination and focus stemmed in part from a belief that he had been given a second chance at life following a childhood illness, and from the inspiration and example provided by his parents. He was greatly inspired by his father who, in his eyes, “has made a success of himself”. His close relationship with both parents and a special connection with his mother, in particular, as a result of the illness which left him with a minor disability, came through strongly in our first interview with Neville.

Within a year, Neville’s life had changed significantly. Three close relatives had died but, most importantly, the unexpected and untimely death of his mother had left Neville in a state of shock and bereft of his mainstay and support in life. He told us that he “just can’t get over it at times … when it’s really hard, it’s like losing part of yourself ... Maybe the rest of them are just coping with it or looking as if they’re coping with it, but

I'm not". Neville made this observation two years after his mother's death and had been unable to "get on with life" in the way that the rest of the family was doing, as it appeared to him. He watched as others around him worked through their grief in a seemingly healthy way, getting counselling and taking comfort and support from other relationships. Neville did not feel ready for counselling at this stage but instead withdrew a little from his social circle and internalised much of what he was feeling. He appreciated the support of the friends who kept in touch with him, but was unsure whether they really understood what he was going through.

In line with the family resolve to keep going and "get on with life", and for his mother's sake, Neville completed his GNVQ. He decided not to go to university as he did not feel in an emotional or physical position to leave home and instead enrolled on a course at the local further education college.

The sense of devastation and loss Neville experienced was as poignant when we met him a year later, then aged 20. A more subtle loss was also beginning to unfold because his father had met someone new. While Neville was completely supportive of this relationship and wanted his father to be happy, he was also anxious about how it might change his own relationship with his father. He had envisaged the close friendship between himself and his father continuing to develop as they shared the family home. Neville's concerns were expressed quietly in the interview and never to his father.

When his father eventually remarried and the family home was sold, Neville moved with the new couple to an unfamiliar part of the city and into a reconstituted family. He quietly mourned the loss of his family home and the mostly exclusive access he had had to his father. His relationship with his father remained very close but "adjustments" had to be made. He was no longer the one his father "came home to", no longer the one his father "made coffee for" and no longer the one he "chatted to at night".

Over the years, Neville experienced periods of physical ill heath that reduced his self-confidence and compromised his transition to adulthood in terms of employment, a relationship and housing independence – which he regarded as the key markers of adult status. After a period of ill health, he remarked on how good it was to be able to say to friends and relatives that he was now "looking for work".

Neville eventually secured a job after a period of unemployment and taking part in the Work Track scheme. He was "fed up on the dole" and although the job was not what he had originally hoped for, it restored his confidence and status and allowed him to rent his own accommodation when he found it too difficult to live with his stepmother and family. Living on his own is both positive and negative for Neville. He likes his independence but is lonely. His choice of location is significant in that it brings him back to the area where he grew up and is more 'mixed' in terms of religious affiliation than where his stepmother and father live, an area in which he was uncomfortable because of all the "bigotry and sectarianism".

Devastation, loss and grief, and his struggles to cope are themes that Neville returns to in the interviews over the years. His resolve and determination to succeed, however, and to overcome the challenges that life throws at him, are a part of his character.

In the latest interview, Neville reflected on his response to the death of his mother, and to subsequent life changes and events. Aged 28, and more than ten years after her death, he felt in need of some kind of support or counselling to help him deal with the grief and unresolved issues. Like so many of the young people in the study who identified their own need for help, Neville had no idea what support might be available or beneficial, or how to access it. The lack of support – or knowledge of what support might exist – is evident from Neville's story and echoed in many other narratives, including those in which interviewees tell of friends who took their own lives following the death of a peer. After the immediate period of mourning, Neville found himself largely dealing with his grief on his own, not wanting to annoy or upset other family members who seemed to be moving on with their lives. The allocated 'grace' period given by schools, communities, friends or families does not always match how the bereaved person experiences grief. In Neville's case, his grief is as poignant and crippling ten years after the death as it was at the time.

Reflecting on his own coping responses and how he "just muddled through it", perhaps "talking to his father" at times or using the computer to write about his feelings, Neville highlights what he regards as a gap in his education. Given the inevitability of death and bereavement in life, he felt that school education should 'touch on' this area, and better equip people to deal with such events.

Joss's resilience in the face of emotional pain was tested to the point where, at one point, she regarded death as the only option. Like Neville, she chose to cope alone at significantly difficult moments in life, though

both of them also turned to family for support. Although it was always available, family support did not always feel sufficient or appropriate to their needs.

Joss

Pupils do not always experience school as a healthy and positive environment. For some it is an ongoing challenge and being bullied can be one of the most damaging school experiences for many young people. Joss was bullied both at primary and secondary school and, over the course of the research, links this experience to subsequent feelings of depression and isolation.

Joss is a young male-to-female transsexual, first interviewed for the project as a young man in 1998, aged 15. He was then a shy and withdrawn interviewee, offering little by way of personal narrative, hiding behind long hair and seemingly intent on confounding and confusing the researcher. He came across as a strong individualist who, in the words of others, "thinks too much" and doesn't "go along with the crowd". He was born into a middle class family and revelled in his difference while also becoming increasingly a victim of it.

From his second interview, then aged 16, Joss's resistance to school and school authority became increasingly evident. His world was more happily lived via the internet, computer games, music and creative arts. Achieving poor results in his GCSEs, he opted to stay at school and complete a course in which he had little interest, biding time until he was old enough to follow another preferred education pathway. With the benefit of the hindsight afforded by longitudinal research, it is perhaps easy to see that Joss was not particularly invested in conventional education.

At this stage he was not given to self-reflection and did not allow the researcher too close. However, there was a brief indication of a darker emotional side in his third interview, aged 17, when he commented on having a "perverse delight with being moody and pessimistic and depressed". The following year, Joss completed the GNVQ course he felt pressurised to take and was at further education college studying an arts course. The college environment suited him much better, and the research interview also seemed to benefit from a move out of the school environment. Joss was much more willing to engage and more comfortable with the research process, even admitting that he found it "interesting", given that it was something he "normally wouldn't do". It was in this interview (age 19) that he allowed himself to talk about his sexuality and the fact that he was bisexual, something he said he had been aware of from a young age. The following year (age 21) he talked more about the 'secret' relationship he was in and his hopes for leaving for university and escaping the rules and restrictions of the parental home. Joss also talked more in this interview about the effects on him of school bullying and how it threw him into depression. As well as suffering severe periods of depression, he talked about being in a "constant state of emotional pain".

Given Joss's aversion to the personal as a topic for discussion, the extent of his emotional pain can only be guessed at. Subsequent communication and meetings (beyond the end of the research) threw light on the source of this pain. An email communication first introduced the researcher to the fact that Joss was living as a woman, had changed name and was waiting for a sex change operation. By the time of the latest interview, Joss had undergone a sex change and other body modifications. Her degree course was complete, and she had returned to live in Northern Ireland. She was receiving Disability Living Allowance and expected to do so for the foreseeable future, feeling unable to deal with a regular work environment. The (still) unfulfilled desire to pass as a woman, and the negative attention she attracts when out in public, account for much of her continued unhappiness. A suicide attempt, recurring suicidal feelings and continuing self-harm throw shadows on Joss's ability to view life in a positive or hopeful way. For her, the darker clouds are always looming and the quest for happiness and acceptance seem doomed to failure. Physically, Joss occupies a very narrow social space at a local level, with little interaction beyond her family and ongoing psychiatric help. However, her world is global and diverse in that she interacts with people all over the world via the internet, on YouTube, podcasts, websites and other networking media. On these sites she shares her feelings to some degree, vents her anger and frustration, and accesses help and support from strangers she may never meet, as well as from people she has made friends with through university.

While the stories of these two young adults, Neville and Joss, are very different and distinct, they highlight the impact of major life events on young people's pathways and on their mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

One of the key points to emerge from all the stories told in this chapter is the importance of knowing how to access support services or resources that meet specific needs at crucial moments. As Luke discovered, merely talking about his worries to the doctor was enough to make him feel better.

Neville and Adrian both benefited from talking to family members but were fearful of becoming a burden; Neville, in particular, chose to struggle on alone in the light of this concern. Fear prevented Joss from confiding in family and friends when she was growing up and coming to terms with her gender and sexual identities. School was not a particularly good experience for her, and while Neville achieved academically at school, it did not serve him in terms of developing emotional learning and resilience. Hard as it is to see how the necessary support could be provided at exactly the moment required, the view of Neville and Joss's lives over time shows clearly that such support could have made a dramatic difference – as is also the case with many others in the study.

6 Community

In this chapter we consider how young people's experience of adulthood is framed and influenced by the communities in which they live and by the roles and responsibilities they have within those communities. In seeking to understand how young people invent their adulthood over time, we observed that they experience it in different ways in different contexts. Their understanding of themselves as adult was linked to how competent they felt in a particular role or setting and the level of recognition they received for that competence. In this regard, the most important settings for the young people in our study were education, work, leisure and consumption, and the domestic (in which we include family, relationships and care). Each of these settings is located within and influenced by the wider community. Young people's relationship to the wider community, their sense of belonging, their ownership and their responsibility to and for the community varied across the group and over the years of the study.

Intersecting communities: participation and citizenship

In early interviews, community relations loomed large and the young people in this study gave an account of how their lives were directly affected by sectarianism, conflict and segregation. They told of being 'put out' of their houses, of being part of or caught up in riots at interface sites, of fearing for their own or their family's safety, of being expelled by paramilitaries, or merely feeling uncomfortable in communities where all of those around them were of a different religion. Over the years such accounts became less dominant but the legacy of conflict, segregation and sectarianism has extended into their adult worlds in ways that are perhaps less stark and obvious but nonetheless present.

Family, work, housing and their children's education are priority areas for this generation now. But these priorities continue to be shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the recent troubled history of Northern Ireland. This generation could be conceptualised as falling between two eras: they are the children of the Troubles but also the first generation to grow into adulthood in a post-ceasefire society. This society is in its infancy in terms of governance and policy-making, and very much at the early stages of building a shared future. The findings from this study suggest that this group of young people has become less politically engaged over the years. In the early research interviews, many of the young people were vocal in their political views and opinions. They were aware of political debates and figures, and expressed opinions about local and Westminster politicians. They voiced political positions that perhaps echoed those of their families and the confessional communities (Catholic/Protestant) to which they belonged. That level of engagement and knowledge contrasts with the most recent findings, summarised below, which suggest a distinct lack of engagement with politics at all levels.

Young people's personal and family relations are experienced within the broader frame of the political and social environment in which they live and woven into the fabric of their local community, with its own distinct identity and values. Intercommunity relations within Northern Ireland remain an issue for both the government and the population as a whole, whether between Catholic and Protestant, or between local communities and those from other countries who have settled in Northern Ireland. Building a shared future, or good community relations, was one of the fundamental tenets of the Good Friday Agreement. A government review of community relations in Northern Ireland in 2002 resulted in the publication of *A Shared Future* (OFMDFM, 2005), a policy and strategic document in which the key objective was to achieve reconciliation through a number of policy initiatives.

This document was revisited in 2007 with the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive, and a new strategy document on community relations, *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (OFMDFM, 2010) was launched for public consultation on 27 July 2010. After a long gestation period, it came in a summer that witnessed scenes of sectarian violence and unrest that were familiar from past times and suggested that the essence of such a document was needed now more than ever. During the 'marching season', nationalist and republican communities protested against Orange Order parades that followed a route through their communities. Children as young as 10 engaged in violence and riotous behaviour, largely directed

at the police, and the media spotlight again fell on sectarian violence in interface areas across Northern Ireland. Young people who were too young to have lived through the darkest years of the conflict, and some born since the paramilitary ceasefires, were seemingly intent on acting out of blind hatred, suspicion and bitterness or perhaps merely out of wanton violence.

There is evidence from this study and from other reports (BBC News, 28 July 2010) that some young people believe they have 'missed out' on the Troubles. Listening to older members of the community romanticising or glorifying this period in Northern Ireland's history (or, as Cynthia put it, "lapping up" the stories about the "good old days"), young people are being enticed into paramilitary groups and gangs, hoping to attain similar status, respect and position within their community thirty years from now. Community workers in Belfast report hearing young people wish they had been in jail, and observe that sections of society in Northern Ireland are becoming more divided and sectarian over time.

The case studies used in this chapter are selected to illustrate the many different aspects of community as lived and experienced by young people over the past ten to twelve years. When we first met these young people in 1997/98, their focus, and perhaps our interest, depicted the most challenging aspects of living in a divided community. They described and related to 'pure' and 'bitter' communities (McGrellis, 2005), telling how they experienced communities that perpetuated hatred and instilled fear and suspicion. They relayed their experiences of delineating the boundaries of their own areas, of respecting or challenging and traversing these boundaries, and then more cautiously of linking with other communities. Young people also occupied many spaces within and beyond the confessional communities they subscribed to. Spaces and communities defined by leisure, hobby and work interests, for example, took young people beyond territorial boundaries and funnelled mindsets.

Although much has been achieved (if, at times, at a slow and laboured pace), there is clearly much work still to be done with regard to community relations and achieving a peaceful and lasting shared future in Northern Ireland. Our most recent discussions with this group point to the failure of local politicians and leaders to engage fully with young people, to interest them in political processes, and to demonstrate the relevance of these processes and activities to their own lives and communities. None of the group had voted or planned to vote in the Westminster elections of 2010. Sheila, whose story is told below, was typical in her response: "I keep saying, I says to myself you know, at the last, 'I need to vote, I'm meant to be voting you know' but ... I never did. It just does not interest me that much."

None of the group was able to name the First Minister and Deputy First Minister accurately, though some came close: "Martin McGuiness, he's a minister for something, he power shares with that Paisley guy, Ian Paisley is it? They're in power share, I think Ian Paisley is the main guy, and Martin's the deputy isn't he?" And from another, when asked if he could name the First Minister: "Not at the minute, no, it's all been changed. Couldn't tell you. It was your man Paisley, was he in it?" Another young man came closer and was able to visualise the First Minister: "Ay, I know what he looks like but I can't remember his name, is it Peter somebody? Is that what he's called?"

Though uninterested in, and even cynical about, the wider political machine and politicians, some did take a specific interest in issues that had personal relevance such as civil servants' back pay, education reform and housing planning policies. By looking at the lives of this small group, growing up as they did within the same geographical space, we can get a glimpse of how their paths have unfolded and their adult identities have been constructed alongside unfolding political, social and economic change. Central to the construction of their adult identities have been the relationships and communities they have developed and engaged with. In this next section we take a closer look at the lives of a few young people, the communities they engaged with and the impact of changing roles and responsibilities in their lives.

Community and relationships

Sheila and Alice, whose stories are summarised below, come from different social backgrounds and have very different experiences of education, work and housing – and, indeed, of community and community relations. Their stories highlight the role and importance of family and community in individual lives and pathways. Critical moments, timing, choices made and resources available in relation to outcomes are very evident in their

stories. The young men who also feature in this chapter, Patrick, Adrian and Luke, give further insight into the competing versions and experiences of adulthood. All three young men were unexpectedly faced with the responsibilities of parenthood at a time when they were investing in other versions of adulthood. The role of family and community had a significant bearing on how they responded and coped individually.

Case studies

Sheila

Sheila's parents separated before she left primary school. Her mother brought Sheila and her siblings up with little support from their father, financial or otherwise, and relied on benefits. Sheila's father was an alcoholic and in later years she reflected on how his drinking was a factor in her parents' separation. Growing up, there was no extra money for luxuries. Sheila was teased at school for her lack of fashion sense. Her mother lived from day to day and their Housing Executive home was basic. From an early age, Sheila determined to earn her own independence and to work towards a life that was very different from her mother's.

Sheila lived in a predominantly Catholic housing estate and was aware of segregation and sectarianism from a young age. Her aspirations and hopes for the future, as expressed in her memory book, aged 16, were for a "crossing over", a blending of the "red hand of Ulster and the shamrock". She had some Protestant friends but commented then that she never went to school with them, perhaps realizing that attending school together had greater potential for enduring contact and shared understanding; the cynic in her thought that it was the politicians who "keep it [sectarianism] all going".

At 16, Sheila had a couple of babysitting jobs and later worked in a local restaurant. She earned little for the long hours but found the importance of earning and having her own money greater than any sense of fair pay. She regarded education as a way out of poverty and a gateway to success and a new life. At school she was channelled more than guided in terms of education choices and options. Her quiet and reserved nature saw her accept the teacher's choices without question and in the end she fell behind in her studies. By her own admission she was lazy at school and faltered when not pushed or encouraged. Ambitions for university and a professional career fell by the wayside before she had turned 17. She failed Information Technology (once her strongest subject) and moved from one further education course to another over a five-year period. In the end she achieved four GCSEs, a GNVQ and then a BTEC in Administration, enough to get her an office job. Her friend Donna features throughout her narrative. They grew up together and shared key life events. However, they moved in very different directions and Donna, who graduated and lived abroad, achieved much of what Sheila had aspired to for herself. Despite their very different journeys, they remained friends though their different life experiences sometimes created distance between them.

Part of the reason for Sheila's disjointed education journey was early motherhood. At 18 she 'fell' pregnant. The relationship had already ended and the legal and personal battles with the father of her child exhausted, frustrated and strengthened Sheila. She determined that she would live as a single mother in her own rented house, and prove to all around that she could cope. She also determined that she would work to earn her own money because she wanted her son to see her as a working mother who took responsibility for her situation. This was not necessarily easy and Sheila discovered that a short-term contract with the Civil Service did not work financially. She was no better off than when on benefits, was physically exhausted and had little time with her child. When her contract ended, Sheila went back on benefits and worked a few hours in a café for low pay, "just to get out of the house".

While she worked, Sheila needed the support of her family and community. She had a love-hate relationship with the community and estate where she was brought up. In early interviews she expressed her desire to leave the violence, drugs and thugs. When her child was eight months old, she met another man and moved to a different part of the city with him, to a new private housing estate, with no sense of community and little public transport. She felt isolated and lonely. When the opportunity arose, Sheila made her way back to the area where she had grown up. A new private housing development was built next to the estate, a stone's throw from her mother's door, and Sheila and her partner bought one of these houses during the housing boom. Not all the houses in the development are fully finished or occupied and, unlike her experience of growing up on the adjacent estate, she does not know all her neighbours.

Relationships have always featured strongly in Sheila's biography. She admitted that she prefers to be with someone than to be on her own. Being an equal and contributing partner in the relationship is of high importance to Sheila, as is giving her children the example of a mother who works and earns outside the home.

Her relationship with her own mother is strong and they grew closer over the years. While Sheila admires her mother for bringing her family up with limited resources, and for "struggling on", she has always set her sights on achieving more than her mother and living beyond benefits and a day-to-day existence. Sheila was the only one of her siblings to maintain contact with their father and seemed to lose most from his lack of involvement in their lives. Although she once described her relationship with her father as "rocky", his death was no less of a shock even though it was inevitable and expected.

Despite the breakdown in her relationship with the father of her first child, Sheila wanted him to be a part of her son's life, and has managed to maintain this. For the present, Sheila seems to have settled into family life as a mother, a partner and, importantly, a wage earner.

Alice

Alice's story contrasts in many ways with Sheila's. She was brought up in a middle class family as a confident and assertive young woman. Her family was well resourced and Alice was able to tap into extensive social capital that allowed her to develop niche sporting and hobby interests, to access well paid summer work, to travel and to spend five years at university with parental support. While always secure in the knowledge that the support was available to her, she was also an independent young woman and believed that success and achievement in life required hard work: "if you're gonnae have something you need to work for it". While her parents encouraged her to apply for university, Alice was also interested in the emergency services. In the end she gave up this idea but – having qualified and started work in her chosen career – she is still unsure whether she made the right career choice. She enjoys aspects of her work but other areas cause her stress and sleepless nights. In the bleak economic climate, however, she is resigned to trying to hold onto her job and to the security it gives her. "Not many [firms] are recruiting at the moment with the current thing, so switching jobs isn't always the best plan". Reflecting on the choices she made at school, she comments in her latest interview: "I don't know whether I was guided, not exactly in the wrong direction, but pushed in a direction".

Having attended an integrated school, and been brought up in a quiet semi-rural area, Alice did not feel exposed to sectarianism in the same way that Sheila did. She was brought up to "take people at face value". She did not experience religious segregation at school but was aware of class differences, and that she was regarded as a "snob", for example.

Alice had a big social circle at school and, when she was old enough (16 or 17 years), enjoyed going out to pubs and clubs, meeting people and having fun. Alcohol featured as part of her social life, but she maintained what she regarded as quite a "sensible" attitude towards it. As she got a taste for an independent life outside the home and parental watch, she fostered plans for greater adventure, to travel and to "get away from Ireland or maybe just Northern Ireland". Like so many young people, Alice saw university as her chance to "escape" Northern Ireland and chose to study in Scotland, with plans to move on from there to America, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

Alice was not as embedded in her community as Sheila and did not depend on it for support or recognition. As the "third oldest daughter", her identity within the community derived from her parents, and leaving or returning to it did not carry the same emotional weight as for Sheila, for example.

In the end, her decision to return to Northern Ireland was made in the context of a relationship rather than from any real desire to live in the province. Between them, Alice and her boyfriend had amassed over £40,000 in student debt. She is currently paying back £50 each month and has worked out that it will take her 35 years to clear her loan. She still has a notion to live abroad, and would also like to buy a house, but in the current economic climate believes that both options are unrealistic and too risky. She would also like to have a family and feels that her desire to be a "young trendy mum" is passing by "as time goes on". If she were to "have one right now," she would be "37 when they're 10, it's not that it's old," she remarks "but there's going to be ones that are going to be 27 with a 10 year old". She also notes that her mother had three children by the age of 27.

Fitting “everything” into life, including the idea of motherhood, has been proving stressful for Alice. As well as working in a busy and, at times, demanding job she is committed to taking part in various sports activities, and training. She has a strong sense of duty towards her family and feels she “should” spend time with them. And then there is her boyfriend who she feels gets the short straw in terms of time and attention. Sometimes Alice feels she tries too “hard to do stuff and then it all sort of backfires”, with her trying to “be at too many places at once”.

Conclusion

Young people’s interaction with community is mediated in the first instance through family. Community allegiance, identity and belonging are influenced by the role, position, attitude and connection of parents or carers to both the local and wider community. Alice grew up in a middle class family, with lots of social and cultural capital, in a religiously mixed rural area. She attended an integrated school outside her local community and very quickly developed a social life and identity beyond that community. She left Northern Ireland to study and with a view to further travel, although she eventually returned. By contrast, Sheila grew up in a working class single-parent family, with few material resources, on a social housing estate. Her education, social life and part-time work were all located within a single-identity community and it was only when she left school to study at a further education college that Sheila had any meaningful contact with her Protestant neighbours. Her journey out of her local community was circuitous in that it brought her initially to another part of the housing estate where she grew up, then to a private housing development in a more mixed community area and, in the end, back to a new development a few hundred metres from her mother’s house. Being close to her mother for childcare and support was critical for Sheila. The shelter, support and protection that come from being physically located within her local community keep her there. By contrast, Alice has a wider experience and view of community. Leaving it from an early age to attend school meant that links were not as close and her parents’ and her own experience of work and social life took them beyond the geographical area in which she was brought up. Life was experienced on a much broader canvas, and her identity and belonging were not derived at a local community level. Both young women came from a Catholic community background but the extent to which this defined or influenced their journeys and identity was mediated by family and school experiences.

Alice and Sheila also had very different experiences of constructing and developing adulthood. Sheila felt she was propelled into adulthood when she became pregnant at 18. Opportunities to participate in education, social life, travel and work all changed for her at that point. In her view, motherhood and the responsibilities that came with it “made [her] grow up”. Sheila was anxious that she was seen to be coping and competent as a mother. Her sense of adulthood came from the recognition she received within her family and community as a single mother and subsequently as a working mother. While work was an important aspect of her sense of self, she invested heavily in the home and in turn in her relationship. Alice “would always sort of associate” being a mum “with being an adult”. She feels she is not ready for motherhood and yet feels the pressure of time in this respect. Her sense of self-doubt and anxiety within her work environment also make her feel less competent within this field of her life. It is therefore within the context of her relationship that Alice appears to derive a sense of adulthood. This is not necessarily related to the amount of time she spends on it (she feels she “should” be a better girlfriend by spending more time with her partner and “should be able to train and cook dinner”), but has more to do with where she feels most fully recognised and where she has invested most in terms of her identity and long-term aspirations.

Parenthood: being a single father

Parenthood was strongly associated with adulthood by the majority of young people across the sample, right from the initial interviews. Five of the young people in the current sample are parents (as are at least four others from the wider Northern Ireland group). Three of the five are young men who are key carers for their children as a result of a variety of circumstances. A summary of their stories is given below.

'Single mother' is a well rehearsed public and policy identity label. The 'single father' is perhaps less common and less well recognised. Luke, Adrian and Patrick have four children between them. All three of the young men moved out of Northern Ireland between the ages of 17 and 20. One left to take up a specialised degree course in order to pursue a particular niche interest and career plan. One left with few qualifications to capitalise on the construction boom and take up well paid work in England. The third was advised by paramilitaries to leave for his own safety as a result of an incident of which he was completely cleared later. Abroad, each made the most of opportunities that would not have come their way in Northern Ireland. High earnings were possible in the construction industry; travel to Europe and further afield was accessible and affordable; interaction with a range of different communities and cultures expanded horizons and challenged attitudes; and connections were established and networks developed.

Case studies

Patrick

Patrick's girlfriend became pregnant when he was in his second year of university. They both took the decision to leave their degree courses and return to Northern Ireland in order to 'make a go' of being a family. In a competitive economic climate, work opportunities were limited, however, and the job Patrick got was low paid and low skilled. They rented a flat and Patrick was determined to be a 'hands on' and involved father. When the relationship broke down, Patrick considered buying a house for himself and his child, but low wages and little job security meant he could not secure a mortgage. In the end he moved back to his parents' home, and his girlfriend and child moved to another flat. Experiencing both the financial and emotional responsibility of parenting, Patrick did not feel able to return to university and instead set about finding a better paid job with career prospects.

He eventually secured a relatively good job, though not in his area of interest. His work pattern allows him to have his child for at least half the time and to be as involved in the care as the mother. Patrick enjoys being a father and likes being a young parent. He feels it has given him a "better outlook in life … things that mattered before don't really matter any more". While he was always highly motivated, he feels he now "has something to work harder for".

After the end of his relationship with the mother of his child, he was reluctant to embark on any other relationships. He became "basically a hermit," and noticed that "when you have a wain friends disappear". When he started to socialise again, he also found that girls "seemed to kind of run a mile when they found out [he] was a father". His hesitancy to get involved with anyone was both a response to the breakup of his relationship and a desire to protect his child.

Patrick is now in a steady relationship and hopes to marry when the time is right. He would like to have another child but thinks it is "mental" even to think about it yet because he continues to live with his parents. One aspect of his role as a father "irritates" him, which is that his name is not on the birth certificate. He concedes that the most important thing is that his daughter is well cared for and realises that the child's mother receives greater state benefits because he is not named. Nevertheless, not being officially recognised as her father annoys him.

Luke

Luke had his own battles to be officially recognised as the father of his daughter and her sole provider. When his girlfriend discovered she was pregnant, they were both living in London, enjoying a good social life, "gallivanting around", earning high wages and planning to buy a house. Luke fell victim to the sudden downturn in the construction industry, and lost his contract just before the baby was due. With lower house prices in Northern Ireland than in London, he and his partner decided to move home and look for work locally. Luke discovered that his options were even more limited in Northern Ireland. There was no work at all in his field and he was forced to take a job as a data operator, which was "not his cup of tea". With financial pressures and increasing tension, the relationship began to unravel and Luke's girlfriend returned to England with their child. Like Patrick, Luke was determined to be a visible and real presence in his child's life and made regular and costly trips to spend time with his daughter.

Life changed dramatically for Luke with news of the death of his ex-partner, the mother of his child. His daughter had been left in the care of her mother's relatives and Luke fought to bring her back to Northern Ireland, believing it was his responsibility to bring her up. He rented a house in a new housing development, close to some of his older siblings and in the general geographical area where he grew up but much more 'mixed' in terms of religion and ethnicity. Having brought his young child over to live with him, both Luke and his daughter found the transition period difficult. He had to learn quickly how to be a full-time father, deal with his daughter's emotional and practical needs, and come to terms with his role and identity as a single father. He continued to do shift work as a data operator but found it difficult to negotiate shift patterns that allowed him to be at home for his daughter at night. He believes that managers and other staff members do not afford the same flexibility and understanding to single fathers as they do to single mothers.

Luke also experienced negative reactions in social circles to the fact that he was a single father. He noticed that "once they find out I'm a single father, they don't want to get to know you or want anything at all to do with you". "Chatting up" a girl at work, Luke told her about his daughter and "she got up and walked away". Such responses, and a desire to protect his child, have made Luke cautious about relationships. He has the support of a large extended family and is at present trying to work out a life for himself and his daughter. It's not all easy and even simple play can throw up challenges. His daughter "loves girly things … like lipstick and make up," which Luke says he doesn't promote because "obviously [as] a fella [he is] not going to sit and put make up on". When she falls at school, she sometimes calls for her mother but most of the time she "asks for her dad". Conscious of the gap left by the death of the mother, Luke concludes that at some point he "may be ready to bring someone in to her", but at present is intent on getting "everything smoothed out", and is "not sure how long that is going to take".

Adrian

Adrian is another young father who has endeavoured to make a life for his children in the absence of their mother. Like Luke he relies heavily on family support, and is now also at the mercy of a much more competitive, less secure and less financially lucrative work environment. He too is protective of his children and cautious about embarking on another relationship. Both young men engaged in extensive formal, legal and stressful procedures to obtain legal care, and encountered both blatant and more subtle prejudice concerning their position as single fathers.

Within a few years of moving to England, aged 17, Adrian had established himself within a social network that provided security and support, and promoted lucrative work opportunities. He worked hard, enjoyed a busy social life and saved money. He lived with other young Irish men, made friends with people from all over the world and from different cultures, backgrounds and religions, and in so doing developed an appetite for travel and new experiences.

On one of his trips abroad, Adrian met a young woman and fell in love. High earnings in England allowed him to maintain a long distance relationship and Adrian travelled thousands of miles every few weeks to see his girlfriend. Within a year they married and before long had a child. Work in England continued to be plentiful and well paid for Adrian, but when a second child arrived he decided to relocate to his wife's country on a more permanent basis in order to be around for his family and to try to establish earning opportunities. Adrian invested his savings in various business ventures not all of which were successful.

Within a couple of years the relationship ended. Adrian took his two children back to Northern Ireland, believing that their futures would be better served there. He wanted his children to be "brought up in a happy environment where there's no stress". Like Luke, Adrian secured legal custody of the children and the full support of his parents and extended family. However, when he returned to Ireland the recession had taken hold and he was unable to find work. He was unemployed for a year and lived at home with his parents and two children. Adrian found unemployment difficult and depressing: "there's nothing worse than signing on". While he had hoped to find work locally in order to be with his children while he supported them, Adrian was forced to move to England again when work opportunities slowly became available there.

Adrian is now commuting again, his wages are smaller than they were when he last worked in England, and he doesn't have as much work as he would like. However, he feels he has no alternative at present. He is saving to buy a house in Northern Ireland that he can share with his children and wants to live in the area

where he was brought up. In the meantime, the children are based with his parents. He talks to them every day and they accept that their father is working away from home so that he can take them "to Disneyland for the summer … They're happy with that, they're going to see Mickey Mouse."

These three young men have all invested heavily in their role and identity as fathers and each of them has evidently found it both challenging and rewarding. Family support has been essential in allowing them to act as key carers for their children. Immediate and extended family networks have facilitated their housing and their return to work, and given them encouragement to plan a long-term future with their children. Beyond the family environment, however, they experienced less supportive responses, whether from potential girlfriends who "walked away" or from employers and work colleagues who were not prepared to afford them the same flexibility as single mothers.

Conclusion

The personal stories of the young parents showcased in this chapter highlight their determination to provide and care for their children, often in difficult circumstances, as well as the challenges they faced in doing so. Unexpected pregnancy brings a highly significant life-change moment and for Sheila and Patrick it meant an end to their education pathway which had implications for their subsequent career paths and earning potential. Broken relationships, maintenance and custody issues created considerable stress and anxiety in the lives of these young people. Decisions made with regard to naming (or not naming) fathers on birth certificates, for example, had both financial implications in terms of social security benefits received, and an emotional and psychological effect.

All the young people were committed to working in order to provide for their children. However, limited work opportunities, low wages, limited childcare options and inflexible work hours made this desire to work and be independent more difficult. As single parents, all relied on their own families for childcare, financial backup, advice, and moral and emotional support. It is also worth noting the more particular experience of young single fathers. With the economic downturn and high unemployment, all had to make significant compromises in terms of wages, type of work, hours and location. After a long period of unemployment, one reluctantly took work in England while his children were looked after by his own parents; another took a job in a call centre, working inflexible shifts that gave him little time with his child. He felt denied the more flexible work pattern seemingly afforded to single mothers. At some point, all the young people experienced a negative response or a lack of acknowledgement from peers of their role, identity and responsibility as single parents.

7 Conclusion: from biography to policy

The nature of this data does not translate easily into policy recommendations. A longitudinal qualitative dataset, which spans twelve years and addresses all aspects of young people's lives, takes a wide focus view as well as a more channelled line of enquiry. The summary themes and personal accounts as represented in this report, and the conclusions drawn below, emerge from analysis within both the broad and narrow focus, and reflect the intricacy and complexity of lived lives. The messages from these biographical accounts, both individually and cumulatively, are filtered into broad policy areas below. The recommendations and summary points made below also take into account the discussion and reflections made in the focus group interview with people working in youth policy, research and practice.

Education

The education pathways of young people in this group varied considerably. Initially they mostly came to the project through schools, some from an integrated school and others from either maintained (mainly Catholic) or controlled (mainly Protestant) schools. 'Traditional' education transitions (for example, moving from school to further or higher education and into professional careers) were the experience of just a few from this group – primarily those from more middle class backgrounds. A significant number of young people left school at 16 to follow a vocational course at a further education college, and some subsequently moved on to university from college. Reflecting on their education experiences in the latest interview, over half of the group expressed some regret – about their choice of subjects, courses and career paths; about leaving school for work; about not pursuing a university degree; and, indeed, about doing just that.

It was noticeable that there was a lack of education and careers guidance, or a key mentor or teacher, at decision-making times. Young people talked about being forced to choose between their best subjects in order to fit in with a curriculum timetable, of sliding from top of the class and subsequently failing when a good teacher was replaced by one "who couldn't teach". Some remained in school after 16 to follow the only vocational course offered but were not interested in the subject. Their decision was based on fear (of leaving) and uncertainty about alternative choices rather than on any informed career planning.

The impact of critical moments on their education pathway was significant for the young people. Many experienced the loss of family and friends during their school and college years. They used different coping strategies, responding and recovering in different ways, but generally did not find or use sustained emotional support within the school environment. Some reported a 'grace' period when allowance was made for missed deadlines or lack of concentration, but the expectation to get 'back to normal' often came too soon.

Pregnancy unexpectedly disrupted the education pathway of a few; young mothers and fathers left education to care for their children and to find work to support them. Those who left for this reason reported an accelerated journey to adulthood. While they retained unfulfilled education and work ambitions, they did not envisage an easy return to such pathways.

Opting out of education was a choice some other young people actively made in order to secure a sense of competence and recognition that was not readily available to them within the school system. Some achieved this through work, others within the domestic arena, and at least one in the leisure field. Attempts to return to education at a later point were thwarted by age or by the level of course fees (above what was possible on a low part-time wage as a part-time student) or by a developed dependency on state benefits.

Those who completed a university degree followed the more traditional and perhaps more socially valued route in education. In the current economic climate some do not necessarily regard it as the best route. Accumulated debt, lack of work experience and increased competition have led to doubts about the "piece of paper" they hold.

The messages from this group of young people, reflecting on their education journeys, argue for greater choice, more flexible learning conditions, easy return pathways to education, and the need for individual guidance and mentoring throughout the school period, but particularly at key decision points. The seeming

absence of this type or level of support is also reflected in the narratives of those who experienced significant trauma or disruptive life events while at school or college.

The Department of Education's Entitlement Framework (DENI, 2006), to be implemented by 2013, addresses some of these areas, particularly the proposal to give students greater choice of academic and vocational courses. Other aspects are perhaps beyond its remit.

Recommendations

- All students should have access to a mentor throughout their school life, providing support and signposting in terms of education choices and career plans.

- Mentors should act as a resource/mediator (within the school) for students at critical moments or in response to challenging life events that may compromise their learning and school commitment.

- Vocational training should be accessible to all students, either on site or at local further education colleges or neighbouring schools.

- Informal education (e.g. youth sector) should be invested in, especially for young adults aged 16–25.

- Shared teaching across neighbouring schools (especially across community divides) is recommended from early years to offer students greater flexibility in terms of subject choices, and to increase confidence in accessing alternative courses and establishments.

- Childcare support should be available (or facilitated) through schools/colleges to young parents, both male and female, to minimise education dropout as a result of pregnancy.

- Education Maintenance Allowance should continue to be available to those whose financial circumstances would otherwise deter them from staying at school beyond 16.

Employment and training

Within this particular study, over 50 per cent of the young people were in full-time employment when interviewed in 2009/10, and over a quarter were unemployed. With one of the highest youth populations in Europe, it is perhaps unsurprising, but none the less alarming, that Northern Ireland's youth unemployment (18–24 years) accounts for one fifth of the current jobless total in the province and that 17.4 per cent of this age group are out of work (DETI, 2010).

The accounts of young people's work lives as told through this study reflect the variety of routes to employment; the different meanings and value attached to work over time; the structural factors that facilitate or obstruct transitions to work; and the range of work and training experiences.

For many of the young people in this study, securing part-time jobs while at school was their first introduction to the world of work. Such jobs provided a degree of financial independence from parents, an opportunity to become independent consumers, the chance to test particular career options, or to expand their CV with a view to future careers.

As time passed, an increasing focus in the interviews was their transition from education to work (traditionally regarded as synonymous with 'youth transitions' in general) and how employment, or the lack of it, defined and influenced so many other aspects of their lives.

Social networks emerged as key for young people as they endeavoured to find either part- or full-time work. Young people from more working class backgrounds, such as the young men in the construction industry, were adept at using such networks which were by and large local and family-based. For some, the network extended to diasporic communities and facilitated a path that was paradoxically rooted in the local but realised at a global level. As well as being beneficial in terms of securing employment, these networks were

often the resource point for housing and leisure. When these structures collapsed or evaporated in relation to work, a chasm of support was left in their wake. Young men who lost high earning jobs in a booming building industry, for example, felt the ignominy of joining the dole queue as a personal failure.

Long-term unemployment has been a feature of life for a small number of study participants. Cyclical training schemes, short-term work placements and casual work have defined their 20s and had a significant impact on their sense of self-esteem and identity. Low self-confidence, previous poor experiences within education, training or social security, and uncertainty about options make their return to work or education significantly more difficult. There is perhaps a gap in support for those in their mid- to late-20s with composite needs and who want to return to work, training or education.

Relationships and family support emerged as a vital resource in relation to work and unemployment. Young parents depended on their own parents and families for childcare in order to return to work. Work did not necessarily pay more than remaining on benefits but a desire to be independent and provide for their children motivated young parents in this direction. The 'cost' of returning to work could act as a disincentive. Travel costs can be significant and for those earning the minimum wage (or less, as was reported by some), the first few hours worked merely covered the cost of getting to their workplace. The lack of workplace childcare is another consideration because, in its absence, childcare is often provided by family. These young people remunerated parents for the childcare provided but this outgoing is not recognised or acknowledged by the state. Parents on Welfare to Work benefits are entitled to some childcare costs, currently 80 per cent to be reduced to 70 per cent, but this can only be used for professional childcare.

The emotional and personal costs of being a working, single parent were perhaps more poignant as young mothers and fathers talked about the lack of quality time they could spend with their children. Tiredness, time pressure and work demands all ate into this space. In terms of policy interventions, none of these young people attract help or intervention and all operate under the radar – but are only doing so with significant and vital family support. Since the Northern Ireland Assembly did not adopt the Westminster National Childcare Strategy of 2004, it currently has no childcare strategy. In addition, the Welfare Reform Act passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly in September 2010 imposed the same conditionality about Welfare to Work as in the rest of the UK, but without provision for structural support such as childcare. Gray and Horgan (2010) raise a number of further questions in relation to implementing the Welfare to Work policy in Northern Ireland, namely the wisdom of importing a policy from Westminster without giving due consideration to the specific Northern Ireland context – including the higher numbers on incapacity benefit or long-term unemployed, and the ongoing effects of the conflict.

Recommendations

- Tailored and targeted support should be made available to young adults in their 20s who find themselves without work, education options or direction.

- Investment should be made in youth and community provision for this age group perhaps in the shape of a forum where support, training, career guidance and personal development could be easily accessed.

- Opportunities for apprenticeships and training should be expanded and supported to allow young people to get experience in the workplace and the opportunity of employment.

- Childcare costs should be payable to family members where they are identified as the carers of choice by young parents.

Housing

Young people in the project have experience of various housing options over the years: living with parents; leaving the parental home for university and sharing with friends; returning home in the event of unemployment or for other reasons; living on their own; living in reconstituted family situations; living in supported accommodation; living with a partner; living with a friend; or living with their child.

In relation to housing, members of the group have been particularly mobile (and more so than the young people in the other four sites). Over the years, however, they have subscribed to the restrictions and fallen into the pattern of living within spaces segregated by religion. Those who left home and country for work or education, and who have since returned, have almost all returned to their home area. Being close to childcare and family support was a significant factor for some. The availability and quality of housing in the private rental market determined the choice of housing for two young parents. Having affordable houses in this sector meets a real need for young people who perhaps cannot wait for public housing (wanting to set up home with a child) or cannot afford to live beyond the support of their own community. The volatility of young people's housing arrangements was particularly marked in this study. The impact of critical moments on housing experience was stark. Life events such as unplanned pregnancy, bereavement, breakdown in family relations, parental separation and unemployment were all seen to have a significant and often negative and long-term impact on young people's housing pathways. The findings from this study suggest that young people are largely unprepared for such consequences and have few resources and little knowledge as a basis for making sound choices.

Given this, it is recommended that education and awareness in relation to housing options and pathways needs to be part of a life skills programme available through schools and colleges. It might also be linked to wider personal development programmes available through education and training, social welfare and work. Such programmes need to be delivered in prisons too, and for those leaving care, in order to help young people plan housing pathways over a lifetime. For example, there might be a pilot programme aimed at enhancing mobility for young people by linking housing with employment.

Moving beyond tight community and territorial boundaries continues to have serious implications for some, particularly young people from working class backgrounds. While distances may not be great, maintaining contact across community boundaries can prove difficult and results in the loss of connection and support. Young people who moved away from their home area, whether from choice or circumstance, detailed the fear, rejection and isolation they experienced as a result.

With the expansion of the private rental and housing market in the early 2000s, however, some young people were presented with a wider range of housing options than previously. A number of young people in this study opted to buy or rent in new private developments, the location of which was often in the general vicinity of their home area. An incidental outcome of such moves, however, was increased integration. Although these private developments were described as being more mixed in terms of religious and cultural backgrounds, real integration involving meaningful contact was less obvious from young people's reports.

Although segregation is still very much entrenched within working class housing areas, some young people from more middle class backgrounds also reported their desire to remain within the area where they were raised. That said, there were young people who valued the fact that their neighbourhood was 'mixed'. Shared housing projects seem a distance away, however, for some areas at least. The practicalities of promoting and facilitating community integration and reconciliation through shared housing space are challenging. The geopolitical landscape of Northern Ireland is deeply entrenched and peace walls, for example, continue to divide many communities. Figures from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT, 2009) suggest that 80 per cent of people would be happy to live in a mixed housing area but this is an aspirational challenge that needs to be supported by very deliberate interdepartmental policies. Creating a shared future, and building community relations within and across all communities, can only be achieved by investment in a dedicated strategy driven by an independent body tasked with bringing the communities in Northern Ireland closer to shared understanding and living.

Recommendations

- A housing strategy should be implemented at government level, tasked with providing real opportunities for shared living and building cross-community relationships.

- Life skills programmes should include practical and sustained education and awareness in relation to housing options and pathways.

- Such programmes should be delivered in schools, colleges, training centres, workplaces, prisons, care settings and for those accessing social welfare.

- Information on housing support and options should be available from a variety of sources to those who find themselves in crisis, for example as a result of family breakdown, pregnancy or unemployment.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

The number of young people who reported feelings of stress, depression or anxiety was remarkable within such a small sample. Some talked about the physical effects of such feelings, which included weight loss, weight gain and insomnia. One reported self-harming and suicide attempts and thoughts. Such experiences were linked to education, unemployment, debt, relationships, and sexual and gender identity. Young men and women both suffered, as did those from different social class backgrounds. While earlier interviews suggested that young women from working class backgrounds were more likely to report stress and anxiety, these later interviews suggest that the pressures of higher education and the demands of work and other commitments contribute to feelings of stress and depression or low mood among those from middle class backgrounds.

The young men in this study seemed particularly vulnerable to life events that resulted in stress, despair and depression or low mood. They were perhaps glad of the opportunity to voice such feelings in the context of the research interview, regarding it as a relatively safe and anonymous space. The chance to share their feelings and be listened to was something that a number of them clearly sought in their lives – going to the doctor to be listened to, spending time on social networking sites 'talking' and accessing support from others in similar situations, or writing their feelings down. Few felt able to talk to their family about the depth of their feelings.

One young woman, receiving counselling and support in relation to her gender, identified a need for more generic support that was less 'issue-based'. As well as dealing with matters in relation to her gender identity as a young transsexual, Joss also faced issues in relation to her sexuality, and drew attention to the challenges young people face in this regard over the course of the project. While her circumstances and experiences were unique and individual, her feelings of isolation and depression echoed those of other young gay people who told their own stories of depression and homophobia. The material suggests that holding and defending a sexual or gender identity that is considered different from the norm in Northern Irish society can contribute to poor mental health. In addition, a question emerges from this data about the extent to which young people can choose or hold on to multiple identities, whether in relation to their religion, politics or nationality, as well as being accepted on the basis of gender or sexual identity. The seeming incompatibility of some identities and roles inevitability led some young people to become disconnected and alienated from communities and thus from potential sources of support (e.g. local, family, friendship, church communities). The need for widely accepted, easily accessible generic services was further emphasised by young adults like Joss who did not want to be constantly defined or made into a problem by her sexuality. In general these young people expressed little knowledge about the support services that were available to them, the type of support that might be beneficial or how to access help when needed. One young man identified the need to include awareness and learning in relation to emotional resilience within the school curriculum in preparation for the inevitable demands of life. Further consideration should be given to the need for support services to be holistic and generic in approach rather than potentially reinforcing boundaries and differences.

While the stigma associated with emotional or mental health needs is perhaps less now than in the past, there are still barriers to accessing help and support. Lack of awareness of services is a barrier; other more fundamental barriers are possibly linked to the lack of education in emotional awareness and resilience. The Northern Ireland Executive has approved an action plan for mental health under the Bamford Review (DHSSPS, 2009) which includes targets and plans in relation to children and young people's mental health. The findings from this study suggest that young people have little knowledge of the nature and availability of emotional support services and how these can be accessed when needed. The study identified a gap in their education in life skills and emotional resilience. While the introduction of the revised curriculum in schools may address these gaps, there is a need for such information to be widely available beyond schools too – for example, in colleges, training and work environments, and through services offered by job centres.

Young people in this study identified a need for easily accessible, confidential, generic listening-ear support. A one-stop shop or holistic approach to health and wellbeing is advocated on the basis of these findings. The need for emotional resilience learning in schools was also identified by several of the participants in this project and is recommended here as a vital part of education at primary and secondary level, and indeed in further and higher education. Young people need to be equipped with skills to cope with and manage stress and life events, and to become familiar with means to access relevant sources of support. Promoting mental health and wellbeing within the school, college, university, training and workplace environment needs to be a priority policy issue. Making it 'acceptable' to get support for emotional and mental health issues by reducing the stigma, especially for young men, is an ongoing but immediate concern.

Recommendations

- Emotional resilience and learning should be a core part of the school and college curriculum across all years.

- Key workers/mentors for young people/adults in social welfare, training, apprenticeships and so on should be trained to offer emotional support and/or to make appropriate referrals for those in need.

- One-stop shops (holistic and generic in approach) should be developed to provide or refer to a range of practical and emotional support services for young people and young adults.

- Use of public health initiatives to equip young men to access emotional support should be a priority issue.

- Public health campaigns need to reach out to and inform young people about the range of support services available.

Participation and citizenship

Members of this group were a part of the first generation of young people to grow up in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland: to witness the introduction of devolution, see the changes to policing and the relaxation in security, and play an active part in a fast changing social and leisure landscape.

Given the significance of these historic moments and developments, it might be assumed that young people in Northern Ireland would be engaged and interested in community politics and developments. This was not the case. Only one young person out of this group had voted in the last election, and she did so more out of respect for her parents than any sense of personal interest or duty. The majority have never voted. Interest in local politics was practically non-existent, except for those with special interest issues that might affect them personally. Knowledge of political institutions and politicians was also minimal. None was able to name both the First Minister and Deputy First Minister accurately. Young people were disparaging and dismissive of politicians, and accorded them no moral authority; they were bored by what could be described as sectarian politics. Overall, young people did not feel consulted, engaged or involved in politics.

However, some reported positive changes in relation to policing. They appreciated the "friendlier" vehicles, felt "protected" when there was a police presence outside bars and nightclubs, and accepted the role of the police in crime response. Some observed no change, while another commented on the falling standard of officers and linked this to the pressure of recruitment quotas.[7]

The task of engaging this generation in politics and active citizenship is a major challenge and one that is perhaps more important than ever. The lack of engagement may well be due to the relative newness of devolved government and policy-making. In addition, media coverage of political debates and policies tends to focus more on party political and constitutional issues than on general social issues, possibly inhibiting public understanding and debate. Making politics and politicians relevant and accessible to young people needs to be addressed if levels of frustration and apathy are to be avoided. This needs to be done through a variety of forums, from school age, and in such a way that young people from all backgrounds can be involved and feel listened to and valued.

Recommendations

- Politics should be an everyday and real part of the school curriculum.
- The possibility of online or text voting should be explored.
- Young people should have more, real access to politicians (through youth surgeries, for example) and have their views and opinions heard and acknowledged.
- Regular opportunities should be made for young people and young adults to attend parliament and to participate in and report on proceedings.
- Opportunities should be fostered for young people to work alongside community leaders and civic officers, including the opportunity to work with the police as police cadets in local communities.

Community and relationships

The parents of this generation of young people were highly politicised but this group is perhaps more disengaged from community politics than their parents were and their involvement with local communities is perhaps less vital. The community relations document, *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (OFMDFM, 2010), has drawn criticism during its consultation period for a shift in emphasis from reconciliation and the creation of a shared future, as was more specifically laid out in the Shared Future document (OFMDFM, 2005), to an acceptance of cultural and community coexistence. In the most recent Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT, 2009), 80 per cent of respondents said they would live in shared spaces if given the opportunity to do so. A proactive strategy and action plan that creates the opportunities, fosters a mindset and facilitates progress towards such a shared future is still, however, very much in its infancy.

Data from the 2009 survey also suggests that the perceptions of relations between Catholics and Protestants have become more positive in the last two decades. Catholics tend to be more positive than Protestants with regard to changes in relations in the next five years (although Catholics over 55 years of age are becoming less positive), and those in the 34–54 age group are most positive across both groups (Devine, *et al.*, 2011).

While it is encouraging that there is a willingness to live in shared spaces and a majority perception that community relations are better than they were, there is an onus on politicians to cultivate and build on such attitudes. There is little evidence from this project that young people are actively choosing to live in mixed communities or that these are easily available to them. For those with young children, the primary driver in choice of location was the need to be close to family and, by and large, this means a perpetuation of single identity communities.

The central role and influence of immediate and extended family in the lives of many of these young people prevailed over the years. The role of the immediate family was crucial for childcare and emotional support for young parents. Further education opportunities (in terms of financial funding for university, for example) depended heavily on parental backup, and parents and close relatives were also a source of financial and material support in other circumstances – for example, debt, job loss and housing. Work opportunities were often the result of extended family networks and contacts, and these ‘communities’ very often extended far beyond the local.

The biographical stories of young parents in this study highlight a number of issues relating to childcare and parenting policies. In Northern Ireland more than a quarter of all families with dependent children are headed by a lone parent, and findings from previous research are that single-parent families have the lowest standard of living of any household type (Simmonds and Bivand, 2008). The government’s Welfare Reform Programme aims to reduce the number of people on benefits and increase the number in paid employment. In order to facilitate a return to work for single parents, however, it is essential that there is proper provision to

meet childcare needs. Currently there is no statutory obligation on local or public authorities in Northern Ireland to provide approved and affordable childcare. As a result, dependence on family support is high.

Access to flexible working arrangements is another key aspect of facilitating a work/home balance for lone parents. The young parents in this study reported how the demands and expectations of work very often interfered with family life and their ability to spend quality time with their children. As one young mother in the study discovered, working full-time hours on a low wage did not make financial or personal sense.

Reflecting the findings of other studies that show the majority of lone parents want to work, all the young parents in this study expressed a desire to work in order to set an example for their children, to provide a better quality of life for their family, and to establish a life for themselves personally beyond the home.

In order to achieve such goals, flexible and sympathetic work conditions are needed, alongside the provision of affordable and high quality childcare. For parents whose education was interrupted as a result of pregnancy, the opportunity to re-enter education and training programmes should be an easy, supported and flexible option. In addition, the provision of work opportunities that fit around the school timetable is recommended.

The stories of the single fathers in this study suggest that some experience less flexible working conditions than single mothers, and are perhaps given less acknowledgement in social and community situations of their role as the main carer. The role of the single father is traditionally less common, is perhaps not as highly profiled and as such does not attract the same level of consideration.

Recommendations

- Priority should be given to the development of a proactive strategy and action plan that creates the opportunities, fosters a mindset and facilitates progress towards shared living.

- Shared community services (e.g. health, leisure, social welfare) should be promoted and supported to foster integration.

- There should be a statutory obligation for local or public authorities to provide approved and affordable childcare.

- Consideration should be given to allowing payments for family members who provide childcare in order to facilitate a return to work for young parents.

- Flexible working conditions need to be provided to enable young parents to return to work. Ideally these should fit the school timetable.

- Re-entry to education at appropriate levels should be facilitated for young people in the 20–30 age group, and young parents.

Notes

1 Space is physical (geographical, geometric) and social (a medium through which social relations are constructed and experienced). It can also be mental, representational (e.g. a map), and virtual (as with the internet). In this report space can refer to physical locations and social space, and to representations of national, community and family spaces and places which individuals might carry with them in their mind whether or not physically in that space. Social spaces with associated social relations that are part of young people's lives are for example home, school, community, workplace, clubs/pubs, religious spaces. All the case studies in the report convey and illustrate these meanings of space.

2 The Economic and Social Research Council has funded the Inventing Adulthoods study within a number of different research programmes from 1996 to 2011. The study was based throughout at London South Bank University, with Sheena McGrellis located at Ulster University from 1999.

3 The Project Advisory Group:
Nancy Kelley, JRF; Ann Marie Gray, University of Ulster; Pat Henry, University of Ulster; Janet Holland, London South Bank University; Grainia Long, Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland; Robert Millar, Queen's University; Martin McMullan, YouthAction Northern Ireland; Norma Rea, Youth Council for Northern Ireland; Vernon Ringland, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland; Louise Warde Hunter, Department of Education; Gillian Wright, Department of Social Development.

4 Focus group participants:
Mary Field, YouthNet Northern Ireland
Clare Harvey, Youth Council for Northern Ireland
Paula Quigley, First Housing
Dirk Schubotz, ARK, Queen's University

5 All real names have been changed to protect identities. Some personal details may also have been changed.

6 In Northern Ireland at this time, entry to grammar school was still dependent on passing the 11+ examination, reproducing the same class divisions as it had in the rest of the UK.

7 In 1999 the Patten Report (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/police/patten/patten99.pdf) recommended that of those applying to the police service an 'equal number of Protestants and Catholics should be drawn from the pool of qualified candidates', and 'that the ratio of recruits should be kept to 50:50, at least for the ten years of the model'.

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Appendix

The Inventing Adulthoods study

In the Inventing Adulthoods study we have used a holistic and biographical approach to understanding young lives, which invites the young people to create a series of accounts of the past, and to project themselves into the future. They are also located in a series of intersecting timescapes, or timeframes, biographical at the individual micro level, historical and generational at the social macro level. At the biographical level we are interested in agency, values and the construction of adult identity, and how the resources to which young people have access, and the social and material environment in which they grow to adulthood, act to shape the values and identities that they adopt.

To enable us to analyse and interpret our data we have employed the concept of the 'reflexive project of self' (Giddens, 1991) where the individual is seen as becoming responsible for constructing their own identity in the face of disappearing traditional resources and supports (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). We have also developed the concept of 'critical moments' to describe events in young people's lives that they or we consider to be highly significant and consequential (Thomson, *et al.*, 2002, Holland and Thomson, 2009). The longitudinal approach allows us over time to see the unfolding of the reflexive project of self and how young people make and remake their biographies. As part of this process, both the young person and the researcher are able to revisit and reconsider critical moments that might not have been recognised initially. We have also used the concept of 'social capital' to understand some social and associational aspects of the resources available to the young people, defined as: 'The values people hold and the resources that they can access, which both result in and are the result of collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships.'

In the study we have analysed the data at one moment in time, and through time. In the cross-cut analysis, factors such as age, gender, social class, sexuality, ethnicity, and education achievement are compared across the sample. We have also analysed themes emerging across the data and developed a model of adulthood from the young people's discussions of this issue. The young people felt adult in different ways and different contexts. Thinking and feeling themselves as adult related to feelings of competence and the recognition received for demonstrating that competence, which would lead to further investment in those activities or areas. Areas of adult lives where identities are accessed and constructed, and competences recognised, included education, employment, leisure and consumption, and the domestic environment, including family relationships and care (Thomson, *et al.*, 2004). In the diachronic analysis through time, we have developed a longitudinal case history method to attempt to capture the life of the young person as it is told to the researcher. Here the researcher's experience of and reflections on the research process are crucial aspects of analysis and interpretation. These concepts and methods have been used in the analysis and interpretation of the current data, which has also benefited from further development of our case history method of analysis (Thomson, 2007; Holland, *et al.*, 2010).

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