

Anti-racism through story telling in Belfast: Telling whose story to whom?

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Introduction

The ‘Shared History Project’ came about as part of a local initiative by the South Belfast Roundtable against Racism (SBRR) in South Belfast, Northern Ireland. SBRR is an umbrella organisation working across local communities to identify local needs in relation to tackling racism at ground level. In light of Northern Ireland’s increasing multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, and the subsequent challenges this brings, a group of community workers from an area of South Belfast felt that working to address some of the myths surrounding why people come to Northern Ireland was of great importance.

The Chinese community has a forty year history in Northern Ireland and the Polish community is representative of the migrant workers who have come to live in Belfast more recently. So the Roundtable set out to approach members of these groups to come on board in a project with the aim of working with Northern Irish residents of the Donegall Pass area of South Belfast to share their stories and to start to breakdown barriers and strengthen positive relationships. The project would therefore consist of these three working groups separately participating in a series of group interviews before coming together to share their experiences. These experiences, in text and photo form, would then form the basis for an educational exhibition. This article takes the opportunity to examine in more detail the experience of the Polish group in relation to the overall project.

Establishment of the project

To achieve the goals of the project, Denise Wright, the Coordinator of the SBRR brought together two kinds of participants. This included two community organisations whose workers had built contacts with the local, Chinese and Polish people living in this area. As the worker who had already worked extensively with the Polish community I was able to take up the role of co-facilitator for this specific working group. We also worked in partnership with Karen McCartney, a lecturer in Adult and Community Education at the Ulster People’s College (UPC). Through its People’s

History Initiative, the UPC has been working since 1998 with community groups who want to gain research skills to present the stories of their communities in exhibition format. This was the first time the College had worked with minority ethnic communities through the Peoples History Initiative as it was the first time we, community workers, were working with our service users on a storytelling exhibition.

Our collaborative work took the form of three sessions of group interviews. To establish an “interview guide” for each working session, the UPC worker had established some common “prompts” for the community workers to use with the group, which I partly adapted to the situation of Polish migrant workers. These were a series of open-ended questions designed to capture the range of participant experiences, including negative and positive aspects. The first session explored the issue of “home”: what was it like to live in Poland and why did people leave. The second session covered the journey to Belfast, and settling in during the first weeks. This was an opportunity to focus on the challenges faced by Polish migrants on arrival in Northern Ireland, for example the process of finding accommodation, a job, opening a bank account. The third session covered settling in on the longer-term, and the “future”: how did people create links in their new communities and where did people see themselves in three years time. After these three story-telling sessions, each community worker worked in partnership with the UPC worker to select and format the texts and photos to be included in the final exhibition. This information gathering stage was followed by an opportunity for the three groups to come together to edit the materials and to discover each others’ work and share stories. Finally, the whole exhibition was ready to be displayed to the public while each individual component or the whole work could potentially travel around community or youth groups on demand.

Sharing experiences

The Polish participants ranged in age from teenagers to those in their forties. There was also a wide range in the level of English; from those with a high level of English to those who required Polish-English interpretation. Maruska Svasek, an anthropologist at Queen’s University Belfast, contacted the project and asked if she could attend the sessions. She thus observed that the Polish group responded in a positive way to the group work:

“There was a very informal atmosphere; a lot of jokes were made [...]. The meeting was not marked by expressions of strong nostalgia and sadness, people were rather joking, although they were also serious

about the bad economic and political conditions in Poland. I guess these are mostly young people, who haven't been away for long, and don't have elderly parents, so they may not feel their migratory experience as 'painful', but rather as challenging and exciting".

Although the ultimate aim of the project was to share experiences with people from different communities, the act of sharing experiences within the Polish group itself had a positive and cathartic effect. People realised that their difficulties had often been faced by their neighbour around the table and recounted stories with humour. For instance, a young woman recounted her own hectic trip to Belfast. In her home province, travelling by plane is not common. She therefore thought that she would be much better off reaching Belfast by bus. She described this three day-long experience as “the journey from Hell”. They first took a bus all the way to London, which broke down several times and was caught in a storm, during which she considered going back home. After another hectic train and ferry trip, she reached Belfast and reported having “kissed the ground of the promised land”.

Some humour also arose from the stressful situations faced by migrant workers, and the distance permitted by story telling: one man reported that, on his first day in Belfast, he walked from his friend's house in the suburbs to the City Centre and back three times, desperately looking for a sign advertising job vacancies. Finally he bumped into a team of Polish street workers, who told him that there was no spare vacancy in their firm. He was so desperate that he shouted at them that he needed a job. They introduced him to their boss, who gave him a job. We also talked about the huge difficulties faced when trying to set up bank accounts as many banks require proof of address. As migrants often live in shared houses with shared bills, only one name is present on the bill. For one young woman, even a letter from her mother explaining that she lived with her parents and therefore did not pay any bills was not enough.

One component of the exhibition was to include photographs from all three groups, documenting the various stages of their lives in Belfast. As the Polish group did not necessarily have large amounts of photographs with them, we contacted the community photography project ‘Belfast Exposed’. ‘Belfast Exposed’ was founded in 1983 as a community photography initiative, which offers photographic walking tours and practical photography and darkroom training. The group took photos of areas and things that were relevant to their lives in Belfast, with a view to using them as the visual basis for the exhibition. All texts of the Polish exhibition, including the photo captions, were translated into Polish. This was also done with the Chinese group's work, which was translated into traditional Chinese

and Cantonese in order to widen the accessibility of the exhibition beyond just English speakers.

The project group sharing evening

Once each of the interview sessions was completed, a night was organised for the groups to come together and discover each other's work, sharing stories and getting to know each other. The two migrant groups got the opportunity to draw some unexpected parallels. Indeed, one of the Chinese texts mentioned that, when they arrived in Belfast in the sixties, most Chinese people thought they would stay for four or five years, and then go back to Hong-Kong. Forty years later, some consider Belfast as home, and one man even joked about the weather being too hot when he goes on holiday to Hong-Kong. When reading this text, the Poles, who consider themselves as migrant workers who are not here to stay, wondered if, forty years from now, Belfast would be buzzing with Polish restaurants. The Poles seemed also very interested to hear the stories of the Northern Irish group. Indeed, when asked which activities they would like to undertake, migrants from the Accession Countries often expressed the desire to get to know Northern Irish culture and history better, as well as gaining a better understanding of the Troubles. The exhibition produced by local residents of the Donegall Pass area provided both.

From experiences to exhibition

With such a large amount of raw materials for the exhibition an editing session was necessary to identify the content for the display. Feedback from the participants was crucial in this editing process to ensure that they recognised the stories shared as theirs. In that respect, it proved to be one of the most interesting parts of the project. The challenges to the project were mainly involved in the selection of stories and photos to be included in the exhibition. On the one hand, participants did not want to put forward only a negative point of view of their experience in Belfast. However, it was also true that many people had experienced difficulties in Belfast and that formed part of their overall experience. I adapted the interview prompts provided by UPC to what I thought to be "main features" of the lives of Polish migrants in Belfast. In my case worker role, as well as through a semi-conscious reflection on my own memories of early migrant life, I perceived these "main features" as being primarily hardships: ruthless treatment by job agencies, the impossible mission of opening a bank account. Though I did also ask questions about positive aspects of the experience and background

of the Polish participants which were shared in the group and represented in the draft presented for editing and in the final exhibition.

As would be expected the editing session did bring up discussions of issues of representation. Interestingly, one participant worried that what was seen as important to the Polish people may not be seen as important by local people, or may fail to answer their 'questions' about the Polish experience. We worked to address these issues in group discussion and in the production of the exhibition. In order to be balanced, the editing process had to be a fair and an informed choice with input from all the group participants in order to reach a consensus about the content of the final exhibition. However, this raises questions of whose input becomes the representation of the story of the group as a whole. This is experienced in most community group storytelling exercises and is by no means limited to the context of migrants.

However, I wonder if, in this case, the question of representation is magnified. Could it be that they do not want to be perceived as either too critical of their 'host' country or to present too grim an image of their home country? In the case of the image of their home country, the emphasis on the positive is probably more than a feeling of 'national pride'. Rather, for a variety of reasons, this might be seen as a better way of ensuring their integration into the new community. This raises questions within the wider context of development education. In other words, which perception or message should be passed on in development education, intercultural education or anti-racism work? Should it be that of the people coming from the other country, some of whom may want to minimise the hardships they faced in the host country? Or should it be that of the workers he or she will be in contact with who may already have their own ideas of what they want to achieve? Should we really try and reach a balance? The worker's urge to create compassion in the audience, the need to right the wrongs which they see regularly, could well produce what some have called *compassion fatigue*.

Bringing the experience to new communities

To complete the last phase of the project, the coordinator of the SBRR invited workers from the community, voluntary, statutory and informal education sectors to a launch of the whole exhibition at Belfast City Hall, at the beginning of December 2006. The launch was well attended and the visitors enjoyed spending time not only looking at the exhibition, but taking the opportunity to talk to the different members of the communities who had been involved in the project. Because of the accessible format of the exhibition, it had always been our hope that, after the launch it could travel on demand around schools, youth or community groups either as a whole or

in parts. The project is now going through its final evaluation process and we cannot say at this stage what its future will be or how it could be supported.

However, it is anticipated that this exhibition will provide an invaluable resource for tackling racism in Northern Ireland. Community arts projects have already expressed an interest in the materials produced. They are exploring the possibility of using the exhibition as the basis for a play. Also, the exhibition can support anti-racism initiatives, which are already taking place locally, for example in the “Village” area of South Belfast where community workers have been strongly involved in partnerships tackling racism. These have led to several groundbreaking initiatives in 2006 including a cross-cultural football match, a boat trip, and Polish classes for Northern Irish residents. This exhibition was seen from the start as the perfect way to “keep the momentum going” as residents from the “Village” were interested to know why Polish people came to live in their area. I, therefore, asked the Polish group if they were interested in meeting the resident group, using the exhibition as a basis to present their life stories, and answering questions. It was decided that, before the three participants share their stories with the residents association, Denise Wright from the Roundtable on Racism would “prepare the ground” by delivering a “myth-busting” session to the resident group, around facts related to migration. These new pieces of work could well bring similar questionings, such as who are perceived as the author and recipient of the anti-racist message, and what role should the community development worker have in the process.

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