**The ‘Shared Workplace’ Agenda in Northern Ireland: Lessons from Local Government**

**Abstract**

This study considers the Shared Workplace agenda in Northern Ireland, which is a significant aspect of the reconciliation process. Our emphasis is on the capacity of a wide range of work-based social identifications to affect, limit and frustrate this policy. Specifically, we address the impact of spatial and functional factors as well as occupational and professional characteristics through fieldwork in three local authorities. Interviews were held with a cross section of 65 subjects, each of whom had either been employed by or worked in partnership with one of these authorities. Our study thus contrasts with much of the literature on Northern Ireland, which is concerned with the impact of Protestant/Catholic or Unionist/Nationalist identities on such reconciliation processes in the workplace and more widely. This approach enables us to develop insights about implementation of such agendas, specifically concerning Northern Ireland and other deeply divided societies. In the conclusion, connections are also made between our findings and consociational forms of governance.

**Introduction**

Following the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) (1998), Northern Ireland has experienced substantive progress towards a state of political, administrative and civil concordance. Notwithstanding dissident republican violence, there is overwhelming eagerness for reconciliation and relationship building. One mechanism designed to erode the intensity of sectarianism and improve relations between the two core ethno-national communities was shared workplaces. This agenda was outlined in *A Shared Future Policy and Strategic Framework* *for Good Relations in* *Northern Ireland* (OFMDFM 2005a) and reaffirmed through the *Triennial Action Plan* (OFMDFM 2006). Associated commitments included ensuring ‘good and harmonious working places’ (OFMDFM 2006, 88) and treating ‘sectarian, racist or homophobic harassment as a serious disciplinary matter’ (OFMDFM 2006, 89).

This overarching theme of community division in the Northern Ireland has also (of course)

been reflected in academic literature originating from perspectives like psychology (Cairns et al. 1995), political economy (Murtagh and Shirlow 2012) and political geography ([Shirlow and Murtagh 2004](#_ENREF_67)). There have been some studies about workplace community relations, for example concerning organizational communication (Hargie, Dickson and Nelson 2003; Dickson, Hargie and Wilson 2008).

However, the literature on workplace-level community relations in Northern Ireland is slender. Furthermore, those exceptions (see, for example, Hargie, Dickson and Nelson 2003; Dickson and Hargie 2006; Dickson, Hargie and Wilson 2008) generally have used social identity theory to address shared workplaces (and barriers to implementing this agenda) through impacts from adherence to distinctive Unionist/Nationalist and or Protestant/Catholic social identities. This reflects much of the wider Northern Ireland literature, which focuses on ethno-national *social identity* (Jenkins 2006) to the substantive exclusion of wider *social identifications* (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Here, we develop the small literature on workplace community relations in Northern Ireland through analysis based on a broader range of *social identifications* rather than one confined to a Unionist/Nationalist or Protestant/Catholic concept of *social identity.* This approach enables analysis of impacts from two groups of social identifications.There are, therefore, two main research questions. First, how do workforce spatial and functional identifications (locations and specific roles) affect attitudes towards the shared workplace agenda? Second, how do occupational and professional identifications alter attitudes towards the same agenda? In tackling these questions, our study has relevance for other deeply divided societies, both concerning shared workplaces and also, more generally, in relation to the impact of wider *social identifications* on initiatives concerned with reconciliation and diminishing sectarianism arising primarily from ethno-national division(s).

Our research questions are addressed through fieldwork at three District Councils, chosen as significant large-scale organisations and as reflexive of the importance of public sector reform to combating sectarianism and promoting reconciliation in Northern Ireland and other similar deeply divided societies. There are also connections through scholarship about spatial-functional and occupational-professional social identifications (Parker 2000).

Next, we outline the shared workplace agenda. We then review the ethno-national social identity perspectives deployed in previous research before delineating our analytical framework. The subsequent section explains local government contexts, before we outline our methodology and summarise each case study local authority. Concerning findings, we illustrate, first, impacts from spatial-functional identifications and, second, those from occupational-professional identifications. Finally, we discuss implications.

**Emergence of shared workplace agendas**

Relevance of workplaces to ethno-national sectarianism has long been recognised in scholarship about Northern Ireland. Particularly, through writings about ethno-national segregation (Aunger 1975; Hughes and Knox 1997; Shirlow and Murtagh 2006) and studies suggesting recent desegregation (Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004; Shirlow 2006; ECNI 2012), trends that might be explained, for example, through factors such as more rapid expansion of the catholic workforce (ECNI 2012), affirmative action (McCrudden, Ford and Heath 2004) and public policy emphasis on fair employment (Osborne 1996). This development has been specified as pronounced at senior and professional grades (Shirlow 2001) and could also be associated with growth and occupational diversification of the Catholic middle-class (Osborne 2003) and willingness of higher grades to travel further to work (Murtagh and Shirlow 2007). Others have referenced problematic interactions between those communities at work, for example through symbols (Hargie and Dickson 2004), unfair practices embedded into work functions, procedures, appraisals and or promotion (Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004) and specific threats or harassment (Dickson and Hargie 2006).

The shared workplace agenda was, in part, a response to workplace segregation and emerged also in recognition of a wider range of workplace problems derived from sectarianism, such as those indicated above. Origins can be located in the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1976, which prohibited discrimination on religious and political grounds and established the Fair Employment Agency, which had powers to investigate and adjudicate on specific complaints. A revised version was introduced in 1989, which obliged all public sector agencies and private sector organizations with more than 25 employees (subsequently more than 10) to register with the new Fair Employment Commission. Registration imposed a new compliance regime on employers, which incorporated monitoring and regular review of employment practices. This legislation also instituted a Fair Employment Tribunal for Northern Ireland to adjudicate cases of religious and political discrimination in employment. This process was enhanced through initiatives such as *Targeting Social Need* (1991) and *Policy Appraisal and Fair* *Treatment* (PAFT) (1993).

This agenda accelerated after the signing of the GFA (1998). The GFA identified public authorities as key institutions for addressing differences between Protestants and Catholics and through Section 75 imposed statutory obligations on them to:

 ‘have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of

 different religious belief, political opinion and racial group’ (ECNI 2010, 7).

The Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order (1998) reformed fair employment by, for example, incorporating provision of goods, facilities and services. However, as the government-commissioned *Harbison Review* ([Harbison 2002](#_ENREF_30)) concluded, progress in improving community relations was limited.

The shared workplace contribution to this wider community relations agenda was developed through the *Shared Future Policy and Framework* ([OFMDFM 2005a](#_ENREF_55)) and extended through the *Shared Future Triennial Action Plan* ([OFMDFM 2006](#_ENREF_57)), which, for example, recommended travel-to-work routes be cleared of racist or sectarian displays. This strategy emanated from concerns that ‘chill factors’, such as politically sensitive flags and emblems, and reports of sectarian intimidation, increase segregation (Shirlow 2006) and diminish employment opportunities ([Murtagh and Shirlow 2007](file:///M%3A%5CBrownand%20Cole2014october.docx#_ENREF_51)). Furthermore, these concerns meant that public sector organisations were required to submit annual good relations progress reports and produce equality impact assessments for the Equality Commission.

The shared workplace agenda was reaffirmed through the NI Executive’s strategy document *Together Building a United Community* (OFMDFM 2013),which incorporated aims to develop a community in which ‘everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance’ (OFMDFM 2013, 3). Specifically, it was noted that:

‘shared workplaces can provide the most common backdrop to building good community relations and increasing understanding of other cultural identities and political opinions’ (OfMDfM 2013, 71).

However, recurrent and formal advocacy from the NI Executive must be situated within persistent support for sectarianism amongst politicians. Particularly, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein have factional agendas, for example, Gormley-Heenan and Macginty (2008, 44) interpreted electoral success of the DUP since the GFA through ‘outbidding’ its unionist rivals ‘as the true defenders of the group position’. Similarly, the post-GFA surge in Sinn Fein support reflected ‘its ethnic tribune role, purporting to act…….as the stronger nationalist voice’ (Evans and Tonge 2013, 51). Reconciliatory policy documents and bureaucratic institutions occurred within a context where politicians from the two main parties owed their election significantly to capacity to protect unionist or nationalist interests. DUP and Sinn Fein reactions to reconciliatory community relations initiatives such as shared workplaces were, therefore, often characterised through scepticism or shallow enthusiasm derived from defensive instincts protective of their community.

Such reactions were reflected in DUP and Sinn Fein responses to the *Shared Future* document, which ranged from scepticism to hostility. An official silence from the DUP was deemed indicative of apathy, while Sinn Fein was overtly critical because the policy failed to recognise the role of the state in perpetuating conflict ([Graham and Nash 2006](file:///M%3A%5CBrownand%20Cole2014october.docx#_ENREF_28)). As Knox ([2011, 550](file:///M%3A%5CBrownand%20Cole2014october.docx#_ENREF_42)) observed, ‘*A Shared Future* became a casualty of policies tainted by association with the direct rule era’. Similarly, in 2012 obstructionist attitudes of DUP and Sinn Fein MLAs precipitated the resignation of Ulster Unionist and Alliance MLAs from a cross-party Stormont working group on community relations strategies (BBC 2013).

Despite, the statutory framework, official publications and activities of the Equality Commission, factional politics thus stalled propagation through the NI Executive. Nevertheless, other political and economic factors operated to counteract scepticism and negativity about shared workplaces, and so drove a grassroots improvement in workplace community relations. Specifically, a US reconciliation driven agenda (Thompson 2001), derived significantly from a rights-based ideology, has proven influential. Shared workplaces can also be seen as counteracting negative impacts of political conflict on the economy of the province (Fielding 2003) and as important to prevent skill shortages (Bennett and McGuinness 2009) resulting from migration of those less influenced by factional attitudes. Similarly, shared workplaces can be interpreted through public service improvement agendas (Knox and Carmichael 2006).

**Social identity, identifications and workplace community relations**

The core ethno-religious chasm in Northern Ireland suggests relevance for theoretical approaches constructed through social identity theory, grounded on assumptions that ‘people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories such as organisational membership, religious affiliation, gender and age cohort’ (Ashford and Mael 1989, 20). These processes create ‘social categories which stand in power and status relations to oneanother…these social categories and their relations to one another lend a society its distinctive social structure’ (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 14). Attitudes of identifiers are affected through such affiliations and reinforced through comparisons between insiders and outsiders, ultimately generating ‘a stereotypical perception of one’s own and opposing groups’ (Hargie et al. 2008, 3). Social identity theory, therefore, incorporates notions of in-groups and out-groups (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

Relevance for scholarship about Northern Ireland is enhanced through reference to scholarship from conflict structuralists such as Weber (1930), who highlighted ideological, value and belief differences between those groups, and scholars such as Beynon (1975), who addressed the question of how groups based on a dominant social identity can impose a ‘status quo that masks, submerges or inhibits overt conflict’ (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 15). This theoretical work implies, therefore, relevance, for example, for understanding successful Unionist dominance and broad Nationalist acquiescence from 1922 to the late-1960s.

Appropriateness of social identity theories for scholarship on Northern Ireland meant that several previous studies used this analytical framework in addressing relationships between the ethno-national communities ([Cairns et al. 1995](#_ENREF_13); [Hughes and Donnelly 2004](#_ENREF_35); Hargie, Dickson and Nelson 2003; [Hargie et al. 2008](#_ENREF_32)), albeit with contrasting attitudes about whether those communities can be conceptualised through religious affiliations, attitudes to the Union or a combination. A dual ethno-national conceptualisation of social identity has also been deployed in studies of workplace community relations, allegiances affecting senses of belonging, self and behaviour in the workplace. For example, Dickson and Hargie (2006, 46) observed that sectarianism ‘has the potential to be enormously damaging to the smitten organization’. Dickson et al. (2008, 129) adopted a similar analytical framework, commenting that work was ‘one of the many institutions in Northern Ireland affected by the deep fault-line of cross-community division that pervades much of social life’. Similar approaches were deployed by Dickson etal. (2009, 34) and justified because ‘the issue of sectarian difference’ was ‘particularly pertinent’ for organisational learning and adaptation in Northern Ireland. There was an implicit suggestion that ethno-national identities were so significant in Northern Ireland that they overwhelmed analytical frameworks, driving other distinctions to the margins.

Whilst recognising the significance of ethno-national social group identities for explaining workplace behaviours, we also address the importance of a wider range of *social identifications* that inform self-identity at work; we, therefore, connect with wider literatures concerning identity and workplaces (Reissner 2010). Our agenda reflects deficiencies of existing Northern Ireland scholarship, which has been reluctant to study impacts from interactions between ethno-national identities and other work relevant social characteristics. It is also grounded on wider academic analysis, sceptical of monolithic identity interpretations, emphasising ‘multiple and contextual’ (Alvesson 2000, 1105) identities.

Our starting point can be located in literature that recognises the significance of work-derived group identifications. Social identity theory has, for instance, been applied to trade union membership, for example, Kelly and Kelly (1994, 80) finding that participation in ‘collective action’ was ‘determined in large part through individual’s sense of subjective identification with the group and perception of the relationship between ingroups and outgroups’. Similarly, Ashforth and Mael (1989, 30) discussed departmental social identities and their potential to make ’both lower order (e.g. workshop) and higher order (e.g organisational) identifications less likely’. Helmreich and Merritt (2001), for example, illustrated impacts from professional identifications, noting how professional cultures affect individual attitudes and values, as well as team interactions, concerning airline pilots and hospital operating room teams. Ellemers, De Gilder and Haslam (2004) connected workplace social identities with leadership and performance, while Watson (2008) discussed managerial identities. Similarly, Collinson (2006) studied occupational identities; Lyons, Duxbury and Higgins (2006) considered public-private sector variations and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) appraised self-identities of manual workers. The theoretical framework adopted for this study reflects, therefore, conclusions of scholars such as Collinson ([2003, 534](file:///M%3A%5CSharedworkplacesarticle2014August.docx#_ENREF_17)), who criticised monolithic social identity constructs, arguing that in ‘privileging one aspect of identity, such approaches neglect other, potentially important features of self that may intersect in complex ways’.

Our analysis uses two analytical constructs deployed by Parker (2000) to evaluate employee social identifications; both affect interpretations of, and attitudes towards, agendas such as shared workplaces. First, spatial and functional identifications concern employees’ personal and social attachments to the geographical locations and departmental units in which they work. Effects from these two entities often amalgamate, as ‘most spatial divisions are also functional divisions’ (Parker 2000, 194). Second, occupational and professional identifications, which emanate from relationships between self-identity and the norms and values associated with vocational, work-based roles. Again, we adopt Parker’s (2000, 200) interpretation that perceived occupational and professional as ‘essentially similar…though….the former is the inclusive term with the latter being a particularly intense and powerful form of job related identity’.

In addressing identities beyond the ethno-national divide, we also connect with some existing scholarship about Northern Ireland. For example, there are echoes of methodologies adopted by Bloomer and Weinreich (2004) to study the impact of community relations projects on individual identities. As in our study, empirical findings about wider identifications inform debates about ethno-national issues. Similarly, there are parallels with approaches adopted by Muldoon et al. (2007), who explored the nuanced and sometimes strategic nature of identities and identification processes. At the centre of this study was recognition that ‘identification processes are dynamic’ and responsive ‘to changes in immediate social contexts’ (Muldoon et al. 2007, 92). What often appears to be a rather static, over-powering ethno-national identification is thus affected by many other social identities. Furthermore, in clarifying relevance for Northern Ireland, these interpretations imply potential relevance for workplaces in other deeply divided societies beset with contestation and similar ingrained community and workplace divisions. This study can, therefore, serve as a basis for extending scholarship applicable to workplaces operating amongst social, ethno, national or religious chasms across the globe.

**Local government in Northern Ireland**

Contemporaneous with this study, directly-elected local government in Northern Ireland was structured through 26 districts, ranging from cities such as Belfast and Derry to small authorities such as Moyle and Ballymoney. This configuration was, however, criticised on the grounds of, as Knox and Carmichael ([2007, 203](#_ENREF_44)) observed, being ‘over-administered’, having more local government officials than necessary. Particularly, it was argued that the small-scale of some of these local authorities diminished the effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery, an argument recurrent in debates about local government reform in the UK and elsewhere (see, for example, Boyne and Cole, 1996). Following a lengthy review process (see, for example OFMDFM 2005b), a new configuration of 11 local authorities became operational from April 2015.

Directly-elected local government in Northern Ireland can also be viewed through diminished responsibilities, for example functions such as education, libraries, housing and social services are the responsibility of public agencies without a clear electoral mandate. These arrangements reflected concern about prejudicial governance and gerrymandered electoral boundaries and specifically conclusions of the UK government that elected-local politicians could not be trusted to deliver many public services in a fair and equitable manner.

Nevertheless, local authorities retain responsibility for significant functions such as leisure services, recycling and waste, arts and culture, local economic development and building control as well as community leadership. Furthermore, as the sole democratic structure over several decades, local authorities supplied platforms for political progress and ‘led the way in promoting power-sharing’ ([Knox and Carmichael 2006, 102](#_ENREF_43)), although there were variations in their political cultures. This political culture is especially relevant for the community relations function, which has evolved over several decades (McVeigh, 2002), but has been received with varying levels of enthusiasm across different authorities.

**Methodology**

Our findings are drawn from loosely structured or interpretive interviews ([Alvesson and Deetz 2000](#_ENREF_1)) with a cross-section of individuals in three District Councils (SDC, TDC and GDC). These organisations were selected through purposive sampling ([Denzin and Lincoln 1994](#_ENREF_19)) to ensure representative coverage concerning a range of geographic and ethno-national characteristics. Between late 2006 and early 2009, one-to-one and dual-researcher interviews were held with 65 participants. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, reviewed and coded to identify key themes. The selection of qualitative methods and focus on specific workplace locations also reflects recognition of the limitations of much of the existing literature on workplace ethno-national segregation, which was based on quantitative data sets reflecting organisational (ENCI 2012) or site level (Murtagh and Shirlow 2007) rather than smaller units such as departments and teams, within which the majority of work-based interactions occur. Our approach is, therefore, a response, in part at least, to the methodological boundaries of much existing scholarship.

Despite the political and constitutional significance of Unionist-Nationalist divides, we addressed ethno-national identities through religion and adherence to a distinctive faith and/or culture. This reflects three primary concerns. First, reliable evidence about Protestant and Catholic identities is more widely available than data about specific attitudes towards the Union. Particularly, we had concerns that pro-Union Catholics would be reluctant to specify this identity given the nationalism prevalent amongst their community. Furthermore, opinion poll evidence indicates that pro-Union Catholic sentiments are widespread, even a significant minority of Sinn Fein supporters favouring remaining in the UK (Devenport 2013). Second, Protestant and Catholic identities are (of course) central to the deeply divided nature of Northern Irish society and specifically to the issues addressed through shared workplaces. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the majority of those we interviewed self-categorised as Catholic or Protestant rather than Unionist or Nationalist, Loyalist or Republican. Overall, 31 interviewees were identified as Catholic, another 31 as Protestant, while three declined to specify a religious identity.

Eighteen participants were employed by SDC, 16 by TDC and 20 by GDC; the others were recent ex-employees or individuals who had worked with, at least, one participating authority. The occupational-profession split was as follows - manual staff (13); administrative staff (25); managers (11); Trade Union officials (11) and training providers (5). Six of the administrators were Community Relations Officers (CROs) and so were employed to strengthen community relations and diminish sectarianism. Gatekeeper contacts in each local authority accommodated requests for a balance of participants concerning religious and work-based characteristics. To, at least, minimise problems arising from gatekeeper derived bias, through steering us towards individuals with favoured perspectives, we identified in each authority at least one main gatekeeper contact from each community. Interviewees were also identified through recommendations from fellow participants, procedures deployed to benefit from wider organizational knowledge, particularly of manual grades, and to further diminish gatekeepers’ ability to restrict access. At each authority, we also drew on recommendations from staff at different organisational levels to identify interviewees, again to minimise selection bias, particularly through limiting capacity of politicians and or senior management to control access.

Interviews addressed perceptions of shared workplace initiatives and impacts from spatial-functional and occupational-professional distinctions on implementation, although specific interviews concentrated on the expertise, function and distinctive perspective of subjects. For example, interviews with senior management covered themes such as resourcing and priority setting. Alternatively, interviews with trade union officials and CROs had a pronounced emphasis on how wider values and their narrow occupational niche respectively affected attitudes. Secondary sources, for example, community and good relations strategies, equality policies, staff training and management development documents, were consulted, although anonymity obligations meant that these documents are not referenced.

SDC covered an urban area in the north-east and employed an approximately even number of Protestants and Catholics. Historically, Unionist parties controlled the council, although recently Sinn Fein had acquired more councillors. SDC’s reputation for addressing shared workplace issues had improved in recent years and, as ECNI Fair Employment Monitoring Report data shows, Catholic representation in the council workforce has increased consistently in the last decade. Internal workforce data also suggested that Catholic representation at senior managerial level had increased but not as rapidly as some had hoped. However, although administrative employees worked in integrated settings, some manual staff had been segregated informally, and in contravention of existing policy, into ‘green’ and ‘orange’ squads when operating in neighbourhoods with a high risk of sectarian attack. Discussions with relevant respondents suggested that employees and their line managers were complicit in this arrangement. The former sometimes accept job roles that require them to work in both Catholic and Protestant communities with the intention of requesting a change of work location due to fear of sectarian violence. Some managers regarded these concerns as genuine and, even when dubious about their intentions, often met requests for change to avoid the possibility, albeit a minor one, that they might put employees at risk.

TDC was a Unionist dominated authority in the north-west covering a large town and associated hamlets. The employee mix reflected the predominantly Protestant population, and has remained largely unchanged in recent years, thus diminishing opportunities for workplace cross-community interactions. Furthermore, Protestants occupied a disproportionately high number of managerial positions leading to internal criticism of its recruitment process. TDC had a culture of minimal compliance towards shared workplaces, seldom extending beyond imposed legal and policy frameworks.

GDC was situated near the border with the Republic, incorporated a large conurbation and semi-rural hinterlands and had substantive groups of Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Fein councillors. The number of Protestant employees as a proportion of the total workforce had increased year-on-year in the decade following the implementation of the GFA 1998. However, overall the workforce still reflected the population and was Catholic dominated, thus reducing work-based cross-community interactions. GDC’s workforce profile has also been criticised but this time due to over-representation of Catholic employees in positions of seniority. Nevertheless, there were positive attitudes towards shared workplace initiatives.

**Social identifications and shared workplaces**

Here, we adapt a social identification framework and address shared workplaces through spatial-functional and occupational-professional identifications (Parker 2000).

*Spatial and Functional Identifications*

There were five main themes. First, office based employees suggested that shared workplaces were more difficult to implement in spaces dominated by manual grade employees. For example, a Catholic administrative officer (SDC) observed that, ‘it is such a culture shock when you go from the office environment to some of these depots’ and that rather than keeping sectarian divisions outside the workplace the manual workers were ‘always fighting’. This point was reinforced during interviews with those manual grade employees, a common theme being the presence of ‘nasty elements’ (Manual grade employee, Protestant, GDC) among their peer group. For example, a trade union representative recalled that recently ‘one of my members was threatened … that he was going to get a bullet in the head’ (Catholic, SDC). Office staff typically self-identified as more politically liberal, regarded themselves as well positioned to embrace a shared workplace and usually avoided discussions about politically and culturally sensitive subjects. As the Protestant Head of Administration (TDC) observed, ‘we tend to have nice middle class people who can cover their feelings and guard themselves better than in the rawer environment of working class men’.

These findings thus imply that workplaces like cleaning depots and grounds maintenance yards, with a preponderance of manual grades, are more resistant to shared workplaces, findings connecting to scholarship about manual grade work derived identities (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). The miscellany of social class backgrounds, cultures, social norms and attributes so affecting the implementation of this agenda. Shared workplaces were facilitated through adherence to more liberal attitudes amongst non-manual staff and middle class social and cultural instincts to eschew open controversy and shroud political, social and religious disagreements in silence and avoidance. Furthermore, there are implicit connections to the work of Ashforth and Mael (1989) through departmental identities fostering contrasting organisational cultures relevant to shared workplaces.

Second, our analysis also connected to previous studies about manual grade (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999) and departmental identities (Ashforth and Mael 1989) through findings that spatial-functional differences were prevalent in manual grade staffs’ discourse about other manual functions and specifically identification of employees perceived as less socialised into workplace communities. For example, a Grounds Maintenance Team Leader (Catholic, GDC) depicted refuse collectors as ‘loners’, concerned with completing their rounds ‘and getting back for their taxi job rather than [shared workplace]’. Such ‘loners’ were associated with ‘an under-valuing of social issues’ (Grounds Maintenance Team Leader, Catholic, GDC). Spatial and functional factors, therefore, complicated workplace social identifications through embedding additional *out-groups* of manual grade staff to augment ethno-national *out-groups* (Ashforth and Mael 1989). The geographic and functional isolation of these individuals created obstacles for initiatives such as shared workspaces as crucial elements, including attitudinal reconciliation and evolution of cross-communal respect, are facilitated through cross-community interactions. To succeed and become embedded in attitudes of individuals, staff had to actually share a meaningful workplace with many colleagues from diverse backgrounds.

Third, similar negative impacts from spatial disconnection could be specified concerning groups working routinely at locations on the organisational periphery, thus restricting opportunities for social interaction, again observations relevant to writings about departmental identities (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Parker 2000). As one interviewee commented:

‘I work out of a satellite office with four people in it. I don’t really have much contact with anybody other than my direct line manager, who I see once, maybe twice a week.’ (Protestant Landfill Monitoring Assistant, SDC).

Alternatively, some manual grade employees suggested that social dynamics cultivated through operating in such small and geographically isolated teams could benefit attempts to improve cross-communal relationships. As a Catholic grounds’ maintenance employee (TDC) asserted, ‘you’re in a squad with the people that you get to know; they are really your own wee family’. Where small groups of employees worked in close proximity, away from the rest of the organisation, participants contributed towards a team or ‘family’ ethos whether the members were from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds. Isolated spatial locations might, therefore, crystallise shared workplace cultures.

Fourth, there were relevant spatial-functional perspectives about public service. This factor was associated with individuals’ values and employment history. Those with substantive public sector backgrounds and a stronger public service ethos were more inclined towards social agendas such as shared workplaces. For example, a Catholic IT Manager (SDC) commented that:

‘I consider myself morally bound to work for the public sector. It would be very easy for me to work elsewhere but I find I’m making an impact socially here. So, I take community-relations issues very seriously’.

Employment experience in the private sector was central to some narratives, findings that also connect with previous studies (Lyons*,* Duxbury and Higgins,2006). A common theme for those with significant private sector experience was that shared workplaces were feasible only in a supposedly less pressurised public sector environment. An Administrative Assistant typified such attitudes and asserted that:

‘People who work in the public sector have it a lot easier than people who work in the private sector. Yes, it can be stressful in here because you have to do things in a certain time, to prioritise, but there’s not as much pressure. So, you have the time to hold meetings about creating better work environments [...] you can have them kinds of conversations’ (Catholic, GDC).

Such attitudes and their relevance to shared workplaces were re-enforced by another interviewee, who observed that the ‘private sector doesn’t really get involved in [shared workplace initiatives]’ because it:

‘... doesn’t have that luxury. It’s about doing whatever job you’re trying to do to make the degree of profits you can make……..Industry to me is much more cut and thrust, public sector you are actually reaching out to your community, actually doing nice things, whereas industry doesn’t afford you any of those luxuries. It’s more cracking the whip’ (Protestant Personnel Manager, SDC).

Our findings imply perhaps that the cohort of individuals that gravitates towards jobs in local government have value identifications favourable towards shared workplaces. However, there is also an interpretation that private sector identifications might lead some to question, at least, the importance of an agenda that was much more difficult to prioritise in the private sector.

Finally, politico-administrative cultural differences between local authorities influenced receptiveness to shared workplace policies. For example, a Protestant TDC administrative officer recalled that:

‘We had a member of staff that went to training with other councils [...] and they found out she worked at [TDC] and said, “oh, God help you”. So, it’s got a reputation’.

Alternatively, GDC’s commitment to shared workplace initiatives, for example support for cultural characteristics of the minority Protestant community such as Ulster Scots, good relations forums and promptly incorporating the shared workplace obligations into management development training, was recognised. The Catholic CEO of GDC acknowledged the importance of a supportive attitude, observing that:

 ‘rather than put [shared workplace issues] in some dark place, I’m going to put them out

 on the table and try to address them’.

Similarly, a Protestant Cleansing Operative (GDC) asserted that:

 ‘we don’t mind telling management what we think about the whole Protestant/Catholic

 thing here. You’re encouraged to talk and that’s quite refreshing. Mind you, it’s no

 like that everywhere’.

These findings show the significance of distinctive organisational cultures for local implementation of shared workplaces and illustrate interconnections between ethno-sectarian and other social identifications. Attitudes at TDC reflected support for the DUP and the overwhelmingly Protestant local population. Alternatively, a culture oriented towards achievement of reconciliatory objectives at GDC reflected the election of a significant cohort of councillors from more centrist political parties.

*Occupational and Professional Identifications*

Our study specified four distinctive themes. First, cultures of reluctance amongst managers militating against implementation of shared workplaces. For example, a Protestant administrative officer (TDC) observed that:

‘... when they were employed, they probably said, you know what? My job is to be in charge of collecting bins, or my job is to be in charge of Environmental Health [...]. They’re there, they’ve got a task to do and they see only that task’.

Similarly, a Catholic Cleansing Technician (SDC) noted that managers ‘preferring to bury themselves in their offices’ rather than address such issues. A key explanation lay in managerial aims to cultivate outward and sometimes superficial organizational harmony through marginalising or ignoring sectarian-derived difficulties. Such strategies, however, had implications through non-disclosure of disciplinary transgressions. A Protestant Trade Union Official addressed this theme commenting that:

‘It’s very easy to justify [sacking someone] because he was five times late – they can sack him for that. But, you can’t say, “aye, he called our manager an Orange bastard!” You can’t put that down in public records.’

Interviews with management respondents affirmed these observations and also emphasised that inaction could often be explained through difficulties quantifying the benefits. As the Catholic CEO of GDC noted, ‘we can easily monitor our performance in terms of collecting bins per household, but [shared workplace] doesn’t lend itself to the same sort of approach’. Furthermore, managers often had little enthusiasm for shared workplaces because the benefits for their career development, appraisal and promotion were slight. As a CRO noted, ‘we’re always trying to persuade people to take on an agenda they don’t see as offering them any [career] advantage.....there’s no big wins’ (Protestant, SDC). Managerial attitudes towards shared workplace agendas could further be explained through disinclination to reveal organisational weaknesses; for example, a Protestant SDC administrative officer noted that, ‘the attitude is yes, you can go and do that work in the community but, no, we don’t want you looking inside at staff training or employment issues’.

To summarise, these findings indicate impacts from managerial identifications (Watson 2008) that reflected pragmatism and protectionism. Overall, successful shared workplace initiatives offered insignificant career gains for managers and were often perceived negatively through exposure to risks derived from highlighting sectarian related organisational vulnerabilities. From the perspectives of managers, risks often outweighed potential benefits, findings that connect with scholarship associating managerial identities with performance (Ellemers, De Gilder and Haslam, 2004).

Second, attitudes outlined above led to perceptions amongst senior management of shared workplaces as a peripheral issue to be confined to occupational and professional niches. As a Protestant Director of Training observed, ‘in quite a few places’ delivery of shared workplaces was restricted to narrow occupational or professional ‘silos’ that were marginal to core organisational objectives. This was a recurrent feature of interviews with CROs, whose occupational identity (Collinson 2006) meant that they were positive about shared workplace aims and highly sensitive about opposing viewpoints. Such sensitivity was evidenced clearly in CRO responses, for example a Protestant CRO (TDC) commented that this ‘has [been viewed] as tea party work ... nicey, nicey with cucumber sandwiches’. Similarly, a Catholic CRO (SDC) observed that shared workplaces were often ‘seen as fluffy ... tree-hugging, sandal-wearing type stuff’. Such negativity caused resentment and feelings of isolation among CROs, many of whom admitted difficulty in transferring their enthusiasm for shared workplaces to colleagues. These variations in enthusiasm and commitment thus revealed clear occupational distinctions, particularly the low-status perceptions of CROs and their work that characterised the attitudes of many in local authorities. Managerial attitudes meant that ownership of, and strong identification with, shared workplaces was often ghettoised amongst a marginalised employee group(s) with restricted influence.

Third, trade union representatives recurrently cited their trade union occupational identities (Kelly and Kelly 1994) in explaining positive attitudes towards shared workplaces: The core themes were a socialistic adherence to workforce solidarity and a salient form of self identity that superseded ethno-national identifications. As one commented, ‘People don’t look at me as a Protestant; they look at me as *The Trade Union* *Man*’ (Protestant, TU Representative). Similarly, a Protestant Union Representative (GDC) observed that:

‘... we have an understanding on the issues between communities. We have their support and their involvement [...] there is a combined effort [we] would try and deal with the problem and I think things are going very well here because of that’.

Fourth, those with financial and accountancy occupational professional identities (see also Helmreich and Merritt 2001) seemed especially prone to question relevance of shared workplaces. This effect was noted by a Catholic administrative officer from TDC, who commented that:

 ‘there is still a level of scepticism in relation to this, particularly from somewhere like

 *Finance.* We would find it very difficult to get their buy-in on shared workplace

 initiatives. They seem to think it’s a distraction from their real job’.

These findings illustrate the relevance of occupational and professional identifications for the grassroots implementation of shared workplaces. First, attitudes reflect assumptions about professional and occupational relevance; managers and finance offers incline towards scepticism and CROs towards enthusiastic advocacy. Second, in the case of trade union officials, in particular, occupational orientations and overarching social and political values converged to create enthusiasm for shared workplaces.

**Discussion and conclusions**

We have considered implementation of shared workplace obligations in Northern Ireland, an agenda designed to diminish work based ethno-national conflict and enhance relationship-building efforts at societal level, through analysis of attitudes of the workforce at three local authorities. Our analysis addressed impacts from spatial-functional and professional-occupational *social identifications,* an approach that supplements a literature on community reconciliation measures in Northern Ireland which has overwhelmingly used empirical and theoretical prisms derived from ethno-national social identity, often to the exclusion of other factors. Particularly, our research has highlighted risks that wider *social identifications* can generate resistance to initiatives designed to combat problems arising from ethno-national identities, whilst also showing that some identifications can facilitate cross-communal reconciliation. We have, therefore, integrated scholarship about wider social identifications with research questions addressing policies designed to diminish ingrained ethno-national chasms amongst deeply divided societies.

There is a connection here with theoretical and empirical analysis of consociational, or power-sharing, arrangements, which characterise the NI Executive, and the governance of some other deeply divided societies (Cole 2015). Although developed as responses to sectarian conflicts, consociational models have been criticised for implicit acceptance of ‘intractable and persistent’ (Norris 2008, 28) divisions. These effects can be perceived clearly in Northern Ireland through persistence of widespread sectarianism and occasional accompaniment with violent disturbances, for example the 2014 flag disputes (Nolan et al. 2014). The core critique is that entrenching community representation diminishes incentives for politicians and electorates to embrace genuine reconciliation. Similarly, stipulations to obtain cross-community acquiescence have meant that consociational governance has often been associated with politico-administrative paralysis over policy development and or implementation (Lusztig 1994).

These consociational ideas resonate with our discussions about shared workplaces, given the absence of enthusiasm from the NI Executive for implementation and the entrenched power of partisan politicians within those consociational institutions, combined with the persistence of intensive polarised attitudes amongst elements of society. These theories also have implications for our findings about impacts from social identifications on implementation and acceptance of reconciliatory agendas. There is an interpretation, therefore, that addressing social identifications might offer an alternative route through which to circumvent sluggish or stalled political processes derived from consociational compromises and or dynamics to reward politicians cocooned within narrow ethno-national identities.

This approach suggests, therefore, a grassroots orientation that circumvents high-level political inertia in relation to enthusiastic and proactive implementation. At its heart, are reconciliation agendas with a prerequisite emphasis on tackling or altering social identifications that might stall, slow, limit or prevent change. Here, for example, shared workplaces might be facilitated through provision of training to financial staff to stress relevance for their occupational and professional identities, perhaps in terms of efficiency and effectiveness gains, or shifting managerial perspectives by making successful implementation of shared workplaces significant concerning job appraisal, remuneration and promotion. Our focus on a diversity of social identifications, and findings about their potential significance for the successful implementation of reconciliation agendas, implies, therefore, strategies through which deeply divided, and often post-conflict, societies, might by-pass, or, at least, supplement sedate governmental progress.

In addressing impacts from a broader set of social identifications on attempts to reduce sectarianism and facilitate communitarian reconciliation amongst deeply divided societies, we have considered a theme rarely addressed in the scholarly literature, despite recognition of the need for a more nuanced approach to considering identities in such contexts (Bloomer and Weinreich 2004; Muldoon et al. 2007). We, therefore, call on others to develop findings from our study, both concerning Northern Ireland and similar contexts elsewhere in the world

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