



From biculturalism to multiculturalism: Minority-ethnic representation in Belfast cultural policy

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Abstract

This paper examines the transition from a predominantly bicultural understanding of identity in Northern Ireland towards a more multicultural cultural-policy environment in Belfast. Developed from a focused section of a wider MA Arts Management dissertation, the study analyses Belfast's cultural-policy context, the Belfast City Council Cultural Strategy 2020-2030, and the challenges of representing minority-ethnic communities within a post-conflict society historically organised around Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist identities. Using policy analysis, document analysis and grey-literature analysis, the paper considers how cultural policy addresses belonging, shared space, participation and diversity. It argues that the expansion of multicultural initiatives has created greater public visibility for minority-ethnic communities, but that broad policy categories and shared-culture frameworks can also compress internally diverse communities into simplified representations. South Asian cultural organisations in Belfast illustrate this tension particularly clearly. The paper concludes that inclusive cultural policy requires both common civic spaces and mechanisms that recognise cultural specificity, strengthen minority-ethnic participation in decision-making, and avoid treating visibility as a substitute for representation.

Keywords: Belfast, cultural policy, multiculturalism, minority ethnic communities, Northern Ireland, representation

Introduction

Cultural policymaking in Northern Ireland takes place within a political and social context shaped by a long history of communal division. Policy has therefore been required to address not only arts provision, but also identity, public space, social cohesion and the relationship between communities. Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley describe cultural policymaking in Northern Ireland as a particularly complex task because it operates within a divided society^[1]. Graham and Nash similarly argue that questions of territory, pluralism and public policy have historically been structured by the dominant Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist relationship^[2].

This two-community framework has been important to the peace process, but it does not fully describe contemporary Belfast. Migration and demographic change have increased the visibility of communities whose identities do not fit easily within the traditional binary. Nic Craith characterises Northern Ireland as a historically bicultural society and shows how this framework can complicate the recognition of newer cultural identities^[3]. Census evidence available to the original study also showed an increasingly diverse population and growing minority-ethnic presence in Belfast^[4].

The question addressed in this paper is therefore not whether Belfast has become more multicultural in a descriptive sense, but how cultural policy responds to that change. More specifically, the paper asks how a policy tradition formed within a post-conflict two-community context accommodates minority-ethnic communities, and whether the language of shared culture and diversity produces meaningful representation or primarily symbolic visibility.

The discussion is developed from a focused section of a wider MA Arts Management dissertation on the role of South Asian arts and creative organisations in cultural policymaking in Northern Ireland. Rather than reproducing

the dissertation as a whole, this article isolates the policy transition from biculturalism to multiculturalism and examines its implications for minority-ethnic representation in Belfast.

Research Approach

The original research used Belfast as a single case study and combined policy analysis with document analysis and grey-literature analysis. The central policy document was Belfast City Council's Cultural Strategy 2020-2030, A City Imagining. Secondary material included academic studies of Northern Irish cultural policy, multiculturalism and representation, alongside council documents, organisational material, news reporting and other publicly available sources.

A constructivist perspective informed the wider dissertation. This was important because cultural policy can be understood differently by policymakers, cultural organisations and communities. A strategy may frame an initiative as inclusive while community organisations experience uneven access, limited recognition or a lack of influence over implementation. The article therefore treats policy language and public visibility as evidence of institutional intention, while distinguishing them from the stronger claim that equality or representation has been achieved.

The present paper is interpretive rather than quantitative. It does not attempt to measure the overall effectiveness of Belfast's cultural strategy. Instead, it analyses selected policy themes and examples in order to identify tensions between shared civic identity and culturally specific representation.

Cultural Policy, Value and Power

Cultural policy is not simply an administrative mechanism for distributing arts funding. It also influences which cultural forms are recognised, which organisations are

treated as legitimate representatives, and whose cultural practices acquire public value. Belfiore argues that cultural value must be understood in relation to power, representation and misrecognition, because institutions participate in validating some forms of culture while marginalising others ^[5].

This perspective is particularly important when considering minority-ethnic participation. Saha's study of British Asian theatre demonstrates that increased cultural visibility does not necessarily remove structural inequalities. He uses the idea of 'segregated visibility' to describe situations in which culturally diverse work is present in the public sphere while unequal conditions of production, distribution and representation continue ^[6]. In policy terms, this means that participation in festivals, parades or public programming cannot by itself be taken as evidence of equal influence.

Hall's writing on multiculturalism similarly challenges the idea that cultural groups exist as fixed, internally uniform communities ^[7]. Cultural identity is produced through representation and changes across time and place. This is especially relevant to a category such as 'South Asian', which contains differences of religion, region, language, ethnicity and cultural practice. Policies that recognise diversity only at the level of broad categories may therefore reproduce simplification even while seeking inclusion.

From a Two-Community Framework to Multicultural Policy

Northern Irish cultural policy developed within a political environment in which the principal institutional concern was the relationship between the Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities. The peace process and the language of a 'shared future' attempted to reduce segregation and create opportunities for common civic participation. This approach was understandable in the context of conflict, but it also established a policy vocabulary in which cultural difference was frequently interpreted through the dominant two-community relationship.

The arrival and settlement of immigrant communities complicated that framework. Nic Craith's discussion of identity politics shows that newer communities had to negotiate a society whose public institutions were already organised around established cultural divisions ^[3]. McDermott later examined migrant languages and cultural spaces in Northern Ireland, arguing that cohesion, sharing and integration became increasingly important questions as migrant communities established a more visible urban presence ^[8].

The wider UK debate on multiculturalism also influenced this policy environment. Mathieu's analysis of UK multicultural policy shows that policy increasingly sought a balance between the celebration of diversity and the construction of common civic identity ^[9]. Coello likewise distinguishes between assimilation, integration and multiculturalism, emphasising that policy choices shape whether cultural difference is absorbed, tolerated or actively supported ^[10].

For Belfast, these debates created a difficult policy task. A post-conflict city needed common spaces capable of reducing division, while an increasingly diverse population also required recognition of cultural differences that could not be reduced to the older binary. The resulting policy environment therefore combined the language of sharing

with a growing emphasis on diversity, belonging and participation.

Belfast Cultural Strategy 2020-2030

Belfast City Council's A City Imagining: Cultural Strategy 2020-2030 provides an important expression of this transition ^[11]. The strategy presents culture as a means of strengthening belonging, participation, civic identity and the relationship between people and place. Its themes include A City Belonging, A City Challenging, A City Creating and A City Exploring, all of which suggest an attempt to move beyond a narrow understanding of culture as elite artistic production.

The emphasis on belonging is particularly relevant to minority-ethnic communities. A cultural strategy that presents Belfast as a city in which people can participate and develop a shared civic identity potentially creates new opportunities for organisations representing communities that were historically peripheral to cultural policymaking. The expansion of community festivals, parades, cross-cultural collaborations and intercultural programming can therefore be read as practical expressions of the strategy's inclusive ambitions.

At the same time, the idea of shared civic identity contains an unresolved tension. A policy can promote common experience while still privileging forms of cultural representation that are easy to present within a generalised multicultural framework. If minority cultures become visible mainly through celebratory public events, their participation may remain concentrated at the level of performance rather than extending to leadership, commissioning, funding priorities or policy design.

Shared Spaces, Cultural Visibility and Representation

Public events in Belfast demonstrate the value of shared cultural space. St Patrick's Day celebrations, civic parades and large multicultural festivals have increasingly incorporated performers and organisations from minority-ethnic communities. O'Donnell et al. show how St Patrick's Day parades can be interpreted as events capable of representing a broader social group rather than a single, fixed identity ^[12]. This type of public programming can help establish minority communities as visible participants in the city.

South Asian organisations have participated in this shared-space model through dance, music, workshops and large public festivals. Such participation is important because it challenges an older public culture defined almost exclusively through the two-community framework. It also allows cultural organisations to create contact between communities that might otherwise have limited interaction.

However, shared visibility should not be confused with complete representation. South Asian cultural life includes multiple religious, regional, linguistic and artistic traditions. A policy approach that treats these communities primarily through broad categories such as 'BAME', 'minority ethnic' or even 'South Asian' can obscure internal differences. The original dissertation identified this as a recurring problem: policies intended to unify diverse communities can unintentionally compress them into a simplified category.

This is where Hall's critique of simplified multiculturalism is useful ^[7]. Multiculturalism does not automatically produce harmonious coexistence, nor does recognition of difference guarantee that difference is represented

accurately. A culturally inclusive city therefore requires more than the presence of diverse performers in public events. It requires institutions to understand how communities define their own cultural priorities and how those priorities differ within apparently unified ethnic categories.

The Limits of Broad Minority-Ethnic Categories

The use of collective terms such as BME and BAME emerged partly from the practical need to identify racial inequality and compare minority populations with the white majority. Yet these terms also illustrate the difficulties of cultural policymaking. They combine communities with different histories, religions, migration patterns and cultural practices into a single administrative category.

Within arts policy, this can shape how diversity is imagined. A funding programme or cultural strategy may successfully increase the number of minority-ethnic participants without examining which communities are represented, what type of cultural work is supported, or whether those communities have influence over decision-making. Saha's analysis of cultural distribution is relevant because it demonstrates that representation must be assessed across production, consumption and institutional power, not only public visibility ^[6].

Hadley, Heidelberg and Belfiore similarly argue that inequality can be reproduced within cultural institutions even when organisations adopt the language of diversity and inclusion ^[13]. For Belfast, the implication is that multicultural policy should be evaluated through questions of access, leadership and decision-making as well as attendance and programming.

A more differentiated approach does not require abandoning common civic categories altogether. Administrative categories can remain useful for monitoring discrimination and inequality. The policy challenge is to avoid allowing those categories to become substitutes for cultural knowledge. Institutions need mechanisms through which particular communities and cultural organisations can articulate their own priorities rather than being represented only through umbrella labels.

Implications for Inclusive Cultural Policymaking

The analysis suggests three implications for cultural policy in Belfast. First, shared-space initiatives should continue because they provide important opportunities for interaction across communities. In a post-conflict society, common civic cultural experiences have particular value.

Second, shared programming should be complemented by culturally specific support. Minority-ethnic communities need opportunities to present forms of culture that may not fit easily into large intercultural festivals or general diversity programmes. This is especially important for communities whose practices are less visible or whose organisations have limited professional infrastructure.

Third, representation should include participation in the institutions that make cultural decisions. Greater diversity within leadership, advisory structures, commissioning and consultation can widen the range of cultural knowledge available to policymakers. This does not imply that demographic identity automatically guarantees fair decisions. It means that policy is stronger when the experiences of the communities affected by it are present within the process.

These implications shift the meaning of inclusion from symbolic presence towards cultural agency. A city becomes more multicultural not only when different cultures can be seen, but when organisations representing those cultures can influence how public culture is funded, interpreted and planned.

Conclusion

Belfast's cultural-policy environment illustrates the transition from a historically bicultural framework towards a more complex multicultural understanding of the city. The shift is visible in cultural strategy, public events, community arts and the increasing participation of minority-ethnic organisations. These developments have expanded public visibility and created important shared cultural spaces.

Nevertheless, visibility is not the same as representation. Broad categories can conceal differences within minority communities, while celebratory multiculturalism can coexist with unequal access to decision-making and institutional power. The challenge for cultural policy is therefore to balance common civic identity with cultural specificity.

The paper is limited by its reliance on policy documents and grey literature rather than a full programme of interviews with minority-ethnic organisations and policymakers. Future research should examine how organisations understand their own relationship with Belfast's cultural strategy, how they experience consultation and funding processes, and what forms of representation they consider meaningful.

For Belfast, moving from biculturalism to multiculturalism should not mean replacing one simplified model with another. Inclusive cultural policy is better understood as a process in which shared spaces and distinct cultural identities can coexist, and in which minority-ethnic communities are not only present in the cultural life of the city but able to shape it.

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