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Faculty Research: Violence and Family in Northern Ireland

Patricia J. Fanning  
*Bridgewater State College, pfanning@bridgew.edu*

Ruth Hannon  
*Bridgewater State College, rhannon@bridgew.edu*

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his or her individual work that would later feed the common project. The individual material was re-processed conceptually, formally and collectively assembled into a ninety-minute video and sound performance. The event took place on a Saturday night on September 2005 at the Caliente dog track. The performance involved two computers, six DVD players, two video mixing boards, one sound board, three live video cameras, one live microphone, speakers, nine TV sets, three 16-feet projection screens, and free local beer. The audience was a mix of the art community of Tijuana, San Diego, as well as the local gamblers. The dog track became a space with a multiplicity of meanings and metaphoric associations, a space of spectacle embodying the transaction of hopes and monies. The elliptic cycle is a visual reminder of cycles of life, of money transactions, of the flux of language, the flow of energy and the passage of time. The dirt registers the imprint of the dogs’ steps; they stay as evidence of the race, waiting to be re-written. The collaboration between the artists created a project that was cohesive, political, dynamic, profound and humorous, yet its ephemeral nature contrasted to the reality of the San Diego-Tijuana border.

—Magaly Ponce is Assistant Professor of Art.

For several years Dr. Ruth Hannon of the Psychology Department has studied working parents and their children’s perceptions of their parents’ work. In interviewing some four dozen children and families, mostly from New England, she found that an overriding concern for those trying to balance work and family was safety. Parents worried about the availability of safe yet affordable day care, after-school programs, and other after-school arrangements, even in ostensibly safe, suburban neighborhoods. How, she wondered, do families manage in areas that are inherently unsafe? Although she continues to be interested in community violence, she has focused for now on the effects of ethno-political violence, particularly among families exposed to “the Troubles” of Northern Ireland, having made contact over the years to faculty from the University of Ulster—Magee campus in Derry.

Beginning in the mid-1960s in Northern Ireland, political unrest emerged primarily among the Catholic population who felt they were being discriminated against by the Protestant elite and the British government. Characterized by protests, sit-ins, demonstrations and sporadic community violence involving paramilitary organizations as well as ordinary citizens, the unrest, referred to as “the Troubles,” has continued to the present day. Although the violence has lessened since the peace accords and power-sharing of the mid-1990s, occasional episodes of anger and discontent flare up from time to time. One such episode occurred as Hannon was making plans to visit Northern Ireland. In September of 2001, small girls and their parents were harassed as they walked to the Holy Cross Elementary School in the Ardoyne section of Belfast. Protestant adults and children, shouting epithets and blowing high-pitched whistles were held at bay by police officers and British soldiers on the first day of school. The following day, four police officers were injured when a pipe bomb exploded on the schoolhouse steps. Dozens of children, ages 4 to 11 were quickly surrounded by riot police and removed from the schoolyard.

How did such events affect family life, Hannon wondered. How do working parents cope with this kind of danger and how do the children perceive the situation? Dr. Hannon also knew from her research that women were entering the workforce in Northern Ireland in record numbers. “In recent years,” she explains, “the rise in women’s employment, particularly part-time employment, was the largest increase by any group in the country.” Since this dramatic increase was occurring within an environment of conflict, she felt that families in Northern Ireland would be an excellent population to study. With the assistance of a Faculty/Librarian Research Grant from CART, she spent 6 to 8 weeks obtaining 26 family interviews among both Protestants and Catholics in Derry and Belfast. She also talked with teachers, principals, child care workers, community board members, faculty at Magee, and women’s center advocates to contextualize the families’ responses and perceptions. These supplemental interviews also helped Hannon to rethink her interview instrument. “If you were familiar with an interview instrument that is largely appropriate for families exposed to community violence such as muggings, break-ins, murder, or home invasions,” she explains, “but in Northern Ireland there were riots, stone throwing, blast bombs, and this gauntlet of threatening individuals. It was a different set of threats and stressors.”

In each family, Dr. Hannon interviewed a child (aged 8-16) and one or both parents. Each respondent was interviewed separately, thus she amassed a vast collection of taped conversations. “As you can imagine, the transcription of these interviews is a mammoth task in itself,” Hannon smiles, “and then the real work of analy-
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She cautions that the sample size is very small but several key concerns emerged. Parents worried about being late to work because they were forced to take a circuitous route to drop their children off at school. A Boston Globe article in September, 2001, anecdotally confirmed this concern. One mother reported to the newspaper that, although she lived 125 yards from the school, she had to walk her daughter more than 20 minutes around a soccer field to arrive safely at the back door of the school. Parents also reported to Hannon that they sometimes missed entire days of work when unrest occurred. They also complained of having to vary the routes they traveled to their workplace in order to feel secure.

A particularly striking pattern of concern involved trying to run errands. “We all know what it’s like to hurry from work, pick up the kids, and then squeeze in several errands before going home,” Hannon explains. But, in certain Northern Ireland neighborhoods she found that parents had to pick up their children, sometimes dodging protests, and then return home to allow the youngsters to change out of their school uniforms before going downtown. Children from local schools are easily identified by the color of their uniforms, Hannon notes, and there were instances of their being insulted by adults when they were out in public. “The children didn’t feel safe, they didn’t want to be seen with their uniforms on, so it added even more time and stress to the day.” Hannon also found that women’s employment was more vulnerable to conditions of the neighborhood: “It was most often the mother who was called from work in cases where schools were closing early due to bomb threats or other threats of violence.”

During the summer of 2005, Dr. Hannon received a Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching (CART) grant to begin a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts of the 26 children interviewed. She has not completed the analysis but already sees similar themes emerging. “The children have all been caught in riots, they’re aware of blast bombs, they know what the presence of helicopters means.” Since beginning this study, Dr. Hannon has presented a paper on her findings at a conference in Manchester, England, and is currently revising an article for Community Work and Family Journal. She will be returning to Northern Ireland to conduct several more interviews this May having been awarded an additional Faculty Librarian Research Grant from CART to continue this research. “When prejudice and conflict is part of the macro-system, the ideology of a culture, these ideas filter down to every level of a family’s existence. I hope my work will help us understand the impact of such conflict on the family and on the child.”

Counseling and Katrina: The Challenges of Practice in the Aftermath of the Hurricane

When three Bridgewater State College professors traveled to Louisiana in the spring of 2005 to help in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, they faced a number of challenges. There, was, of course, the enormous range of needs of the people they went to help. But there was also the problem of putting into practice the special skills and knowledge they teach as faculty members in the Department of Counselor Education.

Louise Graham, Michael Kocet and Maxine Rawlins traveled to New Orleans and Shreveport Louisiana a month after Katrina’s August 29th landfall. The devastation of New Orleans was the worst suffered by a city in the history of the United States, and the needs of its people for the full range of human services was unprecedented as well. Under the auspices of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, each spent two weeks trying to help residents with their mental health needs, but in fact they knew their task would be broader. “We went to do whatever was needed,” as Dr. Rawlins put it. Their training and experience as counselors would be valued resources, despite the short-term demands of the situation and the warning from their bosses in Los Angeles that they not engage in ongoing therapy. This was to be emergency assistance.

Michael Kocet was in Shreveport from September 21st to October 2nd with the first wave of responders. He worked with psychiatrists, social workers and other mental health counselors in multi-disciplinary teams. People were still living in temporary shelters when he got there. Maxine Rawlins was in New Orleans with the second wave of volunteers from October 4th to the 18th. She was assigned to a shelter and followed the residents to assist them when they moved. Louise Graham arrived in Shreveport with the third wave of workers as residents were transitioning out of shelters, and was in Louisiana from October 10th until November 2nd. By federal order, all three were temporarily licensed to practice in the state.

Each of these faculty members has an area of expertise that could be valuable in helping survivors of Katrina to get their lives back to normal. They brought to the task knowledge and professional passions that influenced their assessments and plans for action given the limitations of the settings in which they worked. Maxine Rawlins has extensive training and experience in

Above, Catholic schoolchildren and their parents heading for the back door of the Holy Cross School in north Belfast. AP Photo

Below, One of the nationalist murals found on the buildings throughout Belfast, Northern Ireland.