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## **‘Whose Town is it Anyway?’: An Investigation of National Policy Agendas and their Effects on Real People**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is both an introduction to, and reflection on, an undergraduate research project which was completed for the Bachelor of Social Science degree course in the Department of Applied Social Studies at University College Cork. As such the research had to be on a suitably ‘social science’ area or topic. The topic chosen here was a synthesis of migration, community, settlement, planning, politics and power as they coalesce in the lives of a particular village which at the time was experiencing, and indeed continues to experience, large scale inward migration of both Irish and non-Irish nationals. The article provides a synopsis of the completed project, primarily focussing on its execution, findings and recommendations. In doing so the author highlights, albeit briefly, some of the philosophical/methodological issues such a research project must address in order to be considered a piece of ‘academic’ standard.

**Keywords:** migration, community, planning, power.

### **Introduction**

“To believe in community, you need to think people first, second and last. You have to believe that people and the quality of their lives are not something to be weighed in the balance, but are the sole purpose of development and economic activity” (Waters, 1995: 310 cited in Powell & Geoghegan, 2004, p1).

The research project was explicitly designed to compare, contrast and critique the officially sanctioned planning and development strategies, both national and local



through the lens of the lived experience of the people most affected, i.e. the people on the ground. However this paper focuses on the research process in Carrigtuoill and the results obtained. It will also include some of the findings and conclusions drawn by the researcher.

Through involvement in a 'Science Shop' project being jointly carried out by Dr Feilim O'hAdhmaill and the Community Resource Centre in Carrigtuoill the researcher assisted in conducting 3 focus groups. These focus groups aimed to elicit views of teenagers, older residents and non-Irish residents on issues of concern for them in relation to life in Carrigtuoill. The earliest ideas for research topics and areas of interest came from the responses of the focus group participants.

The researcher's own lived experience was a major factor in wishing to carry out research into the views of the people most affected. Having experience of 'migrant issues' through 3 years as a volunteer in a Cork city immigrant support NGO and as a migrant, the realisation that all the existing research focussed on a particular minority in isolation from its setting within the majority community led to the desire to conduct a more holistic body of work since no human activity occurs in isolation.

### **Location of the Research**

Carrigtuoill is a rapidly growing small town 16km east of Cork city. It is located close to the N25 and adjacent to the closed Cork to Youghal railway (due to re-open in early 2009). As such it falls within the Cork Metropolitan Area (CASP 2001) and is therefore earmarked for rapid development in accordance to national and Cork county development imperatives.

It is ideal for this study because it has grown from a small 'one-street' village with a population of 1,680 in 2000 to 2,486 in 2003 and this rate of growth has continued into 2007. Originally Carrigtuoill was a long thin village with low-density housing, and although about 250 new houses were built up until the late 1990s the pace of growth was one of gradual population increase. However since then the town has grown exponentially with the building of first Fota Rock then Cul Ard and Castle Lake housing

estates. These estates have added in excess of 1700 houses to the town, the majority in the last 5 years.

These estates have been built at opposite ends of the town with Fota Rock and then Cul Ard being built on the eastern edge of the village. Cul Ard is to the north and north-west of Fota Rock and its construction was still continuing during the research. Castle Lake was built at the western edge of the town between the end of the existing housing and the IDA industrial estate. Community facilities were included in the plans but have not been forthcoming.

The research topic was the lived experience of people from a variety of backgrounds in an environment undergoing extremely rapid construction and inflows of large numbers of people the majority of whom had no prior connection to Carrigtuohill. In particular the project looked at the intersection of official policies such as immigration policy, job-creation and housing policy and the everyday realities of a previously homogenous semi-rural community. It follows therefore, that firstly these macro-level national policies had to be understood and critiqued through research and literature reviews. A detailed discussion of issues raised is, due to space, beyond the scope of this article. However, key points included the existence of an economic rationale behind the National and Local Development Plans at the expense of local community concerns and a brief critique of this economic paradigm aka 'The Celtic Tiger. The concepts of community, social capital and migration within Ireland were also considered.

### **Methodological Considerations**

It was decided that one-to-one semi-structured interviews were the best way to fulfil all the design criteria as the project was intended to provide an insight into the effects of sudden urban development on the people who have to live it and more importantly to elicit their views and understanding of these experiences. It was for these reasons that a process of semi-structured interviews was chosen. This decision carries with it several methodological and philosophical problems.

Some of the problems concern issues of ‘objectivity’, and reflexivity on the part of the researcher and are important considerations not only at the beginning when making decisions on sample identification, sample selection and sample size, but also during the analysis of data and presentation phases of the project.

On a more philosophical level are questions of what constitutes valid knowledge and how such knowledge is to be found (even the idea that knowledge is out there and can be found is a question which merits more discussion than space allows). Closely allied to this debate are the issues of reliability and generalisability of the data. Great care must be taken when making claims about any qualitative data’s relevance beyond the context in which it was gathered but given appropriate and rigorous reflexivity on the part of the researcher and a degree of ‘common sense’ then certain qualified claims or suggestions can be made. (Krueger 1994, Morgan 1997 & 1998, Kitzinger & Barbour 1999, ) Sample identification i.e. choosing groups from which to select participants to interview is problematic, in common with all qualitative research strategies, in inverse proportion to the degree of transparency and reflexivity displayed by the researcher about the groups and group members who are chosen to participate in the research itself. Or to put it another way the more open the researcher is about who they choose to study and how and why this particular group was chosen the more obvious are any inherent or implicit biases. All qualitative research involves personal, and therefore subjective, decisions on the part of the researcher at every stage of the process. Sample identification was achieved through facilitation of three preliminary focus-groups for ‘Science Shop’ research requested by Carrigtuohill Family Resource Centre about changes in the town. This informed the identification of categories of residents whose opinions and experience would be of interest and relevance to the study’s aims. The responses from the focus-group participants also helped to clarify what research topics and interview questions would match the parameters of the proposed study.

The restrictions imposed by it being an undergraduate project meant the sample size was limited to 11 people. This again raises issues around the advisability or applicability of

attempting to apply findings from the research to the rest of the community in the town, let alone to any wider area.

Only 5 interviews were transcribed, one interview from each category of resident. Having transcribed and coded a sample of the recorded interviews, the coding scheme was then used to categorise and identify data for extraction from both the transcribed interviews and the 6 un-transcribed interviews (Patton, 2002, Robson 2002, Ritchie & Lewis 2003).

The following 9 themes were used for analytical purposes:

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
Theme 1	Reasons for coming (to) and reasons for staying (in) Carrigtuoill.
Theme 2	Work and related issues.
Theme 3	Use/knowledge of facilities, local and elsewhere.
Theme 4	Use of shops, local and elsewhere.
Theme 5	Children, Access to schools. School services/facilities. Childcare issues.
Theme 6	Social connections local and elsewhere.
Theme 7	Feelings about the town and people.
Theme 8	Knowledge/experience of crime/anti-social behaviour.
Theme 9	Suggestions for improving the town/facilities.

**Findings:**

Given the small sample size and the selection process generalising from the results is problematic, as is often the case in qualitative studies. However within the context of Carrigtuoill and the Cork City Metropolitan Area the following tentative inferences were made.



### ***Issues about which residents are uneasy***

It was apparent from the responses that the local community in Carrigtuoill view the rapid expansion of the town with, at best concern, at worst fear about the future of their town and that the actions of the County Council, developers and planners exacerbate those fears rather than allay them. The fears of the locals about the future of the community would appear to be more than justified in the light of the scale of development envisaged in the Cork County Development Plan 2003.

### ***Social Connectedness***

The data appears to confirm that people with children make more friends than single people without children (Putnam 2000, World Bank 2008) and that availability of school places is both a factor in people's decision to locate in an area and having children in school acts as a facilitator of social contacts between adults and the experiences of one interviewee appear to highlight the intersection of work and making social contacts. In addition 4 interviewees mention the importance of personal attitudes in making friends and contacts in a town like Carrigtuoill.

### ***Employment & Related Issues***

Work provides opportunities for social contacts. But many newcomers find working problematic due to a lack of affordable childcare and rely on facilities provided by neighbours and/or the Society of St Vincent de Paul, highlighting the inability or unwillingness of developers and the Irish state to provide adequate supports for people and communities, which in itself raises issues about the 'mixed economy of welfare' approach and its hegemonic acceptance nationwide. Worryingly even more jobs growth is called for under the Carrigtuoill Special Local Area Plan which highlights the national economic rationale behind the changes in the town.

### ***Shopping and its 'social aspects'***

The existing patterns of shopping activity closely follow the designation of Carrigtuoill as a 'neighbourhood centre' in the Special Local Area Plan p22 and worryingly for the aspirations of the teenagers, who, in common with some other residents, view shopping

as a social activity, under this designation there is no chance of a sustainable shopping centre as such a centre would be contrary to the provision that such developments only be allowed ‘*without undermining or threatening the role of higher level comparison shopping centres*’ (Special Local Area Plan p22, emphasis mine) elsewhere in the Cork Metropolitan Area.

### ***Racism***

The existence of racist sentiments is evident in the comments of 3 respondents with one further “local” respondent being more balanced but she has concerns that the community is not “*integrating people*” and she herself says “*I don’t know where we’ll be*” in 10 or 15 years. Another respondent was openly hostile to non-national newcomers. Also the reluctance of two of the female newcomers to dwell on negative experiences helps to reinforce the impression that they may have had some experiences of racism in Ireland if not necessarily in Carrigtuoohill itself.

The two African people seem to have few friends in the town. They know their neighbours and one says they get on “very well” with the people on their street. She also mentions a couple from another street in her estate whose son is at school with hers and they have become friends through the boys. The other non-European respondent chooses to highlight the fact that African culture is about “the family””. He also points out that his culture is “*not the area of the pub...Africans is more family*”. His social interactions are more “*family-family get to know people*”. At the weekends he visits friends outside of Carrigtuoohill, or “*they visit us.*”

### ***Local’s Perceptions***

Predictably the 5 local people have deeper more varied social interactions. The two adults have their respective family ties and children in the area. One is also deeply involved in the life of the village through the GAA, the Community Council and the SVP. The other also has family ties and children in the area and through her work in the SVP Resource Centre has a wide network of contacts in the village. However even she admits to little socialising in the village, only “*going for lunch*” every couple of weeks in the pub. She

reports that there isn't much for teenagers to do and they tend to either "*hang around*" or visit each other's houses and watch DVDs or go to the cinema in Midleton. (The teenagers, all 16-17 years old, report that there's nothing to do if you're not "*into sport*"). She says that the only social event for mothers and toddlers is an Arts class held in the Resource Centre otherwise people remain isolated in their respective estates and homes. Both the older interviewees express concerns about the levels of migration into the town and the possibility of negative, but unexpressed, consequences. All three teenagers mention "*knowing everybody*" before the estates (Fota Rock, Cul Ard and Castle Lake) were built.

Only one of the three sees the resulting growth as negative while the other two girls are more neutral. Their only contact with newcomers is through school in most cases, although one does babysit for an African family, but she admits that some of her friends are "*kinda hostile*" to the newcomers.

Interestingly one of the three mentions shopping trips to Cork with friends as one of her social activities while another says her main social outlet is to visit Cork city and "*hang around*" with friends she met through a girl in her school. She complains that newcomers don't return her greetings in school or on the streets of Carrigtuoill "*they just pure snob ya*" whether they're Irish or from Cork. Consequently she has no friends among them. Nor do the other two girls. In terms of what social activities go on in Carrigtuoill all three mention visiting friend's houses or just hanging around.

### ***Anti-Social Behaviour & Crime***

On the theme of anti-social behaviour and crime all the respondents knew what the term anti-social behaviour meant. However only three respondents claimed that there was any problem of this sort in the town. They claim there is a drug problem in the town however only one teenager admitted to knowing people who use drugs. All three teenagers know people who drink and hang around.

All the other respondents say that they don't even see people hanging around and again apart from the respondent above, the only crimes mentioned as happening in Carrigtuoill, (by 2 interviewees), are an incident that made national media headlines when a woman had her car hijacked nearby and another respondent who heard of a woman being assaulted in (name of estate removed). In particular one of the teenagers links the building of houses with the increase of trouble, however no other respondent mentions any regular occurrence of trouble in the area.

### ***What does the town need?***

All the interviewees bar the teenagers, list affordable childcare as the main facility missing in the town. 4 would like to see playgrounds installed in several locations throughout the new estates. All the teenagers and one adult would like to see some form of sporting facilities such as 'all-weather' pitches, running track, swimming pool and a gym. While one adult and all three teenagers think a shopping centre such as Mahon Point would provide a needed social space for meeting friends and would provide more opportunities for social interactions.

### **Conclusions:**

The first impression to note is the negative effects that modern planning and development specifically in relation to housing, social infrastructure and transport are having on the fabric and daily life of a small rural community. These are evidenced in the levels of disquiet expressed by 3 of the pre-development residents and by two of the new residents. This disquiet creates an atmosphere of distrust among people and a fear of the future which in turn makes it more difficult to recreate the community coherence that reportedly existed prior to the large scale influx of people.

The planners and developers have deliberately created a 'dormitory town' which two residents, one new to the area and one long standing, identified as having deleterious effects on feelings of community pride and solidarity. Another factor such a strategy creates is a feeling of alienation from the original community and by the original community, resulting in feelings of transience, of an overwhelming number of new faces



who are here today gone tomorrow, and who feel no loyalty to the place where all they do is sleep.

The high quality road links which are provided solely to facilitate movement of goods, services and workers serve to further destabilise the community and militate against formation of new community solidarities by more or less ensuring that people's main communal/social activity, i.e. the weekly shop, occurs elsewhere.

Shopping was a chance to meet, greet and interact with your local community. The fact that all the interviewees do the bulk of their shopping in larger more anonymous locations deprives Carrigtuoill of an important source of community interaction and therefore of social capital. For the teenagers this has resulted in a dearth of casual public social settings with the result that they use Cork city.

A further consequence of planning strategy is that hundreds of houses can be built in one part of town with no easy access to any of the existing facilities, no attempt to coordinate with the local community (in fact residents got the feeling that either their views as expressed through the Community Council were ignored, or that "decisions had already been taken" prior to the public consultation) and no consideration given to estate layout either in relation to access by public transport, e.g. 'shuttle buses', or in relation to play safe play spaces for children (after all these are 2, 3 and 4 bedroom houses so presumably are marketed at young families). Similarly there are no shops or other communal meeting places in any of the new estates in Carrigtuoill. All of which are built at the ends of the town, Castle Lake, an estate of more than 700 homes, at the very western end of Carrigtuoill, Fota Rock (500 homes) which was built on the very eastern end of town and then had Cul Ard (700 homes) built to the north and east of it. Thus as several people remarked you don't see the kids out playing and because most couples will both be working any mums who are at home with small children are isolated and alone in estates which are "ghost towns" during the day.

The lack of facilities being provided by developers, and the failure of government, national or local, to effectively police the provisions in the plans for each estate, throws an unreasonable burden onto the non-governmental providers in the town. In Carrigtuohill this shortfall is being addressed by the Society of St Vincent de Paul and despite a three-fold growth in population they have seen no growth in facilities. One of them stressed the need for a new building preferably close to the existing one but said they can't "get a site" since a "developer can outbid us any day of the week". This highlights a major flaw in the planning, zoning and development process. Inward investment in factories and houses is facilitated. Investment in community is not (Allen 2000, O'Hearn 2003).

Judging by the comments of several participants there is resentment against the newcomers, partly as a result of the sheer numbers and partly as a result of loss of feelings community spirit. On one level this is shown in the lack of cross-community interactions reported by all residents, with the locals being critical of the lack of involvement of newcomers in the activities in the village. They imply that it is the fault of the newcomers and that the local organisations do try to be inclusive. Although this reaching out seems to have been monolingual and by posters and fliers. There is no awareness among most locals of the difficulties posed by lack of language fluency, cultural differences, lack of local ties and family pressures. The community has, from the evidence of this study, not addressed any of these issues in any concrete fashion but then neither has the country as a whole (Lentin 2001, Loyal 2003).

The levels of racism evident in even such a small and non-representative sample point to another source of isolation and alienation. And it is easy to see how resistance to change and resentment of newcomers translates into focusing on visible difference i.e. colour, or language. However none of the stresses on the community are the fault of the newcomers, rather they are the result of the forms of development being pursued and the failure to address the resulting problems of inward migration from outside Carrigtuohill.

These problems are caused by both intra- and inter- national migration but there is no debate in Ireland in these terms. The debate is about ‘managing’ international migration (I.O.M.2006) with the result that the associated pressures on schools, roads, hospitals and other services become attributed to the presence of foreigners. The blame is rarely attached to planners, developers, politicians or internal Irish migrations.

### **Reflections**

The research findings point to a lack of, and need for, a ‘third space’ in Carrigtuoill, both in the physical sense of a location for social interaction and in the sense of a conceptual awareness of even the possibility that such an empowering and inclusive development is a legitimate and necessary ingredient in a functioning multi-faceted social reality. And as such would be both the precursor to and facilitator of a more effective and rewarding community activism.

As is the case with most semi-structured interviews, selection of participants was a problem. The striking differences of views expressed by the only self-selected and working class participant from those of the other locals highlights this flaw. The Resource Centre member who found all of the other interviewees remarked, after the interviews had all been completed, that she hoped “we’d pass muster” which rang alarms for the researcher, who took it as a sign that she had chosen the interviewees at least partly as those who would provide a positive outlook on the village which appears to confirm the issues raised earlier concerning the use of a ‘gatekeeper’ in the selection of participants.

Certain avenues for further investigation seem apparent in order to gain some insight into the perceptions of other stakeholders in the developments in Carrigtuoill

- a) Presence of racism generally and discrimination in employment.
- b) Interviews with local business people and service providers.
- c) Interviews with school teachers, governors, PTA, etc.
- d) Interviews with politicians, planners and developers.



- e) Further interviews from a much wider sample using those already interviewed as sources of further contacts, e.g. ‘snowball sampling’

### **Recommendations**

As part of the planning process there should be a community needs audit carried out both for the existing levels of population and for the projected levels of population. The benchmark should be international standards of best practice not whatever the developer can get away with which is a suspicion aired by several adult participants. Rather than build houses first and then see what happens the process should be let’s build the facilities first then let the people come, which according to one resident is what happens in Australia. For example each estate should have a social centre point to facilitate contacts and community bonds.

There should be regular meetings between the Local Authority, planning enforcers and the community both before during and after construction, since one of the criticisms of both Fota Rock and Cul Ard relate to the difference between what was on the plans and how the estates were actually built. The views of the community both new and old should be taken on board. These meetings should be advertised in a multilingual way and interpreters provided where possible.

Perhaps the older residents could be facilitated to examine their lifestyles and social facilities e.g. GAA and provision of services. Racism and inadvertent discrimination e.g. monolingual posters could be identified and addressed and information on the needs and wishes of the new residents sought and acted upon. The separation of newcomers into the category of “non-national” is problematic and needs to be addressed since it conveys segregation between “Irish” and “Other” which then creates hierarchies and potential for differential treatment. It is symptomatic of the issue raised earlier around the debate on migration and the failure to address the issue holistically.



Both newcomers and older residents could be encouraged to become aware of the difficulties encountered and concerns of each other and awareness raised about the different needs and desires of the many different people now living in the town.



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