

Belonging in the New Berlin

The Experiences of Young East Berliners in the Reunified Berlin

Linda Rootamm, MA. School of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy, Queen's University Belfast, UK. E-mail: lrootammo1@qub.ac.uk
PhD Research undertaken within the framework of the Conflict in Cities and the Contested State research programme (www.conflictincities.org).

INTRODUCTION

This sociological study looks at the reunification process of Berlin and its impact on the former East Berliners only, who, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, were in their early 20s. East Berliners form a group whose experience of the reunification of the city was most radical. The 'new Berlin' referred to in the title signifies the transformed social environment in the city, consisting of former West Berliners, West Germans and the international population living in today's Berlin, as well as the new physical environment – the redeveloped city centre, the former West Berlin, and the former East Berlin, due to its changed significance for its inhabitants.

The aim of this research is to study the changing relationship of East Berliners to their home city and to reflect on the conditions which have led them to "adapt" to the constantly changing environment.

PARTICIPANTS - WHY THIS AGE GROUP?

The focus of this study will be on those East Berliners who, at the time of the fall of the Wall, were ca 20-25 years old (born 1965-1970). Reasons for choosing this age group are due to their following experiences:

- Growing up in a socialist society and experiencing the life-course influenced by the politics of the GDR, such as participating in the *FDJ* (Free German Youth) political movement.
- Their mothers were expected by the State, and thought it to be self-evident, to have to manage a husband, children and a job simultaneously.
- They expected to have a fixed and set life-course with a strong support from the State towards employment, residence and child-care facilities.
- They were young enough to adapt to the changing circumstances of the reunified Berlin.
- They stand between two generations, one very rooted in the socialist system and another, their own children, who have hardly any experience of socialism.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **Overarching research question:** What are the conditions that have assisted young East Berliners in forming new patterns of belonging in the new Berlin?
- How have young East-Berliners established their own place in the unified Berlin? How have they learned to negotiate their way through the new spatial context of the unified Berlin?
- Which physical places are significant to them? What kind of memories do they associate with these places?
- How has their 'adaptation' to the new environment depended on the physical spaces that they inhabit?
- Which social spaces have facilitated the evolution of shared meaning? How? Why?

METHODS

In-depth or loosely structured interviewing: producing a narrative it gives access to information on practical everyday issues, such as job-change, change of house etc., revealing their "process of adaptation" to the new environment and their reflections on the present through the past.

Mapping informants' movement in the city of the past 20 years: the informant marks on a large Berlin map all the places that they have routinely visited in the past 20 years: their homes, their jobs, their regular going-out places, their hobby locations etc. It is a tool to speak more openly about the particular social and physical environments they have resided in.

Walking tours: the research subject identifies particular 'routine' places significant to them and while going to visit them, they tell about their recollections connected to those locales, revealing how they see themselves in relation to their memories and to those places today.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

"MIXED" WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Heike (44yr, kindergarten teacher) talking about her job in 2002:

"You concentrated on work, let's put it like that. And because of that it was actually completely uninteresting if one came from the East or from the West. ... for most of the people it wasn't a question at all. And today even more so. It's the opposite actually, when you talk to someone about it, then strangely enough you compare which word West Berliners used for something and which did those from East Berlin use - communication. ... And then you exchange views once in a while and you think: "Really, we used to say something like that? Oh yeah, that's right!" and so. But everything else doesn't really play a role anymore."



PERCEIVING A CHANGE IN ONE'S STATUS AS A CITIZEN

Anja (46 yr, unemployed) talking about her job before 1989:

".. it was a great honour for me, since at that time I was 23-24, to take over the management of a library. ... And there I could be significantly involved, since I could calculate how many bookshelves we needed... I could arrange everything myself, I could find furniture. Well, it was an amazingly great honour for me. ... I was still so young. Meanwhile, the jobs that we used to do at that time - they were well supported - now they have lost their significance. I have completed my studies now and I can be happy, if I will ever earn half of what I earned as I was managing the library."

PRESENT THROUGH THE LENSE OF REMEMBERING THE PAST

Anja (46 yr, unemployed) speaking of the few days before the fall of the Wall:

"There were masses moving peacefully around in the city. In the subway everyone talked to everyone. Today that wouldn't be possible, everyone has earphones in the ears, or they hide themselves behind a book or a newspaper. One doesn't want to see or talk to anyone in the subway... But at that time there was somehow a feeling of complete solidarity, it was almost a bit euphoric, but so was the atmosphere at the time. Even if it was so only on that particular day."

LEARNING TO MOVE ABOUT IN THE NEW HALF OF THE CITY

Elke (43yr, secretary) talking about her experiences in West Berlin:

"Yes, there was a difference. It is so dirty here on the streets, I didn't have that before in a Neubaugebiet [socialist housing area]. The caretaker of the house cleaned up everything, the street was swept, nobody begs there on the street. That is what really shocked me after the Wende [change]. ... I never went to West Berlin, maybe only a few times for shopping, but the times that I was there, I can count them on my fingers. I didn't go there very gladly, since you didn't feel well there. ... You would always hold on to your purse in a bus and then, these beggars on the street who are then looking for food in the trash bins and so..that wasn't familiar to me at all. I'm slowly getting used to it now – well, you never really get used to it, but you slowly start dealing with it and try to look away."



THE PERMANENCE OF LIVING LOCATION

Elke (43 yr, secretary):

"And in '76 we moved to Lichtenberg. And where I grew up, that is where I continued living alone as well. I found a flat for myself close to there, in that neighbourhood. Yes, I went to school there, and I lived there until 3 years ago, in my two-room apartment alone with my child for 18 years. Until I moved here [Kreuzberg]. Now I have become used to it, living here, without my child."

THE ABNORMALITY OF LIVING WITHOUT THE WALL

Marcus (47 yr, architect) speaking of 1990 as he returned to his childhood neighbourhood:

"..., and it was a coincidence actually that I came here again. And we were then pushing the pram and we were up and about quite a lot, especially here near the water, ... That, of course was very interesting, suddenly to be able to walk on the paths where you couldn't walk before, at least I couldn't. ... very close to the same ... but suddenly it wasn't the end of the street anymore, instead it went on. That already was a very uplifting feeling and very very new and it was really exciting."



THE NORMALITY OF LIVING WITH THE WALL

Marcus (47 yr, architect) speaks of the walled neighbourhood in which he grew up:

"„Since this corner here was quite closed up, as kids we used to move around all over the place. You wouldn't be allowed to go right up to it [the Wall]..there were signs saying „Keep out. Border area.“ but nobody said anything to the kids. It was good like that. ... Yes, it was a bit ... when you think back to it, funny, but since we grew up here.. it [the Wall] always stood there and it was completely normal for us. Our school was immediately at the Wall and there we could practically look at the border stripe from the class rooms. Well, it was definitely very bizarre, but we never, at least as children, never gave it a thought."