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 radi-
cal. 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 in-
habitants.

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 chang-
ing 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 poli-
tics of the GDR, such as participating in the FDJ (Free German Youth) political move-
ment.
• 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 to-
wards 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?
• Which physical places are significant to them? What kind of memories do they associate
with these places?
• 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 infor-
mation 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

Helke (44y, kindergarten teacher) talking about her job in 2002:
“...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, somehow 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 new and it was really exciting.”

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, somehow 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 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.”

THE PERMANENCE OF LIVING LOCATION

Elke (43y, 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 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: lrootamm01@qub.ac.uk

PhD Research undertaken within the framework of the Conflict in Cities and the Contested State research programme (www.conflictincities.org).

This PhD research is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain.

PhD Research undertaken within the framework of the Conflict in Cities and the Contested State research programme (www.conflictincities.org).

Linda Rootamm, MA. School of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy, Queen’s University Belfast, UK. E-mail: lrootamm01@qub.ac.uk

This PhD research is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain.