



Beyond gross divisions: national and religious identity combinations

E · S · R · C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

Orla Muldoon, Niamh McNamara, Paula Devine and Karen Trew

Although many violent political conflicts actually relate to tensions over territory, power or resources, the 'identity' of different groups also plays a crucial role. Indeed, identities can often take on a meaning similar to the struggle over power or resources themselves. Pride becomes bound up with the fortunes of the group and contributes to stereotyping; differences are frequently created and emphasised by opposing social groups. Whilst any individual may hold several identities at any one time (for example, father and Catholic; woman and Asian), single identities are often talked about in isolation. This Research Update examines the extent to which national and religious identities that have underpinned difference and division in Northern Ireland still remain, nearly a decade after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

In real world settings, group conflict and differences are often reduced to dichotomous distinctions such as Arab and Jew, Black and White, or Catholic and Protestant. In Northern Ireland this is without question too often the case. Indeed some commentators argue that researchers and academics have contributed to this (Fahey et al., 2005; Muldoon et al., 2007). The aim of this research was to explore the nature of national and religious identities in a more textured way, and so we included a set of questions in the 2007 *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey. We set out to uncover the extent of diversity evident within the main national and religious groups. In addition to the strength of attachment

or loyalty people showed to national and religious groups labels, the manner in which the identities combined and their impact on attitudes and emotional responses was also explored.

Valuing national identity

We asked respondents about their national and religious identities. Thirty nine percent of respondents described their nationality as British, 29% thought Irish their best national descriptor and 25% described themselves as Northern Irish. This represents an increase in the popularity of the Northern Irish label, which has up to now been preferred by 1 in 5 of respondents in previous NILT surveys. In terms of religion, of the 1011 respondents who regarded themselves as belonging to a particular religious group, 43% stated they were Catholic, 53% Protestant, and a final 4% stated they were another religion or

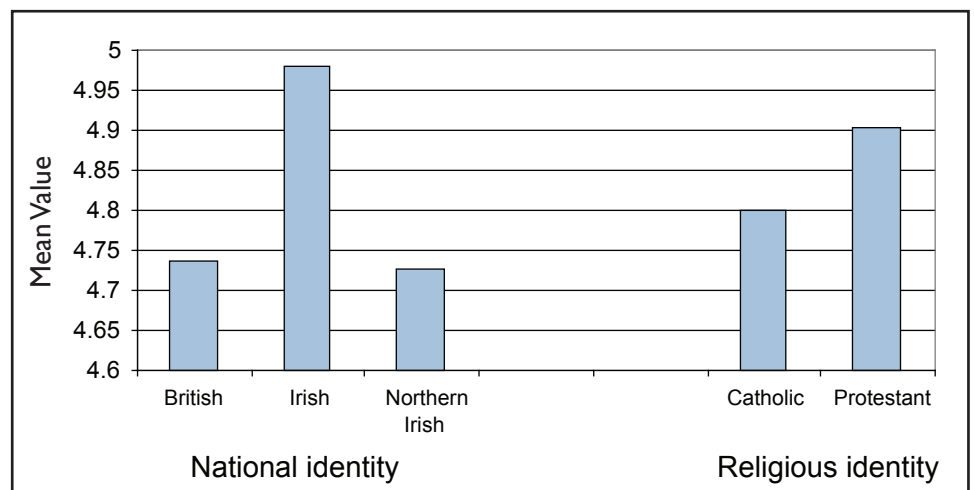
chose not to provide this information (see Table 1).

Respondents were then asked to rate the importance of their nationality and religion to their overall sense of who they were, using a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 was not at all important and 7 was very important to their sense of who they were). Figure 1 shows the mean value for each group, and indicates that, overall, Irish respondents see their nationality as more important to them than British or Northern Irish respondents. On the other hand Protestants see their religion as more important to them than do Catholics.

Do Catholics always see themselves as Irish, and Protestants British?

The point of this research was, of course, to go beyond this basic

Figure 1: Relative importance of national and religious identity



Catholic-Protestant dichotomy. So the first interesting question to pose is the extent of the overlap between national and religious categories. Previous NILT surveys have shown a persistent shift away from the Irish identity amongst Protestants and a similar reticence on the part of Catholics to identify as British (see Muldoon et al., 2007). Table 1 shows that in 2007 there was a significant group of people (30% of respondents) who implicitly rejected the traditional divisions in Northern Ireland and described themselves as British Catholics (4%), Irish Protestants (2%), Northern Irish Catholics (10%) and Northern Irish Protestants (14%). Table 2 provides an even more nuanced view of the relationship between nationality and religion. For the first time in 2007, as well as asking

Table 1: Overlap between nationality and religion

	% of all respondents			
	Catholic	Protestant	Other	All
British	4	33	2	39
Irish	26	2	<1	29
Northern Irish	10	14	1	25
Other/Don't know	2	4	1	7
All	43	53	4	

respondents to state their preferred nationality, the extent to which they described themselves as Irish and/or British was considered. A significant association between preferred national and religious identity combinations and the degree to which they felt they could describe themselves as both Irish and British was evident. As we might expect, respondents with Irish-Catholic identifiers were far more likely to describe themselves as Irish and not British, whilst those with British-Protestant identifiers were far more likely to describe themselves as British, not Irish. On the other hand, approximately one third of Northern Irish Protestants and Northern Irish Catholics described themselves as equally British and Irish. This is a very significant finding as it suggests these survey respondents have moved away

from the oppositional definitions of British and Irish.

The importance attached to national identity differed based on preferred nationality and religion. Figure 2 shows that national identity was more important to Irish Catholics than it was to Catholic respondents who described themselves as British or as Northern Irish. On the other hand, nationality was more important to Northern Irish and British Protestants respondents than it was to Irish Protestants.

Figure 2 also illustrates that for both religions, where a less usual identity combination arises, such as Irish Protestant or as British Catholic, less importance is placed on nationality. On the other hand, the more typical identity combinations of Irish Catholic and British Protestant tend to highly value their nationality. In effect it would appear that national and religious identities can be mutually reinforcing. Those with expected identity combinations such as Irish Catholic and British Protestant are therefore likely to be most vested in their identity.

Group membership, attitudes and emotional responses

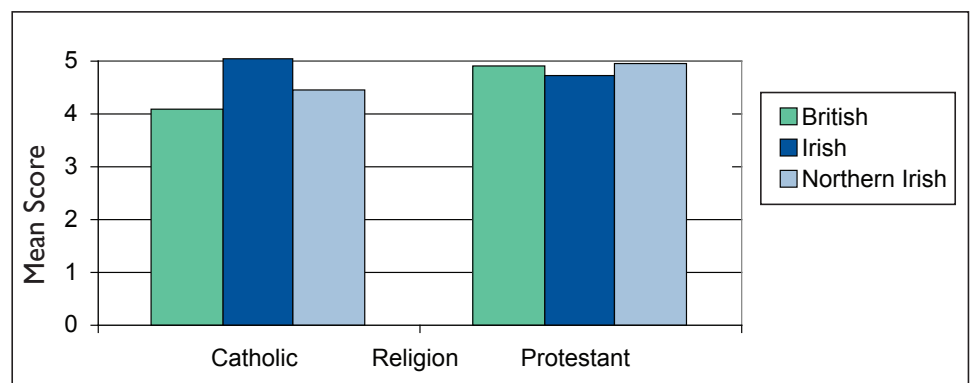
To date, studies on identity have concentrated on how people think about their identity and have given little attention to the feelings aroused by their own or others' group identity. This represents a serious research gap given the degree to which people are invested in their identities and the emotion that they can arouse. To fill this gap, we asked respondents how they felt when presented with a set of five visual images and scenarios. These were deliberately chosen to represent a range of contemporary and historical images and emblems that could be viewed differently depending on your political position. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 3 (where 3 was 'very', 2 was 'a bit', and 1 was 'not at all') how annoyed, how hopeful, how satisfied and how uneasy each image made them feel.

When we look at the particular emotions reported in response to the

Table 2: Identity combinations and views of Irishness and Britishness

	%					
	British Prot	Irish Cath	British Cath	Irish Prot	N Irish Prot	N Irish Cath
Irish not British	0	64	2	10	0	14
More Irish than British	1	30	12	30	8	54
Equally Irish and British	9	5	40	50	36	32
More British than Irish	46	1	35	10	39	1
British not Irish	43	0	12	0	18	0

Figure 2: Importance of national identity



national flags (the Union Jack and the Irish Tricolour), differences emerge. British Protestants tended to have a negative reaction to the Tricolour (see Figure 3). This group reported feeling uneasy and annoyed when viewing this flag, whereas they reported feeling more satisfied and hopeful when presented with the Union Jack. The findings for Irish Catholics were the inverse: they felt uneasy and annoyed when viewing the Union Jack, and satisfied and hopeful when viewing the Tricolour. Interestingly for those with less usual identity combinations, no significant differences in emotional responses were reported when presented with the Union Jack or the Tricolour.

British Protestants reported feeling more annoyed by the Irish Tricolour than any of the other five identity groups (see Figure 3). In a similar vein, Irish Catholics felt significantly more uneasy and annoyed, as well as less hopeful and less satisfied, when presented with an image of the Union Jack, than did all other groups (see Figure 4).

We also asked respondents about their emotions in response to some iconic images. Irish Catholics felt significantly more uneasy and annoyed when viewing a picture of an RUC emblem than all other groups. In this

same group a memorial to the 1981 Hunger Strike elicited mixed feelings, both uneasiness and hopefulness. Among respondents who described themselves as Northern Irish, these emblems were divisive. Northern Irish Catholics felt significantly more uneasy and annoyed than Northern Irish Protestants on viewing an RUC emblem. Similarly, Northern Irish Protestants were significantly more annoyed and uneasy, and significantly less hopeful, on viewing the Hunger Strike memorial than Northern Irish Catholics were. Importantly, no differences in annoyance, hopefulness or uneasiness were evident in this group when presented with the iconic image of Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams at the first meeting of the Northern Ireland Executive at Stormont in 1999.

As well as viewing these photographs, respondents were also asked to imagine their feelings in response to two scenarios, firstly, receiving an appointment from a hospital on headed paper with Irish and English on it, and secondly, viewing a local TV news presenter wearing a poppy in November. Among all the six identity groups, British Protestants anticipated significantly more uneasiness and annoyance were they to receive such a hospital letter. They also anticipated

more hope and satisfaction in response to seeing the poppy worn on TV than other groups. The opposite was true for Irish Catholics who anticipated significantly more annoyance in relation to the wearing of a poppy by a news presenter than any of the other groups and anticipated significantly more hope and satisfaction in response to the hospital letterhead than other groups. The Northern Irish group and those with less usual identity combinations did not differ in terms of their responses to these imagined scenarios.

Conclusions

As we expected, the bulk of respondents to the 2007 NILT survey could describe their religion and nationality unambiguously, and 59% of respondents identified as British Protestants or Irish Catholics. It is interesting that these allegiances remain ten years subsequent to the Good Friday Agreement. However, one in three respondents did not describe themselves in terms of the national and religious labels that are often purported to underpin the Troubles. This group of responders did not see Britishness and Irishness as mutually exclusive and rejected the notion that these nationalities were oppositional. This is a positive development as even post ceasefire and post Agreement oppositional identities appeared to dominate in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, the expected identity combinations would appear to be mutually reinforcing, that is, identities are strongest in those who align their nationality and religion alongside the social divisions in Northern Ireland. This means that this group may be particularly inflexible in matters related to these identities.

Overall, Protestant respondents rated their religion as more important to their sense of themselves than Catholics did. Irish identifiers rated their nationality as more important to their sense of themselves than Northern Irish or British identifiers did. There is considerable evidence that minority or threatened groups tend

Figure 3: Annoyance reported in response to a picture of an Irish Tricolour

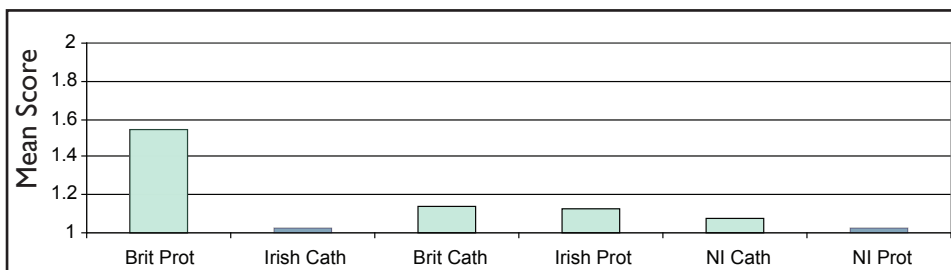
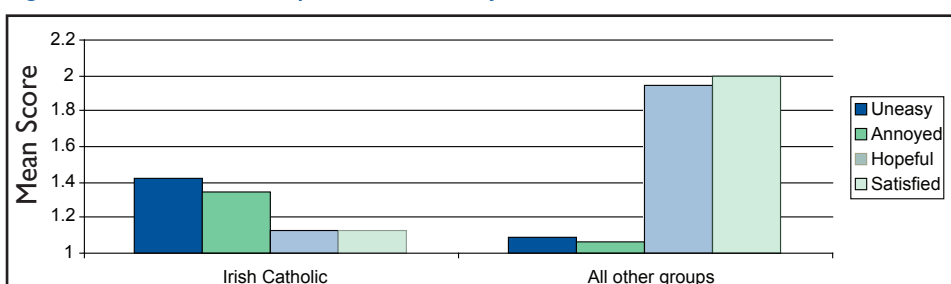


Figure 4: Emotions in response to Union Jack



to attach greater importance to their particular social identities (Branscombe and Wann, 1994). So our findings appear to suggest that the Protestant group (who can be seen as a cultural group given the nature of the questions in this study) - irrespective of their nationality - show psychological evidence of minority group status. Equally, the Irish group, irrespective of religion, show evidence of minority group status in a way that the Northern Irish and British groups do not.

In line with the contention that identities and identity strength relate

to feelings and emotion, Northern Irish Protestant and Catholic identifiers, British Catholics and Irish Protestants tended to respond very differently to socio-political flags and emblems than the other two groups. Those with less usual identity combinations reported less uneasiness and annoyance and more hopefulness in response to divisive images. Unfortunately the converse was also true. Irish Catholics and British Protestants (that is, two thirds of respondents) reported increased annoyance and unease, and decreased hopefulness when looking at images of national flags, the RUC

emblem and a Hunger Strike memorial. When we look at the Northern Irish group separately, it is interesting to note that whilst divisive images of the past result in different emotional responses by religion, this is not the case when the image representing the Stormont power sharing executive is presented. In sum, orienting towards the divisions of the past can serve to highlight religious differences in the Northern Irish group which are no longer evident when an image orients respondents to current or future politician situation.

Key Points

- 59% of respondents identified as having traditional religion/national identities (British Protestants or Irish Catholics).
- 30% of respondents rejected traditional religion/national identities.
- National and religious identity is more important to respondents with traditional identity combinations.
- Emotional responses to iconic images (flags, RUC emblem and Hunger strike memorial) were stronger among respondents with traditional identities.

References

- Branscombe, N.R and Wann, D.L. (1994). Collective self esteem consequences of out group derogation when a valued social identity is on trial. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 24, 641-657.
- Fahey, T., Hayes, B. C. and Sinnott, R. (2005). *Conflict and Consensus. A study of values and attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration.
- Muldoon, O.T., Trew, K. Todd, J., Rougier, N. and McLaughlin, K. (2007) Religious and national identity after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. *Political Psychology*, 28, 189-103.

Orla Muldoon is Professor of Psychology at University of Limerick. Niamh McNamara is a research associate and junior lecturer at the University of Limerick. Paula Devine is Research Director of ARK, based at Queen's University Belfast. Karen Trew is a visiting researcher at Queen's University of Belfast.

The identity questions on the 2007 NILT survey were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-1938).

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2007, 1179 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Central Survey Unit.

The survey is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster.

Aberfoyle House, Magee Campus, University of Ulster
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 7137 5513 Fax: 028 7137 5510
Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3947 Fax: 028 90 9097 3943
Email: info@ark.ac.uk