

The Orange and the Green: National and Religious Identity of Young Adults in Northern Ireland

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by
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Abstract

Northern Ireland has traditionally housed a discordant mix of those that identify as Irish Catholic and those that consider themselves British Protestant. After a thirty-year period of political and ethnic violence known as the Troubles, these two groups came to peace terms in 1998. Yet, a sense of distinction between Irish Catholics and British Protestants remains in this society today. Research indicates that identity is changing in Northern Ireland in both kind and numbers, and individuals now form identity in a climate vastly different than that of their parents. While there is a wealth of research on the general population and youth in Northern Ireland, little qualitative focus has been given to young adults in the region, particularly in religion. My primary research questions are, 1) How do young adults in Northern Ireland identify religiously and nationally? and 2) How do they form this identity?. Using a social identity perspective, sixteen qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted in Belfast, Northern Ireland with those ages 18-35. Structured questions were asked to all participants, designed to elicit narratives about the nature and formation of national and religious identities. Results indicate that while these two identities were previously nearly synonymous, young adults in Northern Ireland today disassociate with a religious identity yet retain a national identity. Furthermore, young adults categorize society by level of tolerance, and form national and religious identity from parental influence and geographic upbringing. Through this research, I hope to present a more accurate portrayal of the current religious and national climate in Northern Ireland and the evolution of identity for young adults in this area.

Geographically on the island of Ireland and territorially a part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has a longstanding history of clashing national and religious identities. Conflict in the country has primarily hinged on these socially determined boundaries, creating a society of those that consider themselves to be Irish Catholics versus those that are British Protestants. While the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain are now on peaceful political and social terms, citizens in Northern Ireland struggle to find unity. Inhabitants of this space face a challenge of self-categorization: how to form national and religious identities in a post-conflict but socially divided area.

In the twelfth century, Catholic Ireland was brought under English rule, instigating sectarian animosity between the two cultures. Ireland did not regain its independence from Britain until 1921, when the island was split into the free state of Ireland and the United Kingdom-ruled Northern Ireland, dictated by the Protestant majority in the north (Bull 2006). By the 1960s, years of ethnic tension and unequal status between Irish Catholics and British Protestants resulted in riots and the formation of paramilitary groups. The next thirty years, named ‘the Troubles,’ marked a time of great sectarian violence in Northern Ireland; the two communities routinely attacked, bombed, and killed both military members and civilians on the basis of social group membership (Quinn 2007). Although the Troubles officially ended with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, society is still somewhat split along these cultural lines.

Today, Northern Ireland primarily houses a mix of those that are Irish, British, Northern Irish, or Ulster, with the majority still identifying as Irish or British (Sedghi 2012). Those that consider themselves Irish have historically simultaneously desired reunification with Ireland and identified as Catholic, creating an overlapping, synonymous ‘Irish, Catholic, nationalist’ identity. Likewise, those that consider themselves primarily British have typically identified as Protestant

and unionist, desiring a continued union with the United Kingdom. These comprehensive, analogous identities segregate the country culturally, politically, socially, and otherwise, with schools, churches, leisure centers, neighborhoods, and sports teams often attaching to an Irish Catholic or British Protestant affiliation.

However, in the aftermath of the Troubles, this identification has become less predictable (Lamont and Bail 2005). Shifting patterns of identity indicate that residents of Northern Ireland increasingly form self-identity based on membership in other groups, both within the realm of nationality and religion and outside of it (Cassidy and Trew 2005).

While much quantitative data exists on youth¹ and adults in this post-conflict area, little qualitative focus has been given to young adults, especially on religion. To address this gap, sixteen qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted in Belfast, Northern Ireland in July and August 2014. My primary research questions were: 1) How do young adults in Northern Ireland identify nationally and religiously? and 2) How do they form these identities?.

Nine participants primarily identify nationally as Irish, three as British, and four as Northern Irish. Only one participant identifies as Catholic, seven are solely atheist/agnostic, three are atheist/agnostic but also Catholic, and five are atheist/agnostic but also Protestant. Overall, participants rated religion as a very unimportant part of their sense of self, and nationality of moderate importance.

For the purpose of this paper, “Irish” and “British” will refer to those that self-identify as such while still living in Northern Ireland. Likewise, “Northern Irish” will refer to those identifying as such, and will not refer to all residents that live in Northern Ireland as much of the literature does. Furthermore, the “island of Ireland” will refer to the island as a whole, and “southern Ireland” or the “Republic of Ireland” will refer to the sovereign nation, including

County Donegal. “Northern Ireland” will refer to only the six counties under rule of the United Kingdom.

Review of the Literature

Social differentiation in Northern Ireland has thrived because of the distinct group processes that dictate senses of identity. Tajfel and Turner outline these social patterns in their work on social identity theory, emphasizing both interactions between groups and within them (Muldoon et al. 2007). These social identities, described as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership,” create cleavages within society and are inseparably connected to self-conception (Tajfel 1972:31; Hogg and Abrams 1988).

As social beings, we naturally form groups based on commonalities. Categorization helps simplify our social environment and make it more manageable, promoting mental and social well-being (Tajfel 1978). These groups give us a sense of belonging, provide us with a support network, help us achieve and set goals, and accomplish change that would often be insurmountable at an idiosyncratic level (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Haslam et al. 2009; Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007). A strong social identity is thus associated with overall psychological health, and a person’s self-esteem may be further promoted through membership in high-status, supportive groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

While Turner argues that we act in ways characteristic of the group due to our cognitive identification with said group, Abrams theorizes that this is because we desire a low level of uncertainty in a group; we are motivated to reduce any disagreements of action between members, creating a system of conformity (Thoits and Virshup 1997; Hogg and Abrams 1993).

Our actions, therefore, become guided by our set of group memberships, and the identity of the group is shaped by the collective social scripts of its members.

We derive much of our self-concept from these memberships, and as Anderson notes, “The self is possible only in the web of connected lives” (Hargie et al. 2008:793). Thus, our sense of self is formed and perpetuated by social categories such as gender, class, race, nationality, and occupation, among others (Terry, Hogg, and White 1999). Born into a set of previously structured social categories, over the course of our lifetime we develop a distinctive set of identities which comprise our unique self-concept (Stets and Burke 2000).

To simplify our environment, we accentuate similarities within a group as well as differences between groups (Hargie et al. 2008). Social life is built upon a system of inclusion and exclusion, where “persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and labeled as the in-group, and people who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group” (Stets and Burke 2000:225). These in-groups and out-groups exist only in relation to each other, highlighting which has more or less stature or prominence (Stets and Burke 2000). Members of the in-group thus view it as more favorable than the out-group, motivated for a need for positive identity and increased self-esteem (Harwood, Giles, and Palomares 2005).

Self-categorization and social comparison are not without consequences, however. As opinion of the in-group increases, opinions of other groups often conversely decrease (Stets and Burke 2000). This social identity perspective is thus useful for understanding group bias and collective discrimination.

To create these social categories, individuals must separate into groups based on a distinguishable feature. Religion is often this method of stratification in a society, as demonstrated by several studies noting in-group favoritism based on religious denomination or

identification (Brewer and Higgins 1999; Kremer, Barry, and McNally 1986; Stringer and Cairns 1983). National identity, informed by birthplace, residence, accent, ethnicity, or ancestry, may likewise become a mode of distinction when conflicting nationalities exist in a single location (McCrone and Bechhofer 2008).

When an association between religion and nationhood forms, religious symbols become iconic representations of nationality as well (Brubaker 2012). These identities comprise and become facets of ethnicity, and ethnic identity becomes the product of “actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture” (Nagel 1994:152). This communal identity encompasses nationality, religion, language, geography, and several other components of society which create a shared ethnic outlook (Gurr 1993).

Tajfel notes that social categorization becomes of particular importance if two conditions are applicable: “If the division of the social world is such as to produce two clearly distinct and non-overlapping categories” and “if there exists a serious difficulty, if not impossibility, of passing from one group to another” (Bull 2006:41). The cultural, political, and ethnic climate of Northern Ireland led to the embodiment of these conditions in dichotomous Irish Catholic and British Protestant identities, rooted in continual historical struggle.

Ireland’s history marks over 700 years of English, then British, involvement and control in its affairs and government. The English in Ireland date back to the 12th century, although at the time the English monarchy over Ireland was essentially only nominal. In the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth I brought Ireland under full control of England, and her successor, James I, extended the English government’s power even further. By initiating the ‘Plantation of Ulster,’ he instigated Protestant English colonization in Catholic Ireland, leading to a series of unsuccessful

rebellions by the Irish (Bull 2006). Sectarian animosity between the groups consequently escalated as Catholic land was taken over by these Protestant colonies.

Catholics and Protestants then began competing for this universal rule of England, Scotland, and Ireland. When Catholic King James II took control in 1685, he was quickly overthrown by Protestant William of Orange. An attempt to recapture the throne at the Battle of the Boyne was fruitless, marking James II England's last Roman Catholic monarch. Many British Protestants in Northern Ireland celebrate William's victory every year on the 12th of July, christened "Orangeman's Day" (BBC History, Battle).

Ireland did not gain its independence back from Britain until 1921, when the Irish War for Independence, prompted by the newly formed Irish Republican Army (IRA), ended with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The new free state of Ireland encompassed twenty-six of the thirty-two counties on the island of Ireland, and the remaining six counties became Northern Ireland (Bull 2006). This partition did not solve conflict between the two communities, however; instead, it concentrated it into the north, where those that wished to rejoin the Republic of Ireland and those that wished to remain in union with Britain now coexisted in a defined geographic area. These identities became difficult to reconcile, as both groups experienced minority status: Irish Catholics within the United Kingdom and British Protestants on the island of Ireland (Jackson 1971). Both groups felt threatened by the other, creating a society in which each side considered themselves the in-group and the other the out-group.

These conflicting identities and ideologies served as the catalyst for a period of violent conflict from 1968-1990 called 'the Troubles.' Belonging to one identity became as much about holding that membership as it was about not holding the other one. While this placed Catholics and Protestants on opposite sides, this conflict was not theological, but ethnic and political, in

nature (Brewer and Higgins 1999). Extreme in-group and out-group tendencies, unequal status for Irish Catholics, and a sharp divide in society erupted into violent ethnic conflict. Paramilitary groups such as the IRA and UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) staged riots, murdered civilians, and planted bombs, causing routine public searches and political imprisonment (British Broadcasting Corporation 2013).

The Troubles resulted in over 3,600 deaths and more than 50,000 injured, many severely (BBC History, Troubles; British Broadcasting Corporation 2013). Considering Northern Ireland's comparatively small geographic region and population, when scaled to the size of the United States, this number of deaths is equivalent to over 600,000 (Hargie et al. 2008). Every resident of Northern Ireland has been affected by the Troubles or knows someone who has been affected—the wounds of this conflict are sociologically still fresh.

Identity during this time became more polarized, and religion and nationality became more synonymous. In 1968, before the Troubles began, about 39% of Protestants in Northern Ireland also saw themselves as British, 32% as Ulster, and 20% as Irish. By 1978, two-thirds felt British, 20% felt Ulster, and only 8% felt Irish (Muldoon et al. 2007). Today there is still a notable association between religious and national identity, where “when targets are multiply categorizable, and perceivers can use more than a single dimension of categorization and recall subordinate attributes” (Crisp, Hewstone, and Cairns 2001:509). Furthermore, the higher the degree of overlap between these identities, the less positive out-group attitudes and lower intergroup tolerance (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

The Troubles officially ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, establishing the “birthright of all the people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose” (Hayes and McAllister 2009:386). Northern Ireland was

reaffirmed as a territory of the United Kingdom for so long as it is the wish of the majority, and commitments to equal representation of Irish Catholics and British Protestants were made (Bull 2006).

This history of Irish Catholic and British Protestant conflict has consequently structured religious and national identity as opposing in Northern Ireland (Muldoon et al. 2007). Society is still somewhat segregated, as over ninety percent of children attend Catholic or Protestant schools and thirty-five percent of the population overall lives in segregated neighborhoods (Hughes, Campbell, and Jenkins 2011). By age six, 90% of children are aware of the divide in Northern Ireland, 15% make sectarian comments, and one-third identify with a particular side (Connolly, Smith, and Kells 2002). People from all backgrounds are subject to sectarianism to at least some degree, and Catholics are more likely than Protestants to be unemployed (McGrellis 2005; McCartan 2015). Religious and national labels still mark society despite decreased religiosity and territorial vehemence, and it is difficult to create collective citizenship due to the lack of consensus on nationality and treatment of religion as a badge of membership (Evans and Tonge 2013; Smith 2003; McAllister 2000).

However, Northern Ireland has shown significant progress since the Good Friday Agreement, both in action and mindset. National violence is now replaced with a more peaceful and tolerant outlook on nationalism. Moreover, religious, national, and political identities are not as synonymous as they once were: Lamont and Bail note that it is currently very possible for a person to be Catholic without being republican (2005). People look to other memberships for composition of their social identity, citing their friends, significant other, university, and family as more important to their sense of identity than nationality and religion (Cassidy and Trew 1998).

Starting in the 1990s, residents of Northern Ireland began identifying as “Northern Irish,” a new nationality free of sectarian connotations and built upon an inherent ambiguity (Hayes and McAllister 2009; Moxon-Brown 1991). The Northern Irish are more likely to be educated, young, and middle class, but often still identify as nationalist or unionist, meaning Catholics and Protestants alike can share in a Northern Irish identity without sacrificing a political ideology. Although they are proud of their Northern Irish identity, many assert that is not an important part of their sense of self (Trew 1998).

While this Northern Irish identity is often believed to be the result of successful intergroup contact, it lacks the same intensity of feeling as other identities, and the majority feel that being Northern Irish does not solve the divide (McKeown 2013; Hayes and McAllister 2009; Ewart and Schubotz 2004). Yang argues that cultural differences are inherently necessary to uphold societal unity: in a Chinese-American Christian church, the ethnic quality of the church meets members’ needs for affiliation, intimacy, and security. This allows them to then interact positively outside of the religious sector with those of other ethnicities (1998). Positive interactions, therefore, come from a place of identification, not disassociation.

In the short amount of time since the conclusion of the Troubles, Northern Ireland has made great strides in the reconciliation between ethnicities. As the country becomes less religious and decreasingly focused on sectarianism, these ethnic identities evolve as group relations continue to change. Research suggests that patterns of allegiance are now more complex than just religion, nationality, and politics, and most children can form identity in violence-free world—a vastly different climate than that of their parents (Coakley 2002; Trew 2004).

Young adults in modern Northern Ireland have thus been able to form identity largely outside of the Troubles. As the upcoming policy makers, leaders, and future of Northern Ireland, it is important to understand what memberships they hold and how they form social identity.

Methodology

To examine the current state of religious and national identities of young adults as well as how they form these identities, sixteen in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted in Belfast, Northern Ireland in July and August 2014. Interviews were face-to-face, and all were conducted after the 12th of July, Orangeman's Day. They ranged from 18 minutes to 99 minutes in length, averaging 42 minutes.

Recruitment occurred through flyers posted near Queen's University Belfast and on Reddit, a 'community bulletin board' website, to the subreddit r/NorthernIreland. Additionally, four friends of previous participants indicated interest and participated as well, creating a snowball sample. Conditions for participation included having primarily grown up in Northern Ireland and age (18-35). Participants were informed that the interviews would involve topics of religion and nationality on the recruitment flyer and then again through email.

Participants were allowed to pick the interview location and given suggestions such as Queen's University, various libraries and coffee shops in downtown Belfast or the University Quarter, or any quiet, public location. This was to ensure that participants would be interviewed in a neutral² location or ethnic area that they felt comfortable in.

Several conditions led to the selection of Belfast: a) the percentage of Irish, British, and Northern Irish in Belfast is closer than Londonderry to the percentage overall in Northern Ireland³ (NI Census 2014), b) Belfast has distinct Irish, British, as well as non-sectarian areas, and c) as the capital city, it houses people from all over Northern Ireland and of various levels of

radicalness and education. Furthermore, the neighboring Irish, British, and mixed communities create a more heterogeneous area than a homogeneous rural community. Due to travel constraints, interview locations were restricted to within the greater Belfast area. However, participants represented a mix of those who had grown up in Belfast and elsewhere, as well as those coming from larger, more mixed communities and those from smaller, homogeneous, rural communities.

At the start of each interview, participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary, with the ability to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time without penalty. Interviews were recorded with participants' knowledge and consent, and each participant signed and was given a copy of an informed-consent form. At the conclusion, participants were asked if there was any additional information or comments that they wished to contribute and were thanked and given monetary compensation for their time. No group interviews were conducted, and all participants received the same amount of compensation regardless of length of interview.

Interviews were somewhat structured with certain questions asked to all participants. Questions covered a variety of topics, including nationality, religion, neighborhoods, family, education, and politics, designed to elicit narratives about the nature and formation of national and religious identities.

While some researchers believe non-demographic interview questions should precede demographics as to not prime participants, participants in this study were asked their nationality and religion at the beginning of the interview due to the level of sensitivity associated with this topic and the need to cater certain questions to a participant's nationality if necessary.

When describing groups in the questions, religious, national, or political labels were not used in isolation, i.e. saying just “Irish” or “Protestant” instead of “Irish Catholic nationalist,” to prevent participants from just mirroring language used in the questions. Whenever possible, more ambiguous terms such as “the two communities” or “other groups” were employed, and when a specific label was required, “Irish Catholic nationalist” or “British Protestant unionist” was used.

Of the sixteen participants interviewed, twelve are male and four are female. Fourteen are university-educated. Age ranged from 19-31, with 23 as the mean age. Nine live in mixed or non-sectarian areas, seven live in Irish Catholic areas, and one lives in a distinctively British Protestant area.

Participants were asked if they identify as Irish, British, Northern Irish, Ulster, or otherwise. Nine first-identify⁴ as Irish, three as British, and four as Northern Irish. Eleven identify as only one nationality, four identify as two nationalities, and one identifies as three nationalities⁵. In total, ten participants identify as Irish, six as British, five as Northern Irish, and one as Ulster. No participants identify as another nationality.

Participants were then asked if they identify as Catholic, Protestant, neither, or another religion. Seven solely identify as atheist, agnostic, or irreligious. Five identify as atheist/agnostic/irreligious but also Protestant, and three identify as atheist/agnostic/irreligious but also Catholic. One participant solely identifies as Catholic; this participant is religious and attends mass regularly. In total, a vast majority therefore identify as atheist, agnostic, or not religious ($n = 15$). No participants identify as other religions or belief systems.

Participants were asked to rate both their national identity and religious identity from one to ten, with one indicating that being that identity is not important to them at all, and ten

indicating that it is extremely important. Those that answered between two numbers, e.g. “between a 6 and a 7,” were scored in .5 increments. For religion, participants average a 1.16 with a mode of zero. For nationality, participants average a 3.88 with a mode of 4. This indicates that nationality is more important for participants, and religion is of very low importance to them.

Interviews were transcribed in full and a content-based analysis was performed. Particular attention was given to how participants described sectarian groups or those they viewed as radical, and the language they used to differentiate between people/groups. Questions with a targeted religious, national, or political label that would elicit a response with that same label, such as “What is your mother’s nationality?” were not included in this analysis. Likewise, because schools often have an assigned Catholic or Protestant affiliation, descriptions of schools in religious terms were also excluded.

Results

My primary research questions are: 1) How do young adults in Northern Ireland identify nationally and religiously? and 2) How do they form these senses of identity?. Using a social identity perspective, I examine the social categories that exist in Northern Ireland today, as well as the memberships young adults hold and how they determine these memberships.

Sixteen in-depth, qualitative, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Belfast, Northern Ireland with those native to Northern Ireland ages 18-35. Interviews were somewhat structured and designed to elicit narratives about the nature and formation of national and religious identities. All interviews were transcribed in full and a content-based analysis was performed.

Results from this study fall into three distinct categories: 1) Current religious, national, and social categorization and differentiation in Northern Ireland, 2) Participants’ own

identification, including both type of identification and degree of identification, and 3) How participants form social identity and the factors contributing to their identity.

Social categorization and differentiation in Northern Ireland

Moderate vs. Radical

Participants acknowledged that Irish Catholic and British Protestant identities are still prevalent in Northern Ireland today, but made distinctions in the degrees to which these identities are salient to people, i.e. how radical an individual is in their sense of Irish Catholicism or British Protestantism. They stated that while some people still hold sectarian beliefs, they see the majority of Northern Ireland as moderate and tolerant.

Extremists are probably only about ten percent of the entire population of Northern Ireland. The rest, the other 45% are Protestant, 45% Catholics just like, are happy enough. My dad they grew up in some crazy times, you know, having troubles during the '80s and '70s. And nowadays people have wised-up. They know that it's stupid, there's no point in it. It just causes more trouble, you know? (Male, Northern Irish and British, Atheist and Protestant)

Likewise, almost every participant felt that their generation was more tolerant than their parents' generation, and many noted less discrimination along religious or national lines.

The older generation is very stuck in their ways. They would never change, especially with religion and people's sexuality or people's color because they were so used to that in the other days. But, with younger people, you know, they realize you don't need to be completely obsessed with your religion, and give other people a chance. My best friend is Catholic and it doesn't affect me. Whenever I go down to her house I don't feel scared or anything. (Female, Northern Irish and British, Not religious and Protestant)

I think back during The Troubles it was an issue. My father said the family wasn't particularly happy that my dad was marrying my mom. But he carried on regardless. He didn't mind. Nowadays, I don't think it's really quite so much an issue, not with the people that I know anyway. My brother is going out with a Protestant and no one really cares. (Male, Irish, Atheist)

Fifteen participants feel their generation is more tolerant than their parents', and one feels that it is about the same amount of tolerance. Furthermore, participants prefer these mixed, moderate, or tolerant groups and often explicitly identify as non-sectarian, placing themselves in

a different category from those that are more radical.

I think most people would prefer to not live in a very sectarian area. I don't know, some areas in west and east Belfast I wouldn't really like to live in, but I'd look at the place before living actually living there, and if it was a very "flag-y" area. If it was just sporadic, I wouldn't mind. But if the flags were everywhere, if they were really all over the place, I don't know, that's a lot of...culture...there. (Male, Irish, Atheist and Catholic)

More tolerant. Much more tolerant. You find strong opinions in extremists, but yeah, the vast majority of people in my generation are non-sectarian. And I try my best to never, ever be sectarian. The minority make the rest of us look bad. (Male, Irish and Ulster, Not religious)

From this, it is evident that a new social category exists in Northern Ireland among young adults: the tolerant vs. the intolerant, or the moderate vs. the radical, with participants displaying in-group favoritism for the tolerant.

Religious, nationality, politics not as synonymous

Participants also feel that religion, nationality, and political ideology are not as synonymous anymore, confirming evidence in the literature.

A lot of people within the republican community, they go to like commemorations and stuff for members of Sinn Féin or the IRA that died in the conflict and such, and Queen's Sinn Féin president got it passed within the entire election ring, the biggest party in Northern Ireland, he got it passed there last year that you're not allowed to have any religious affiliation at any of the commemorations, which I thought was cool. He said, you don't have to be a Catholic to remember the dead. I think that's a good example of a radical who wants to make a change. There's always that association that if you're nationalist you're a Catholic as well. But, the president of Sinn Féin is an adamant atheist, which I thought was kind of cool. (Male, Northern Irish, Irish, and British, Agnostic)

I feel more connected to being British because I was in the army. I grew up in this mixed community, where everyone's so friendly, but despite me being a Protestant and all there, it's like there's so many things you can be, Northern Irish or you can be this and you can be that. So when I went into the army, since it's the British army, you think "Well if I'm in the British army, I'm British." That's the way it is. (Male, British, Not religious and Protestant)

Religion and nationality are less overlapping, indicating a more fluid system of identity among young adults and a shift in social categorization.

Religious labels

When describing sectarian groups or using labels to differentiate between people, participants overwhelmingly use religious terms, rather than using religion, nationality, and political ideology interchangeably.

This is probably sounding quite bad, but I would say it's the Protestants that are a lot worse than the Catholics. However, they can both be as bad as each other. But I just think sometimes the Protestants will throw everything over the top. Like the 12th in particular, that's all Protestants. Whereas St. Patrick's Day is mostly a Catholic thing, however even Protestants will celebrate that here. It doesn't bother them having Protestants walking around. But some people, if they saw Catholics around on the 12th, they would be very angry. You get the occasional fight on St. Patrick's Day, but that's mostly just, you know, drunk people. (Female, Northern Irish and British, Not religious and Protestant).

This opinion that Protestants cause more trouble than Catholics was common among participants, even if the participants identified as British or Protestant themselves.

Of the sixteen participants interviewed, eleven almost exclusively used religious terminology, three used religious and political labels, and one used religious and national labels. Only one did not employ religious terminology, but instead used political labels; this participant identified as Northern Irish, Irish, and British, and agnostic.

By primarily using religious labels, participants sort others into groups based on their religious identity, even if participants themselves don't feel that religion is an important part of who they are. This is surprising, given the historical overlap of nationality and religion. Therefore, to young adults, it appears that divisive social categories hinge more upon religion than nationality, showing an association of social partition with religious identity over national identity.

It should be noted, however, that participants hold mixed opinions of religion and religious institutions. Some participants feel that religion has been an issue in society or in their family personally, while others note a more positive experience.

My grandfather was very, very religious, and a lot of times it alienated the family, and I think my mother distanced herself from that. (Male, Northern Irish, Irish, and British, Agnostic)

Going to mass growing up, they were very neutral. They'd occasionally have the Irish mass on St. Patrick's Day but apart from that, there were really good about it. (Male, Irish, Atheist and Catholic)

Participants that attended religiously-affiliated schools have generally positive opinions of them, noting that teachers and administration did not try to force any views on them.

Growing up I went to a Catholic school. I think it was pretty inclusive. We had Protestants going there. We had Muslims, Hindus going there as well. Obviously most people there would have called themselves Irish. But yeah, there were Gaelic sports, but you could also play rugby or basketball, whatever floats your boat. Sometimes we maybe had to say a prayer, you know? At the start of the school day or something like that. But if you didn't want to do it, you didn't have to do it. There were no issues there, I don't think. (Male, Irish and Northern Irish, Not religious)

In secondary school we had religion classes and all, but I don't think they tried to force it on us. If you had an opinion, they'd listen to you. They wouldn't be like, "that's wrong, this is what you have to believe." (Male, Irish, Not religious)

When examining opinions of religion or religious institutions, however, there is no pattern of terminology use based on these views.

Young adult identification

Radical to neutral

Several participants expressed a change in their opinions of social groups as they aged.

I suppose when I was a kid, with all the stupidity of, you know, that age...if I were to write down it would be "Irish—good, Catholic—good, British—bad, Protestant—bad." But yeah, as I grew older, you grow out of those things, out of that kind of tribal mentality cause all your friends are from the same place as you. And as you meet more people, your impression of the world grows a lot bigger, you become more tolerant. So obviously I look back like "What an idiot." (Male, Irish and Northern Irish, Not religious)

I grew up with all these stereotypes about Protestants and stuff. But once I met Protestants for myself I realized they weren't always true. (Male, Irish, Atheist and Catholic)

Eleven participants expressed similar stories of holding more radical or intolerant views as children, and the remaining five asserted that even from a young age they thought about both

sides or didn't hold any unfavorable beliefs about any particular group. This supports the idea that identity is not fixed, and furthermore asserts that young people are often not born into a state of neutrality, despite the great strides in peace processes Northern Ireland has made. Young adults must negotiate their own identity against previously structured religious and national categorization.

Participants cite travel outside of Northern Ireland or contact with others of a different identity as the catalyst for this evolution in thinking.

I used to be very strongly republican. It sounds ridiculous, but at one point I actually wanted to be the president of Ireland. But the more that I travelled and got out of Belfast, the more it certainly has mellowed. I'm a lot more neutral than I used to be. (Female, Irish, Catholic)

I went on a six-week trip to America, and another guy from here went, too, and he was a Protestant. He was a bit of an asshole, but at the same time I realized that I'm also an asshole. So I realized he's just like me, so I was like, why should I hate him? (Male, Irish, Not religious)

They aspire to present themselves to others as someone who is neutral, moderate, or tolerant. Their motivation is often personal safety and a desire to not create trouble if they do encounter someone who holds sectarian beliefs.

I don't mind [being Catholic] really, it's just the way I was brought up. It's fine to me, in the way that you can't really tell anybody about it. You know what I mean? You have to keep it a secret here. There's just so much conflict here. You have to pretend that you have no religion, no culture, no identity at all because you have to be safe. (Male, Irish, Not religious and Catholic)

Because young adults view those who are sectarian as the out-group, they accordingly downplay their religious or national identity to remain in the in-group. Participants display this behavior even if their parents are more radical.

Disassociation with religion

In addition to using religious labels, participants were very quick to dissociate themselves with a religious identity. When asked how they identify nationally, every participant responded

that they were Irish, British, or Northern Irish. Regarding religion, however, almost all participants strongly asserted that they were not religious, atheist, or agnostic.

I'm not religious. I mean, I was raised Catholic, but it's kind of just a box you tick, but, no, I'm not Catholic. (Male, Irish and Northern Irish, Not religious)

Fifteen of sixteen participants identify as not religious, atheist, or agnostic. Of these, seven are solely irreligious, three also identify as Catholic, and five also identify as Protestant. Only one participant identified as Catholic and religious. This high response of irreligiosity comes from participants that did not regularly attend church services growing up as well as those that did. While participants do not emphatically positively talk about nationality either, they do not dissociate from a national identity to the extent they do a religious one. Irreligious, atheist, agnostic, and Northern Irish are inherently neutral stances, but participants do not identify as Northern Irish ($n = 5$) at the same rate they are irreligious, atheist, or agnostic ($n = 15$). Furthermore, while Western Europe is becoming less religious in general, religious identity in Northern Ireland is typically thought of as an ethnic measure rather than an indication of theological beliefs.

I'm really only Protestant on paper. Whenever I have to write it down. Like whenever you're filling out a form that says, "Are you Catholic or Protestant?" keep in mind, it doesn't actually matter if you're religious, just, it's your background that sort of identifies it. (Male, British, Atheist and Protestant)

While young adults are more likely to describe others in religious terms, they are less likely to describe themselves in this way. This lends question, therefore, to why young adults associate division with religion more than nationality.

Identity formation

Family influence

For some, parents are a significant factor in the creation or inheritance of identity, whether it be along traditional lines of identity or otherwise.

When I was growing up I didn't really think about identity for myself, I just grew up in it, cause I did come from a very religious family. So, it wasn't forced upon me but that was kind of what I became accustomed to so that's what I adopted. (Female, Irish, Catholic)

When I was 16, I actually hated both Catholics and Protestants; I wanted to be like my own identity. And then I got older and realized the values of families and how important it is. So I got into being more Catholic and more relaxed in that sort of community. Cause that's your family. (Male, Irish, Not religious and Catholic)

One participant believes relationships and marriage have an effect on a person's identity as well.

The only time I've ever seen anyone change is because they married someone or got into a relationship with someone. Then, obviously, they reassert it depending on what's the dominant one in the relationship. (Female, Northern Irish, Not religious)

Others assert that those living in Northern Ireland can't just pick an identity, as it is dictated by one's background.

When you're filling out a form or whatever, you have to be one or the other, generally. I'd like to tick the neither box but I can't really because of my background. I've sort of realized recently how important national identity is and that, as I was growing up, I tried to sort of just avoid it. Didn't realize that no, that's part of me whether I want it to be or not. Like if I could, I would just be Northern Irish and I would just forget about the whole thing. But you can't just do that. (Male, British, Atheist and Protestant)

While parents may influence what an individual identifies as, they have less influence over the degree to which a person adopts that identity.

My mum's got really strong opinions. But she lets me have my own, you know, she's not going to force me into anything. I'm probably less British than she'd prefer me to be. But she also says that she's glad that I'm not because of all the troubles that I could get into and then bring to her door. (Male, Northern Irish and British, Atheist and Protestant)

Participants raised in a strongly Irish Catholic or British Protestant household usually held that identity to some extent, however, even if it was minimal.

Area influence

Several felt their geographic upbringing, especially the identity of the town or neighborhood they were raised in, informed their group membership.

Most of the time I do feel just like Irish and it doesn't really change that much because I've already grown up in a more Irish nationalist society. It's just basically based on my geography because all the people around me felt Irish as well. (Male, Irish, Atheist and Catholic)

I'm a Protestant because of the location of the schools that I've gone to where I grew up and stuff. (Male, British, Atheist and Protestant)

As a territory of the United Kingdom but geographic neighbor of the Republic of Ireland, many feel there is a distinction between those identifying as Irish and British in Northern Ireland and those identifying as such elsewhere.

There's a growing third subgroup, the Northern Irish. And it's not even because of how we feel, it's because of how we're viewed from people from Britain and the South. The Southerners don't see us as fully Irish, and equally the British don't see us as fully British. So you think, well what are you fighting for if you're not even acknowledged? So we've got that third group coming up, and I think that's a very positive thing actually. (Female, Irish, Catholic)

My girlfriend would call herself Northern Irish and British, but she would say Northern Irish first, British second, Ulster third, and Irish never. Whereas I would say Irish, Ulster, maybe Northern Irish like 5%, because there is a difference between me and someone from Cork. It's a regional difference just like there's a difference between me and someone from Manchester. (Male, Irish and Ulster, Not religious)

Two participants, both Irish, furthermore feel that they are treated as tourists when visiting southern Ireland, despite considering themselves Irish as well.

Identification based on schools appeared to be more about the types of students attending the school or the location of the school, rather than the administration or affiliation of the school itself. As demonstrated previously, schools in Northern Ireland typically do not try to indoctrinate their students into a set of beliefs or identities.

Overall, I found that young adults form a less dichotomous, juxtaposed sector of society in terms of nationality and religion, but transfer this "us vs. them" mentality to those that are more moderate and those that are more radical. They dissociate with a religious identity more than a national one, despite the historical overlap of religion and nationality in Northern Ireland. Moreover, they typically do not match the fervor of their parents' identity, unless their parents

are very moderate themselves, but show an attachment to this identity nonetheless. Geographic upbringing has a significant effect on young adults' religious and national identity, and while some feel they get to choose their identity, others feel it is dictated by their social and physical environment.

Discussion

The findings of this study show both positive outcomes and potential shortcomings in the changing processes of identity in Northern Ireland. Today, parents in Northern Ireland are no longer afraid to send their children to school, Irish Catholics and British Protestants are commonly close friends, and the two communities exist relatively peacefully. Successful efforts to improve relations are evident in participants' level of moderation as well as their preference for mixed or tolerant groups. Young adults' desires for peace and neutrality far outweigh any nationalist or unionist desires, indicating that a referendum or revival in sectarian conflict over the territorial state of Northern Ireland is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

However, a lack of non-sectarian religious vocabulary in Northern Ireland may cause young adults to feel they cannot hold a strong religious identity. Young adults are not able to call themselves Catholic or Protestant without others applying a sectarian connotation. While this is not necessarily a problem for an individual who is theologically irreligious, this does pose an issue for those who are theologically religious: they must weigh their religious beliefs against the desire to present themselves as neutral.

There are several potential explanations for young adults' use of religious labels when describing social groups. Affiliation of most schools as Catholic or Protestant may create a sense of grouping based on religion early in a child's formation; thus, even if a school itself is very moderate, children develop a sense of distinction between Catholic and Protestant, attributing

those labels to social groups overall. It is additionally possible that nationality inherently means more to young adults in Northern Ireland, making it easier to attribute a religious identity to sectarian groups. Further research is required in this area.

Conclusions

It is important to note that this study does not attempt to explain young adults' social identity as a whole, but the religious and national facets to their social identity. The change in social grouping from "Irish vs. British" to "radical vs. moderate" indicates that there is not a lack of social distinction, but rather, a shift in social categorization to level of tolerance. While some research argues that parents are the most influential factor in the religiosity of young adults, the conflict surrounding religion in Northern Ireland and the emphasis placed on tolerance appears to trump radicalness of parents (Briggs 2014).

However, this sample is overrepresented with university-educated students. Highly educated individuals are more likely to be tolerant, indicating a potential skew of these results toward a more moderate front. While the less educated participants in this study did not display different attitudes than the more educated participants, this would be better examined with a larger sample. Time of year may also be a factor in participants' responses, as tensions in Northern Ireland are heightened around the 12th of July. The imbalance of men and women is likely due to recruiting through Reddit.

There are implications for this study both within Northern Ireland and outside of it. These results show the complexity of identity for young adults, as well as the distinction between religion and nationality, relevant for both political and religious organizations. Additionally, this highlights problems in the lack of distinction between theological religious identity and ethnic religious identity in Northern Ireland surveys. Furthermore, because it is relatively safe to

conduct interviews on religion and nationality in Northern Ireland, this research may have applications for countries with ethnic conflict where individuals do not feel as free to voice their opinions.

Notes

¹ While in many areas of the world, the term “youth” encompasses the young adult population, studies on youth in Northern Ireland typically restrict age to younger than eighteen years, synonymous with the American definition.

² ‘Neutral’ signifies an area of mixed Irish and British representation, comparably low conflict, low sectarianism, and/or higher tolerance.

³ Northern Ireland: 39.89% British, 25.26% Irish, 20.94% Northern Irish; Belfast: 35.07% British, 31.08% Irish, 18.73% Northern Irish; Londonderry/Derry: 19.81% British, 51.86% Irish, 19.75% Northern Irish.

⁴ Indicates that the participant solely named that identity or named it first, indicating that this was how they primarily or mostly identify.

⁵ Northern Irish, then British: $n = 2$; Irish, then Ulster: $n = 1$; Irish, then Northern Irish: $n = 1$; Northern Irish, then Irish, then British: $n = 1$.

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