

# Young Children's Social Identity in The Border Region of Ireland

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## *Abstract*

The participants in this study of young children's social identity in the border region of Ireland, reside in several areas along both sides of the border separating Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The settings ranged between pre-school (3/4 years) and 6/7 years. The key criterion for selection of the participants was that they crossed the border to avail of, mainly, educational/child-care provision. The children were presented with a range of stimuli depicting governmental and social institutions in both political jurisdictions that may have had an impact on their daily lives, including representations of the concept of ethnicity and political division in Ireland. The results will be discussed in light of competing viewpoints and explanations surrounding the developing child's awareness and understanding of such political and social division.

## *Introduction*

This pilot study was initiated to explore issues of social identity of young children living around the border region in Ireland. Also in this context, the findings and methodological approach will provide a basis and framework that underpins the feasibility of a large scale study.

The basic premise of the study is propelled by the fact that since 1922, a political border has existed on the island of Ireland and has been the focus for intermittent political violence by Irish republicans targeted at the institutional basis of the Northern Ireland state. Research in Northern Ireland in terms of the conflict has traditionally been located in urban settings, and has been understood as occurring between two ethnic groups with religion as a socially determined boundary or marker (Trew, 2006). Attempts to study children's understanding of sectarian divisions have focused on children's developing ability to discriminate between Catholic and Protestant groups (Cairns, 1987), and this has included notions of national and ethnic identity as represented by each community and the institutions within each. In urban areas of Northern Ireland the interfaces of sectarian groupings tend to be physical and visible, and these have been mostly defined in very clear symbols of division between the groups. Even with the moves toward political settlement in Northern Ireland over the last 10 years, in such urban areas, the threat of violence has not been entirely removed, and children here are constantly confronted with symbols of their identity such as political murals (Trew, 2006).

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The border region of Ireland is an overwhelmingly rural setting. The geographical route of the border follows older county boundaries and is thus not entirely topographical. As a political boundary, it also denotes a certain religious division in terms of overall proportions of Catholics and Protestants who reside on either side of it. For example, in counties such as Tyrone, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Armagh (in Northern Ireland), the proportion of Protestants is around 40% (NINIS, 2003). Whereas in the Republic counties bordering these; Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, and Louth, the proportion is 9% (CSO, 2006). On the immediate Northern side of the border however, the proportions in terms of religion are more reflective of those in the Republic. During the recent conflict, and also because of Customs and Excise issues, the border in Ireland was clearly visible. There were fortified police and military installations and blocked roads that clearly defined where the border was situated; customs posts existed on many roads. In contrast to urban areas, the cessation of the IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries of their military campaigns has meant the trappings of the conflict have largely been removed, and since the relaxation of border controls within the EU, customs posts no longer exist. Therefore the border is not now entirely visible or obvious in physical terms. Distinctive symbols of both nationality and sectarian division are not at all conspicuous.

In light of this, aspects of space, place, and interface in a sectarian sense do not obviously impact on the developing identity of children. Europeanisation and the peace process have produced a 'normalisation' of the border, where it is less relevant in daily life and should fit in with hybrid, plurinational, and transnational identities (Laffan & Payne, 2001). Yet children growing up in this region experience two sovereign political entities. These have different and distinct education systems and range of provision, two health and social care systems, two justice and policing systems, and two separate economies. Indeed, Todd et al. (2005) observe that much scholarship on state boundaries assumes that these form and are at least salient forms of conditioning in terms of identity. Establishing a measure of the extent to which this is the case in young children's social identity formation along the Irish border, provides valuable perspectives on policy in areas such as education provision, health care delivery, policing and justice, and economic integration and cooperation.

### ***Methodology***

The methodological approach uses Social Identity Theory (Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as an initial framework for underpinning the research. A major aspect of the theory is that it provides for an explanation of how identity emerges from the processes of social categorization and comparison. There are various competing viewpoints as to what age young children can begin coherently expressing social categorisation and comparison between themselves and those from another group. Generally, it is thought that children develop the ability to categorise people at around 2-3 years; salient categories include gender at this stage (Trew, 2006). According to Aboud and Amato (2001), children, by age four can use distinctions among people based on ethnic or racial groups. On the other hand, Connolly et al. (2002) found that out of a sample of 352 children, only very few 3 year olds, and only 20% of six year olds could make coherent meaning and distinction between the terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic'. Given the partial and largely inconclusive perspectives on the cognitive development of identity of children in both early years and middle childhood, this research sought participants from two age categories:

The children

- 6/7 years N=7, 5 x female 2 x male
- 3/4 years N=8, 5 x female 3 x male

The settings were as follows:

- 2 x pre-school settings
- 1 x community group

These were situated in border areas covered by:

- South Armagh – Louth
- Armagh – Monaghan
- Londonderry - Donegal

The children were all from the catholic community. The children were presented with a range of photographic stimuli depicting governmental and social institutions in both political jurisdictions that may have had an impact on their daily lives, including representations of the concept of ethnicity and political division in Ireland. Discussion was promoted and focused in the domains of interest portrayed by the photographs, and recorded accordingly. This procedure was carried out both individually and in small groups.

## ***Findings***

The findings are presented here under the broad headings that denote the social categories and themes in the research model and approach. The salient responses from the children according to each theme are further divided according to the age categories of the children.

## **Education**

In recent history, education in the two jurisdictions in Ireland has developed with almost 100% 'back to back' separation in line with the political partition in the first part of the twentieth century (Pollak, 2006). During the 1980s however, educational links began to be established with such schemes as the European Studies Project (ESP). Although embedded in a wider European context, this was largely prompted by the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985. Since then, there has been an extensive growth in North-South school exchanges. More recently, during the five year period up to 2004, there were almost 3000 school and youth group exchanges. Almost two thirds (64%) came from formal education, and 25% of these were in the primary education sector (Green, White, McGearty, Macaulay, 2004).

As mentioned above (Connolly, 2002; Trew, 2006 for example) children as young as 3 may begin to categorise themselves and therefore establish distinctive individual or group identities. These categorizations enable children to engage in social comparisons with others who are perceived to be different; whether this be as basic as gender identification, or of interest here, nationality. Early childhood education

provision in primary schools (Key Stage One which caters for children aged four to seven years in Northern Ireland, and the Infant and Junior Classes in the Republic) cater for what would be classed as pre-school children in many countries. Therefore, such cross-border educational initiatives should impact upon the lower age groups in primary schools. A specific project that investigated this kind of cooperative focus on diversity was initiated under the auspices of the North-South Early Years Network (which is part of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South – SCoTENS). The project included schools in the border region of Ireland. The research involved enquiring into, amongst other areas: The views and perceptions of the children on difference and diversity, and how the early years curriculum deals with diversity (Kenny & McLoughlin, 2004). Results from this study can be compared to the responses from the 6 and 7 year old children in similar settings here.

### ***6/7 year olds***

There are unlikely to be obvious differences between North and South of the border in terms of images of classrooms or other stimuli that would portray recognisable educational settings. However, discussions with the children included prompts with regard to their thoughts around differences and aspects of diversity in this context.

- When presented with the picture of a classroom, a response: “that must be from the South, because there are a lot of coloured people. Most coloured people live in the South around Dublin”
- When asked about ‘different’ children or different schools: “Julie and Nathalie come from Poland”.

It was clear that these children did not perceive diversity or inter group differences in their cultural setting as involving Protestants and Catholics, or others from Northern Ireland or the Republic. Their experiences of difference and diversity involved more global notions of race and immigration in Ireland. Kenny and McLoughlin (2004) for example, found that colour as a first marker in the identification of difference or comparison with other children was not widespread, and indeed was a variable that was expressed as a matter of fact phenomenon in line with other distinguishing features such as hair colour. However, this was in schools where there was a more ethnically diverse mix of children. The children in the current settings’ direct experience of ethnic diversity was in relation to white immigrants from Poland. Otherwise these settings were in the main, culturally and religiously monolithic. Nevertheless, issues surrounding comparative racial differences were clearly salient in the form of awareness of recent high levels of immigration into Ireland generally.

In relation to the responses from the three and four year old children, none of them recognised that there might be any difference between North and South. They did not indicate any concept of the border at all.

### **Justice**

The societal manifestation of the justice system and how it may be seen to impact upon young children’s identity is most easily represented by the most visible representatives in this context, the police.

Issues concerning policing policies, structures and practices - and the administration of justice in general - have been central to the polarisation of Northern Irish society since the establishment of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) from the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). This was in 1922 at the formation of the Northern Ireland state and partition. On the one hand, most unionists have seen the various institutional arrangements and legislative frameworks for the maintenance of law and order as essential to the preservation of the constitutional *status quo*, faced with the threat from militant republicanism. On the other hand, most nationalists viewed the same institutions and legislation as yet another example - and one of the most blatant and important examples - of the sectarian nature of the state (Hamilton, Moore, and Trimble, 1995). Also in 1922, the role envisioned for a new force in the Irish Free State, An Garda Síochána, would be a different one from that fulfilled by the RIC. Here, only a degree of organisational continuity was possible. As a police force it would be conceived of as a 'Peoples' Guard', rather than an instrument of colonial power. This idea meant fundamental changes that were conceptually different in policing terms from the old RIC (or the new RUC) ethos. This was an aspiration to promote a new relationship between the police and the local community (Dunn, Walsh, & Murray, 2002). The history of both police forces and policing as they represented the administration of justice on both sides of the Irish border, as well as between the religious/political communities on the North of Ireland has developed in stark contrast throughout most of the twentieth century.

Since the crisis of the Irish civil war in the 1920s, An Garda Síochána (meaning guardians of the peace) have enjoyed relatively consensus-based and peaceful policing in the Republic of Ireland. In contrast, the RUC (now the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) since 2001) has met with both sustained community opposition and political violence from mostly the nationalist/republican community at various times during the last 80 years. Since the early 1970s, particularly in the border region of Ireland, most policing functions were carried out by heavily armed RUC personnel accompanied by military, normally patrolling in helicopters for fear of landmine attack.

More recently, In April 1998 the Belfast Agreement was accepted by the majority of the political parties in Northern Ireland. The difficult and contentious issue of policing was an important element within the Agreement, and it was agreed that an independent commission on policing would be set up, although policing reform in Northern Ireland was already underway. Nevertheless, this commission on policing reform (Patten, 1999), made a number of recommendations that have now been implemented with regard to cooperation between police on both sides of the border. This includes *inter alia*, common information sharing, written protocols, personnel exchange, and joint training for example. In line with policing reform and the absence in recent years of the threat of violence the PSNI have begun to normalize policing functions, including using more conventional patrol and community engagement methods in the border region. This is reflected in the responses from the children:

The older group of children recognised that although there were differences between the two police forces, they both performed 'normal' policing functions.

***6/7 year olds***

- Recognised differences between An Garda Síochána and PSNI
- ...but saw both mostly in a policing function: (PSNI) “would come if there is a robbery to see who done it”

### ***3/4 year olds***

The younger group of children also perceived police from both sides of the border as performing globally recognisable policing functions. It was clear that they did not see the PSNI for example as any different from the Garda Síochána. Policing in general was seen as similar to popular media portrayals on television:

- (PSNI) “would shoot you”
- (Garda) “they would shoot as well”

### **Health**

It has been suggested that people living in the vicinity of the border are economically disadvantaged because of things like high rates of unemployment, rurality and geographical isolation (Jamison, Butler, Clarke, McKee, & O’Neill, 2001). A wide ranging analysis of regional deprivation in Ireland underpins this view, with deprivation in border areas particularly evident with regard to age, dependency, and unemployment (SAHRU, 1997; Robson, Bradford, & Deas, 1994). It is likely that people living in border areas will have a higher than average need to use healthcare services due to such deprivation. Jamison et al. (2001) have identified the real and obvious need for cooperation and coordination in cross border provision of health care, both at the front-line end primary care or emergency services, and in the strategic areas of research and healthcare planning and funding, but that there were many economic and practical barriers to such cooperation.

In terms of experience of and use of healthcare provision, all of the older group mentioned settings that were in Northern Ireland. However, they did not recognise that there were any particular differences between there and other facilities and services across the border. Nevertheless, though not entirely explicit, there was some indication of perhaps a parental preference for the use of services in Northern Ireland.

### ***6/7 year olds***

- No concept of Northern or Southern healthcare differences
- All were aware of using the NHS in the North

### ***3/4 year olds***

- No concept of Northern or Southern healthcare differences
- Just recognised doctors, nurses, hospital, ambulance etc.

### **Economy**

At partition in 1922, Northern Ireland and the then Irish Free State had considerable different economies in terms of types of industry. Generally, in essence, the South had a large proportion of its economy entrenched in agriculture, whereas the North, retained for some time throughout the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, its shipbuilding,

manufacturing and textile industries. In recent years, however, there has been a vast shift in differences between North and South. Currently the Republic of Ireland is enjoying sustained growth in modern industrial sectors, whereas Northern Ireland is set in relatively narrow, mature, and declining industrial sectors.

Recent research (Todd et al., 2005) continues to emphasise that the Irish border has had a clear economic impact. The impacts range from perhaps the negative aspects of enduring daily living within two distinct economies with two currencies, there are also obvious advantages surrounding exchange rates and differing interest rates. Other perceived positive aspects of living within and between two distinct and separate economic realms include such illegal activities as smuggling or doubly claiming benefits on both sides of the border. The border region is also now particularly seen as an economically deprived area that will warrant special investment from the European Union.

Both groups of children demonstrated that they knew that there were two economies in terms of currencies. The older group of children displayed quite a sophisticated knowledge around value for money and exchange rates between the two currencies. However, the differences tended to be expressed more in a European context, rather than any salient national differences in the Irish context.

### ***6/7 year olds***

- All the 6/7 year olds distinguished the differences between Sterling and Euro
- Recognised through this that there were 'different' places referred to as "North" or "South"
- "you can spend both round here"
- "...can use Euro in Spain or Amsterdam"

### ***3/4 year olds***

- Several of the 3/4 year olds indicated that different money was spent in Derry/Donegal
- Responses to whom the picture of the Queen was on Sterling included:
  - "Barbie"
  - "a Princess"

## **Nationality**

It is a salient and important notion that the formation of states and associated institutions will affect national and ethnic identity. It is a key vehicle through which people make sense of and use categorisations and comparisons with others to make sense of the world. The regions surrounding state borders are the areas where there exists either distinct or possibly blurred national and ethnic identity. As Todd et al. (2005) state, the Irish border has gone through a period or periods of contest, through institutionalisation, to transnationalisation or normalisation. They have found that there is possibly less of an impact on peoples lives and how they actually live than the wider literature might suggest. The border did not have a particularly prominent impact on individuals' definitions of self. This was especially true of younger people. The border appears as not a notional, psychological barrier or entity, but mainly as an economic phenomenon wherein transmigration can produce practical advantages in saving money. National, religious, and ethnic identity are separate from the border as

represented by either state. Indeed, as can be seen from responses from the young children below, the emphasis on locational identity is not one particularly of nationality, but rather of county or town.

On presentation of symbols of national identity in an Irish context, neither group of children were prompted to respond with any allusions to conflict or sectarianism. Rather, they saw the Union flag in particular in a global popular media context, and the Irish flag as merely a local symbol of national identity.

### ***6/7 year olds***

- Union Flag – “maybe England” “See in America or London” “Saw it in my favourite TV programme, Bratz, they were shopping in London”
- Ulster Flag – “Liverpool?” One child recognised the red hand of Ulster in the context of being on the Tyrone county crest (GAA)
- Irish Flag – “there’s one down the street; Ireland” “It is in Newry, and Newry is in Ireland”
- EU emblem – “Brazil”
- Differences within the island of Ireland were saliently represented within the minds of the children by GAA County competitions

### ***3/4 year olds***

- Union Flag – “the ‘Little Britain’ flag”
- Most of the younger group of children though, showed preferences based on aesthetic qualities of the symbols and emblems

## ***Conclusions***

The implications of the findings of this small sample pilot study point toward agreement with Connolly (1998) that research relating to young children are at best partial and inconclusive. It must also be recognised however, that with such a small sample the findings should be treated with caution, and that generalisations cannot be robustly made from them. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study was to draw out some of the issues that would require further investigation, and in this vein, the findings certainly point to interesting and important avenues for research both in terms of developmental psychology, and in relation to transitions away from conflict in this region.



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