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The Nature of Meaning of Identity in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Good Friday  
Agreement

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Abstract

Social identification processes can be seen as the basis of the conflict in Northern Ireland. During the conflict it can be argued that preferred social and political identities became increasingly oppositional and entrenched. This paper reviews this evidence using population level studies. It also explores trends in preferred identities since the 1998 Agreement as well as examining the patterns of preferred identity across generations with particular attention being paid to the responses of young people. In an attempt to elucidate the meaning of these identities, a series of inter-related qualitative studies that have examined constructions of national, political and religious identification are reported. These suggest a fluidity, rather than entrenchment, in post-Agreement respondents and point to the variability and complexity of identity phenomena in Northern Ireland.



The Nature of Meaning of Identity in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Good Friday  
Agreement

The conflict in Northern Ireland can be viewed as arising from competing social identities (Whyte, 1990) between two ethno-national groups with religion acting as a socially determined boundary (Trew, 2004). However, religion is only one dimension of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The two main protagonists to the conflict can be seen as differing on a range of dimensions, including religion, nationality, political aspirations and economics. As such the conflict has most often been characterised as a clash between a British Protestant Unionist majority and a Catholic Nationalist Irish minority. Social or ethno national identity therefore lies at the heart of the Northern Irish conflict. The most common psychological framework that has been employed to explore the nature of identity in Northern Ireland has been Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987). The social identity perspective emphasises relationships between groups, as well as intragroup behaviour. It defines social identity as self categorizations that define individuals in terms of 'shared similarities with members of certain social categories in contrast to other social categories' (Turner et al, 1994, p454).

Available research evidence has supported many of the fundamental tenets of Social Identity Theory. Social categorisation on the basis of religious denomination has been demonstrated and the functional salience of this categorisation for adults has also been demonstrated (Cairns & Duriez, 1976, Stringer, 1987, 1989; Stringer & Cairns, 1983). The approach has provided a more useful explanation of involvement and support for paramilitaries than previous psychoanalytic accounts of such behaviour (Cairns,

Wilson, Gallagher & Trew, 1995). Other studies have demonstrated some evidence of in-group favouritism and out-group bias in Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Kremer, Barry and McNally, 1986; Stringer & Cairns, 1983). Latterly researchers have tended to use a wider variety of paradigms to underpin identity research in Northern Ireland. In part this is due to the evident shortcomings of the social identity approach (Trew, 1992). Increasingly, Self Categorization Theory has emphasised the contextual determination of social identification processes a position which has received some support in Northern Ireland. For instance Waddell and Cairns (1986) found that national identification was responsive to changes in immediate social contexts and more recently Cassidy and Trew (2004) found changes in religious identification over time in young people making the transition from a religiously homogenous school environment to a religiously heterogeneous university environment. Indeed self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherall, 1987) argues that the intergroup comparative context is crucial to understanding social identities at a given point in time. Obviously, this context has changed immeasurably in Northern Ireland because of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

In a similar vein, personal history and narrative approaches to social identification have widened understanding. Such studies suggest that experience of conflict is fundamental to identity choice as well as identity relevant behaviour and activism (Ferguson & Burgess, 2004). Further to this, these more recent approaches embrace qualitative methodology allowing greater explication of the meaning, values and ideologies which underpin social identity processes. It is now increasingly acknowledged within the psychological literature that the previous explicitly quantitative orientation has

meant these processes have not received the interest they merit (Ashmore et al, 2003; Muldoon, 2004).

### **Outline of Current Paper**

The current paper aims to attend to these issues and provide insight into self-categorised social identity in Northern Ireland. By necessity, this paper focuses on only two dimensions of identity, namely religion and nationality by comparing these self-categorisations before and after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement with those observed during the years of 'the troubles'. This overview is provided subsequent to a secondary analysis of a population wide survey undertaken in Northern Ireland at regular intervals over the last 30 years. The paper then illustrates the complexity, variety and richness of religious and national identification processes through reference to two inter-related qualitative studies of social identity. The first study examines narratives from in-depth qualitative interviews with two groups of adult participants. These participants, 23 in total were theoretically sampled from two groups. Nine adults were interviewed in Northern Ireland's border region. The nine participants were recruited from this area as the presence of the border, its altered visibility and impact subsequent to the Agreement and the Europeanization of Ireland more generally, allowed for discussion of identity related issues. In depth interviews were also conducted with individuals in mixed Protestant-Catholic marriages, again sampled because of the salience and relevance of identity related processes for this group. The interviews were conducted by the third and fourth authors using a common topic guide which was designed to elicit narratives about the nature of and changes in national and religious identity. The interviews, which



averaged between one and one and a half hours, were transcribed in full, coded for ethno-national identity, religious identity and changes in each form of identity; the discussions under each category were compared for individuals of different generations, religions, gender, places of present and of original residence (two of the sample had moved from South to North).

The second study sampled young people again in the Eastern border region of Northern Ireland as the secondary data analysis suggested that social identification may be particularly prone to change amongst young people. Young people's views and experiences of national and religious identity were explored using an essay writing study. This method of data collection was seen as the most suited to the purpose of this study. It allowed young people to engage with the study in a familiar and readily identifiable and avoids the restricting effects that the presence of other can have in group interview formats. Individual interviews with young people are problematic in the context of the Children's Order (1995). In total, one hundred and fifteen young people aged between 13 to 17 years old (mean age =14 years) participated. All of the young people attended secondary schools, and were from both urban and rural areas. Seventy boys completed the study, of those 54 attended a Roman Catholic school and 16 went to a Protestant school. Of the forty five girls, 30 went to a Roman Catholic school and 15 to a Protestant school. Each respondent completed a different combination of two essay questions (in addition to some personal details) which included titles related to nationality and religious affiliation. The data was analyzed using the guidelines of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both studies were conducted subsequent to the Agreement and

as such particular emphasis on the changing nature of identity in the post-Agreement political climate is central to these analyses.

### **National and Religious Identification Choices**

Following the pioneering work of Rose (1972) and Moxon –Browne (1983) in Northern Ireland, a series of population surveys between 1989 and 2003 have used virtually the same questions to monitor self–categorization in terms of religious and national identities. A number of papers have employed these survey data to examine historical changes in identification (e.g. Breen 2001; Coakley, 2002; Curtice & Dowds, 1999; Fahey, Hayes & Sinnott, 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003; Trew, 1994, 1996). Survey evidence and the census reveal a slow but steady increase in the number of people who choose to identify themselves as religiously non-affiliated.(Fahey et al, 2005; Mitchell, 2004). In the 2001 census, 84 % of the population identified themselves with a religious group but the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2003) found that only eight per cent of their 1800 respondents identified themselves as not having a religion. It does seem that religious identification remains important but as Fahey et al (2005) assert the ‘pace of secularization is still restrained ‘(p.54)

Following the pioneering work of Rose (1972) and Moxon –Browne (1983) in Northern Ireland, a series of population surveys between 1989 and 2003 have used virtually the same questions to monitor self–categorization in terms of national identity. A number of papers have employed these survey data to examine the historical changes in identification produced when Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland have been asked to select one of a list of national descriptors (e.g. British, Irish, Ulster, Northern

Irish) which best describe the way they usually think of themselves (e.g. Breen 2001; Coakley, 2002; Curtice & Dowds, 1999; Fahey, Hayes & Sinnott, 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003; Trew, 1994, 1996). This paper briefly outlines the general findings from these accounts and extends their findings with the latest evidence on the identification of younger respondents.

Rose (1971) found that in 1968, before the period of sustained violence known as ‘the troubles’, 39% of the Protestant respondents categorized themselves as British, 32 % saw themselves as having an Ulster identity, 9% chose other terms such as sometimes British –sometimes Irish and 20% described themselves as Irish. A decade later (Moxon-Browne, 1983), two thirds of Protestant respondents saw themselves as British, one fifth chose the Ulster identity but only eight per cent chose to categorize themselves as Irish. The shift away from the Irish identity among Protestants has persisted with no more than three per cent of Protestants seeing themselves as Irish in any survey conducted after 1986 ( Trew, 1996; Fahey et al. , 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003).

Rose (1971) found far greater consensus among Catholic respondents than among Protestants. In 1968, three–quarters of the Catholics categorized themselves as Irish and 15% saw themselves as British with only 5% choosing the Ulster identity. The Northern Irish identity was not offered as an option in the 1968 and 1978 surveys. Following its introduction as an option in surveys from 1986 onwards, which in and of itself suggests the emergence of a new identity, one in five of Catholics categorized themselves as Northern Irish, while approximately three in five continued to prefer the Irish identity (Fahey et al, 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003). The Northern Irish identity was also selected by a minority of Protestants with just over one in five categorizing

themselves as Northern Irish in the 2003 Life and Times Survey.

It would seem from the survey evidence that despite the volatile nature of events in Northern Ireland the pattern of national identification of Protestants and Catholics has remained surprisingly stable for at least 30 years with Protestants identifying themselves primarily as British, Ulster or Northern Irish and Catholics mainly identifying themselves as Irish, Northern Irish or British .

The data from the 2003 Life and Times Survey (Table 1) in which age trends are shown suggests that whereas there is little evidence of age variation in the dominant pattern of national identification among Catholics, there does appear to be an age-related change among Protestant respondents. Although, the majority of all age groups categorize themselves as British, it would seem that younger Protestants are more likely to identify themselves as Northern Irish than older groups

Table 1: Identity by age in Northern Ireland

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Overall
<b>British</b>							
Protestant	60	62	65	63	73	68	66
Catholic	5	3	6	10	13	10	8
<b>Irish</b>							
Protestant	1	2	2	1	4	4	3
Catholic	65	62	63	60	67	64	64
<b>Northern Irish</b>							
Protestant	30	23	23	24	17	14	20
Catholic	29	26	28	29	17	21	25
<b>Ulster</b>							
Protestant	6	10	7	7	5	12	8
Catholic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source Life and Times (Northern Ireland ) survey 2003

Recent surveys have added to the evidence by exploring the strength of identity in a number of ways. For example, Fahey et al's (2005) analysis of the 1999-2000 European Values Study survey suggests that, Protestants who identify themselves as

British, and Catholics who define themselves as Irish, rated their national identities as highly important. In contrast, those who were not following traditional allegiances such as Catholics who chose to identify themselves as British, and Catholics and Protestants who saw themselves as Northern Irish, rated their national identities as less important.

### **Identity Meaning and Change in Adults**

Overall, notions of division, opposition and feelings of ‘entrenchment’ of one’s identity, be it national or religious, were very much downplayed by adult participants, when specifically questioned on the subject. Common ground, similarity and, above all, tolerance were emphasised. Residential segregation and lack of actual social mixing between the communities were acknowledged by many individuals, two Catholics even admitting having ‘*never really met a Protestant*’ throughout their upbringing. This lack of contact was presented very factually and despite the prior testament to tolerance, was presented as neither regretted nor welcomed. Indeed, narratives of openness and tolerance, together with examples of specific areas and issues where common ground and integration are still found wanting, co-existed in all the interviewees’ discourses **(Nathalie a quote exemplifying this would be good).**

Overall, there was a recognition that Northern Ireland has changed tremendously in recent times, and is still changing and evolving, and that identities, old classifications, stereotypes and aspirations must change with it. However on particular issues, the spectre of old divisions emerged. Similarly, very specific current problems associated with religious identification were mentioned by two interviewees from the Eastern border region with regard to mixed marriages and the issue of children from such marriages

growing up in a relatively small, town still perceived as segregated: *“I thought I was so broad minded... so liberal but then it hits your own front door, it makes you think and I want to... I want to be understanding, I’m trying to be understanding but it still hurts, you know, it’s still there, it’s the grounding that I’ve had”*; *“well, if you send the child to a Catholic school with a Protestant name in [the town] it’s... that is a situation on its own... still now... if you send the child to a Protestant school, if it’s found out its mother is a Catholic there’s still an issue...”*(self-defined Irish Catholic woman). Further to this the role of the Churches in generating and perpetuating religious segregation was also identified. One Protestant interviewee stated *“The churches had a big part in dividing people because they provide a place for people to go on Sunday but they also provide social things for them to do, they’ve got halls, and they can provide a whole.... lifestyle for people so that they can stay with their own kind of people... so the churches played a big part in dividing people up, in my opinion... to this day, yeah...”*.

Interestingly though religion was mentioned by all interviewees, it was construed only as a ‘secondary’ identification and as tangential to, rather than systematically associated with, nationality. Although it was perceived and presented as an important facet of their identity, religion was not portrayed by individuals as a strong social marker but rather as a matter of fact and was firmly located by participants in the realm of one’s private life. Indeed, personal faith, rather than denominational identification, was emphasised by individuals and religious beliefs were presented as allowing relationships and exchanges with others and as promoting tolerance, openness, equality, sharing and respect.

All of the individuals within mixed marriages also emphasised the common-ground between Protestant and Catholic. Sometimes the term ‘*Christian*’ was used to describe this: *‘I was brought up in East Belfast in a Protestant family. First and foremost, I’d say I was a Christian. Not strongly Protestant although I go to a church of Ireland church, but I wouldn’t take it as my identity that I am a Protestant, I would take it that I am a Christian’* (2<sup>nd</sup> generation), or *‘I still consider myself to be a Catholic, but not as strong as I consider myself to be a Christian’* (2<sup>nd</sup> generation). Another contrasted the *‘terrible, horrible old doctrinal divisions and theology that seems to bog other people down’* with *‘a true Christian spirit that rises above it, that’s able to see the wood for the trees’* (2<sup>nd</sup> generation). Sometimes individuals in mixed marriages spoke of the common moral elements: *‘they brought us up the way any parent would bring any child up and you just show them right from wrong’*. Again a key aspect of this morality, and one which guided child rearing practices was openness. A contrast was drawn between those who *‘want to embrace their hatred and bigotry’* and those seeking to overcome this *‘ignorance’* and *‘prejudice’*.

For most interviewees in mixed marriages, religious identity was viewed as more important than national identity and they spoke at greater length about the former. Where there had been conflict in the mixed marriages (typically with the extended families), this had centred on religious rather than national or political issues. However these individuals gave complex and nuanced views of their national identity: *‘I was brought up in an environment where we’re British...I suppose I saw myself as a mixture, you know both’* (1<sup>st</sup> generation Protestant); *‘I consider myself Irish in the broadest sense of the term. I’m Irish more than I’m British’* (2<sup>nd</sup> generation Catholic); *‘I’ve got both a*

*British and an Irish passport. I don't really think about it, ...but if you did push me I would probably say I have probably more Irish leanings, sort of more nationalist than unionist leanings at the moment but sort of the jury's still out' (2<sup>nd</sup> generation Protestant).*

One second generation Protestant mentioned all the possible national categories, while explaining the senses in which she felt each: *'I would have to say British, and the only reason I say that is because I have a British passport....I suppose I should say Northern Irish because that's where I live... where do I feel I belong to?.. well Northern Ireland obviously but England as well...because most of the things you would hear on TV would be mostly England oriented... most of the news is England... I mean our country is governed by English rule as such...'* and later *'You see I don't know if I have ever made my mind up if Ireland is all one, north and south, or if it is two different countries'.*

Amongst mixed marriage participants, if change in religious identity typically involved a generalisation to a category ('Christian', or 'morally open') which encompassed difference, change in national identity was less likely to involve such generalisation to an encompassing category (Northern Irish) than it was to involve boundary crossing or boundary blurring (British and Irish, British and Northern Irish, more Irish than British). The complexity in categorisation noted above distinguished the Northern Irish interviewees from those in the Irish state who, even if they gave an internally complex content to their national identity, tended to use one simple category (Irish).

### **Young People's Views**



Given the obvious age trends in identity preference evident in table 1 above, the views of the new post Agreement generation are clearly of interest. Happily in 2003, All Young people in Northern Ireland who celebrated their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday in February were asked to participate in the Young Life and Times Survey (YLT) (Devine & Schubotz, 2004) . From table 2, which shows the pattern of identification in the 2003 and 2004 YLT surveys, as compared with the data from the 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, it seems that Catholic 16 year olds show a greater tendency to categorize themselves as Irish than the adult sample . A third of the Protestant 16 year olds in 2003 categorized themselves as Northern Irish and 9% chose the Ulster identity which reflects the age related choices found in the NILT sample. Although findings from one sample could reflect the impact of immediate events (such as the victory of the local Ulster rugby football team) it does seem that a different pattern of national identification is emerging in 2004. The NILT data suggests that for the first time since the start of the troubles less than half of a survey sample of Protestants identify themselves as British and almost a fifth categorize themselves as having an Ulster identity. Furthermore, whereas only 30% of the 16 year old Protestants who preferred the British identity viewed this as very or quite important, 86% of the Ulster identifiers saw this identity as very or quite important. In contrast, 82% of the Catholic Irish identifiers rated this identity as very or quite important. The findings from those (12% in 2003; 17% in 2004) who did not affiliate themselves with either the Protestant and Catholic communities are included in Table 2 and the importance of the Northern Irish identity for this group is notable.

**Table 2 : Patterns of National identification amongst Young People (Updated table to follow)**

	Protestant			Catholics			Non-affiliated		
	NILT 2003	YLT 2003	YLT 2004	NILT 2003	YLT 2003	YLT 2004	NILT 2003	YLT 2003	YLT 2004
British	66	51	47	8	4	1	36	37	20
Irish	2	3	3	63	77	81	22	16	27
Ulster	8	9	19	0	1	0	2	3	2
Northern Irish	20	33	29	25	16	15	29	32	40
Other/don't know	3	2	3	4	2	2	12	11	10
N=		370	312		420	356		104	136

### The nature and meaning of identity for adolescents

This snapshot of young people's views is no doubt enhanced by the qualitative data collected as part of our second study. The majority of young people who participated in our essay writing study appeared to attach a great deal of significance to their national identity, irrespective of whether they identified themselves as Irish or British. Significantly whilst respondents were quick to report their identity and the pride they associated with it, a few stated that it was not that important that it justified fighting over. For instance, one participant remarked, "*I don't think that nationality, religion etc. should be that important because you only live once why fight over religion*" (14 year old female identified as British and Protestant).

For the most part young people in Northern Ireland viewed their nationality initially in terms of either being part of the United Kingdom or being Irish. For instance, one Protestant female reported, "*My nationality means that I am from Britain and I am connected with England, Scotland and Wales. My nationality means a lot to me as I have been brought up like this and intend to stay this way the rest of my life.*" Another stated, "*My nationality means that I am a part of Britain, it is very important to me as I would*

*rather know about the King and Queen not like (sic) the people who don't belong to Great Britain"* (another 14 year old female identified as British and Protestant). For others, largely Catholics whilst they lived in Northern Ireland and so were technically part of the United Kingdom, they readily voiced their disapproval of this union. One 14 year old Irish Catholic male remarked, *"I do live in Northern Ireland but I do not sing along to 'God save the Queen' or salute the British flag. I salute the tricolour and sing along to, 'Soldiers are we'"*.

When the young people were asked what their identity meant to them, a variety of responses were provided. Sport, sportspeople, culture, and characteristics such as friendliness and sense of humour were readily voiced by respondents who self-categorized as Irish. For instance, one 14 year old Catholic male stated, *"I sometimes play Irish instruments and I have learned the Irish language in school"*. Another wrote, *"Irish people are dead on and happy to say hello when you walk down the street"* (14 year old male self-defined as half Irish and half English). Generally those who identified as British provided a more limited number of cultural meanings associated with national identity. Again these examples highlighted the overlap between religion and nationality as they included events such as band parades, the 12<sup>th</sup> of July as well as football matches. One 14 year old Protestant participant wrote, *"At the twelfth of July and at band parades, because that is a time when most people celebrate and go to watch bands and be proud of their religion"*. Another important distinction between these two groups was their use of collective memories. Again collective memories were much more prevalent in the essays of those who identified as Irish rather than the British respondents. Some referred to specific events such as Bloody Sunday, and the 1916 Easter rising, whilst others tended

to refer more generally to historical happenings. For example, one 15 year old female who identified herself as Irish and Catholic wrote, *“I would be annoyed if someone called me British because of all the trouble in Ireland and how the British treated the Irish”*.

Stereotypes also heavily influenced their tolerance of the other group and in doing so strengthened their own identities. One female who identified as Irish reported, *“I’d hate to be English because everyone always seems to be fighting, and are also very rude”*.

Conversely a 14 year old Protestant British male wrote, *“The Irish are always making trouble and always use violence”*.

The data also revealed variability in the emotional meaning of national identity, and the influence of context. Respondents described how at different times or after different events nationality represented either something to be proud of, or a source of shame. For example, one boy described how when he goes on holiday he always says he is from Ireland as opposed to Northern Ireland which in his opinion is synonymous with ‘the troubles’. He explains, *“When I am on holiday and someone asks me where I am from I would say Ireland and not Northern Ireland because I am embarrassed because of the troubles going on and the person asking me might get the wrong impression”* (14 year old male who identified as Catholic and Northern Irish).

There was also variety in the meanings attached to religious identity. Sometimes religious identity was viewed as a more personal thing in terms of faith, morality and worship. For example one 15 year old self-defined Irish Catholic male remarked, *“As a Catholic I should go to Mass every Sunday at least and try to act in a better way like a Christian. My family and parents would like me growing up in a way that I am not a bad person, but am mannerly and not getting into trouble for doing the wrong thing”*. Whilst

on other occasions religion was viewed as a collective identity, intrinsically political rather than spiritual. For instance, one respondent stated, “*Yes because in Northern Ireland religion is strong in what you believe you’re a Catholic or you are a Protestant (sic)*”.

Finally, a pervasive theme throughout the data was the belief that nationality and religion were interchangeable. When the young people were specifically asked about their nationality or religion, they would often answer the question without distinguishing between the two, or suggest that the two equivalent, for instance, one 15 year old Catholic female stated, “*I love being called Irish because if I said that I was British you would think that I was a Protestant (sic) so I say I am Irish and Catholic and proud to say I am Irish* . Another 14 year old female wrote, “*My nationality means what I believe in. It means what I don’t and do believe and which Church I go to whether Catholic or Protestant*” (self identified as British and Protestant).

## **Conclusions**

The analysis presented here suggests that the majority of both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland continue to self-categorize themselves both in terms of religion and nationality. Furthermore, the majority of Protestants continue to categorize themselves as British and the majority of Catholics categorize themselves as Irish. However there is evidence of some change in national identification, increasing proportions of the population view themselves as Northern Irish. Furthermore, unlike previously incarnations of ethno-national identity, this identity has been embraced by a significant minority of both Catholics and Protestants. It is also encouraging to see some

evidence of identity strength associated with this identity, together with a comparatively high preference for the identity amongst the post-Agreement younger generation.

Though there was this evidence of change, the most substantive finding from the qualitative study of young people was that their nationality was fundamentally viewed in terms of Irishness or Britishness. The research also suggested that a large proportion of the young people attach a great deal of significance to national identity. National and religious identity was viewed as encompassing an array of different features, from culture, through to characteristics thought to be typical of a particular nationality. Significantly, for many of the young people national and religious identity are viewed as equivalent and inter-linked. Finally, the data also suggested that respondents often refer to collective memories which seem to heavily influence their national identity, the strength they attach to this identity and their attitudes towards the other nationality. The more common recourse to such memories by those who categorized themselves as Irish, may well be related to the continued importance attached to the Irish identity by those who embrace it.

Individuals in mixed marriages are extremely articulate about their identity and processes of identity change which typically were recounted as beginning before the marriage and having continued since. None of these interviewees reported that their identity was affected by the Good Friday Agreement. Episodes of identity change were often provoked by experiences in civil society institutions: basketball (a sport played by Catholics and Protestants); adult education classes; the university. Interestingly, boundary-crossing and boundary-blurring in the family background were often mentioned. Sometimes it was territorial boundary crossing (South to North, England to

Ireland) or sometimes previous mixed marriages (close or distant relatives of the 'other' religion). On other occasions one parent, typically the father, was said to be very 'liberal'. Whether or not individuals in mixed marriages have more boundary-crossing or boundary-blurring in their family backgrounds than do others is difficult to know. Irrespective of this, this emphasis provides them with a sense of inter-generational continuity, despite their personal changes. Further their recourse to these instances of boundary blurring provided justifications for the marriage choice they made. Mixed marriages in Northern Ireland remain the exception and it is interesting to note that it was mentioned by another non-mixed marriage interviewee as an issue that she had found very challenging within her own family.

More generally consonant with this point was the evidence that identity narratives offered reveal a process of reflexive self-identification. The meaning of ethno-national identity, even in a deeply divided society like Northern Ireland, is often varied, sometimes conflicting and contradictory. Interestingly many of the adults interviewed expressed a desire, albeit sometimes hesitantly, to embrace pluralism and diversity and to incorporate these into their self-definitions. Paradoxically, this interest in tolerance and pluralism was often justified in the context of religion. Indeed discourse around religion for those not in a mixed marriage predominantly emphasised its private, moral and spiritual nature despite its being a highly contentious inter-group issue in Northern Ireland. This interest in openness was expressed by those who had little or limited contact with those from the other community and despite a persistence of old-time, apparently inescapable, entrenched divisions. Further this attested interest in inclusion and diversity is at odds with current voting patterns in Northern Ireland. Future research

could usefully examine the apparent and hidden meanings of discourse around inclusion, tolerance and religion in Northern Ireland.

Although, none of the respondents in our studies explicitly mentioned the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, the identity change and evolutions outlined coincide with the changes in the socio-economic, cultural and political landscape of Northern Ireland since 1998 (Mitchell, 2003a, 2003b; Ruane & Todd, 2003). Indeed our work supports the contention that social identification processes are influenced by wider social contexts. Whilst this change is slow, and there is considerable evidence of entrenchment and intransigence, amongst the young as well as the old, there are also some promising signs. Given the importance attached to personal experiences for subsequent social identity formation, by both our interviewees and psychological theory, the reduction of the political violence in Northern Ireland portends well. Retaining the current largely peaceful climate, may provide greater opportunities for identity change, which in turn could contribute to maintaining peace.