Fluid or Frozen? Choice and Change in Ethno-National Identification in Contemporary Northern Ireland
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Based on in-depth interviews from research projects in Northern Ireland, this article shows processes of choice and change in national identifications. Posing the question of fluidity or frozenness with regard to the categories of national identity in Northern Ireland – Irish, British, Northern Irish, Ulster, European – and with regard to the contents of that identity, we argue that situational variation in identity is quite compatible with unchanging and oppositional forms of identity. By looking at how “everyday nationals” in Northern Ireland discuss their own sense of national identity and describe the occasions of identity-choice and identity-change that they encountered, we identify sequences of identity-change and the resources and repertoires that are called upon in processes of change. This shows conclusively that national identity is not frozen; however, neither is it fluid.

We show that what appears in interaction as fluid movement from one identification to another may be a complex but stable pattern of identification, where several categories are used, each with precise and stable referents. In other circumstances, where change in identity category is easy, it may be because the category is empty. For most of our respondents change involved personal cost and radical consequences for their relations with others and it was not undertaken easily or lightly. It often occurred in situations of crisis and trauma, and it was more likely to be in oppositional, conflict-generating directions than in non-oppositional directions. Their national identifications were not frozen but deeply embedded, with change having implications for their whole set of values, judgments, and social interactions. This suggests that the mass, sudden category change recorded in the survey data in Northern Ireland is likely to be strategic and political rather than cultural and substantive. Furthermore, our research clarifies some of the debates in the scholarly literature on Irish nationalism. Far from having disappeared in the new Europe, Irish national identifications and British-Irish tensions lie close to the surface and there are situations where they are easily revived.

Through our analysis of the interviews we showed the logic of the processes of essentialization and opposition. Interactional slights and humiliations are at the core. For some of our respondents, these were sufficiently infrequent to be dismissed as exceptional. But for others, the injury was serious and the oppositional route was available (in Northern Ireland provided by a history of division which supplied such oppositional repertoires) and was taken intuitively by ordinary individuals. Essentialization processes did not require the activities of “ethnic entrepreneurs”; nor did they affect only “naïve primordialists”. Our interviewees described considerable boundary crossing and reflection on identity categories prior to experience of essentialisation. Essentialization processes do not require a pre-existent belief in an oppositional nationalist narrative by the individuals affected, although oppositional repertoires and understandings must be available to them. It follows that incremental attempts to change the national narrative may be worthwhile in themselves, but they will not interrupt the mechanisms of essentialization, which reach for past repertoires. The simple way to interrupt the mechanisms is to lessen the frequency of serious institutional injustice and collective stigmatisation and to provide avenues of redress for those who suffer it. This does not undo past essentialization processes but it does reduce the chance of new ones.
If essentialization is an immediate reaction which asserts personal and collective dignity in situations where it is denied, de-essentialization appears as a more complex process. It is provoked by boundary-crossing experiences, themselves rare in situations of conflict. It takes place through crises, which give rise to individual choices, the outcome of which is not pre-determined. This gives a new perspective on the well-known observation that ethnicity is a “sticky” phenomenon, such that, once formed, intensely oppositional ethnic identities tend to persist, and such that most of the forces operating in divided societies push towards a polarization of identities and towards conflict. Our research suggests that this is not rooted in a primordial and unchanging ethnicity: it is rather a question of the triggers and resources for identity shift which are more frequent and more powerful in an essentializing than de-essentializing direction.

The central message that comes from the interviews, particularly in situations of conflict, is of a great diversity and range of moral and cultural experimentation in a situation where there were no given answers. Occasions of choice emerged intermittently, and if a few respondents willingly embraced and others resolutely refused them, there is a wide variety of ways in which ordinary individuals come to recognize such choices, define and cope with them.