Ireland has experienced dramatic levels of change in the 20th century (particularly accelerated in the latter half) and Irish society has been characterized by an intensive pattern of social change on multiple levels. Within such a context, questions regarding the meaning and change of national identity have become more prominent. In this article we discuss changes in the construal and definition of ethno-national identity for the Catholic population living in the Southern border area through the concept of generations as proposed by Mannheim. We do not generate a new theory of nationalism, but we probe the role that ‘generations’ play in framing ethno-national identity in Ireland.

Mannheim’s concept of generations was an attempt to link the process of social change with the historical evolution of ideas. In this paper we use the concept of generations to explore changes in the idea of “being Irish” in relation with the recent historical changes on the island of Ireland. This approach is an adequate and promising standpoint, because implied in the idea of a nation is that of a community formed by past, present and future generations. We contend here that generations possess certain structural qualities, that they are simultaneously enabling and constraining, and provide the binding of time and space within which individuals develop and evolve. Each generation imagines the nation in a different way within the constraints and possibilities afforded by the generational positioning.

The empirical study involved multi-sited fieldwork (in both rural and urban areas) in counties Louth and Monaghan during 2004 and 2005. It combined ethnographic participant observation with in-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews. We analysed the interviews looking for themes and patterns in ways of “being Irish”. Having observed the existence of changing ways of explaining what “being Irish” meant to our interviewees, we realized that they coincided with three broad age groups. The commonality was in terms of the establishment of the space within which agreement and disagreement occurred. These spaces were built through the positioning of the narrator along three dimensions: the relationship with other generations, the relationship with institutions, and the relationship with “others”. These different spaces of shared “commonality of framework” guided our selection of generations and the boundaries between them. The first generation, “Generation A”, is thus composed of individuals who were born between 1914 and 1939. “Generation B” is composed of individuals born between 1940 and 1965. “Generation C” includes those born after 1964.

For our respondents in Generation A the combination of heroic Celtic mythology; the notions of blood, lineage and transcendent territory; independence, and the dilemmas of the post-colony, were central issues that framed individuals’ identities. Variations in individuals’ definitions of “being Irish” were the result of dealing with these tensions. Although variegated primordialist narratives pervaded this generation’s definition of Irishness, cultural practices were not fully excluded. Generation B was also concerned with history and past generations, though in more concrete ways. The mythical horizon was reduced in importance, and the past generations’ actions and values were often understood in a more critical, even judgmental manner. The transmission of identity focused on practices, values and beliefs, and was highly institutionalised through sporting, religious and educational organizations. This “culturalisation” of Irishness allowed individuals the possibility of
questioning its very definition. Many managed to see Janus’ hidden face in this process: that together with these strong identity formations also came practices of exclusion and violence. It was probably this recognition, and the trauma and tragedy they experienced through their lives, which they sought - through silence - to communicate to the following generation. The main source of tension was the evaluation of their own positioning within the historical process: was their notion of being Irish compatible with a partitioned Ireland? If not, was it compatible with the use of force? Each individual in this generation struggled to develop his/her own answer. In parallel to the culturalization of identity went the shift of religion from the public to the private sphere, and the removal of its mantle of unquestionability, on both the institutional and theological level.

In terms of the relationship with “others”, although there was continuity in the categories used, their meaning, relevance and the process of classification itself changed. For the first generation the range of possibilities spread from seeing an irresolvable opposition between being Irish, and being English or British, to the possibility of partaking in the British world while still maintaining a certain degree of differentiation. For the second generation, the spatial focus changed from Ireland’s “place” in relation to the British Empire to concentrate on Northern Ireland, and Protestants came to the forefront and became the most significant “others”. Even if Europe also emerged as a (much weaker) point of reference, it served mostly as a means of (re)discovering their own sense of Irishness and as reinforcing their pride in their identity. Individuals in Generation C seemed to carry the (recent) past as a burden, an issue to be resolved in order to look forward into the future. Even though they perpetuate the usage of the categories used by Generation B, these have changed in significance. On the one hand they look towards Europe or the broader international scene for other references, but return to the familiarity of the “local” context as their main reference point. On the other hand, the entry of new immigrant groups into the ethnic classification system, provides a new “other” against whom Irishness can be defined. Whether or not this generation will manage to achieve a resolution of these issues is too early to say.

In summary, this research demonstrates how each generation produces its very own definition of “being Irish” as the result of a process in which individuals are actively engaged with ever-present and evolving power relations as well as in inter-group and inter-individual relationships.