How do individuals open up social and symbolic boundaries in situations of protracted ethnic conflict? The ‘contact hypothesis’ suggests that cross community contact leads towards inclusive identities. But, despite considerable evidence that long-term and significant contact can have this effect, there is very little research on the causal mechanisms by which contact changes identities. This paper, by focussing on a few situations of radical identity change, shows some of the mechanisms involved.

In thinking about change from oppositional to non-oppositional, or inclusive, identities, it is useful to think of three modes of change, sequenced in increasing radicalism.

1. Individuals can symbolically refuse the boundaries (‘I am not British or Irish, I am Northern Irish’; ‘I am not Protestant or Catholic, I am a plumber’) from within the existing social boundaries. Sometimes they negotiate for themselves an accepted place within one ‘group’, so that their symbolic refusal of division coexists with social reproduction of it. Sometimes the tensions get too much and they leave Northern Ireland (the ‘exit’ option). Sometimes they are motivated to action which blurs the social boundaries.

2. Individuals can focus their activity in those spheres or institutional sites where social boundaries overlap and ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ interact freely: boxing and business, ice-skating, community work and university are such sites, as well as some other sports and explicitly cross-community political and educational ventures. This involves a radical decline in the salience of the boundaries. However the range of such activities is limited: when ice-skaters or businesspeople have children and have to decide what names to give them, whether and what religious formation to give them, and what school to send them to, social boundaries return in high salience. If some reproduce the boundaries of their own socialisation, others convert: mixed marriages and conversion of one or other partner were always present in Ireland. Others go a step further to crisis and more radical change.

3. Some individuals come radically to disaggregate symbolic boundaries while socially breaching and blurring the new multiple boundaries, with a concomitant helter-skelter of identity change. These are the individuals on whom I focus in this paper. The schematic logic of such a process is clear. Individuals separate out the distinct symbolic dimensions which constitute the boundary, changing on one dimension (nationality or politics) more than another (religion) and thus coming to straddle a more complex set of boundaries. In their own practice they transform a singular multiply-determined boundary into multiple boundaries with many overlaps. They blur some symbolic divisions, heighten others, while the resonance of each begins to change as it is disaggregated from the others. The multiplication of boundaries gives possibilities for many more forms of blurring, crossing and shifting.

This third mode of change was particularly evident among one segment of our respondents: those in mixed Protestant Catholic marriages. Working with these interviews, I extract some typical mechanisms of change.
1. The occasion of change is contact across social boundaries which generates experience that demands decision, provokes crisis, and may lead to identity change. In several of these cases, the experience which provoked change was close and civil contact with those defined as terrorists (Sinn Féin); in others it was a matter of the ethno-religious future of the next generation (the baptism of children of a mixed marriage). In each of these cases, the boundaries were breached in practice and experience before the oppositional ‘prejudices’ were changed in personal understanding. Contact alone does not generate change. It makes more likely experiences which generate a whole series of cognitive and moral dissonances, which show that the elements of identity that had previously been tied together have to be pulled apart.

2. What is thrown into crisis is the relevant moral community, the boundaries of intelligible moral behavior. The boundary blurring that takes place is not a taking on of another set of cultural norms or values, although it may in some cases come to involve this. It is rather a finding of potentially share-able moral (or sometimes religious) values that allow for a ‘fusion of horizons’. This was, however an achievement rather than a foregone conclusion. Some respondents alternated between different evaluative repertoires, one more oppositional and one more open, without resolving the potential tension.

3. In none of the cases did the individuals convert to the entire package of beliefs and values of the other community. Nor did they broaden to a fully universalistic or cosmopolitan position. In each case it was a repositioning of self within a reinterpreted tradition, an imaginative reforming of the Protestant or Catholic tradition. Change was so painful and difficult for many of our respondents because they insisted on changing while retaining their earlier (familial and sometimes also neighbourhood) relationships. They did not reject the relatives who refused to come to their weddings or who insulted them and their partners; they returned to them, reforming relations with them while insisting that their own changes also be recognised. In these interviews, they were successful: initial alienation was overcome, and the four women above and their partners achieved not simply different social networks, but markedly wider and more inclusive ones. (Such ‘happy endings’ are not representative.)

4. The result is a renegotiation of boundaries. For those most centrally involved, symbolic boundaries become multiple and distinct. For Sara and John, religious boundaries had lost salience, national boundaries remained clear, distinct, unchangeable, but without implications for interaction, political boundaries were constantly in process of revision, cultural boundaries had blurred over time and there was a fusion of moral horizons.

5. At the level of the immediate and the extended family, change in social boundaries is radical, in social mixing and interaction, in the free movements of the immediate family from one side to another of the boundaries with the extended family becoming aware of different life-paths and rationales.

Was this a blurring of boundaries? I want to say that it was rather a multiplication of them, at once a highlighting of boundaries, a distinction of different boundaries, and a making of them all negotiable and revisable. It is a world where the resonances associated with the identity categories and boundaries are split apart: the unionist resonances and sectarian practices of a Belfast soccer team are distinguished from the football and the fellow feeling. It is a world where it is possible - in the words of one respondent’s 8-year old daughter – to be a ‘half and halfer’, to have both ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ repertoires and to move between worlds. It is peopled by apolitical individuals, their parents and their children, with a penumbra of extended family, friends and acquaintances, but it has a subversive quality. In cases where boundaries involve a multiplicity of symbolic divisions, the work involved in separating them out at once remakes identities and traditions; it shows transgression by conservatives who do not wish to depart fully from their (collective and individual) past. It may take place in multiple, sometimes unexpected, sites.

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1 Ethnic cleansing presupposes boundary crossing and Denise knew the Catholic killed on her street.