Does being Protestant matter? Protestant minorities, minority Protestants, and the re-making of Protestant identity in contemporary Ireland.¹

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ABSTRACT

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This paper looks at the way individual choices impact upon collective categories of identity, and in particular how individuals reconstruct their way of being Protestant in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the context of social and political change. Working with qualitative interview material, it shows quite radical variation in the way of being Protestant in Ireland, not simply in the conventional distinctions between denominations, degrees of religious belief, political views and national identities, but in the very salience of being Protestant, in the making and blurring of boundaries between Protestant and Catholic; not simply in the values which they take to be distinctive to the Protestant tradition, but also in their willingness to draw from these universalistic norms of relevance to the whole society. It argues that these renegotiations are highly sensitive to the macro-political context, and that cognitive understandings and strategic interests are as important to individual choices as are social solidarities.
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Introduction

Being a minority, like being a Protestant, is not simply a matter of ascription. Collective categories and communal belonging are assumed as well as ascribed. How ‘Protestant minorities’ act politically and socially depends on whether and how being Protestant matters to the individuals in question. The process of assuming any collective category is a complex one, constrained by existing divisions, fostered by perceptions of self-interest, affected by values and socialisation processes (Laitin, 1998; McAdam et al, 2000; Jenkins, 1996). Most important for this paper, it is also a process where the meaning and boundaries of the category can be changed, on a personal and interactional level, sometimes with wider social consequences. How do individual level choices impact on wider collective categories, social cleavages and symbolic boundaries? One of the ways to investigate this is to focus on periods of social and political change, when large sections of the public are impelled to rethink their priorities: this can reveal some of the processes by which categorical oppositions fall into disuse, or are highlighted with new meanings, and group-ness subsides or is self-consciously reproduced in institutions and networks. This article works on a small empirical canvas - 54 Protestants in Northern Ireland and the Irish state interviewed between 2003-6 – but it is conceived as part of this larger agenda.

Being a Protestant, or a member of the Protestant minority, in Ireland raises all of these issues with some urgency. Every Protestant in Ireland is in a minority. Protestants are a demographic minority on the island, and each particular
denomination is a minority even in Protestant-majority local areas. In some respects Protestants in Northern Ireland, although a majority, behave like a minority (Whyte, 1991, pp. 100-1). Yet many Protestants do not define themselves as part of a Protestant minority, either because they do not think it worthwhile to ‘head-count’ or because in Northern Ireland they are self-consciously part of a majority. Some do not even define themselves as Protestant: they are Presbyterians or Church of Ireland, or they are Christians, or they are non-religious (see Trew, 1998). And, when they do so define themselves, they do so in very different ways. Social scientists’ and policy makers’ ascription of Protestantism and/or minority status to those from Protestant family or communal background is only a starting point of analysis. This paper focuses on the different patterns and processes of self-definition among ascribed Protestants, and the social conditions which favour them.

The Irish border is of major importance in assessing minority status. The partition settlement of 1920 divided the island in order to create a clear Protestant (and unionist) majority in Northern Ireland. By the same token, it left Protestants in the new Irish Free State a small minority, even those in the border counties that historically had been at the margins of a much denser Protestant settlement pattern and where considerable numbers of Protestants remained (Bowen, 1983). Continuing nationalist aspirations on both sides of the border, highlighted in unionist rhetoric, left Protestants in Northern Ireland continually conscious of their minority status on the island. Meanwhile the informal networks, life-paths and trade patterns of border-dwellers had been disrupted by partition (Coakley and O’Dowd, 2007). Their self-conceptions, however, did not follow this institutional division (Todd et al, 2006). The sensed contingency of the border made for an inherent fluidity in minority/majority
self-assignment among many Protestants. For this reason, their varying modes of identification can usefully be compared and contrasted with those of the other Protestant minorities discussed in this volume.

Three aspects of identification are focussed upon in this paper: communal identification (group-ness, sense of belonging); cultural identification (cognitive frame, cultural contents, constitutive values); strategic identification (identification as a power resource). Each involves a different way of being Protestant, different emphases, different meanings, different reasons for prioritising this category over others.

i. **Communal identification.** Being Protestant matters because, like ethnicity, it involves belonging, community and descent. This may itself be further divided into a sense of shared cultural understandings, a sense of immediate familial loyalties, a sense of wider communal loyalties and a sense of descent groups and/or origin myths (being Protestant matters because we are a people who came here in the 17th century, suffered and survived).

ii. **Cognitive and normative content of identity** Being Protestant matters because of the values and principles with which it is associated. These may be conceived in purely religious terms or in a wider socio-cultural sense. This is to emphasise the symbolic content of being Protestant, the contest over it, and how it helps create the social boundaries of the group (Lamont and Molnar, 2002, pp. 168-9; Pachucki et al, 2008). Within this, there are many different types of content that can be emphasised, universalistic
moral repertoires, particularist narratives, religious vs political meanings, and there may be different trajectories of change over time (Todd, 2005).

iii. *Power resources, power relations and institutional context.* Being Protestant matters because the social context makes it matter. Power relations make collective categories important (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 86-9). They create minorities and majorities in whose interest it is to assert their minority-identity or to sustain a majority-consciousness. Potential power alliances give a motivation to highlight one category rather than another. Discrimination or intimidation – institutionalised or informal - may keep it constantly in view.

Each has been particularly evident in the formation of opposing communities in Ireland, where communal differentiation is of long and traumatic provenance, where cultural and moral differentiation on the basis of religion has been intense, and where power relations have been radically unequal, and are only now being evened up. The three aspects can, however, be differentially interrelated. Ruane and Todd (1996, pp. 290-3; 2004, pp. 224-6; 2007, pp. 448-450) have argued that it was the tight systemic interrelations of group-identifications, cultural distinctions and power relations that made conflict in Northern Ireland so intractable in the past and that the (partial) loosening of these interrelations paved the way for settlement. But how are these interrelations perceived at the individual level? How do individual-level choices form new patterns of identification and underpin, or undermine, settlement? This paper looks at how ordinary people’s own reasons for taking Protestantism as something that does or does not matter to them. It reveals patterns in their choices.
Methodology

Over 240 in-depth interviews were conducted by the authors in two recently completed multi-method cross-border research projects. The research design defined local areas where interviews would be concentrated – in one research project primarily border areas, in another comparable middle sized towns in Eastern Ireland and Eastern Northern Ireland, with additional interviews in Dublin. Interviewees were found in part through gate-keepers, in part through participant observation, in part through snowballing. Most of the local areas in which we interviewed were majority Catholic, although each had a sizeable minority of Protestants who were overrepresented in our final sample; some of the Northern Ireland interviews were conducted in mixed religion areas, where housing estates were predominantly (or totally) Protestant or Catholic. This paper focuses on over 50 interviews with Protestants, which were divided almost evenly between Northern Ireland and the Irish state. The Southern sample was gender balanced but with a slight underrepresentation of working class respondents: the Northern sample was representative in class terms, but with an overrepresentation of women, and in particular of working class women or women from working class backgrounds.

There was a good generational spread among adults, with the exception of the very youngest generation: we had only three interviews with under 20s. 14-15 year olds were however studied in a related investigation (see Muldoon et al, 2007; McLaughlin et al, 2006).
Each of the research projects was designed to map identity and identity change in different parts of Ireland, with a focus on ethno-national identity. In each study, if the interviewee did not volunteer about religion, they were asked about it and its significance for them. The aim was to elicit episodic personal narratives which would focus on issues surrounding ethnicity, nationality and religion. In this paper we interrogate these narratives for the way nominal Protestants understand their Protestantism, asking if being Protestant matters to them and why it does or does not matter.

The initial analysis of the interviews took place while the projects were still underway (2003-6) with frequent discussion among the project teams. For this paper, the authors contributed analysis of their own interviews. Given the small numbers involved, coding was not used, but the same set of questions was addressed by each author: does being Protestant matter, why does being Protestant matter, does it matter because of values, because of solidarity or descent, for strategic reasons, for other reasons? The authors prepared a commentary on their interviews in light of these questions. Todd read all the interviews and analysed the information and interpretations, first by interviewer, then by geographical area, neither of which provided clear patterns in the data. Finally, she began grouping the interviews by conceptual category (emphasis on moral values, emphasis on group solidarity, emphasis on interests and power). This did not produce clear patterns in the data because most respondents emphasised more than one of these and the way in which they emphasised them was as important as the fact of emphasis. In charting the manner in which interviewees talked about values, interests and sense of community, however, it became clear that the interviews clustered into 4 groups that fitted more
complex conceptual patterns.\textsuperscript{5} The clusters are outlined below. They represent empirical types rather than ideal types (see Brewer, 1998, p. 132), and are not intended as exhaustive.

There is no claim that this material is representative of the Protestant population at large or even of Protestants in minority situations in Ireland. However it adds to our knowledge of the variety of repertoires available to Protestants in both parts of Ireland (see also Mitchell and Todd, 2007; Ruane and Butler, 2007). The quotations and examples below are chosen not because they are representative but rather because they express repertoires and responses common in our interviews with clarity. Names of respondents and some details are changed to preserve anonymity.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Being Protestant does not matter. Doing Protestant without being Protestant.}

…”Well… I’d say I’m Irish, you know… I’m… I guess I’d say I’m Irish and religion… humm… I’d have to say Protestant, though not your typical Protestant maybe… if you ask me how I’d define myself, I’d say first as a mother… that’s what I’d say… that’s what I’d put first… being a mother… hopefully a good one [Laughs]. Joan, interviewed by Rougier, works in the service sector in a predominantly Catholic Northern Irish border town. Her children were brought up as Protestant and sent to local Protestant schools – ‘like I said I’m not into religion much but we raised our children in [my husband’s] faith which is Presbyterian and, that was important to him and I respect that’. She lives much of her life easily in a predominantly Catholic mixed-religion environment, moving at times (for children’s schooling and religious upbringing) to a
predominantly Protestant environment. Despite ‘living’ Protestant in these respects, her Protestant identification is weak, it is not a collective category that she affirms and the Protestant/Catholic distinction is not important to her, personally or professionally. She attributes this to her unusual family background, Protestant but relatively detached from organised Protestantism.

Tom, a middle aged, middle class man, grew up and still lives in an East coast town with a small Protestant minority in the Irish state. He is a regular churchgoer in the Church of Ireland. Tom spoke freely to O’Keefe about national identity and secularisation – he felt that young Irish people were losing their moral standards with their religion and that it was not a good thing - but he appeared to have little to say about Protestantism either theologically or socially. When O’Keefe tried to get him to talk about Protestant-Catholic relations as he had experienced them growing up, he recounted playing football as a boy (where religion did not matter) and the conversation turned to an animated discussion of football. Finally, asked by O’Keefe ‘And what about being a protestant, is that important to you, or do you think of yourself in those terms, at all?’ he replied ‘No… It doesn’t mean much, no, no, no, no, as I say it’s a, once you’re happy in your community, that really doesn’t come into it.’

These are two individuals for whom being Protestant does not matter. They might in some respects ‘do Protestant’ (in the sense of attending a Protestant church, living in a Protestant family, sending their children to predominantly Protestant schools) but they do not define themselves as Protestant, nor do they see their nominal (ascribed) Protestantism as important beyond the defined and differentiated spheres of church and school. Their Protestant networks coexist with mixed religion and with predominantly Catholic networks; their Protestant fields of activity coexist with others (football, work) where religion is irrelevant; their sense of community is plural,
overlapping. Among the various aspects of their lives, and the numerous collective categories to which they belong, being Protestant comes very far down their list of priorities.

At least another nine individuals of our sample, although nominally Protestant, did not connect their religious beliefs or practices with the collective category of being Protestant: they did not highlight Protestant community or solidarity; they were not troubled by Protestant power or powerlessness. Some had stopped even ‘doing Protestant’. Some hardly went to church, some saw their spirituality and morality in non-church terms, some highlighted other categories and values. One woman felt socially closer to Catholics than to Protestants, whom she saw as ‘high and mighty… a cut above the rest’, even though she felt religiously closer to Protestantism than to Catholicism. Some in the North rejected Protestant politics. For some, other collective categories – in particular their ascribed Englishness - were simply more urgent and made a Protestant identity irrelevant: ‘I had to be very careful when I was growing up to tell people that I was from England, they would spot it in my voice or accent’.

Most of this group recounted particular factors in their background which made it seem ‘natural’ for them to detach from social-Protestantism. Some, like Tom and Joan, reported easy and happy social relations in childhood, where mixing between Protestants and Catholics was taken as natural – in each case, specific and relatively unusual traits - a mother’s unusual religious beliefs, a family tradition, a commitment to football - led to easy integration into the local (predominantly Catholic) peer-group. Another set of respondents in this category either came originally from England or were converts to Protestantism (or both) and had never intuitively identified with Irish Protestantism, either in terms of its specific values, its relations with Catholics or its communal solidarity.
Not every environment, however, would easily support this privatisation of religious belonging, and in Northern Ireland there were individuals who struggled to maintain their preferred categories of self-definition in the face of ascribed categories and communal expectations. David, interviewed by Cañas Bottos, consistently rejected the ascribed categories. He defined himself not in religious or political terms but as ‘hard working, a plumber... work every day that I can. ... see myself as having some sort of stature here in the town in the work that I do .... I get a lot of gratitude from it. It’s a hobby... ‘. He had distanced himself from what he perceived as a restricted and violent sectarian ‘mindset’ and refused to define himself in ethnic, religious or national terms. Only as the interview progressed were enough pieces of information given to allow the inference that he came from a Protestant background. Others emphasised the power of the ascribed categories. Anna – third level educated from a working class background - told O’Keefe: ‘Nationality would be Northern Irish, so it would. Religion... probably I don't... I have to say Protestant because that's the way I was born into and the way I was brought up, sort of thing, but given the preference I'd prefer not to be classed by or under a religion.’ Leah, from a working class area, did not let religion matter much to her, and went out of her way to ensure that her daughter did not pick up sectarian attitudes. Leah was clear, however, that being Protestant did affect her. She felt safe attending Orange festivities but her Catholic friend would only attend (and bring her children) in Leah’s company. Leah had dated Catholics in the past, but now pragmatically preferred to date Protestants because it was easier when she brought them home to meet her family. Still others, like Jean, Ellie and Laura, discussed below, found that religion mattered more to them than they wanted it to.
Being Protestant matters a lot: the loyalist

Sometimes the relation between collective category, group solidarity and perceived threat is immediate. Stuart recounts a rural family- and church-centred sense of childhood belonging, juxtaposed with looking up at a ‘hail of thirty bullets’ and experiencing attack from Catholic neighbours: he responded by joining the British army. Arthur, a committed unionist recalls being told that the ‘neighbour men’ were shot by the IRA ‘because they were Protestants’, and “what is a protestant, what is a catholic”, “we’re Protestants”, ‘yeah’, ‘we’re Unionists’, and the I.R.A don’t want, they want a United Ireland, they don’t want a British presence and they see us as a British presence and therefore they shoot us. So probably that, that’s whenever I sort of realised you know what a Protestant was, what a Catholic was, what a Unionist was, what a Nationalist was’. He explained to Cañas Bottos how group networks, political belief and communal opposition converged to lead him to become a member of the Orange Order: ‘A mixture of family, of friends, neighbours were in it, and also it was a statement saying that I’m Protestant, I’m Unionist, I believe in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and how do I express that, I express it by joining the Orange Order, and a certain amount of snubbing the nose to the likes of the I.R.A.’ Political involvement, in turn, intensifies communal solidarity and the sense of being under threat. This threat has not disappeared with the ceasefires and agreement: Len, another loyalist activist described ‘his’ people as simple, homogenous: ‘The Protestant is very, very simple, they see their culture, their identity gradually being taken away from them’.
That description partially fits Ellie, a woman whose family in the past had been involved in the paramilitaries, and who had left Belfast for an East Ulster town in order to shield her children from conflict and bitterness. She now lives in a working class Protestant estate with a strong paramilitary presence. Ellie’s Protestantism is above all relational: if she speaks of being Protestant she immediately mentions her relation to Catholics and in particular to Sinn Féin and the SDLP. She hardly ever goes to church and associates being Protestant not with religious belief, but rather with family background. ‘Yes I am Protestant deep down inside you know, but on the outside I can communicate with Catholics in every aspect even with them having a united Ireland’. Her discussion switches between, on the one hand, a classic loyalism where Catholics are a threat and where being Protestant is identified with being British and with being a good Ulsterwoman, and, on the other hand, a much more moderate and reflective sense of the contingency of being born Protestant, and the mixedness in everyone’s background (Ellie’s aunt married a Catholic). Ellie does not want to feel bitter against Catholics, but sometimes she does feel bitter. As the interview progresses she tells of the past when celebration of Protestant culture was unrestrained: ‘cause we used to follow the bands and it was all different then, we used to walk in front of the band and want to dance in front of the band and sing party songs like “Cap the Pope” and “Dolly’s Brae” and all this here and all you know where nowadays you know there’s someone even plays tunes ‘till hymns and the Catholics are still not satisfied in Belfast you know, they still can’t let a band parade certain flashpoints because they say they’re playing party songs, you know and that there’s an awful difference for me’. When O’Keefe asks if she has anything to add, Ellie’s tone becomes challenging: ‘I’m a fucking Protestant and proud to be one and I know you’re Catholic aren’t you?’ O’Keefe deflects the question by distinguishing
religion of origin and present religious belief, and Ellie again turns to discuss the contingency of religious division and how she didn’t want her children to grow up without knowing Catholics.

Like Ellie, other interviewees show a complexity of identification: a loyalist vision coexisting in tension with more general values. Jean, with close relatives involved in paramilitaries, expresses the desire to move on, to leave the estate, the town, implicitly her own past. ‘Because I know everybody in it, and you know the bigots and you are like get me out of here - I don’t want the kids growing up with that.’….’I’d like to just be European. I’d like the whole bloody place to just be European and then that would get rid of the whole lot of rubbish, wouldn’t it? While she stays, however, being Protestant remains important personally and interactionally: If anybody tried to take it away from me I would fight for it the same as if anybody tried to take any part of my identity away I would fight for it.’. It affects her interactions when she meets Catholics whom she considers to be extremists: ’sometimes it would come out when I would see sectarian people that I know and like I am so aggravated and so angry like, bullies, they’re all bullies’.

Some of our interviewees had what appeared as a seamless web of Protestantism as belief, as community and as power, but even for them there was movement: Len and Stuart are now working for or with government funded agencies to lessen conflict; Arthur is on the moderate wing of unionism. There are undoubtedly others in Northern Ireland who have moved less far from classic loyalism. But some of our loyalist respondents – in particular a set of women whose relatives and neighbours were involved in paramilitary organisations – had moved farther. They shared in parts
of the loyalist vision but at one remove: they also relativised it, combining it with other values and ideals. But, as the interviews with Jean and Ellie illustrate, despite their changes they are easily drawn back into the loyalist mindset.

**Universalising the values of the minority**

Cecil and Wilma are a middle aged Presbyterian couple who live in County Louth, the easternmost border county in the Irish state. They are very conscious of being part of a small Protestant minority community. They define their community in terms of its distinctive values and clearly differentiate their views from the ‘sectarianism’ of the North. They articulate moral and cultural values which would benefit the entire society, not just a part of it.

*Cecil:* But there are subtle differences that we… living here on the border, and I suppose living anywhere in Ireland… in the republic of Ireland, as Protestants would see… that’s there is a …hem… there’s a culture that we don’t… how would you call it… wouldn’t have empathy with … things that are done on Sundays… although we are much more lenient nowadays in how we react to things now… but… the corruption, and that, that is not to say that the Protestants wouldn’t be corrupt but there is a awful lot of that in this country… and it is not denounced from the pulpits the way I feel it should be…so…[...] and this attitude of…hem… there is a saying around… hem … it is not very Presbyterian looking, not very Protestant looking… but if you go up to Northern Ireland, and you see… a lot of the farms and that and they are immaculate… whereas in some places, well I am generalising, maybe unfairly now… but some places down here, they don’t look… as if the people CARE… There is debris and rubbish thrown around… [...] But you
understand... so there are differences... But in general, as far as how we are treated by the State there is not an awful lot of difference...

Wilma: “I had a disabled brother... who... because we were Protestants, we... and this is the difference.... There was a difference in this... lifestyle as well... Mum did not hide him away... he couldn’t walk but he went to school with us, we pushed him to school in his wheelchair and she did everything she could for him, to get him into hospitals, and that sort of thing whereas... neighbours in the area who might have had children like him... would leave them in the house... they wouldn’t bring them out... You know... they wouldn’t let anybody see that their child wasn’t... perfect...”

Many on the Louth-Monaghan border area, like Cecil and Wilma, volunteered that they were a member of ‘the minority’, ‘a minority’, ‘the minority community’ or ‘a minority person’ defined by religious denomination (Presbyterian, or evangelical). 14 The boundaries of this community might be more permeable than before – some spoke of the young going to integrated schools – but some individuals still lived most of their life within it: ‘So I mean that would be quite a big part of my social life would be the church, actually you know I don’t really do anything outside the church as such’. The very smallness of the community meant that each individual could spend much of their time sustaining communal activities. What was emphasised, however, was not primarily communal solidarity but the values of the particular Protestant tradition. Not all were as strongly assertive as Cecil and Wilma, but many individuals spoke of the values they had taken from their tradition: ‘you shouldn’t be afraid of hard work and awkwardness shouldn’t really get in your way...’; they emphasised the work ethic of Protestants, their tidiness, and their ‘straightness’ rather than ‘flexibility’; some spoke of more specifically religious values of ‘faith’ and ‘unselfishness’. 15 This
was related to their sense of minority-ness: ‘the pressure is on you to conform to the majority, the majority opinion,…’; Catholics, they said, treated everyone as if they were Catholics or spoke of ‘non-Catholics’ rather than of ‘Protestants’, when ‘...they’d prefer to be called Protestant because it’s a positive affirmation of their identity’.\(^\text{16}\) The emphasis on Protestant values was not intended as superiority, although some were aware that it could be mistaken for this. Bob, a Protestant from the North who had long lived in the South, explained: “…the Presbyterians, I think have fairly good reputation down through the years you know we were, we were active in opposing injustices down through the years and we are happy to be associated with a church with that outlook …. we don’t see ourselves as being superior to others, now I’m telling you now this is fact, up North it used to be we felt sorry for the Roman Catholics, they mean well, the poor devils, they’re mislead altogether and they’re doomed, they’re going to hell that’s it. Now we don’t subscribe to that view eh, we try to adhere to what the scripture tells us…”

There were others in the North who were conscious of being, or becoming, a minority, although few identified explicitly as ‘a minority’.\(^\text{17}\) Laura, who works on cross-community projects and lives in the Eastern border area was one of the few who highlighted minority status: “… well… there’s that phrase… the greening of the west… I suppose that’s relevant to me, yeah… I suppose there is a tendency to feel a bit… yeah you do feel a bit under threat because we’re not that far away from it and I suppose now I’m more conscious that the area used to be more mixed … I suppose like any culture or any group that’s becoming a minority there’s a bit of… I don’t know how to put it… a fear there… … I wouldn’t say I spend a lot of nights thinking about it but yeah I guess there’s something in that…” . Unlike those on the Southern side of the border, however, she associated this change with a loyalism with which she did not (or did not want to) identify: ‘ we are a very
sectarian society, we have aspirations… but at the end of the day if you touch my Protestantism or if you touch my Catholicism … I want it back the way it is …” . 

Instead of freeing her to assert in universalistic fashion the values of her tradition, it is as if the process of becoming a minority provoked in her a defensive response.

**Being Protestant differently: deconstructing social and symbolic division**

The worst thing I remember, I always remember, was that with growing up an increasing sense of …. just how loyalist the area that I lived in was, how sectarian it was ….. Like there was the Catholic Church, behind, in the field behind where we lived and it must have been bombed about thirty times …. and then we started hearing, you know, on the grapevine about there was a guy who was Catholic who lived at the end of the. road … and his car was blown up and then there was a whole big untrue spiel about him being in league with the IRA … so there was basically ethnic cleansing, or whatever you want to call it, going on in the area … 

And I remember an increasing sense of, you know, feeling that this was totally horrendous and that I really didn’t want to live here anymore if this was going on and feeling ashamed as well, ashamed of being Protestant, and I think the biggest shame was that in the same area there was a guy that had been living in the area …. he was shot dead by the Red Hand Commando …. my mum and dad used to call it a quiet area but I remember thinking as a teenager, there’s no way that this area is quiet. ..
Denise’s story is one of increasing political distantiation from the Protestant community in Northern Ireland while retaining a continuity with her religious and familial tradition. She finds aspects and origins of her present attitudes in her parents’ evangelical pietism – distanced from Protestant politics – and in her family history. She has, however, moved far from the anti-Catholicism which is prevalent within evangelicalism (Brewer, 1998). She recounts a process of ‘mellowing’ through increasingly finding herself in situations where she met Catholics and nationalists and where her ‘prejudices [were] challenged’. The process accelerated, with a mixed marriage increasing the intensity of cross-community contact. In the process, she has reappropriated a Protestant tradition (which she now defines as part of a wider Christian tradition) which lives up to the values which the actual Protestant community described above rejected. The reflexive process of reevaluating tradition, values and interrelationships and of mediating between two communities in her daily interaction and familial relationships is continuing. She speaks of identity as an unfinished process.

These elements are common to a small subset of our interviewees who distance themselves from community solidarity, find themselves in situations where prejudices are challenged, criticise the dominant Protestant tradition by using values from within that tradition and assess those values reflexively. Several of them are in mixed marriages, although as the account above indicates, this is as much a consequence as a cause of change. Each highlights aspects of their religious and familial tradition while moving very far from conventional Protestant values. Being Protestant matters to them because they want to change the dominant ways of being Protestant and to subject its values to the test of intercommunal interaction. What emerges is
idiosyncratic. Jack asserts a British military tradition, a rootedness in the land, together with an openness to Irish culture and a consciously principled fairness towards Catholics and nationalists: he has married a Catholic woman, and is involved in peace and reconciliation activities. In his ease in keeping an Irish as well as British dimension to his identity he is more like some of the Irish Protestants described by Ruane and Butler (2007) than like most Northern Protestants. What is common to these cases is a mixture of conservation of the values of Protestant tradition and conscious change and critique of communal practices in light of these values. A similar process, without some of the initial prejudices and without the intensity of communal opposition, can be seen in some Southern respondents. In all of these cases the collective category (being Protestant) is symbolically highlighted in order to change it cognitively, communally, and relationally.

**Minorities, Protestants, and the process of change.**

The data suggests quite radical variation in the way of being Protestant in Ireland, not simply in the conventional distinctions between denominations, degrees of religious belief, political views and national identities, but in the very salience of being Protestant, in the making and blurring of boundaries between Protestant and Catholic; not simply in the ‘standards of morality and excellence’ (Barth, 1969, p.14) which they take to be distinctive to the Protestant tradition, but also in their willingness to draw from these universalistic norms of relevance to the whole society.

First, only a subsection of our respondents saw themselves as part of ‘a minority’ or ‘the minority community’. These were also the respondents who most clearly asserted
minority values as universalisable. They were almost exclusively dwellers in the counties on the Southern side of the Irish border, a tiny and powerless minority, but one sufficiently dense to sustain a range of church-centred activities which contributed to a sense of community. Precisely when such a minority is powerless, it can distinguish some of its values from its specific institutions and practices and present them as universalisable, not by imposition but by agreement. In Ireland, and particularly in Northern Ireland, this has been difficult because of the heritage of Protestant power.

Some did not think of themselves as a ‘Protestant minority’ because their social activity and their sense of community cross-cut the Protestant-Catholic division. They differentiated their religious practice and ‘Protestant’ domains from their other activities, they separated and secularised, governing their everyday interrelations by standards common to Protestants, Catholics and others. These individuals already live in a plural world, where the Protestant/Catholic cleavage has fallen into disuse. This, however, is a local phenomenon, which is far from pervasive. In localities where others assert the significance of the division, one option is privatisation. David exemplified this in his interview, refusing to answer questions – the area he lived in, where his children went to school - which might highlight religious difference.

Another option is adaptation: Leah pragmatically adapted her behavior to local community and familial norms by dating only Protestants, while asserting her principles in her daughter’s upbringing. Whether this makes the Protestant/Catholic boundary less relevant for the next generation, depends crucially on a threshold number of individuals so acting.
Others, faced with social divisions which they find morally repugnant, appeal to the values of the Protestant tradition to criticise its practices. This process involves a selective elaboration of Protestant values which allows a critique of the domimatory aspects of Protestant practices while acknowledging other valuable aspects. The individuals in this cluster transform in their own lives the categories, values and relationships that are at the core of social division: they show a new way of being Protestant, a way of remaking boundaries and indeed institutions. They may face danger, but, if they succeed, they change boundaries not just for themselves, but for their families and friends. In the process, they create new repertoires that are available to others and may someday become more widespread.

Still others were Protestants-in-defence, Living in a Protestant cultural world, a context of life in which Catholics were outsiders, they highlighted their group-identity only when they felt this world challenged. For Jean, Protestantism would be important for her if people tried to ‘take it away’; Len spoke of Protestants’ culture and identity being taken away; Laura described how, if people’s ‘Protestantism’ was touched, they ‘want it back the way it is’. For the most part, this was not phrased in terms of group solidarity: it was not a community of people in danger of being destroyed, but a way of life, a set of practices and assumptions, a ‘world’ which had been valued and was disappearing. Ellie regretted the world of marches, dances and dominance. Others faced the loss of the unquestioned Protestant world (the ‘greening of the West’) and still others the loss of a clear moral-political frame of understanding, as they had to interrelate as equals not just with Catholics but with unrepentant republicans. For some, these were challenges with which they could not easily come to terms and they looked to group solidarity to defend what was being lost.
In these cases, community belonging, cultural identification and strategic interests were differentially interrelated. Belonging was not primary to most of our respondents: rather individuals were thrown back on community belonging when their cognitive frame was challenged. For these individuals, Protestantism did not mark out a strongly solidaristic ethnic community. Ethnic group-ness was relatively weak except as strategic defence: cultural differentiation and strategic interests were strong. Boundaries were clear: Ellie’s self-definition as Protestant was coterminous with her definition of others as Catholic, and implicitly involved an oppositional content to Protestantism, albeit one which she herself realised was becoming practically irrelevant. For Joan, with another sense of what it meant to be Protestant, the Catholic/Protestant boundary was not of primary salience while Denise’s construction of the Protestant tradition opposed her primarily to other Protestants. Many of these individuals were finding in themselves and in their cultural traditions ways of coming to terms with changing social relations, with changing sites of power and cultural status: in the process, they were changing their ways of being Protestant, sometimes in minor ways (Ellie’s move from Belfast) which had major implications for their own children. Whether this primacy of cultural negotiation and strategic interests over group solidarity is typical of Protestant minorities, or perhaps of multiply-differentiated societies like Northern Ireland, are questions beyond the scope of this paper.

In this paper we have taken ‘being Protestant’ as a complex construct, not defined by any one element, belief, practice or collective narrative, but involving a putting together of these elements cognitively (the personal meaning and salience of religion), imaginatively (the nature and strengh of communal bonding), and relationally (in
interactions). This is inherently a process of self-making and self-change, where choices are highly dependent on the macro-political context. In a situation of continuing political and demographic change in Northern Ireland, dangers and challenges remain. These the dangers and challenges are not, however, reducible to ‘minority’ interests or ‘group identities’.

References


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Intergenerational Transmission and Ethno-national Identity in the (Irish) Border Area (ITENIBA) (funded by the EU programme for Peace and Reconciliation through the Irish Higher Education Authority North-South Strand Two programme) (see www.ucd.ie/euiteniba accessed November 2007) and Identity, Diversity, Citizenship, (IDC) funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority’s third Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions.

For this initial categorisation, we took the broadest definition of Protestant, as encompassing either religious practice in a Protestant church or familial or communal background.

The female/male ratio among Northern Ireland Protestant respondents was 2/1, with the imbalance clearest in working class respondents. Our study provides a useful counter-balance to existing studies of the Protestant working class, which have predominantly focussed on men.

For the theoretical perspective which informed the research design of ITENIBA, see Todd, 2005.

A draft analysis along these lines was circulated to all authors for further input after which Todd wrote the paper.

In what follows we give references to each interview in formulae which identify their relevant social characteristics, and in terms of which cross references between articles can be made. Joan, interviewed by Nathalie Rougier, a second generation female Protestant working class in a Northern border town, is identified as NF2NHP05. Tom, interviewed by Theresa O’Keefe, a professional in an Eastern town in the Irish state, is identified as TM2MDP55 and is referred to in the archive as (D55).

TF2MPAo1, TF2MPA6, TF2MPA7, TM2MPD14 ; JF2MPB02; NF1FWP01, LM2EPY1, JM2MPD01, LF1WPC1, JM2MPD01, LF1WPC1, TF1WPD53, TM2MPD14

TF2WPA06, TF2MPA07, JF2MPB02. LM2EPY1

LM2OPY2. LM2NPH1, LM2OPY1.

Cap the Pope and Dolly’s Brae are highly sectarian songs, the latter celebrating a ‘battle’ in 1849 in which only the Orange party was armed and thirty Catholics were killed.

TF1WPA02 ; TF1WPA09.

See Rural Community Network. ‘You’d feel you’d have no say’ Border Protestants and Community Development. Cookstown : 2002 ; Bruce, 1994 ; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006.

NM1DMP01, NF1DTP02, ; NM2DMP03, LF1WPC2, LF2WPC4, LM1NPC1, LM2FPC1.

LM2FPC1, LF2WPC3, NF3DSP04, TM1MPD51.

NM2DMP03, LM2FPC1, LF2WPC3.

NF2NOP02 and JF2MPB02 were both conscious of the local demographic balance in which Protestants were in a minority.

At least five of our Protestant interviewees in Northern Ireland fall into this category (LM2FP61, NF1FWP01, JF2MPB03, TM2TA16, JF2MPB01) with others in the Irish state (TM1MPD51, JM2MPD01, LF1WPC1). Some Catholic respondents manifested very similar processes of changing identification, as did children of mixed marriage couples.