Understanding the 'Northern Irish' Identity

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Introduction

How many people in Northern Ireland actually describe themselves as Northern Irish rather than Irish or British? Does this identity choice vary across the two main communities? What kind of people hold a Northern Irish identity - in terms of age, and socio-economic status? Is Northern Irish identity on the increase over time? In addition to addressing these questions we try to understand what the 'Northern Irish' identity actually means. Is it a genuinely different, cross-community identity. Or is it just another way of expressing the dominant identities of British and Irish? We probe the meaning of Northern Irish by examining the political views and the political behaviour of Northern Irish identifiers, their social attitudes and the relationship between inter-group contact and identity choice. In our final section we tease out some possible policy implications of 'Northern Irish' identity. To begin with, however, we provide a brief overview of the academic literature on the Northern Irish identity.
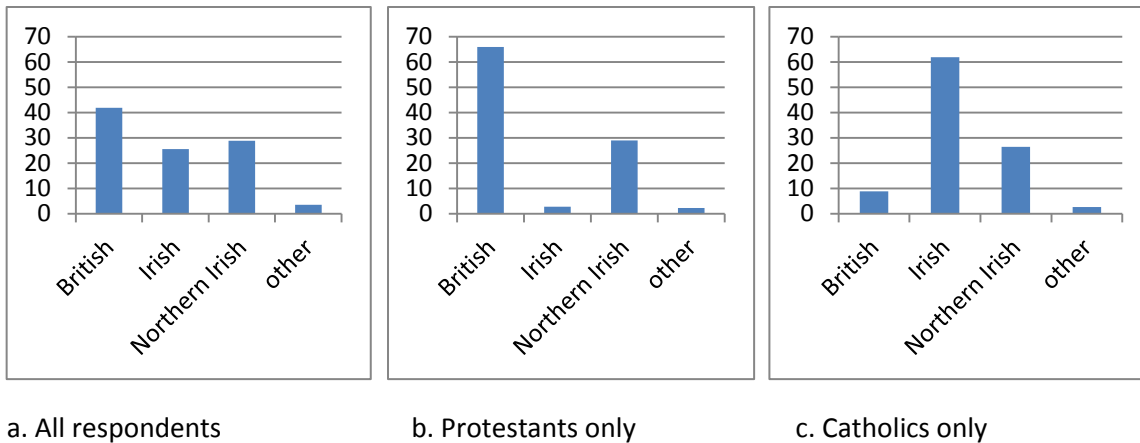
Northern Irish Identity

Research on Northern Irish identity typically uses Social Identity Theory as a theoretical departure point (Tajfel, 2010). This theory posits that an individual's behaviour and attitudes can be predicted, based on the social category that they consider themselves to be a part of. Each salient social group of people has its own norms, values and shared understandings and this to a large degree influences how each person acts and thinks. Early research in this area showed that dividing people into groups, even if those groups are virtually meaningless, can create a scenario in which people exhibit ingroup favouritism and the potential for hostility towards outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, Sherif et al, 1961). This led social psychologists to attempt to find the optimal conditions under which groups can live together harmoniously. When people have contact with outgroup members, when there is equal status between them, when they work cooperatively to achieve common goals, and when there are dominant social norms to encourage contact, prejudice has been shown to be minimised (Allport, 1954). This paradigm for conflict reduction has been the key to many interventions in Northern Ireland (Hayes, McAllister and Dowds, 2007), including integrated education. Such conflict reduction may occur because a new overarching identity is created by increased cross-community contact, and this new identity to some extent replaces the binary categories (Gaertner et al. 1993).

Most analysis of the Northern Irish identity has suggested that this identity may indeed be one such super-ordinate identity, a new 'shared identity'. Northern Irishness has been shown repeatedly to be perceived as the most inclusive of the main identities here (Moxon-Brown, 1991). Those identifying in this way tend to have more tolerant attitudes to the people of other religions (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014). It is also associated with attending integrated education (Hayes, McAllister & Dowds, 2007), and having contact with religious outgroups. It has also been shown that the further one lives from an area that historically suffered high levels of conflict related violence the more likely one is to consider oneself Northern Irish. These findings seem to add weight to the argument that Northern Irish is an inclusive identity that can overarch the sub-groups Irish and British.

However, recent research shows that each group does not have the same level of potential inclusion to Northern Irishness. It has been shown that people consider Northern Irishness to be more closely associated with Britishness (and Protestants) than Irishness (and Catholics) and that the typical Northern Irish identifier is generally perceived to be a Protestant (McKeown, 2014). Studies on similar identities in other countries suggest this may be due to differences in the social status of members of each sub-group (Devos & Banaji, 2005). It seems likely that the historical and continuing higher average status of Protestants in Northern Ireland (Nolan, 2013) may mean they have a greater ability to define what this identity actually means. The Northern Irish identity is particularly susceptible to differing interpretations in meaning due its terminological ambiguity. For instance, someone can say they are Northern Irish and mean they are Irish, but from the North and thus delegitimise partition. Similarly, someone could say that are Northern Irish and mean they are from a state within the United Kingdom, and are in no way Irish. In this case it is British that is the overarching identity, encompassing Northern Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English. Northern Irish is a relatively new identity and its meanings appear to be very much in a state of flux. To shed more light on the issue we now report our empirical findings.

Northern Irish: How prevalent? And who are they?

The proportion of citizens who describe themselves as 'British', 'Irish' or 'Northern Irish' is reported in Figure 1. The Northern Irish option is chosen by 29 percent, more than 'Irish' which is chosen by a quarter of respondents while over two fifths indicate that they are British. When identity choice is broken down by religion there is unsurprisingly a strong relationship between being Protestant and feeling British, and between being Catholic and regarding oneself as Irish. What is striking, however, is the even distribution of 'Northern Irish' across the religions. Twenty-seven percent of Catholics and 29 percent of Protestants feel 'Northern Irish'.

| a. All respondents | b. Protestants only | c. Catholics only |

Figure 1   Prevalence of 'Northern Irish' Identity *(see endnote for data description)*

However, these patterns have not been stable over time. Looking at historical survey data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and its precursor, the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA), there has been a long term trend of increasing popularity over time of 'Northern Irish' for Protestants while Catholics have had a reasonably consistent level of support for this identity. For most of this period though Northern Irishness was more popular among Catholics than Protestants, with the notable exception of 2012 when the survey was conducted during the Union Flag dispute. At this time only 16% of Catholics considered themselves Northern Irish, compared with 24% of Protestants. It seems that preference for this identity is susceptible to political events, particularly as it is consistently shown to be the 'weakest' national identity compared with Irish and British. In the 2007 NILT 70% of Catholics saw themselves as 'very strongly' Irish, 60% of Protestants 'very strongly' British, while only 16% of Catholics and 45% Protestants saw themselves as 'very strongly' Northern Irish.

Further breaking this data down by age shows some clear trends. For Protestants, age is a very clear predictor of Northern Irish identification, being preferred by younger respondents. For example, the latest NILT shows that 36.4% of 18-24 year old Protestants choose Northern Irish, while the figure is only 15.3% for those over 65 years old. The relationship is more complex for Catholics. Year on year there appears to be a consistent bell-curve shaped trend with Northern Irishness being preferred by middle aged Catholics compared with both older and younger respondents.

There is also a correlation between wealth and Northern Irish identification. When asked if they had been in employment the week before being interviewed asked 58.6% of Northern Irish identifiers said they were. The figures for Irish and British are 50.6% and 46.2% respectively. Northern Irish identifiers are also less likely to rent their accommodation (21.6% compared with 36.9% for Irish and 30.7% for British) and are more likely own it.

Northern Irish: Possible Meanings
If 'Northern Irish' is a genuinely 'neutral' or cross-community identity, this may lead to politically moderate views and behaviour. A different interpretation of 'Northern Irish' as identity choice is that it may be simply another manifestation of the two main identities. Some Protestants may adopt the term as a way of expressing their belonging to a particular part of the UK while some Catholics may use the term to indicate their belonging to the Northern part of Ireland (McKeown, 2014). Accordingly, Northern Irish Catholics and Northern Irish Protestants may be just as different from each other as Irish Catholics and British Protestants are. A third possibility is that being 'Northern Irish' is a meaningful distinction for Catholics but not for Protestants. As the majority culture Protestants may 'project' their identity on the superordinate 'Northern Irish' identity (Noor et al. 2010 and McKeown, 2014). This would lead to large differences between Irish Catholic and Northern Irish Catholics in terms of attitudes and behaviour, but little or no differences between British Protestants and Northern Irish Protestants.

Which Meaning is Correct? Relating to Political Attitudes
We find that British Protestants are different from 'Northern Irish' Protestants: less than a quarter of the latter favour direct rule compared to two fifths of the former (see Table 1). Identity based differences in constitutional preferences are even more stark for

Catholics: support for a united Ireland is three times greater among Irish Catholics (59 percent) than among Northern Irish Catholics (21 percent). The British versus Northern Irish distinction among Protestants also differentiates Protestants who are 'unionist' and those who are not: British Protestants are 'unionist' by a proportion of 2 to 1 while Northern Irish Protestants are almost evenly divided between 'unionists' and 'neither unionist nor nationalist'. An analogous, *but much starker,* pattern emerges among Catholics. Irish Catholics are over twice as likely to be nationalist than 'neither unionist nor nationalist' while Northern Irish Catholics are almost twice as likely to be 'neither unionist nor nationalist' than 'nationalist'. The identity distinction is related to attitudes to powersharing among Protestants. One quarter of British Protestants are opposed compared to only 14 percent of Northern Irish Protestants. Among Catholics, attitudes to powersharing are equally positive, irrespective of identity. This analysis of the relationship between identity choice and other facets of ethno-national positions suggests that the 'Northern Irish' identity is politically meaningful in the sense that it is related to relatively moderate aspects of ethno-nationalism within both communities, but particularly so within the Catholic community, seemingly echoing the asymmetric findings of Noor et al. (2008).

Table 1: Relationship between identity and other ethno-national positions

	Protestants		*Catholics*	
	British	Northern Irish	Irish	Northern Irish
unionist	67.7	51.4	1.1	2.1
neither	31.1	47.0	29.9	63.7
nationalist	1.2	1.6	69.0	34.2
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
UK direct rule	38.9	23.0	4.6	9.0
UK assembly	60.4	74.8	36.1	70.2
united Ireland	0.6	2.2	59.2	20.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
very pro power sharing	30.7	36.1	52.8	53.2
pro power sharing	45.3	49.8	41.2	41.9
anti power sharing	24.0	14.0	6.0	4.9
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Relating to Vote Choice at Election Time
In Table 2 Protestant vote choice between the DUP and UUP is examined. DUP voters are essentially no different from UUP voters with respect to identity choice (Northern Irish versus British). This is in sharp contrast to the patterns than emerge for Catholic vote choice between Sinn Féin and the SDLP (Table 3). Catholics who are Irish strongly support Sinn Féin rather than SDLP (by a proportion of three to one) whereas 'Northern Irish' Catholics are evenly divided between Sinn Féin and the SDLP. What this analysis highlights again is the asymmetric nature of the relationship between northern Irish and vote choice: it matters for Catholics but less so for Protestants.

Table 2: Protestant vote choice between the DUP and UUP by ethno-national positions

	DUP	UUP	total
British	62.1	37.9	100.0
Northern Irish	65.9	34.1	100.0

Table 3: Catholic vote choice between Sinn Fein and the SDLP by ethno-national positions

	SDLP	SF	total
Irish	25.2	74.8	100.0

Northern Irish   52.3   47.1   100.0

Relating to Inter-Group Attitudes
On virtually all indicators of attitudes towards people of different religions Northern Irish identifiers tend to have a greater acceptance than both Irish and British identifiers. For example if asked "Would you mind if a close relative married someone of another religion?" 5.8% of Northern Irish Catholics say they would mind compared with 18% of Irish Catholics. The same pattern is found for Protestants with 11.7% of Northern Irish identifiers saying they would mind compared with 29% of British Protestants. When asked about the other main religions culture we find the same pattern. When respondents were asked "Does the culture and traditions of the [other religion to the respondent] community add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society?" 8.3% of Irish Catholics strongly agree compared with 17.2% of Northern Irish Catholics, while 9.5% of British Protestants strongly agree compared with 20.4% of Northern Irish Protestants. It does seem clear that Northern Irish identification is associated with greater tolerance for mixing and the culture of out-group religious members.

Intergroup Contact as a Cause of Northern Irishness?
The existing literature on the Northern Irish identity considers it to be a possible 'superordinate' identity. This is an identity that can overarch smaller subcategories. For this reason it is suggested that it is possible to be both British and Northern Irish or Irish and Northern Irish without there necessarily being a contradiction. Another example of this kind identity would be American, which is inclusive of both African Americans and European Americans. Research in this area shows this form of identity comes from positive contact between group members (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012). When people from different groups have contact under conditions of equal status, working cooperatively towards common goals while there are social norms that are accepting of this contact, it makes less practical sense to talk about difference and a new overarching identity is created so that both members feel a part of the same group. For this reason it is valuable to look at correlations between Northern Irish identification and contact with religious outgroups.

For instance, how many friends one has of another religion is a good predictor of Northern Irish identification. Only 4% of Northern Irish respondents say all of their friends are of the same religion as themselves, compared with 16.4% for Irish and 12.6% for British respondents. Interestingly though the influence of more out-group friends on national identity is greater for Catholics than Protestants. A Catholic who has half of their friends of the same religion of them is approximately 3 times more likely to be Northern Irish than one with all of their friends of the same religion. However, a Protestant with half of their friends of the same religion is only about twice as likely to be Northern Irish as one with all their friends of the same religion (NILT 2007-2012). The reasons for this difference are discussed later in this report. There also appears to be a significant correlation between integrated and mixed education and Northern Irish identification so that they are 37% more likely to consider themselves Northern Irish.

Looking at the 2011 census there does not appear to be a particularly strong correlation between the religious homogeneity of one's electoral ward and the likelihood of Northern Irish identification. This is most likely due to the fact that religious diversity in a ward is not a good indicator of intergroup mixing in that area. What can be said though is that in all electoral wards where there is less than 20% Northern Irish identification, more than 90% of the population is from one religious community.

Conclusion
From the analysis we can draw two main conclusions. First, Northern Irishness does appear to be a real common ingroup identity, inclusive of both Protestants and Catholics. It is associated with pro-social attitudes towards outgroup members so that prejudice is at a lower level than with Irish or British identifiers. Based on our theoretical assumptions not only is this identity correlated with more supportive attitudes to social mixing, but that contact is in fact its cause. The levels of support for Northern Irish identification can tentatively be predicted to follow patterns of intergroup contact.

Secondly, there does appear to be a difference in the perception of what Northern Irishness means to Catholics and Protestants. Intergroup contact appears to influence Catholics identity choice significantly more than for Protestants. There are different interpretations of how inclusive the concept of Northern Irishness is to Britishness and Irishness. From this it can be inferred that Catholics, on average, tend to view this as a neutral, overarching identity more so than Protestants. Similarly, there are differences in terms of voting behaviour. Northern Irish identification has a bigger impact on Catholics voting, and there is a much larger difference between the identities of SDLP and Sinn Féin voters than there are between UUP and DUP voters. This data, along with previous work by other researchers suggests that the Northern Irish identity is framed such that it is closer to Britishness. This is most likely a result of inequalities in status, although more research is required before this can be confidently asserted. As there is a long term trend of increasing Protestant preference for this identity that seems as though it will continue, this means that in the future

the Northern Irish identity could become less inclusive of Catholics and its chances of being a neutral middle-ground between Irish and British could be undermined.

Note on data: The data used for Tables 1-3 are generated from four Election Study surveys conducted in Northern Ireland and pooled into a single data set. The four studies were conducted by John Garry and were carried out directly after the 2007 Assembly Election, 2009 European Parliament election, the 2010 Westminster election and the 2011 Assembly election. More details on this data source are available upon request from John Garry. All other survey data in this report is from the Northern Ireland Life and Times.

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