Community, difference and identity: The case of the Irish in Sheffield

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There is a growing body of research in racial and ethnic studies on the processes of identity construction within minority ethnic populations. This article seeks to build on this work by analysing emerging collective identity formations in an ‘invisible’ minority ethnic group. Based upon focus groups and in-depth interviews with Irish people in Sheffield, the article aims to advance three key arguments. First, the concept of community is central to an Irish collective identity, but is negotiated in a multiplicity of ways. Second, Irish collective identity has been shaped not only by demographic differences but by shared experiences of non-recognition and stereotyping. Third, there is a simultaneous assertion of an Irish identity running parallel with a perception that the ‘traditional’ Irish community may have to re-invent itself in response to changing demographics at the local level. The paper concludes by considering the implications of these arguments for an understanding of Irish ethnicity in multicultural Britain.

Keywords: community; diversity; ethnicity; identity; Irish

Introduction

Irish people make up one of the largest ethnic minorities in Britain (Limbrick 2007). However, the academic and policy discourse on race and ethnicity, framed as it is around a black/white binary, fails to fully problematise Irish ethnicity (Parekh 2000, Mac an Ghaill 2000). This factor, combined with an assumption that Irish people have been readily assimilated into British society by virtue of having a common language and close historical ties, has rendered Irish ethnicity invisible. This has been compounded by the fact that up until 2001 Irish people living in Great Britain were not always able to register their ethnic background as ‘Irish’, hence were not generally included on systems of ethnic monitoring, a position that was formally redressed relatively recently with the 1997 Race Relations Act and the inclusion of ‘White Irish’1 in the 2001 Census.

Some studies regarding Irish ethnicity have focused on the social and political history (Panayi 1994, Hickman 1998; Mac An Ghaill 2000). They have examined Irish migrants’ dual ambiguous positioning as ‘white insiders’ and ‘cultural or suspect outsiders’ (Hillyard 1993, Gray 2002). The significance of context and recognition by others suggest the ways in which the constructions of Irish ethnicity can be shaped and constrained by wider social processes and structures (Ryan 2007). Sociological studies of the Irish in Britain have encompassed aspects of race and discrimination (Hickman and Walter 1997), gender and identity issues (Delaney...

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Hickman’s (1996) article provides a useful framework for understanding the basis of community and within that context establishes what is meant by an ‘Irish community’ (p. 16). Exploring the myth of community both historically and in its more contemporary guise, it asserts that the Irish community is characterised by diversity and inclusivity. This diversity belies the notion that homogeneity is a necessary element of ‘community’. Although the point as to the diversity of Irish identity is well made, the ways in which changing Irish identities impact on community formations over time and space is not explored to any great extent. Hickman (1996) concludes by pointing to the need for further research into Irish communities against the changing reality of Irish experiences in Britain, to which this paper is a direct response.

More broadly, the context and situated nature of identity formations and processes and their manifestation in complex and shifting locales is important (Anthias 2001, Ehrkamp 2005). However, much of the literature on the Irish in England is centred on London (Leavely et al. 2004) and the Home Counties or in cities where there are well-established and relatively large centres of Irish population such as Manchester, Coventry and Liverpool (Leonard 2005). Much less is known about the Irish presence in places with small and dispersed Irish populations, such as Sheffield, which unlike other cities (Newcastle, Leeds and Birmingham, to name but a few) does not have an Irish centre. While the study of Irish identities in Sheffield is interesting in its own right, the aim here is to go beyond simply adding another case study to the growing literature on migrant identities (Findley et al. 2004). The paper intends to broaden the understanding of the contingent positioning of ‘invisible’ minority ethnic groups by exploring not only the orientations towards collective identity, but also how these identities are constructed by reference to broader social changes which will have relevance beyond the case study site.

To this end, this article investigates how Irish collective identities are constructed, maintained and contested among Irish residents in the city of Sheffield. It begins by setting out the case study methodology and theoretical ground upon which the research is based. It then establishes that multiple forms of the concept of community inform the construction of Irish collective identity, which manifests itself differently within and between older Irish (first- and second-generation) people and the younger Irish (again both Irish-born and those who self-identify as being Irish). Commonalities in the conceptualisation of a collective identity are also evident across generations centred on a diverse and rich cultural history. A shared cultural heritage is a powerful motivation for social interaction and provides the motivation for the accommodation of difference within the Irish community. Understandings of community are also premised on some shared cultural predispositions and common
experiences of ‘otherness’ which form the basis for collective demands and aspirations. The article examines how cultural identity can also be maintained through nodal sites of interaction and imagined belonging rather than based solely on residential concentration or everyday social proximity. It then suggests that the ‘politics of recognition’ (Taylor 1992) has had a significant impact on the Irish and their struggle to be recognised as a distinct grouping. The formal categorisation of Irish people as an ethnic minority has led to a repositioning of the community vis-à-vis the dominant British hegemony and other minority ethnic groups. Finally, it will be argued that there is a conscious move away from a ‘deficit’ view of the Irish community towards a more assertive expression of a shared collective identity which embraces diversity. In doing so new forms of collective representation and practices adapted to local conditions emerge.

The case study context
Sheffield is one of England’s largest cities and a unitary authority in South Yorkshire. It gained worldwide prominence during the nineteenth century for its production of steel and stainless steel. Drawn to the city by increasing industrialisation, many immigrants from Ireland walked from Liverpool over the Pennines to Sheffield and settled in the Crofts area of the town. The Crofts, in St Vincent’s parish, was dominated by working-class tenements and back-to-back housing and became known as an Irish area (Harman and Minnis 1994). The 1851 Census identifies just 3.3% of the city’s total population (then 135,000 people) as being Irish. There are two possible reasons for the relatively small Irish population: Sheffield was perceived as having fewer opportunities for work-hungry migrants than its near neighbours Leeds and Bradford; and, unaccustomed to metal work, many Irish avoided the town altogether (Ruane 1996). However, Irish people continued to be clustered in St Vincent’s parish and the Crofts area of the city, a situation that pertained up until the slum clearances which began in 1929. Many acres of old properties were demolished and residents moved to the suburbs, a development that may account for the noticeable dispersal of the Irish population throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

The 2001 Census indicates that 3,337 individuals in Sheffield identified themselves as ‘White Irish’ (0.7% of the population of the city). Indeed, Sheffield’s reported white Irish population is the fifth largest minority ethnic population after the Pakistani population (3.1%), the ‘other white’ population (1.4%), the Black Caribbean population (1.0%) and the white and Black Caribbean population 0.7% (Limbrick 2007, p. 9). This is a smaller Irish population than is the case in Leeds, where Irish people make up 1.2% of the total population, and in Manchester, which has a significantly larger Irish population (3.8%). In Sheffield, the recorded Irish population is comparable to the size of the population in the Yorkshire and Humber region (0.7%), and smaller than the Irish population of England as a whole (1.3%). It is estimated that if all the Irish-born and second-generation in Sheffield were counted it would amount to over just under 10,000 individuals2 (Limbrick 2007). Significantly, the Irish are dispersed across the city and this provides an important context to the construction of community and sense of identity among the Irish.

Much of the literature on community affiliation and individuals’ embodiment of cultural practices is based upon a habitus that is constructed and reinforced through
daily social interaction, residential proximity and the sharing of similar spaces within
the city (Bourdieu 1984, Charlesworth 2000, Wacquant 2008). Having an area (or
areas) of a city that is synonymous with an ethnic group or provides a visible
manifestation of ethnicity through buildings, services and facilities is often important
to individuals from that ethnic group, as a marker of identity, regardless of whether
they reside in these areas (Phillips 2006). Such spaces are not available to Irish people
in Sheffield.

Research methodology and methods

The research findings discussed below are taken from a study of the Irish population
in Sheffield, conducted over an eight-month period in 2007 and 2008. The main
objective of the study was to explore in detail the experiences and needs of the Irish
population in Sheffield. One of the central research themes was participants’
attitudes towards Irish identity and community. The following research questions
were included in the study:

- What does being Irish mean to you?
- Is being Irish an important part of who you are?
- Do you think you have much in common with other Irish people?

The research methodology was informed by two guiding principles. First, the
working definition of ‘Irish’ referred to individuals who self-identified as Irish,
whether they were born in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland or other parts
of the UK or elsewhere. Second, the study recognised the diversity of the Irish
population (e.g. age, gender, religion, country of birth, housing tenure and
occupation) and the varying degrees of individuals’ involvement (if any) in Irish
community activities. A number of approaches were used to advertise the study
and to recruit participants with the aim of minimising any possible bias from
disproportionate representation from any one source of recruitment (Scanlon
et al. 2006).

The study was widely publicised in venues and services frequented by Irish
people, including hospitals, a charity music event, a luncheon club, churches (both
Protestant and Catholic) and on a local Irish radio programme. A total of four focus
groups were held with the following participants: first-generation Irish (8 partici-
pants); second-generation Irish (6 participants); Irish Travellers (3 participants); and
Irish students (8 participants, who were a mixture of first- and second-generation). 3
A series of 16 one-to-one interviews was subsequently carried out. These interviews
were supplemented by nine interviews with Irish stakeholders and activists. In total,
25 participants took part in the focus groups and 25 one-to-one interviews were
undertaken. Three of the focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. 4
The data were supplemented with participant observation in venues where Irish
people congregated, such as Irish music evenings in a city-centre pub, as well as
fragments of data annotated from informal conversations with individuals who were
active in Irish circles in Sheffield.

The transcripts were coded and analysed using a thematic approach. A thematic
analysis is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the phenomenon
under study (Daly et al. 1997, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Through a careful
reading and re-reading of the data themes emerge which then become the categories for analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, p. 4).

The conceptualisation of collective ethnic identity and community

It has become widely accepted that ethnic identity is a multifaceted concept with cultural, political, symbolic and psychological dimensions (Keefe 1992, Eriksen 2002, Cullingford and Din 2008): ‘Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity that consists of the subjective, symbolic or emblematic use, by a group of people . . . of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from the other groups’ (Brass 1991, p. 18).

The emphasis here is on the interpretation of ethnicity and the active appropriation of an ethnic identity by groups of people rather than the objective facts regarding difference. Another focus is on self-perception and the active agency of individuals in defining their own ethnicity over time and space. Waters (1990) draws our attention to self-identification and how individuals actively engage with their own interpretations of their ethnicity. As she points out, there is considerable choice in ethnic identity, particularly among the second generation. It is also well documented how people’s perceptions of their ethnicity may change over time with increasing emphasis on the fluidity and changing nature of ethnic identity (Waters 1990).

Having a well-developed sense of one’s own ethnic identity is, however, no indication of how one may or may not relate to a collective sense of ethnic belonging. Alba (1990), while positing the significance of self-perception for the construction of ethnicity, maintains that ethnic identity cannot be sustained as a private, individual orientation, but needs a public doing to become fully realised. In this sense, ethnic identity may be ‘performed’ in the same way that gender or other social identities are (Butler 1999, Leonard 2005). However, as Ryan (2007) suggests, a migrant’s sense of ethnic or national identity may be important on a personal level but may not result in active or exclusive membership of an ethnic-specific community. But how are we to understand the relationship between individual unique identity and collective shared identity? The paper adopts the central argument outlined by Jenkins (1996) that the individual and the collective aspects of identity, while not exactly the same, are intimately and routinely related to one another, i.e. that the process by which they are produced and reproduced and changed are analogous and that both are intrinsically social (p. 19). In keeping with a postmodern approach the following two assumptions are also made: that an individual’s identity is made up of multiple identities – comprised of personal, idiosyncratic aspects and social identity based on social aspects, such as group interaction and group membership (Tajfel 1982), and that the construction of one’s identity is a dynamic process and is subject to change over time (Giddens 1991).

Another body of literature has investigated the complexities inherent in ‘community’. ‘Community’ is an elusive concept with multiple definitions encompassing a myriad of ways of thinking and talking about human collectivities. In a special issue of Environment and Planning A, Silk (1999, p. 6) situated the term within a long philosophical history of community and wrote that community ‘suggests any or all of the following: common needs and goals, a sense of the common good, shared lives, cultures and world views, and collective action’.
‘Community’ offers a convenient shorthand for the arena of local social arrangements beyond the private sphere of the home and family (Crow and Allen 1994, cited in Clark 2007). Delanty (2003) suggests that the communities of today are less bounded than those of the recent past and open up numerous possibilities for belonging based on religion, nationalism, ethnicity, lifestyle and gender (p. 187). There are different forms of community and all appear to coalesce around attempts to understand belonging (Clark 2007), which is one reason why the concept of community abounds in ethnicity studies. However, its use with regard to identity politics and ethnic minorities is problematic (Alleyne 2002). The idea of ‘community’ as a self-evident and distinct collectivity of like persons can become an obstacle to a reflexive understanding of the complexity of social relations in which ethnic minorities are enmeshed in Britain. A more recent trend in ethnicity studies has moved away from community as a homogeneous solidarity of ‘one’s own kind’ towards an analysis of the lived complexity of minority ethnic populations on the ground (Robinson et al. 2007).

This paper focuses on community because it was an important part of what our research respondents readily (and spontaneously) discussed in relation to Irish identity and belonging. Community, as it is discussed here, is not understood to be a reified or structural phenomenon, but rather as Anthony Cohen has argued, community is viewed as a ‘symbolic construction’ which stems from the minimal sharing of a cultural repertoire (Cohen 1986). This is not to suggest however, that community is imaginary (Anderson 1991). For the individuals concerned who subscribe to the notion of community, in the sense of organising some part of their lives with reference to it, it is not only socially ‘real’; it is consequential (Jenkins 1996, p. 111). Following Cohen, we explore how Irish people construct a sense of themselves and their fellows as ‘belonging’ in a particular locality or setting, and with – if not to – each other (Cohen 1986). Community is not simply the recognition of cultural similarity, however differentially expressed, but is a concept that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness. Put simply, community is as much about difference as it is about similarity and identity (Gilroy 1987, Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Moving away from ethnic communities as social facts, Barth (in Jenkins 1996, p. 92) drew our attention to the persistence of difference between and within ethnic groups. In this conceptualisation ethnic groups are produced in social interaction, leading to a focus on how the membership of groups is recruited, rather than simply assuming a process of ‘birth-and-death reproduction’ (Jenkins 1996, p. 92).

The findings

Collective identity, dis-identification and difference

A diverse collective identity was identified which highlights the importance of the socio-historical context (Houkamau 2010) in shaping Irish identity. Some participants, most of whom had come to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s (now in their 60s and 70s), were part of the ‘labour diaspora’ (Cohen 1996) generation. Having left Ireland to get work, they were mainly concerned with getting by and earning a living as best they could. Some of this first generation, who were in the main labourers, factory workers and nurses, were reported by participants to have ‘done well for
themselves’, particularly those in the construction industry (Casey and Flint 2008). Others were characterised as socially isolated, living on welfare benefits and cut off from support networks in Sheffield and their families in Ireland. The migrants in this group had borne the brunt of the racist discrimination and stereotyping directed at Irish people in Britain when the conflict in Northern Ireland was at its height. One respondent, Sheila,\(^5\) described being verbally abused by racist comments in the following excerpt:

Somebody was talking at the bus stop saying ‘you’re not from here?’ I said ‘I live here now but I’m from Ireland’ ‘oh’ and this chap went for me, didn’t he? Mountbatten had just been killed you know, oh god the names he didn’t call me at the bus, and I just stood and looked at him and he said ‘you bloody so and so Irish, killing our people’ I said ‘excuse me I never killed anybody in my life’. (Female, 62, first generation, interview)

In the face of latent and more obvious hostility, Irish people had sought security and comfort from within their own family and friendship networks (Casey 2010). As Máire explains:

When things were really bad – like around the time of the Birmingham bombing . . . the only place we felt we could really relax was at the Irish centre. . . . At least there we could be sure of meeting people we knew, family and Irish friends going back years. (Female, 64, first generation, interview)

Those who had come to Sheffield during the 1990s and 2000s were characterised as the ‘professional and transient’ generation who had also come to Yorkshire to take up employment and education opportunities in the face of a growing recession in Ireland. However, this group were, by and large, better qualified than previous generations and hence had more choices available to them in terms of jobs and migration destinations.\(^6\) While struggling to find jobs in Ireland, they found it relatively easy to get into employment and slot into life in England. Motivations also differed in that some of this group had chosen to come to Britain in pursuit of greater opportunities and different experiences, rather than being forced to leave Ireland like the generation before them. As Jack explains:

I didn’t have to come here for work you know. I was broadening my horizons, for want of a better expression . . . just fancied a change really. (Male, 28, first generation, focus group no. 1)

Some of this cohort are also highly mobile and have no long-term plans to settle in England. The more recent Irish migrants were portrayed by participants as ‘passing through’ and ‘transient’ migrants, coming to the city to take up jobs and university places for defined periods and ‘semi-detached’ from Irish social networks and spaces. One of the main reasons given why the younger Irish appear to have different value systems, attachment to an Irish identity and even cultural practices is that they left a very different Ireland from the labour diaspora Irish who came after the Second World War. This younger cohort of migrants appeared well equipped to face the demands of a new life in Sheffield. They described themselves as having a much more confident sense of their identity in being Irish, partly as a result of the reflected positive connotations of coming from the ‘Celtic Tiger economy’.
While it is clear there are generational differences, the diversity of the Irish population is more complex than the ‘labour diaspora’ group versus the more recent ‘younger, modern’ migrant grouping would suggest. The second generation disrupt this binary in ways that transcend age and socio-demographic differences. This emerged most clearly in the experiences of second-generation participants of all ages and their attempts to make sense of, and retain a semblance of, their heritage by participation in ‘all things Irish’. Irishness is linked most clearly to cultural and social practices that mark them out as ‘other’ from their English acquaintances and friends (Hickman et al. 2005, Walter et al. 2002). Being Irish and constructing that as an important part of their personal identity is also a trait that differentiates them from members of their own family who do not share their enthusiasm for all things Irish. Gráinne, a 35-year-old second-generation teacher reflects on this issue in the following words:

I often wonder about that – why I’m the only one of all my brothers and sisters who feel like that. Right from a young age I was always mad into the [Irish] music and dancing and the others [her siblings] can’t be bothered with it. They’re English as far as they’re concerned and that’s that. (Female, 35, second generation, interview)

The orientation of family and social practices, for example regarding the end of life (i.e. funerals, wakes) were frequently cited as being cultural signifiers that were not only reminiscent of a more traditional way of life in Ireland but also worth retaining by a younger second generation. This attachment to Irish culture highlighted some differences between Irish-born and second-generation Irish. Second-generation Irish people were perceived (by some migrants from Ireland) to be emotionally attached to a static cultural heritage that took no account of the significant changes that had taken place in Ireland over recent years, music being a case in point. Irish showbands and dances (whose popularity has been on the wane in Ireland for many years) retained their appeal among some younger second-generation Irish, something that was a source of bemusement to participants’ Irish relatives and first-generation Irish friends in Sheffield. John narrates his experience in the following excerpt:

I was over [in Ireland] in the summer and we went to see The Bards [showband] and for us, we were ‘this is brilliant’ sort of thing, but one of my cousins was like ‘are you coming down to the football, we’re not sticking up there with the old folks’ and stuff like that. . . . It was the first time I realised that maybe it wasn’t exactly cool for people my age to like that sort of music. I was surprised by that ‘cos it had always been a really popular thing to go to in Derby. I mean I like the Saw Doctors and all that but I like the older stuff too. (Male, 23, second generation, student focus group no. 3)

Second-generation Irish had mixed opinions as to how they were regarded by the more ‘authentic Irish’ migrants they encountered at Irish social events. The label ‘Plastic Paddy’ (Campbell 1999) looms large but is refuted by those who challenge the notion that their claim to Irishness is any less authentic than the Irish-born. This sentiment is articulated in the following words by Denis:

I’ve got into enough trouble over the years for being Irish, got into fights at work when anti-Irish comments were made . . . so no, I don’t think I’m any less Irish than someone
born in Ireland. I’ve been laughed at for having an English accent but it’s more about your blood line than where you were born. There’s all Irish names in my family going back centuries, on both sides so you can’t get any more Irish than that. (Male, 55, second generation, focus group no. 2)

The heterogeneity of the Irish population is reflected in the plurality of ways they experience life in the city, construct their ‘Irishness’ and identify with their cultural heritage and collective identity. Older people in the past had looked to Irish community sites as places where social and material needs were met, such as access to accommodation and employment. Hence Irish centres were a much-needed resource. In the 1950s and 1960s, migrants were engaged in regular meetings with other Irish people, centred around a limited number of social sites and events. Highlights of their social interactions included traditional music sessions in one or two well-known Irish pubs, céilís (Irish dancing) and dinner dances and the annual St Patrick’s Day celebrations. Older participants had had the benefit of an Irish centre around which they had based their social lives, but this focus for identity is no longer available due to dwindling resources and the ageing profile of the population:

There was always a big crowd at the Irish dance halls. There’d be show bands over and everyone would show up to see them . . . never any problem in packing the place out . . . it all fizzled out. It got so that the older ones didn’t like going out at night. Where the Irish Centre was it was a bit rough and one or two had their cars broken into. That put paid to that. (Male, 75, first generation, focus group no. 1)

There is just one popular Irish public house in Sheffield which acts as a source of community information and advice as well as playing host to weekly Irish music sessions.

The majority of ‘young professional’ and ‘transient’ respondents did not immediately seek out Irish spaces and, significantly, it had not occurred to some participants to do so. This suggests that, unlike previous generations, an Irish community was not automatically sought after, or thought of as a resource for meeting social needs:

Well, I found that when I came over I wanted to do my own thing, I had my own journey if you like. (Male, 32, first generation, interview)

It took several of the newer arrivals to Sheffield some time before they were became aware of any other Irish people or Irish social events. As Séamus put it:

I had no idea there was even an Irish pub. I just didn’t think of it when I came here first. I found it relatively easy to make friends with people I was working with and sharing a house with so it wasn’t an issue. (Male, 35, first generation, focus group no. 1)

They had broad social networks that included some Irish people, although this tended to be more by accident than design. There was also deliberate avoidance of Irish gatherings which sprang from a dis-identification with any imagined undifferentiated ‘Irishness’. Cian articulated his experiences of trying to distance himself from Irish people of his own age as follows:
I didn’t mind the old Irish crowd in bars. I would go and have a drink with them and have a laugh but I didn’t like the kind of pressure of young Irishness, I never liked that kind of carry on I found that when I was round Irish people of my own age they were trying to preserve . . . it was like a club really, the ‘when Ireland left Ireland club’. I didn’t like it. (Male, 32, first generation, interview)

Tensions were discerned between the older generation of migrants and more recent arrivals, who were keen to explore a broader and non-sectarian expression of Irishness (Gray 2000). Younger migrants had ambivalent views about being associated with a ‘traditional’ Irish community centred around the Catholic Church and Irish clubs and societies that they struggled to identify with. This was a particular issue for non-religious participants who wanted to disassociate themselves from the Catholic Church.

I wouldn’t want to go to something at the Catholic Men’s Society or whatever it’s called. (Male, 35, first generation, focus group no. 1)

The association of an Irish cultural heritage with the Catholic Church was regarded as being divisive and exclusionary with regard to Protestants from Northern Ireland, expressed in the following words by Róisín:

I’m acutely aware that many of the people I know in Sheffield who identify as Irish do not come from a Republic of Ireland or Catholic or a nationalist tradition and I think that’s quite important to register as well. (Female, 36, first generation)

A professional in her mid-30s, Róisín distanced herself from what she described as the ‘deficit’ Irish community which she viewed as presenting a particular version of the Irish experience in Britain to which she did not subscribe:

I had brief contact with an Irish community organisation and to be told constantly that the model was a sort of deficit one, which was about oppression, and that if I didn’t feel that I was being discriminated against on the grounds of my nationality I was in denial about my heritage. (Female, 36, first generation, interview)

For others still it was more about not having anything in common with Irish people other than a shared cultural identity:

I didn’t go to the [Irish] Club when it was operating as a club because I didn’t like it, it didn’t feel . . . it was the same as going into an English working men’s club as far as I was concerned. It was full of people that I wouldn’t necessarily associate with. (Female, 40, second generation, interview)

Interestingly, although they struggled to identify with certain aspects of the ‘traditional’ Irish community, both these respondents nonetheless sought out particular social activities such as Irish folk music that for them represented authentic Irish culture (as opposed to the showband music that was hugely popular in 1960s Ireland), and which they also associated with an Irish cultural heritage that was admired throughout the world. What emerges from their reflections is that, for younger participants, Irish identity, as well as being a cultural inheritance, can also be constituted as a ‘conscious choice’ to partake in Irish cultural activities, within the
context of also having a varied and multicultural social life. It is also evident that two
countervailing tendencies are being held in tension: the value placed on maintaining
and performing an Irish identity on the one hand, and a resistance to being
ghettoised and the desire to integrate into wider society on the other.

It is not surprising that some Irish people will invariably feel more of a
disconnection from the Irish community than others (Gray 2000) and this was
particularly true of the Travellers in the study. While being immensely proud of their
Irish heritage (all were second generation) they had no contact with any Irish social
networks and perceived themselves as being looked down upon by other Irish people
in the city. The way in which Travellers position themselves outside the Irish
community as a consequence of their self-perceived ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman 1968)
is a telling reminder that any ethnicity, however freely chosen, can be open to
contestation and rejection (Jenkins 1996). One respondent expressed some reserva-
tions that she would be made welcome in any social setting with other Irish people:

It’s happened to me before. The neighbours here [who are not Irish] don’t know I’m a
Traveller, not by lookin’ at me. Irish people can, though . . . I’ve had it before . . . made to
feel like I wasn’t wanted. (Female, second generation, early 30s, Traveller focus group)

And yet, despite these differences a clear majority of respondents across all ages and
socio-economic groups felt that their Irish identity was important.

Community making without a ‘home’

While the diversity of the Irish population calls into question any notion of an active
and cohesive Irish community, this should not be read as an undermining of the
significance of community for the individual. It was important to participants of all
ages and backgrounds not only to claim an Irish identity, but also to publicly ‘perform
it’ with other Irish people (Butler 1999, Leonard 2005). There was a shared
commonality of feeling and perceived social practices that appeared to transcend
socio-economic, age and generational differences. Socialising with other Irish people
was valued because there they understood the background context and shared
meanings of conversations with one another, which did not necessitate protracted
explanations. A public sector manager exemplified this point. He had a wide circle of
English friends, but also wanted to meet other Irish people because of what he terms
‘an unspoken kind of connection’, a fellow feeling that they have shared experiences
regarding growing up in Ireland (centred around the church, Irish politics and music)
which makes it enjoyable to socialise in Irish circles. Seán, another participant, stated:

There’s a better chance of being understood in Irish company, you wouldn’t have to
explain yourself. (Male, 72, first generation, focus group no. 1)

The Irish conversational style, which was perceived to be influenced by the idioms of
story-telling, was singled out as a case in point:

I think Irish people are more of the story telling and always have been. . . . If you look at
Irish literature and plays and stuff, you know, they’re very much based on that. . . . I
think we have that built in us. (Female, 68, first generation, focus group no. 1)
The high value placed in the rich diversity of Irish culture, and the emotion and pride invested in it by participants of all ages is a key component of identity:

I just feel that we have this tremendous ancient culture and ancient language, ancient literature . . . ancient sites in Ireland, New Grange that’s older than Stonehenge you know. . . . I feel that I’ve got that land inside me. (Female, 67, first generation, focus group, no. 1)

It was thought that Irish culture differed not only in content, but also in form. Irish ways of socialising where young and old frequented the same pubs and clubs was seen as being quite distinct from English social life, which was much more segregated along age lines. There was a general perception that Irish people placed a greater emphasis on ‘doing a turn’, performing for one another in the course of an evening and ‘sing-songs’, a staple of any Irish gathering, was given as one example of this. Irish music, dance and sport were perceived as an important part of the cultural heritage that marked Irish people out as distinct and unique and which was to be celebrated. Importantly, these markers of Irish identity (for example, being able to sing Irish songs) did not rely upon daily interactions to be maintained. Rather they were a latent form of belonging which could be enacted in specific and sporadic social settings.

What emerged from the interview data was that a commonality of feeling based on cultural and social practices, as well as shared sentiments of home and belonging, was perceived to be broad enough to encompass difference. In the words of Pádraig,

I think Irish people in Ireland can knock each other’s heads off but once they’re elsewhere they’re just Irish. (Male, 72, first generation, focus group no. 1)

Indeed, the narratives of community that emerged made a virtue of the heterogeneity of the Irish population and their perceived ability to get along with everyone, including each other. Rather than attempting to promote the ‘thick solidarity’ of a homogeneous Irish population, many respondents made reference to the notion that there was a complex mix of people, characterised by one middle-aged woman as ‘lots of different bits to what you might call the Irish community’ [emphasis in the original]. This point was explicitly made in relation to the North-South dimension of the Irish community in the city by one Northern Irish social worker:

They [Northern Irish Protestants] realise over here they’ve more common with me as fellow Ulster men and me with them as well, indeed I’ve more in common with protestants from county Armagh than I would have with someone from Kerry or Cork or Clare or whatever. (Male, 36, first generation, interview)

What is significant is that, rather than problematising the notion of difference, it was regarded by many as an asset, for pragmatic as well as social reasons. Members from a wide range of backgrounds brought with them a range of skills, resources and social contacts, social capital, from which any future community organisation would benefit. Further, increased reflexivity regarding their ethnicity led many respondents to conclude that what they held in common, their ‘Irishness’, was as salient as any perceived differences.
The absence of daily interaction, spatial proximity or a focal point to host social events might be assumed to be a significant barrier for Irish people to come together and to express this sense of common identification. However, individuals adapted by actively constructing a ‘community’ based on sporadic and informal social interaction and cultural practices nonetheless. There was a seeking out of Irish places and spaces by some participants across the age spectrum. Individuals adopted different strategies in order to meet other Irish people and take part in Irish social gatherings. One elderly volunteer helped to run a luncheon club for a dwindling number of Irish elders despite a shortage of funding and his own advancing years. He explained that the luncheon club represented the only opportunity for members to meet other Irish people of a similar age and that they would be ‘lost without it’.

Irish people were also actively striving to keep Irish music, dance and sport alive in the city. For example, a young, second-generation Irish student spent much of his spare time organising the Gaelic Athletic Club (GAC) in one of the universities. It was important to him that he had some connection to his Irish background and he saw the GAC as a way of fostering Gaelic games, as well as interactions with other Irish people. Similarly, a second-generation Irish dancing teacher in her mid-30s was motivated by both a love of Irish dancing and the opportunity it gave her to make contact with Irish families. However, she was also adapting Irish dancing culture to a more contemporary (non-Irish) setting. Eschewing the traditional model of an Irish dancing school with full participation in the formal structures of competitive dancing, she was actively promoting a non-competitive approach which was thought to have a broader appeal. This approach was endorsed by one Irish mother whose two daughters had taken up Irish dancing, something that she herself had disliked as a young girl:

Yeah, I remember just hating it and when they said they wanted to, in the post Riverdance craze they said they wanted to do Irish dancing, I thought ‘are you sure, are you sure, really you’ll hate it, I hated it’ and I had this, ‘I’m not sewing things on dresses for you and I’m not doing hair ringlets and I am not going on bus trips to Leeds to sit in cold halls watching you do your three hand reel. And they insisted and oddly enough they managed to find a non-competitive, non dress wearing Irish dancing group in Sheffield who were fantastic. (Female, 36, first generation, interview)

The Catholic Church and Catholic social networks performed the function of an Irish community ‘by proxy’ for older Irish respondents. Chatting on the steps of one local church after mass was viewed as an Irish ‘thing to do’ because it was both reminiscent of the social practice in Ireland and was a site where individuals would be guaranteed to meet other Irish people. Catholicism was also consciously thought to signify an Irish identity and heritage for second-generation younger Irish people. However, it was also pointed out that the Catholic Church was itself undergoing significant change, which meant that assumptions about how it could facilitate Irish social activities and fund-raising for community events were increasingly outdated. While in the past a long succession of Irish priests had organised church-based social events such as cèilis (Irish dances) they were now almost all replaced by (non-Irish) priests who did not have the same affinity with Irish culture or the interest in supporting Irish community activities:

The other thing I’ve noticed, you know with the churches is . . . most of the priests were Irish, so they’d run dances and things like that . . . so that used to bring Irish in from
different areas when they put a dance on and that’s not happening any more. (Male, mid-50s, second generation, focus group, no. 2)

In the absence of Irish public spaces older participants retreated to the private sphere and hosted music and Irish-language (Gaelic) classes in their own homes, which were sustained over a long period of time despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of any resources from outwith the community. Another strategy was to ‘colonise’ non-Irish spaces such as working men’s clubs for social gatherings.

**Community and the legitimisation of Irish ethnicity**

This sense of collective belonging was challenged and also re-enforced by the perceived lack of recognition afforded Irish people and their claims to be a distinct ethnic minority (Howard 2006) by significant others they came in contact with on a day-to-day basis in Sheffield. The formal recognition of Irish people as an ethnic minority group in the 2001 Census was perceived to be a significant breakthrough in that regard:

> On the census forms we used to be classed as White and came under British and then we fought a long time to make sure that we would be able to classify ourselves on the census form as Irish, not just as ‘other’ but as Irish, and I feel that is a battle we have won and I’m very proud of that you know. (Female, 45, second generation, focus group no. 2)

A distinction was drawn, however, between the categorisation (i.e. the nominal identification) of the Irish for official purposes and participants’ actual experiences of the right to be recognised as such (Jenkins 1996). Individuals reported having to proactively defend the notion that the Irish were a distinct minority group with their own culture, heritage and resources:

> I didn’t realise that we’d have to go back to basics, having to justify why we considered ourselves an ethnic minority. That really threw me. (Male, 26, second generation, focus group no. 2)

> People don’t really want to know anything about it, they would prefer if you just had no ethnicity at all, particularly Irish ethnicity … the difference that can be celebrated if it’s integrated but if there’s something that can’t be integrated it can be also something that can be knocked or something that is an obstacle for them. (Male, 32, first generation, interview)

One social services officer experienced an unspoken but palpable resistance from other professionals to the notion that the Irish were an ethnic minority, which strengthened his resolve to represent the interests of the community as he perceived it. Unlike other minority ethnic groups, by virtue of their being (mainly) white, second-generation Irish people tended to be invisible unless they self-identified as being Irish. A health professional described how he proactively sought out Irish clients on hospital wards:

> I’d go on the wards and ask if they had any Irish patients and nine times of ten the answer would be ‘no’. So I’d look down the list and pick out the Irish surnames, Irish first names. And sure enough there’d be Irish people, some second generation, and that
wasn’t picked up. People don’t know what are Irish surnames in some cases so it completely passes them by. (Male, 35, second generation, interview)

In the absence of any Irish dimension to social and welfare services individuals took it upon themselves to give voice to the ‘absent’ Irish community, in particular the elderly, and their perceived distinct needs. Some Irish professionals and volunteers working in the city thereby acted as ‘brokers’ for the Irish community by attempting to ensure that Irish cultural needs were taken into account.

This lack of recognition of Irish ethnicity by others reinforced the perception that the community needed to reassert itself and increase its visibility to ‘outsiders’ formally and informally, suggesting that the memory of trauma arising from marginality is indeed a potent element (Delanty 2003, p. 162) in Irish communal identities in Sheffield. Paradoxically, this desire to be officially recognised as a community did not result in wholehearted support for the categorisation of Irish people as a minority ethnic group by some individuals. There was a considerable degree of ambiguity and confusion about being constructed as a minority ethnic group for official purposes. Indeed, several people problematised the notion that Irish community had any ethnic dimension at all, which may suggest that their construction of community was based more on origins and nation than ethnicity, or alternatively that ethnicity was associated with being non-white. While this confirms similar findings elsewhere (Gray 2002) and was more likely to be the case for the labour diaspora, there was also evidence among younger participants that the notion of having common ground with other minority ethnic groups was beginning to take root:

I would say there would be similarities because you know if you are a migrant from Scotland, Ireland or West Africa, you are somebody new to a city, you’re unfamiliar with things, you’re unfamiliar with how to access services and social activities. . . . I can see similarities with Irish people that way. (Male, first generation, focus group no. 1)

Clearly, Irish collective identity is framed by the lack of visibility and recognition afforded to it by the significant Other. However, this process of ‘othering’ is resisted and challenged by a more strident assertion of Irish identity, a theme to which the remainder of the paper now turns.

Community and the reassertion of Irish identity

Anti-Irish racism and stereotyping was still a feature of everyday life for Irish people, even for those in middle-class and professional jobs, which served to engender a degree of solidarity among disparate Irish. Experiencing racism, however unintended, brought individuals’ Irishness sharply into view and reinforced a sense of community with other Irish people, from whatever background. It was clear that when people did encounter racism they were much more likely to challenge it than might have been the case in the past, reflecting a new-found confidence that differed to the older generation:

They were a bit more subservient . . . keep your head down. It’s what you did. Now you’re in 2008, because anyone says anything to me I throw it back at them, I am so proud of being Irish. (Male, 38, first generation, interview)
While throughout the ‘Troubles’ in the 1970s and 1980s the Irish were a ‘suspect community’ (Hillyard 1993) and had collectively kept a low profile there was thought to have been a discernible shift towards a more positive view. The younger Irish diaspora in Sheffield felt they had gained some kudos from Ireland’s image as the prosperous ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy:

There was a time when we wouldn’t have been able to have anything inside the Town Hall on St Patrick’s Day – now we get the mayor and other VIPs there celebrating our day and enjoying the Irish dancing and what have you. (Female, 62, first generation focus group, no. 1)

In stark contrast to the period from the 1960s to the 1990s, Irish ethnicity was thought to have undergone somewhat of a ‘renaissance’ in recent years and was now viewed as a social asset. This has had a knock-on effect on the Irish business community in the city. Beyond the ‘cultural stuff’ of Irish ethnicity the deployment of economic and social resources was significant, both for the internal dynamics of Irish collective engagement, but also the public image of any Irish community representation. The Irish Professional Network (IPN) in the city is a case in point. Its members are from a wide range of business and professional backgrounds and they market themselves as providing a forum for Irish professionals to come together and establish business relationships and opportunities. This signals a number of different aspects of what might be considered a new image for a significant part of the Irish community. The focus is firmly on middle-class professionals (rather than on a more traditional image of Irish workers on a building site) and on the resources to be mined within the community (i.e. business and enterprise). On the IPN’s website the network is portrayed as dynamic and proactively seeking to generate business from within the community and being successful in doing so. This is in sharp contrast to an earlier 1960s incarnation of the Irish business community in the city, the Hibernian Society, which was thought to have disappeared during the ‘Troubles’. The IPN is characterised by several respondents as being an essential part of any new Irish formation in the city because of its business connections and the resources it can ‘bring to the table’:

It’s good that we can be seen to offer something from within our own community, so we’re not just always going to the council and looking for money. We’re not just about having problems – we’ve a lot to offer and that’s where Irish people in business . . . some of them very successful, IPN people for example, come in. (Male, 36, first generation, interview)

This highlights how the construction of the Irish community, although intimately connected with the collective memory of the Irish in Sheffield as an ethnic group, was not viewed as a vehicle for any static repetition of ‘tradition’. The idea that the Irish community was experiencing rapid change from within, and also in the context of an increasingly diversified multicultural Sheffield, which required new forms of collective engagement, was a central theme in individuals’ discourses regarding the community and its future. This was substantiated in individuals’ reflections on the form that any future Irish community activities should take. A traditional Irish centre (Casey and Flint 2008, p. 28) with a big dance floor and bar, financed by social and cultural events, and reliant on a consistent level of support from a large
percentage of the Irish population, was considered to be both outdated and undesirable, which echoes sentiments found among London Irish immigrants (Gray 2000, p. 75). Musical events such as dinner dances and showbands, mainstays of Irish social interaction in the past, were perceived to be ‘a bit old fashioned’ and unlikely to attract big audiences. Doubt was expressed that the numbers needed to maintain such a site were sustainable in the light of an ageing and dwindling population. It also reflected in part a conscious move away from what Gray has labelled ‘ghettoised collective formations of “Irishness”’ (Gray 2002, p. 107). In its place individuals articulated a more fluid and inclusive way to express their cultural identity.

Participants suggested that an opening-out of Irish culture to a wider audience was another way to sustain and foster interest in Irish cultural activities, a strategy towards inclusivity that has been attempted by the London-Irish in recent times (Nagle 2008). This contention was bolstered by evidence that Irish culture had the potential to have a broad appeal beyond the Irish community. One Irish dancing teacher reported that her classes were continually oversubscribed and that the majority of her pupils had no Irish connections whatsoever. British students also made up half the membership of the previously mentioned Gaelic Athletic Club at the university. This opening-up of Irish culture and sport was viewed in a positive light by the majority of respondents. It was perceived that being more inclusive of other cultures, including ‘Britishness’, would increase the chances that Irish people who had a wide circle of non-Irish friends would frequent Irish places:

One building you know, probably wouldn’t sustain itself … and people who are not Irish wouldn’t want to go in there as much in terms of like sharing that culture where if we say we’re an open culture who are, then it would be nice ‘we’re running an Irish night bring a friend and come and … it’s not a closed door if you’re not Irish’ (Male, mid-30s, first generation, focus group, no. 1)

Other new and flexible approaches to ethnic solidarity which went beyond the ‘bricks and mortar’ of physical space were also evident. Many respondents articulated the feasibility of maintaining a connection to the Irish community through a loose network of publicised events and web-based communication:

You could have an Irish organisation that is an organisation that uses different venues and does things … and had a database where you can your address details and you post ‘well we’re running a night here or this is happening here’ and you e-mail it out. (Female, 35, second generation, interview)

Hence, there was a move away from an attempt to simply re-create the ‘bricks and mortar’ approach to social interactions towards a mobile city-wide use of a variety of venues.

Conclusions
Drawing particularly on the work of Jenkins (1996), Cohen (1986) and Chaitlin et al. (2009), the paper aims to contribute to studies and theorisations of ethnic identities on three ways. First, these findings nuance our understanding of intergenerational factors in the construction of collective identities. The study demonstrates that the
salience of ethnic identity varies situationally and contextually (Schulz 1998) and in
the case of Irish migrants changes over time in both form and content. The
construction of community and camaraderie is central to Irish collective identity but
is negotiated very differently on a generational basis (Silva 2009). This paper has
sought to differentiate between segments of the population as a way of under-
standing how Irish people are actively constructing a sense of collective identity
based on these social locations. Irish collective identity continues to be an important
part of Irish peoples’ lives but is drawn upon increasingly as a matter of positive
choice, rather than as a bulwark against hostility and isolation as it was for previous
generations (Leavey et al. 2004, Kelleher and Hillier 1996). The perspectives of a
wide range of Irish people in Sheffield illustrate the complexities and contradictions
of Irish cultural identity and ethnicity, as well as providing a counterpoint to any
tendency to essentialise (Barth 1996) components of a reified Irish identity. A focus
upon the diversity within the community also highlights the need for a multifaceted
understanding of Britain’s Irish population, rather than simply ‘adding on’ another
assumed homogeneous ethnic group to the existing spectrum of ethnicity (Mac an
Ghaill 2000). The paper also illustrates that diversity within the population can be
viewed as a positive resource for pragmatic and social reasons, and also provides the
basis for establishing common ground. In doing so it draws attention to the potential
for Irish organisations to reconstruct collective belonging among Irish people despite
socio-economic mobility and class-based divisions.

Second, Irish collective identity has been shaped not only by generational and
socio-economic circumstances (Kelleher and Hillier 1996) but also by shared
experiences of non-recognition and stereotyping. For these participants their struggle
to be recognised as Irish is an important part of their resistance to being stereotyped,
or to having their Irish identity ignored by the white majority (Kelleher and Leavey
2004). As such the Irish represent a stark contrast to other black and minority ethnic
populations and a point of commonality with other ‘invisible’ minority groups in
Britain (Findley et al. 2004). The study examined how the views of the significant
other, the majority ‘host’ group continues to impinge on the definition, construction
and negotiation of Irish ethnicity. Non-recognition of Irish ethnicity has provided the
impetus for key individuals within Irish social networks (Ryan 2004) to ‘broker’ Irish
community needs and aspirations.

Third, while the paper bears out Cohen’s (2004) assertion that the attachment to
community is much more resilient than many sociologists have supposed (p. 75), the
evidence presented here also suggests that this attachment is increasingly played out in
ways that represent a significant point of departure in terms of community
formations. Community making is not confined to ethnic specific ‘construction sites’,
and in the absence of a focal point will be carried out in both the public and private
spheres. This article demonstrates how Irish people, in the absence of daily spatial
proximity, adapted to actively constructing a community based on sporadic and
informal social interaction and cultural practices mainly, although not exclusively,
centred on music and sports. There is evidence that community-conscious individuals
are adopting new goals in response to the shifting demographic profile of post-1970s
immigrants and second-generation Irish in Sheffield, whose trajectories are too
diverse to fit traditional models of community engagement. There is a conscious shift
away from a ‘traditional model’ of an Irish community based on the exclusive
ownership of a physical space towards a more inclusive network of connected
individuals. As such, these research findings also open up the possibility of a more fluid collective formation of Irish identity within the context of a multicultural city.

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Notes

1. The inclusion of ‘White Irish’ has not been wholly successful in estimating the percentage of Irish people in Britain due to under-reporting, which was partly attributed to the inadequacy of the Census question: British-born Irish descendants may have interpreted the question in relation to country of birth, not ethnic background (Hickman et al. 2002). There may also be under-reporting due to a lack of a ‘Black Irish’ category in the Census, as well as an absence of an ‘Irish Traveller’ category.
2. Using the suggested 2.5 and 3 correctional factors of the Irish-born population proposed by Hickman and Walter (1997).
3. Students and Travellers formed two separate focus groups for practical rather than methodological reasons.
4. Consent to record the focus group with the Irish Travellers was not forthcoming, although permission was given to take notes.
5. All respondents’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.
6. Sheffield is a popular university city and continues to attract small numbers of students from both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Several respondents were graduates who had chosen to remain in Sheffield after completion of their degree courses. Others were ‘chain migrants’ joining family and friends.
7. The Irish Professionals Network was established to provide an opportunity for Irish professionals and their associates to develop business links, share good practice and provide a forum to socialise with people from a similar cultural background. It was created in Manchester in 2005 and went national in 2007, with networks now in cities including Birmingham, Leeds, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Coventry. Members can access a website which is described as a ‘Facebook for Irish professionals’. Supported by the Federation of Irish Societies, most branches also aim to support local Irish charities in their respective locations.

References


