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***Identity, identity change and group
boundaries in Northern Ireland. ¹***

DRAFT ONLY.

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Introduction

In this paper I look at identity choice and identity change in a situation of low intensity communal conflict where social boundaries are well defined and institutionalised, and symbolic boundaries sharply oppositional. The paper shows how individuals work on, change and negotiate group boundaries, creating spaces which are non-oppositional. This is also a form of identity change; I use the term to point to the whole package of feelings and dispositions as well as conceptual and perceptual frames which predispose towards opposition, and which are put in question and shifted in the process of change.² The paper shows some of the mechanisms involved in this process of identity/boundary change, not least the mechanisms by which ‘contact’ may lead to change. It also shows the extent of practical and symbolic work required for identity change. It is useful to see identification and boundary making as social process, but the preconditions of the process need to be identified and they can be ‘sticky’, hard to change.³ This paper reveals some of these preconditions through showing how some individuals change that process of boundary-making, practically disaggregating ‘groupness’ in their own social contexts, networks and life-paths. The case study is of Northern Ireland where, despite the peace process and recent settlement, this sort of change is rare.

² I take ‘identity’ as the loosely knit set of embedded and embodied dispositions, feelings, values and assumptions about the world which guide the individual’s practice and form the embedded ‘frames’ which outlast immediate interactional contexts and generate dispositions to act within them: for such a concept of identity, and an argument that ‘identity’ in this sense forms an important part of the causal sequences involved in reproducing or changing group boundaries, see J. Todd, ‘Social transformations, collective categories and identity change’, *Theory and Society*, 34.4, 2005.

³ *When* group boundaries come into play is a crucial issue. However a focus on the ‘when’ of boundaries requires also to look at the ‘what’ of them, for boundaries are more than the use of particular ‘labels’, rather they are complex modes of interaction and negotiation of interaction and even to identify them requires analysis of symbolic repertoires and preunderstandings.

The processes of symbolic and social assimilation between immigrant communities and host societies has been much studied.⁴ Less studied are the ways in which boundaries change in situations of protracted ethno-communal conflict.⁵ The reason is clear. They don't change much, and those who breach or blur the boundaries may be killed or driven out. But the reasons for the entrenchment of these boundaries are of general theoretical as well as immediate political interest, and looking at the individual and exceptional cases may tell us much about boundaries in these societies, and perhaps throw a new light on boundaries in other cases too. For the purposes of this paper, and with the wider conceptual issues in view, I am going to narrow my focus to Northern Ireland, and to specific boundary-breaching processes in Northern Ireland.

I begin with some general considerations about boundaries, boundary-blurring and boundary-breaching and the ways in which the Northern Ireland case may throw an interesting light on the literature. I go on to review some of the scholarly literature on identity change in situations of ethno-communal conflict, justifying the need for the qualitative approach taken here. After outlining my research methodology, I describe some cases of identity change beyond opposition, showing the ways in which symbolic boundaries are disaggregated, and identifying some of the conditions which

⁴ M. Lamont et al, 'North African immigrants respond to French racism. Demonstrating equivalence through universalism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 25.3, 2002, pp. 390-414. Richard Alba 2005 'Bright vs blurred boundaries: Second generation assimilation and exclusion in France, Germany and the United States', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28 (1), pp. 20-49. A. Wimmer, 'Does ethnicity matter? Everyday group formation in three Swiss immigrant neighborhoods', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27.1, 1-36. More generally on social and symbolic boundaries, see M. Lamont and V. Molnar, 'The study of boundaries in the social sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 2002

⁵ For examples of protracted conflict, see ex-Yugoslavia, Israel-Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, or for a much less intense case, Canada. For studies of identity shift in situations of conflict see A. Rao, 1999. 'The many sources of identity: an example of changing affiliations in rural Jammu and Kashmir', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22.1, 56-91. and Guy Ben Porat, 'Dollar diplomacy: globalization, identity change and peace', paper delivered at ITENIBA conference, Geary Institute, University College Dublin, Jan 26-7, 2005. On the concept of 'change' as opposed to situational variation and fluctuation of identifications (and by extension, boundaries) see Todd et al 'Fluid or frozen? Choice and change in ethno-national identification in contemporary Northern Ireland', unpublished manuscript.

facilitate it. This gives rise to some policy relevant conclusions for Northern Ireland, some conclusions specific to situations of ethno-national conflict, and some wider suggestions about identity change and symbolic boundaries.

Identity change and symbolic boundaries

There are several distinctive contextual features of the Northern Ireland case.⁶ *First, the social boundaries between the communities are well defined, and the symbolic boundaries even more so.* There is no blurring or lack of definition. Where social boundaries relax enough to allow interaction, that interaction is constrained by the need to avoid topics of symbolic contention. Rosemary Harris, in a now-classic study of a small town North of the Irish border, pointed out that there was a Protestant and a Catholic perspective on just about every issue, including international relations, so that the frequent contact and civil interaction between Protestants and Catholics in the area seldom went beyond the most superficial of topics.⁷ Today there is considerably more symbolic differentiation within each community, but areas of symbolic overlap are open only to relatively small numbers of the population and older symbolic oppositions remain powerful.⁸ *Second, boundaries are bright not because they are imposed but because they are embraced.* The symbolic boundaries are not imposed simply or primarily by the dominant group: they are rather self-imposed. Catholics and nationalists do not wish to assimilate to the society-in-dominance, and do not

⁶ As always in Northern Ireland, every claim is debated. Because of constraints of space, I do not fully argue any of the points which follow in this paragraph.

⁷ Rosemary Harris, 1972. *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbours and 'Strangers' in a Border Community*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁸ The narratives below show the power of symbolic oppositions even for those who are in process of changing them.

assimilate even when it is possible to do so.⁹ There is therefore a symmetrical quality in the symbolic boundaries. *Third, the symbolic boundaries are multiply constituted.* The boundary between 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' is constructed at once from religion and ethnicity and morality and a sense of culture and politics and nationality. It is not a matter of adding other symbolic divisions onto an 'essential' ethnic one, but rather that they are interrelated, semi-fused, symbolically inter-resonating.¹⁰ The result is a clear and stable boundary between 'Protestant' and 'Catholic', but the reasons for and content of the distinction shift, with different aspects (religious, political, national) coming in and out of focus, highlighted or made recessive over time and for different sections of the populations. *Fourth, the symbolic boundaries are differentially constructed from each 'side'.* Different values, different narratives with different periods of origin, different dimensions of difference, and different interpretations of these dimensions (what it means to be national) are involved in constructing the symbolic boundaries from each side. In this sense the boundary is asymmetrical and contested, not just meaning different things but perceived at a different place depending on perspective.¹¹

⁹ Some social boundaries were primarily imposed by Protestants, sections of whom were active in ensuring population movement to ensure territorial segregation in the 1920s and again in 1969-70; for fifty years from the foundation of Northern Ireland, they closed the governing Unionist Party to Catholics. Yet in the school system, in medicine and in the service sector during the same period, Catholics self-excluded. Still today, Catholics are permitted to attend state (predominantly Protestant) schools but Protestants are not (except in very exceptional circumstances) permitted to attend Catholic schools. Discrimination was practiced by both communities, but since Protestants had control of most economic and political resources, they had more chance to be effective. In opinion polls, Catholics are somewhat more in favour of social mixing than are Protestants but this has not translated into key areas of social practice. There is a Catholic self-image of inclusivity but its function, whether genuine or a mode of cultural assimilation of Protestants, is much debated.

¹⁰ Akenson, D.H., 1992. *God's Peoples. Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. well argues this for the colonial and religious dimensions, not just in Northern Ireland but also in Israel and in South Africa.

¹¹ John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1991 pp.

All of this makes identity choice and boundary change quite different in the Northern Ireland case (and more generally in protracted ethnic conflicts) than in the case of immigrant and host populations. Alba distinguishes three types of boundary change: boundary breaching, where individuals assimilate to the dominant culture; boundary shifting, where socio-symbolic definitions of boundaries, who is and who is not included, change for whole populations; and boundary blurring, which is defined in several ways, either with individuals able to fit in either culture, sharing both sets of cultural repertoires (identity fluidity) or where some individual positions are ambiguous because the bounds of the culture are not well defined (boundary blurring) or where the distinction itself declines in salience (making boundaries recessive).¹² Examples of each exist in Northern Ireland. Fifty years ago all mixed marriages were, and today some are, cases of boundary breaching, assimilation by conversion.¹³ Boundary shifting has occurred in the past; the 'Protestant' vs 'Catholic' boundary became clarified and defined as a national one in the nineteenth century; the wider Irish Protestant community was divided and a cohesive Ulster Protestant community emerged in the early twentieth century; in the last 30 years, unionism came to encompass Catholic as well as Protestant unionists. Boundary blurring also occurs. There are isolated cases of identity fluidity among for example, children of mixed marriage couples or individuals with extensive cross-border experience. The salience of the boundary remains very strong, but it is lessened in some contexts, for example in some sports. The boundaries are, however, typically well defined. It is hard to think

¹² Alba, 2005, see footnote 5

¹³ R. M. Lee, *Mixed and Matched: Interreligious Courtship and Marriage in Northern Ireland*. Lanham: University Press of America. 1994. Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance*. Valerie Morgan, Marie Smyth, Gillian Robinson and Grace Fraser, *Mixed Marriages in Northern Ireland: Institutional Responses*. Coleraine, Centre for the Study of Conflict, 1996. .

of cases which are not ‘made to fit’.¹⁴ This means that ‘boundary blurring’ cannot work with the given boundaries but has to change them, disaggregating the multiply defined boundaries, changing the form of groupness and in the process changing self-definitions.

The very fact of a multiply constituted symbolic boundary that is differently defined from each side gives potential for individuals to create a non-oppositional social and symbolic space. However this is more difficult in practice than it may appear conceptually. It is useful to think of three modes of change, sequenced in increasing radicalism.

1. Individuals can symbolically refuse the boundaries (‘I am not British or Irish, I am Northern Irish’; ‘I am not Protestant or Catholic, I am a plumber’) from within the existing social boundaries. Sometimes they negotiate for themselves an accepted place within one ‘group’, so that their symbolic refusal of division coexists with social reproduction of it.¹⁵ Sometimes the tensions get too much and they leave Northern Ireland (the ‘exit’ option). Sometimes they are motivated to action which blurs the social boundaries.

¹⁴ Incomers are identified by the school they attend, so non-Catholic immigrants (Hindus, Chinese) go to state (predominantly Protestant) schools; non-religious individuals generally come from religious-identifying families and are identified according to their background. Surveys and census use additional questions for those who define themselves as ‘non-religious’, asking variously about their community of origin or the community to which they feel closest. These questions are deemed necessary in order to see if the economic and social advantage of the Protestant community (and ‘cultural Protestants’ are disproportionately likely to say they are non-religious) has or has not been eroded.

¹⁵ In much social interaction in Northern Ireland, this potential is symbolically exploited without breaching boundaries. So, for example, Protestant, Irish-identifying unionists often negotiate for themselves a comfortable place within the networks and understandings of unionism and Protestantism while occasionally being ‘claimed’ by nationalists as potential assimilators. How this negotiation takes place - how ‘eccentrics’ within each group keep a place in that group – is worth study but is not the topic of the present paper.

2. Individuals can focus their activity in those spheres or institutional sites where social boundaries overlap and 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' interact freely: boxing and business, ice-skating, community work and university are such sites, as well as some other sports and explicitly cross-community political and educational ventures.¹⁶ This involves a radical decline in the salience of the boundaries. However the range of such activities is limited: when ice-skaters or businesspeople have children and have to decide what names to give them, whether and what religious formation to give them, and what school to send them to, social boundaries return in high salience.¹⁷ If some reproduce the boundaries of their own socialisation, others convert: mixed marriages and conversion of one or other partner were always present in Ireland.¹⁸ Others go a step further to crisis and more radical change.
3. Some individuals come radically to disaggregate symbolic boundaries while socially breaching and blurring the new multiple boundaries, with a concomitant helter-skelter of identity change. These are the individuals on whom I focus in this paper. The schematic logic of such a process is clear. Individuals separate out the distinct symbolic dimensions which constitute the boundary, changing on one dimension (nationality or politics) more than another (religion) and thus coming to straddle a more complex set of boundaries. In their own practice transform a singular multiply-determined boundary into multiple boundaries with many overlaps. They blur some symbolic divisions, heighten others, while the resonance of each begins to change as it is disaggregated from the others. The multiplication of boundaries gives possibilities for many more forms of blurring,

¹⁶ F. Cochrane, 'Unsung Heroes', in McGarry ed. *Northern Ireland and the Divided World, Post Agreement Northern Ireland in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ See Claire Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2006 .

¹⁸ R. M. Lee, *Mixed and Matched*. Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance*,.

crossing and shifting. But if this is a schematic model of possible change, does it capture key features of actual cases and processes of change? And if so, what of the social conditions and resources which favour or facilitate such change, the reasons it is so infrequent, and the sorts of political interventions which might facilitate such processes among more sections of the population?

Identity change in situations of ethno-national conflict.

There is relatively little discussion of identity change in situations of ethno-national conflict. The most interesting and best developed section of the literature focuses on the movement towards opposition, the crystallisation of oppositional categories, what may be called ‘essentialisation’ where collective categories take on personal significance and oppositional content.¹⁹ This process whereby a trait or category with which identification had been implicit, ‘banal’ or empty of content, becomes highlighted, crystallised and imbued with oppositional personal meaning is common in situations of ethnic conflict.²⁰ Examples are typically associated with the experience (direct or indirect) of injury, humiliation or stigmatisation, where the stigmatised category is taken on as a way of asserting dignity and value.²¹ The attitudes and actions of others provoke one into crystallising identity for oneself.²² Kakar vividly describes the stories which served this function in his own youth.²³

¹⁹ Petersen, Roger D. 2002. *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. S. Kakar, *The Colors of Violence, Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

Horowitz, D. L., 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press , ;

²⁰ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*. Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*.

²¹ M. Lamont and C. Bail, ‘Sur les frontières de la reconnaissance. Les catégories internes et externes de l’identité collective’, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 21, 2005, pp. 61-90.

²² cf Jenkins, R. 1996 *Social Identity* London: Routledge Jenkins

²³ Kakar, *Colors of Violence*.

Such cases were common in our research, not always so violent and intense but – even when simply experienced slights and humiliations – remembered.²⁴ The process of ‘essentialisation’ begins when an underlying cultural trait – typically not a strong identification – is taken as the grounds of injury or stigma. It is by identifying with and affirming the value of that trait that self-respect is re-gained, at the cost of an oppositional identification. A dynamic of opposition then begins. In some of the literature, it is suggested that a strong identification is pre-given, then fired by the incident.²⁵ Logically, however, it does not have to be pre-given. All that is necessary is that it be among the *available* repertoires for the individual. These repertoires can be available in the general culture, or in the family tradition, they do not need to be adopted by the individual prior to the episode; they may rather be grasped to explain an otherwise incomprehensible episode and to legitimate the stigmatised position.²⁶ The sequencing is significant: since collective identity is ascribed before it is affirmed, the reaction may also affect those who are willing to blur boundaries. If change away from opposition is rare, it may in part be because the conditions of essentialisation are so common and can interrupt incipient processes of boundary blurring.

²⁴ Discussed with examples in Todd et al, ‘Fluid or frozen: ...’

²⁵ Petersen and Horowitz’s examples tend to assume this. It was not, however, the case in our own interviews where the examples were of individuals either too young to have any clear sense of boundaries (as in Kakar’s case), or already open to blurring of boundaries, to friendships and intimacies across the social and symbolic divide.

²⁶ In one of my interviews in 1988 a Catholic woman (‘Elise’) expressed a very strong Irish identification and political support for Sinn Féin while this was still an ‘extreme’ and marginalized party. She pinpointed the episode fifteen years previously where this strong Irish identification crystallised: a close relative shot dead by the British army, herself as a teenager humiliated in public by British authority and Protestant peer when she tried to describe what had happened. This woman’s family had themselves been culturally divided, with one branch strongly republican, another apolitical and pragmatic and as a child she recounted being open, apolitical, following her father’s pragmatism: the episode changed her personal way of balancing these divisions.

Analysis of movement away from oppositional identities and understandings is much less frequent. It is sometimes discussed in terms of revising national narratives to provide inclusive rather than exclusive and oppositional repertoires of understanding collective history.²⁷ The portrayal of extremists as trapped in myth, and the need to break from such myths, has been common in much of the literature on ethnic conflict.²⁸ In both states in Ireland a concerted political effort to change the national narrative in order to reduce oppositional understandings of identity is underway. There has been a revision of historical understandings, a rewriting of school history texts, a new teaching of ‘civic education’ and ‘education for mutual understanding’, and, in the Irish state, a strong media attempt to change understandings in order to recognise unionists’ British identity.²⁹ Clearly the provision of alternative repertoires of understanding and interaction may facilitate identity change. However the hopes invested in historical revisionism and the retelling of collective memories are sometimes over-blown. If individuals sometimes reinterpret their experiences in terms of new national narratives, this activity requires a certain calm and space for reflection. The situations of essentialisation described above are ones where the opposite sequence takes place: individuals reach for national narratives to fit their experiences. As I have argued elsewhere, actors in Northern Ireland reached for mythological national/ethnic narratives not because they were old-fashioned, but

²⁷ See [Grillo, R.](#), 1998. *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference*. Oxford: Clarendon . This position follows easily from an ethno-symbolist approach to nationalism, see Smith, A. D., 1986. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. In effect, the national narratives provide the repertoire for understanding the present. Greenfeld, L. (1992) *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) sees the different values embodied in different narratives and rhetorics as typical of the different nationalisms. Walker Connor in *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, tends to take nationalist rhetoric as indicative of the understandings of ‘everyday nationals’.

²⁸ ‘Ancient hatreds’ interpretation of ex-Yugoslavia and of Northern Ireland. See O’Malley, P. 1990 *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair*. Belfast: Blackstaff see Garvin on myth. . For critiques with respect to the Northern Ireland literature, see Ruane and Todd, and McGarry and O’Leary.

²⁹ Roy Foster, Community Relations Council, etc.. See Iseult Honohan’s November 2005 conference on civic education in Ireland in the Humanities Institute of Ireland, University College Dublin.

because they needed them to fight for their interests and to explain and legitimate their personal stories and experiences.³⁰ Exactly how the re-telling of national narratives affects national identity is an important area of research. My point here is simply that it is only one possible factor favouring change to non-oppositional identities, whose importance has to be seen empirically, in the accounts of those who have changed.

There are also large-n studies of movement away from opposition. The ‘contact hypothesis’ has been revived in social psychology, where it has recently been shown that sustained contact on issues of significance does tend to decrease exclusivity between groups.³¹ Varshney’s work can be taken as backing for this view: cities where civil society institutions promote sustained cross community contact tend to have less serious intercommunal tension than others.³² What these studies do not show, however, is the direction of causality. Varshney’s work has been criticised for suggesting that ‘bridging’ social capital lessens conflict, when one might equally argue that low conflict allows the building of bridging social capital.³³ We need to be able to identify the process by which contact decreases opposition, the mechanisms at work and for this detailed qualitative studies are also necessary.

³⁰ J. Ruane and J. Todd, ‘Why can’t you get along with each other?’ in E. Hughes, ed., *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1991, 24-43..

³¹ Reference, Cairns et al.

³² Varshney, A. (2001) ‘Ethnic conflict and civil society: India and beyond’, *World Politics*, 53(3), pp. 362-398. John Darby showed something very similar in Northern Ireland in his qualitative study, *Intimidation and the Control of Conflict*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1986. See A. Wimmer. ‘Does ethnicity matter?’

³³ I owe this point to Christopher Farrington, .

Another important comparative theoretical perspective focuses on power relations as key factors in embedding identities, and hypothesises that changing power relations are key factors in changing identification.³⁴ Greif and Laitin have recently given very plausible comparative over-time evidence for this in changing linguistic practices.³⁵ Once again, however, the significance of this change and the causal mechanisms at work require further clarification. In principle, as I have argued elsewhere, changing power relations provide a trigger for identity change – not least by creating cognitive dissonance between old assumptions and values and new social practices - but do not determine its direction.³⁶ While in the case cited, linguistic change may have involved assimilation to the dominant culture, this is not always the case. In Ireland, for example, recognition of new opportunity structures in the nineteenth century led to a mass popular switch to the English language; this was, however, concomitant with an increasingly intense national identification, in opposition to British rule and later to British culture. Radical linguistic change affected identification much less than might have been expected: the linguistic aspect of identification became recessive while other aspects – history, culture, values – were given prominence, thus allowing masses of individuals to pursue their strategic interests without identity conversion.³⁷

All of this suggests that the existing literature on identity change and boundaries in situations of ethno-national conflict, has to be supplemented with analyses of processes of change, of the repertoires called upon in these processes, and of the

³⁴ This approach derives proximately from Pierre Bourdieu. See, Lamont and Molnar, 'Boundaries'. A. Wimmer, 'The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries' manuscript. J. Ruane and J. Todd, 'The roots of intense ethnic conflict may not themselves be ethnic', *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, 45.2, 2004,

³⁵ Greif, A. and Laitin, D.D. (2004) 'A Theory of Endogenous Institutional Change', *American Political Science Review*, 98(4), pp. 633-652APSR

³⁶ Todd, 'Social transformations'.

³⁷ That the case is a complex one, and subject of disputes among scholars as to the significance of the changes, is precisely my point: significance for identity cannot be read off from behavioural change, even linguistic change.

sequences in which change occurs and the precise mechanisms which appear to be at work in individual cases. This is doubly important, not just to show the causal processes at work, but also to throw light on possibilities of recidivism. Part of the value of individual interviews is to reveal the self-understood process of change in a way which allows us to see the thresholds beyond which it becomes difficult to imagine a return to oppositional identities.

Method

I present in summary form some descriptions of radical identity shift from oppositional to non-oppositional forms of identity. These are drawn from in-depth interviews which were conducted in 2004-5 as part of a wider research project funded by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.³⁸ In this project, 128 interviews were conducted, 54 in Northern Ireland. The interviews followed a common topic guide designed to elicit the content of ethno-national identity and perceived changes over time and generations.³⁹ A minority of these interviews (16 in all) were with individuals in mixed (Protestant-Catholic) marriages, their parents and their children. This group was chosen because we expected that these individuals would report considerable change in their construction of their identity and the interviews confirmed this. Two further sets of interviews form the background of this discussion. One study comprised over 100 interviews in three locations North and South (of which 26 in Northern Ireland) between 2003-5, in an open-ended format designed to

³⁸ 'Intergenerational transmission and ethno-national identity in the (Irish) border area', funded by the EU programme for peace and reconciliation.

³⁹ The interviewees ranged over the local political spectrum, and there was a representative age-, gender-, generation- and religion- distribution. The middle class was over-represented in this sample. Interviewers were Nathalie Rougier, Lorenzo Cañas Bottos and the author, interviewed most of the mixed marriage families.

tap into all aspects of identity, not primarily ethno-national.⁴⁰ The final set of interviews – 80 in all - were conducted by two researchers in Northern Ireland during a period of intermittently intense violence, in the first six months of 1988. These interviews were designed to reveal individuals’ perspectives on the conflict; prompts covered their sense of national identity.⁴¹

Out of this very large sample, there were many narratives which showed occasions of choice and change and many respondents claimed to be tolerant, non-oppositional in their identification.⁴² Explicit narratives of change from oppositional to non-oppositional identities were rare. I report on some of these cases below, attempting to draw out their logic. Names and identifying details are changed. The analysis that follows focuses primarily on the narratives of four women, each of whom happens to be in a mixed (Protestant-Catholic) marriage. What is being studied, however, is not mixed marriage but the process of boundary crossing and its relations to self-understood identity change. The analyses below are therefore intended as analyses of ‘logic’ of identity change, rather than the logic of mixed marriages.⁴³

⁴⁰ This study covered a very wide range of diverse social categories. The interviewer was Theresa O’Keefe. Analysis is only beginning, but I have read through many of the interviews and discussed them with Dr O’Keefe.

⁴¹ The interviewees were the author and J. Ruane. These interviews were not taped but the interviewees recounted them onto tape immediately afterwards and transcribed this account subsequently. The individuals were representative in gender, political and religious distribution; interviewees were predominantly but not exclusively middle class in social position but there was class representativeness in terms of social background.

⁴² Todd, Rougier, O’Keefe and Cañás Bottos, ‘Fluid or frozen? Choice and change in ethno-national identification in contemporary Ireland’, unpublished manuscript..

⁴³ About 10% of marriages in NI are mixed, although measurement is contested and significant numbers of these cases involve the ‘conversion’ of one partner. See Robinson et al, *Mixed Marriages*, and R. M. Lee, *Mixed and Matched*. While there are analogies between mixed marriages in Northern Ireland and in other situations, I do not explore them here. ,

Identity change, process and logic

*Four narratives of change*⁴⁴

Denise grew up in a unionist and evangelical-pietist Protestant family, in a strongly unionist neighbourhood in Belfast. She has changed *'absolutely fundamentally'* on national identification. *'I've got both a British and an Irish passport. .. if you did push me I would probably say I have probably more Irish leanings, probably sort of more nationalist than unionist leanings at the moment but sort of the jury's still out..'* Change began in childhood with visits to cousins in the South of Ireland and she *'just got caught up in a more relaxed lifestyle, especially compared to how things were up here in the Troubles...'* *'I probably felt a great deal of affinity for Irish culture then'*. As a teenager she experienced *'ethnic cleansing'* as Catholics in her loyalist neighbourhood were killed or intimidated out. *'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.'* As a young adult she decided to do a course in the Irish language at a cross-community college: her teacher was *'very winning, she kept you entranced for the full two hours...'* A defining moment occurred after the course was over when she saw her teacher on television as a leading member of Sinn Féin: *'I had been brought up with a stereotype of a Sinn Féin person as an absolute monster, you know, and then on the other hand I had X who was a very friendly, amicable woman and ... I*

⁴⁴ The interviews to be discussed here were selected because of the extent of change reported. The relation with the interviewer in these cases (also a woman, mother, in a mixed marriage) did not involve the negotiation of gender or generational differences; religious differences or similarities (the interviewer is from Northern Ireland and thus identifiable in religious origin) were not highlighted in the interviews themselves. The interviewees were asked how they categorized themselves in national and religious terms, what this meant to them, and how far it had changed: In all cases, this produced a set of episodic narratives.

couldn't reconcile the monster with... this lovely amicable woman who would have listened while I chatted away... I had an awful time trying to reconcile the two... I came to the conclusion...that ... I didn't agree with her politics but it didn't mean that I didn't like the person... that she wasn't a monster...' Now she herself teaches an evening class in West Belfast. When I asked her what she thought of the republican murals and symbolism which are pervasive there, she said that she did not notice them, although once she would have found them intimidating. She remains a religiously committed Protestant; she is married to a Catholic and has a young child; she keeps in close contact with her family of origin, frequently visiting her mother who still lives in the same unionist neighbourhood .

Brenda, from Protestant East Belfast, began to see things differently through her participation in handball, a sport which was predominantly 'Catholic' which allowed her to '*widen her horizons*'. Marriage followed to a national handball champion. A personal crisis preceded the baptism of their first child. Initially she delayed the baptism: '*I felt ... something innate. I didn't want my children brought up Catholics...*'. Yet the decision could not be delayed, for infant baptism was a crucial sacrament to her Catholic in-laws and her husband. Finally, having assessed the costs to the extended family and to her marriage, she overrode her '*innate*' feelings and allowed the baptism, '*trusting*' that it was the right decision. The outcome was (on her account) both unconventional and happy. This so confirmed her in her choice that she now sees the main cause of conflict in Northern Ireland as such '*ignorance*', the '*innate*' prejudices which prevent individuals from encountering difference, in her own metaphor the insistence on '*eating fish and chips*' in a foreign country.

Sara – from a strongly Catholic Irish nationalist background in Dublin – was sent by her parents to a predominantly Protestant school. Her personal constructs of (national) self and other followed quite closely the national trajectory, which she followed closely on the media: *‘as a younger child it was very much put across that the English was the bad guy.. .. around the time... of the bad troubles up North and then the H-Blocks and the bombings, it was suddenly the IRA were the bad guys.. I think it only became full circle for me... at the time of the peace treaty... you could suddenly see both sides.’* Interspersed with this history is her marriage and increasing contact with the unionist perspective of some of her in-laws. She retains a strong Irish identity, in an ethno-cultural form, which she holds separate from her political and lifestyle decisions. She and her husband differ ethno-culturally, and converge in most other respects. Her children are raised in an international environment.

Jane – from a Catholic Southern-border-county background – came to live in Belfast because her teenage friends had chosen to come to university there and she followed them. Living in Belfast made her reflect on her national identity in a way that she never had and never had wanted to before. *‘.. it was more practical reasons that you had to become aware of what you are. Whereas in A-town really while everybody else is the same as you and is in the same category as you sure it didn’t matter where you go or who you talk to’.* For her, identity change began with the shock of encountering difference: first simply living with social divisions in Belfast, and later in relation to her Protestant East Belfast future husband: *‘we kept fighting, we were opposite ends of the same continuum if you like, you know, on very similar constructs, sport or religion.. I used to think god I loved him so much and I thought will this ever work, can this work?’* For her, identity change involved a gradual relativising of her

identification and perspectives, a recognition that quite radical national, religious and cultural difference could coexist with moral convergence.

Other narratives of change in our interviews share some of these characteristics.

Sara's husband John traced quite radical changes in his own political views and sense of history. Barbara, a Protestant who lives on the Northern side of the Irish border, interviewed by Nathalie Rougier, traced a change in her own identity from British to Irish: she separated from her strongly loyalist Protestant husband, took on a job as a community worker, and is now learning Irish and Ulster Scots and reinterpreting her familial and the collective history. In her new work, she associates with all types of nationalists (she described community events where she dances on a regular basis with a local Sinn Féin representative). This has led her to moral questioning and the beginnings of a recategorisation not just of republicanism but even of her ex-husband's 'extreme' loyalist views. Catriona, a Catholic from West Ulster interviewed in 1988, was alienated from her nationalist background by the behavior of republicans, and began building a new set of Northern Irish reference points through feminist and cross-community activity. Anne, from a fundamentalist Protestant background, cast off both her religion and the political oppositions associated with it in a marriage outside the fundamentalist fold.

If these individuals willingly embraced change, the parents of mixed marriage families had change thrust upon them, and they reacted in different ways. Susan, interviewed by Nathalie Rougier, discussed her feelings of distress when her daughter, in a mixed Catholic-Protestant relationship, became pregnant: *... ' but I have an issue now myself... I have a daughter who... she is not married but she is living with her companion who is a protestant... and she is also expecting a baby... and for me that is*

raising a lot of issues in what I believe and what I don't believe... I always felt that I would be broad minded about it... but I find I'm not... and I'm quite saddened by that, I am... because I don't want to be like that...' and later 'I thought I was so broad minded and so liberal but then it hits... it hits your own front door, it makes you think and... as I say I want to, I want to be understanding, I'm trying to be understanding but it still hurts...'.⁴⁵

The narratives of change are also echoed politically. One unionist politician described a 'dark night of the soul' before he decided to support the Good Friday Agreement in 1998: his emotions and loyalties to friends killed by the IRA warned him against compromise with Sinn Féin but he finally decided that peace was the higher value and he became a wholehearted supporter of the agreement.⁴⁶ New loyalists, with links to Protestant paramilitaries but pro-Agreement, have similar narratives.⁴⁷

Sequences of change, logic of change

In these cases, the occasion of change is contact across social boundaries which generates experience that demands decision, provokes crisis, and may lead to identity change.⁴⁸ In several of these cases, the experience which provoked change was close and civil contact with those defined as terrorists (Sinn Féin); in others it was a matter of the ethno-religious future of the next generation (the baptism of children of a mixed marriage). In each of these cases, the boundaries were breached in practice and experience before the oppositional 'prejudices' were changed in personal understanding. The identity change that was provoked was gradual for Sara, Jane and Barbara, and punctual and crisis-ridden for Denise, Brenda and Catriona.

⁴⁵ This interview is significant because it shows how a trigger of change may be experienced, before it becomes clear if or how far change will proceed.

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⁴⁷ David Ervine, 'Redefining loyalism' in John Coakley, ed, *Changing Shades of Orange and Green: Redefining the Union and the Nation in Contemporary Ireland* Dublin, UCD Press, 2002, pp. 57-63.

⁴⁸ Ethnic cleansing presupposes boundary crossing and Denise knew the Catholic killed on her street.

In both sets of cases, it generated a new set of practices and experiences and an ongoing process of recategorisation.

Contact alone does not generate change. It makes more likely experiences which generate a whole series of cognitive and moral dissonances, which show that the elements of identity that had previously been tied together have to be pulled apart. For Denise, the first dissonance was between her sense of moral and religious values and her sense of religious collective identity: when her Catholic neighbour was killed by paramilitaries acting in the name of Protestants she felt *'ashamed of being Protestant'*. A later dissonance was between her sense of political morality and her sense of personal values: republicans were outside the bounds of her politico-moral imagination, yet her teacher was clearly within the bounds of her personal-moral universe. For Brenda the dissonance was between her 'innate' feelings and her rationally considered family values. For Jane her clear recognition of her partner's moral standards and moral worth required her to recognise the entwining of her own moral standards with her sense of nationality, religion and culture. For Sara the dissonance was interpersonal: her extended family spanned the entire range of British-Irish relations, from republican to unionist and while she was able to interact with them all, she communicated clear satisfaction when her historical understanding *'came full circle'* and she could *'see both sides'*.

A changed moral community

What is thrown into crisis in the narratives above is the relevant moral community, the boundaries of intelligible moral behavior. The boundary blurring that takes place is not a taking on of another set of cultural norms or values, although it may in some cases come to involve this. It is rather a finding of potentially share-able moral (or sometimes religious) values that allow for a ‘fusion of horizons’ (as Gadamer called the quest for interpretative understanding). Denise’s move from a strong political-moral-identitarian aversion to republicans to a simple political disagreement with them was triggered by a contradiction between her recognition of another’s humanity (and human warmth, openness, decency) and her oppositional categories. For Barbara, when she begins to question her previous categorisation of Sinn Féin, she equally begins to question her categorisation of her own ex-husband. For Brenda, the baptism of her first child was a major moral decision where stronger values won out over the innate reaction: the child was baptized in a Catholic church ‘*out of my greater love for John, and for the unity of the family*’ and she could only ‘*trust*’ she was making the right decision.. For Jane, it was her husband’s strong moral values, her sense of him as ‘*very, very decent and kind and I would trust him in any situation to do the right thing*’ that sustained her and allowed her to work to recategorise religious and cultural opposition as mere difference. For Sara, it was all-important to be ‘*open*’ rather than ‘*boxed*’, this lay behind her on-going revisions of her ‘Irish’ identity and sense of history. In all of these cases, the individual prioritised a set of sharable values over the values entwined in the oppositional category, separating personal values from the ethnic or national category, and allowing the oppositional identification to be criticised and changed at the same time as the boundaries became permeable.

This was, however an achievement rather than a foregone conclusion. Some respondents alternated between different evaluative repertoires, one more oppositional and one more open, without resolving the potential tension. Elise, mentioned above (footnote 22) as the respondent who had undergone an intense essentialising experience, tempered her strong nationalist opposition to British and unionist values with what she saw as her father's open and pragmatic perspective. When interviewed in 1988 she was in a relationship with a Protestant, and wondered if it would be better for herself and her children to assimilate to his 'culture-in-dominance'. It was not at time of interview clear if or how Susan, whose daughter was pregnant, would change her own values to accept the child of a mixed relationship.

Self-repositioning and the retelling of familial and national narratives

In none of the cases discussed above did the individuals convert to the entire package of beliefs and values of the other community. Nor did they broaden to a fully universalistic or cosmopolitan position.⁴⁹ In each case it was a repositioning of self within a reinterpreted tradition, an imaginative reforming of the Protestant or Catholic tradition. Change was so painful and difficult for many of our respondents because they insisted on changing while retaining their earlier (familial and sometimes also neighbourhood) relationships. They did not reject the relatives who refused to come to their weddings or who insulted them and their partners; they returned to them, reforming relations with them while insisting that their own changes also be recognised. In these interviews, they were successful: initial alienation was overcome,

⁴⁹ Out of the 127 recent interviews that have been analysed, we only had one interviewee (a Northerner who had moved over the border to the South) who did not declare himself British or Irish or Northern Irish but a 'citizen of the world', and even he remained firmly Protestant, and one other who saw herself as primarily European.

and the four women above and their partners achieved not simply different social networks, but markedly wider and more inclusive ones. (Such ‘happy endings’ are not representative.⁵⁰)

This mode of identity change is best seen as a revision of priorities, values and perceptions, a rebuilding of the identity boat while one is sailing in it, reaching for resources and repertoires with which one feels at home, albeit ones which were in the past kept recessive: in this way, it is change while retaining a sense of continuity with tradition.⁵¹ In each case, the individual reassimilated their own process of change within a longer and larger tradition by retelling of the familial, and sometimes also the national, identity narrative.⁵² Denise emphasised the border-crossings in her family history; Barbara retraced her family history to find a grandmother who had lived in Dublin and her ‘ethnic’ history to show the interlocking unity of all the peoples of the Britain and Ireland. Others found incidents in the past that *might have* led to a similar outcome. Denise’s husband spoke of his aunt, who wanted to marry a Protestant and was not permitted by her family; Susan, worried about her daughter’s baby, remembered back to her own relationship with a Protestant boy in Belfast thirty years ago. It is as if the changes and turning points in the present encouraged the extended family to find also potential – failed - turning points in the past. Some – in particular Sara, her husband and many of their extended family – also brought in the wider national historical narrative, revising this in different ways to show the paradoxes and cross-currents in the past as in their own present. All of this functioned as a way of asserting identification with the family (and national) tradition and allowing family

⁵⁰ See Robinson et al. *Mixed Marriages*

⁵¹ Todd, ‘Social transformation’ .

⁵² Cerulo, Karen A. 1997. ‘Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions’. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23: 385-409. In the cases reported here, the new narrative accompanied the interactional change, or followed it and legitimated it..

(and national) resources to legitimate change towards a more inclusive identity, while situating that change and giving it wider social significance.

Renegotiation of boundaries

The result is a renegotiation of boundaries.

- i. Symbolic boundaries. For those most centrally involved, symbolic boundaries become multiple and distinct. For Sara and John, religious boundaries had lost salience, national boundaries remained clear, distinct, unchangeable, but without implications for interaction, political boundaries were constantly in process of revision, cultural boundaries had blurred over time and there was a fusion of moral horizons. For Denise and Colm, Brenda and Paul, religious boundaries remained salient and clear, but with a sharing of key beliefs, while there was convergence in national, political, and cultural positions. For their children, the ‘packages’ of religio-national-political-cultural-moral positions, which in the wider society constitute bright boundaries, had no symbolic hold. They freely chose position on each dimension, feeling no internalised constraint to follow any package; at the limit they had multiple repertoires and moved fluidly between them.
- ii. Social boundaries. At the level of the immediate and the extended family, change is radical, in social mixing and interaction, in the free movements of the immediate family from one side to another of the boundaries with the extended family becoming aware of different life-paths and rationales.

iii. Social boundaries. At the wider social level, boundaries remain and are resented.⁵³ Mixed marriage respondents have to be careful where they live. One couple had just bought a house in an expensive (religiously mixed, middle class) locality, having walked away from a good cheaper house because they had seen a loyalist flag further up the street. One family much resented the Catholic church's rules precluding them from sharing communion. The son of a mixed marriage couple – himself with a fluidity of religious identity, with both Protestant and Catholic repertoires easily available to him – had to hide his background from some Protestant fellow students. One mixed marriage couple were angry that their daughter's right to attend religion class at school had been questioned. One man was angry and disillusioned that the local Protestant clergyman had refused to co-officiate at his wedding.

Was this a blurring of boundaries? I want to say that it was rather a multiplication of them, at once a highlighting of boundaries, a distinction of different boundaries, and a making of them all negotiable and revisable. This is a world where an ordinary Protestant woman dances with a Sinn Féin representative, where a Southern Catholic can accept a hard Protestant soccer team into her moral universe and family life and look forward to her son watching their matches. It is a world where the resonances associated with the identity categories and boundaries are split apart: the unionist resonances and sectarian practices of the soccer team are distinguished from the football and the fellow feeling. It is a world where it is possible - in the words of Brenda's 8-year old daughter – to be a '*half and halfer*', to have both 'Protestant' and

⁵³ Robinson et al, *Mixed Marriages*; McClung, *Mixed and Matched*

‘Catholic’ repertoires and to move between worlds. It is peopled by apolitical individuals, their parents and their children, with a penumbra of extended family, friends and acquaintances, but it has a subversive quality.

Other groups could also have been chosen to illustrate the possibilities of identity change in Northern Ireland.⁵⁴ On any count, however, they are a small minority. Of the 160 Northern Ireland interviews, many individuals recount occasions of choice and change but very few show this extent of identity change and disaggregation of boundaries.⁵⁵ Northern Ireland is not peopled by individuals who move fluidly in and out of categories, until corralled by political entrepreneurs.⁵⁶ The cases discussed here are important not because they are typical but because they happen at all. It is all the more important to see what social conditions facilitate such processes, and what prevents them.

⁵⁴ Similar subversive tendencies are more overt and politicised in the radical evangelicals described by Ganiel who meet in a pub, hold ‘last suppers’ and want to break the stranglehold of religious institutionalism and sectarian division; the activists who moved from the Northern Ireland Labour party to the civil rights movement to a variety of small, alternative movements; some ex-paramilitary Protestant community workers; a variety of small groups. There are also the individuals who ‘cross-over’, for example the Protestants in the Social Democratic and Labour Party. Some within the business community, desiring political stability and economic expansion on the island of Ireland, have also effectively subverted Northern Irish boundaries and appear to have changed quite radically in their own identifications. Gladys Ganiel, ‘Emerging from the evangelical subculture in Northern Ireland’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, forthcoming. Claire Mitchell, ‘Protestant identification and political change in Northern Ireland’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 26.4, 612-31. Aaron Edwards and Stephen Bloomer, ‘Democratising the peace in Northern Ireland: Progressive loyalists and the politics of conflict transformation’, Conflict Transformation Papers no. 12, Belfast: LINC resource center, 2005

⁵⁵ Less than twenty; there are some interviews which are difficult to categorise and require closer reading, or where the interviewer did not sufficiently probe on these issues. There are eight clear cases, discussed here, not counting the children of mixed marriage families, with some additional examples in the sample from the Irish state. The movement to an alternative category (eg ‘Northern Irish’) may be more frequent, but it may also be less stable: see Todd et al, ‘Fluid or frozen’.

⁵⁶ See Todd et al, ‘fluid or frozen’.

Occasions of change: wider social context and processes.. .

The occasions of change for our respondents seem ordinary, unexceptionable: visits to family in the South, playing hand ball at college, going to a local Protestant school, going to college in the North, or, for others, becoming a student politician in Belfast, separation and community work. The degree of contact was connected to wider social processes. Denise's family linkages in the South were the product of successive family migrations, England to Ireland, Dublin to Belfast and back to Dublin and back to Belfast, partially driven by economic interest, partially by political decision (after the second world war to send Southern workers back to the South). Such processes were not atypical: Barbara spoke of her recent discovery that her grandmother had lived in Dublin and her desire to learn more.

Sara, sent to a Protestant school, was a child of the new modern post-war Southern Irish nationalism, Catholic but independent of the Catholic church, suffering from a Catholic-run public education system unable to cope with post-war expansion. Brenda got involved in one of the 'Catholic' sports at her (Protestant) college. Jane was one of a new Southern generation which left the state for university education. Meanwhile in Northern Ireland, recent British state funding provided neutral 'civil society' venues for the teaching of the Irish (and Ulster Scots) language, European funding intensified cross-border activity and the 'peace process' provided both safe passage and the motivation for Sinn Féin politicians to enter the mainstream of cross-

community activity.⁵⁷ While our research supports Varshney's conclusion as to the importance of civil society institutions,⁵⁸ their central importance in these cases was less in providing resources (social capital) which could sustain cross-community contact and restrain polarization, than in providing experiences which produced identity change.

Conclusion

The discussion above suggests points of policy significance, points of comparative significance about identity change and boundaries in situations of ethno-national conflict and some general conclusions about boundaries and identities.

- *Occasions of change*: Sustained contact across boundaries is a necessary but not sufficient condition of change. Cross-community civil society institutions were particularly important in stimulating identity change. They threw up occasions in which received wisdom and traditional oppositional categories might come into overt conflict with experience and values. The interviews also show the importance of border-crossing networks, which may have either immediate effect, or a delayed action, being called upon much later as legitimating resources. That the British and Irish governments, together with the European union, are now putting considerable resources into such institutions and networks is of key importance for identity change in the future. There needs to be monitoring to ensure that there actually is cross-community interaction within these, but they should not be assessed simply on their immediate political effects.⁵⁹ When it happens, identity change can be sudden, but there can be long delays and threshold effects between political

⁵⁷ Brigid Laffan and Diane Payne, *Creating Living Institutions: EU Cross Border Cooperation after the Good Friday Agreement* Armagh, Centre for Cross-Border Studies, 2001;

⁵⁸ Ashutosh Varshney, 'Ethnic conflict and civil society: India and beyond', *World Politics*, 53 (April 2001)

⁵⁹ For a useful discussion of some of the government funded initiatives, see Owen Hargie and David Dickson, *Researching the Troubles: Social Science Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Conflict*, Edinburgh, Mainstream Publishers, 2003

change and identity change. The time scale of identity change may be significantly longer than the time scale of political change.

- *Resources for change.* These cases show how moral repertoires within the traditions of each group came to be used as critical tools of change, able to criticise and dissect the identities and assumptions of each group. Each of the four women found values and moral principles which she associated with her own background (family and/or religious) and which came into conflict with her identifications and sense of group-belonging. These values and principles had universalistic resonances: these women did not reach for a pluralist respect for traditions which would be less able to criticise their own tradition.⁶⁰ Revised national narratives were sometimes appealed to in processes of change, but less often than might have been expected.
- *Pressures against change.* The stories recounted here are complex, with many stages where reversals could happen. They can be countered by processes of ‘essentialisation’, a simpler and more immediate reaction against stigmatisation and danger and in our interviews significantly more common than the change away from opposition. To facilitate the types of change discussed here, an immediate policy recommendation is to put in place safeguards against and procedures for redress for such cases of stigmatisation, injustice and threat: the sort of equality and rights legislation that is slowly being put into place in Northern Ireland.⁶¹ This can help prevent future processes of essentialisation. It can also ease processes of change for those who have already reacted in this way, who would require greater safeguards and guarantees than did the individuals discussed above.⁶²
- *The character of ethno-national conflict and of settlement structures.* The discussion suggests that the currently dominant ‘realist’ vs ‘transformationalist’ paradigms on ethnic conflict and settlement are

⁶⁰ M. Lamont, *The Dignity of the Working Man: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class and Immigration*. Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2000

⁶¹ See McGarry and O’Leary *Consociational Engagements*: Oxford University Press, 2005. For individuals who have already reacted in this way, any process of change would be contingent on a level of recognition and guarantees of respect/safety that were considerably more overt than those required by the four women above.

⁶² There is material in the data set on ‘de-essentialisation’ processes which requires further analysis.

themselves misconceived.⁶³ Ethno-national identity is persistent, and continuing inequality, injustice and perceived humiliation reproduces oppositional ‘essentialised’ forms of identity. Strong equality legislation is therefore necessary. But there is a question how this legislation should be justified. It is presently justified by pluralist or ‘liberal nationalist’ arguments that give little hold to criticise existing traditions and identities. If universalistic values are important in identity change, a different tack is necessary, one that justifies national equality not on liberal nationalist grounds but as a transitional stage or threshold towards further change.⁶⁴

- *Boundaries* This case study shows identity change and boundary blurring which involves not a gradual decline in the salience of oppositions, but a change in their content, not assimilation but a remaking of traditions and a partial disaggregation of groupness, not fitting into a blurred area of symbolic (and social) boundaries, but the creation of such an area. This is particularly urgent in situations of ethnic conflict where the existing boundaries lead to appalling effects. It is not new to point out that similar processes may also take place at other boundaries and interfaces. Yet the case studied here may give some suggestions useful in other cases. In cases where boundaries involve a multiplicity of symbolic divisions, the work involved in separating them out at once remakes identities and traditions; it shows transgression by conservatives who do not wish to depart fully from their (collective and individual) past. If the Northern Ireland case is anything to go by, it may take place in multiple, sometimes unexpected, sites.

⁶³ For some of the debates, see McGarry and O’Leary, *Consociational Engagements*, and R. Wilson and R. Wilford, ‘Northern Ireland: A route to stability’, Belfast: Democratic Dialogue.

⁶⁴ In a forthcoming work, Ruane and Todd argue for national equality as a ‘threshold’ of change.