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Abstract

This paper is a methodological reflection on the experiences of a white Irish woman researching ethnicity in England. Ethnic identity is described as a performance between two social actors that requires the collusion of both parties in order to be socially accepted. The history and disputes around the white Irish ethnic group category in England are discussed. Through the use of fieldnotes and interview extracts, I discuss how I became aware that my ethnic identity was not always recognised by participants, and in some cases the distinction between white Irish and white British was denied. At the micro level this affects my rapport with individual participants, while at the macro level it resonates with historical relationships between Ireland and England. I argue that such experiences can lead to an existential threat to a person's ethnic identity and therefore that the status of white Irish identity in England can be fragile.

Key words

Reflexivity; ethnic invisibility; Irishness; whiteness; ethnicity; minority

Introduction

In this paper I argue first that 'white Irish' is a distinct ethnic group, second that white Irish constitutes a minority ethnic group in Britain, and third that I am white Irish. Drawing on Goffman (1969), I argue that ethnic identity is continually socially constructed through a 'performance' between at least two actors and that both actors must collude in this performance for it to be accepted as 'real'. I also show how the position of the white Irish in England is distinctive in the 'whiteness' literature (Walter 2001; Frankenberg 1997). Through extracts from my experiences conducting research about ethnicity I will show how my ethnic identity has been constructed and challenged, thereby enabling an understanding of why white Irish is a fragile ethnic identity in England.

Definition of ethnicity

In Britain, an ethnic group is a group sharing at least some of the following characteristics: language, religion, cultural values, physical similarities, and an ancestral homeland (Dobbs, Green, and Zealey 2006; Modood et al. 1997). Ethnicity in Britain is a combination of the US concepts of both race and ethnicity (Grieco and Cassidy 2001). Ethnicity is fluid, and an individual can change the ethnic category by which they define themselves (Nazroo 1998). Ethnic identity is the importance of ethnicity to one's sense of self (Phinney 1989) and the level of identification one feels with a particular ethnic group. Physical characteristics, such as skin colour, are often used by the outside observer to classify ethnicity. This limits the fluidity of ethnic self-labelling; it is difficult to imagine the situation where society would accept an individual moving from self-identifying as white British to African American, for example. One only has to look at the responses to Rachel Dolezal's claims to be black to see this in action. Individuals are subject to social construction influences, and the choices available to them are limited by the meanings society places on ethnicity.

Theoretical perspectives on the self and identity

According to Goffman (1969), presentation of the self is an interactional process. We portray ourselves in a certain way by performing to others. The persons performed to must accept our portrayal as accurate in order to complete the interactional process, thus validating our presented self. Without the confirmation from the other party, our self has not been affirmed. The other person's acceptance makes our self 'real'. The other person can reject our performance. Thus we have not succeeded in being the self we are attempting to perform. In Goffman's terminology my 'personal front' and 'performance' need to make a convincing portrayal of white Irish. A person might reject our performance if they are threatened by our claim, or they perceive our claim as false (Goffman 1969). It could make their own claim seem weaker. If I am a minority, what does that say about them?

Sabat (Sabat 2002; Sabat and Harre 1992) adapted Goffman's theory to dementia, with a distinction between three different aspects - Self 1, Self 2, and Self 3. Self 1 is the internal sense of identity, how we keep a record of our autobiography. Self 2 refers to our attributes, and how we understand those attributes. It could be a physical description of ourselves, or an identification of affiliations, e.g. religion. Self 3 refers to social roles, e.g. teacher, caregiver, etc. A person can inhabit any number of these social roles and can swap between them. For example, one role is adopted at work, and a different role is adopted at home. In contrast to Self 1, Self 3 is dependent on the co-operation of other people in the social world, similar to Goffman's argument. Selves 1 and 2 can be considered the micro level of the self, but Self 3 is the meso level; the level that requires interactions with other people or groups to validate itself (McGhee Hassrick 2012). Sabat (2002) argues that Self 3 is vulnerable, because without the collusion of others we cannot maintain the persona.

I argue that ethnic identity is a part of Self 3. My ethnic identity as white Irish requires the co-operation of others in my daily life. Without their co-operation I can only uphold my identity internally. This is important for my research, because I study ethnic diversity in Britain. Through the course of different research projects I have come to realise that my participants do not always view my identity in the same way I do. This leads me to the core question of my article: if my ethnic identity is solely held within Self 3, and other people don't recognise it, how Irish am I?

A similar theory has been applied specifically to ethnic identity (Nagel 1994). According to Nagel, ethnic identity is constructed from both a person's internal view of themselves (or Self 1 and 2) and also other people's view of the individual (or Self 3).

Ethnic identity, then, is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations - i.e., what *you* think your ethnicity is, versus what *they* think your ethnicity is. (Nagel 1994, 154)

Nagel discusses how some ethnic distinctions may be very important to some groups, but others may not understand the distinctions being drawn. The distinction of immigration cohort might not mean much to a non-Cuban, but has great meaning to Cuban people, i.e. situating them in context with Cuban history (Nagel 1994). Similarly, to an Irish person, being called 'British' has enormous social meaning due to the historical suppression of Irish culture and denial of difference. However, to a non-Irish person, the history might not be known, so it might make no sense to them to view white Irish as any different from white British. This interaction at the level of country, with the weight of history, can be seen as the macro level of ethnic identity (Appadurai 1996).

In summary, these three theoretical perspectives all show that other people must agree with the way we portray our self in order for it to be considered 'real'. If only half of this partnership is present (i.e. if only I believe it, but nobody else does) then it does not have social reality. Furthermore, I have to re-present my self every time I interact with a new person. Each time, that person must be convinced by my presentation of 'white Irish' and 'ethnic minority'. If they do not, then my self is not real to them. Because I am not visibly different, I must work harder to present myself as different to the majority population. However, I am not always successful.

Whiteness and white Irish

I argue that the experience of white Irish identity *in England*, its former colonial power, is distinct from being white Irish in any other country in the world. In the US literature, whiteness is about the white 'race'. Different white groups are not perceived as different races from each other, but they may belong to different ethnic (i.e. national and/or cultural) groups. The racial aspect of whiteness is emphasised in contrast to blackness, as well as the cultural distinctiveness of different white groups, e.g. Irish Americans (Frankenberg 1997, 1993). Such emphasis highlights the assumption that whiteness is the norm to which everything else is compared, implying that other races are deviant (Quraishi and Philburn 2015). The structural isomorphism argument, that nation states and cultures are similar at the global level, may partly explain why whiteness is seen as a singular experience (Meyer et al. 1997).

The whiteness literature typically focuses on whiteness being synonymous with the historical colonial powers of Western Europe; the beneficiaries of the system of slavery and racial dominance (Frankenberg 1997). Within this perspective, the position of the white Irish is discrepant. Although Ireland is the westernmost country in Europe, it did not have the West's historical power. Ireland was colonised by England, thus a majority white country was colonised by another. The position of Irish Americans is therefore different from the position of the Irish in England. At the macro level, the interactions between a British and an Irish person are informed by the power relation between former coloniser and colonised. Britain can be perceived as the former colonial power that had the

ability to eradicate the cultural distinctiveness of Irish Catholics, enacted through Penal Laws (McGrath 1996). The efforts of the Gaelic Revival in the nineteenth century were an attempt to reverse the perceived Anglicisation of Irish culture, though increased interest in Irish music, language, and sport (McMahon 2008). Appadurai (1996) argues that smaller countries fear becoming assimilated into the cultures of larger countries, e.g. Sri Lanka fearing becoming 'Indianised'. Ireland is in a similar position with both geographical proximity and colonial history leading to a fear of becoming Anglicised.

There is a long tradition of British denial that the white Irish are a different ethnic or racial group from the white British (Walter 2001). Irish actors are wrongly assumed to be British (HeyUGuys 2011; TaffyCrones 2016), while there are debates about whether authors born in Ireland under British rule should be referred to as British or Irish (Clout 2007; Holland 2003). This denial replaced the nineteenth century portrayals by British media of the Irish as subhuman, racially inferior, often depicted with simian features (Curtis Jr. 1971). Walter (2001) argues that the shift was due to the polarisation of black/white identities following immigration from New Commonwealth countries after World War II, with the effect of making whiteness a homogenous concept. Another effect is the ability to deny that anti-Irish discrimination is inherently racist (Hickman and Walter 1995).

Recognition of white Irish in official statistics

One of the most powerful limits to ethnic self-identification is the way official statistics categorise ethnic groups. Censuses reify and legitimise ethnic group labels; thus Self 3 is confirmed or denied at the macro level. An ethnic group question was introduced for the first time in Britain in the 1991 Census (Bulmer 1996), but there was no specific category recognising Irishness. Two categories focused on skin colour: white and black. Additionally, people who selected black could choose from three sub-categories of Caribbean, African, or other. Some categories were solely national in nature: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese. Finally, there was an 'any other ethnic group' category. Thus, the white Irish were hidden, and officially categorised as the same ethnic group as the white British.

There are differences of opinion about whether the white Irish are a minority group in Britain (Howard 2006; Ryan 2007). In order to emphasise the diversity of the minority ethnic groups in Britain the Fourth National Survey of ethnic minorities (FNS) stated that the only thing ethnic minorities in Britain shared was a history of British colonial rule (Modood et al. 1997). By this they meant people who came from the New Commonwealth countries such as the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean. However, the Republic of Ireland was until 1922 also under British rule. Nevertheless the white Irish were not considered ethnic minorities in the FNS. Contained within the broad white group of the 1991 Census are minorities who are rendered invisible by this label (Chance 1996), and yet may experience discrimination similar to the visible minority ethnic groups (Aspinall 1998). In particular, a distinction was recommended between the white Irish and white British groups (Aspinall 2000). This was to acknowledge the poorer health of the Irish group, which has been shown to persist into the second generation (Harding and Balarajan 1996); an indicator of disadvantage that is usually associated with the experience of minority ethnic groups (Modood et al. 1997).

An official ethnic minority group can claim rights, and demand that services recognise its specific needs (Nagel 1994). In 1984 a report called for the recognition of the Irish in Britain as an ethnic minority group (Greater London Council 1984), acknowledging the discrimination experienced by this group. In 1997 the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) recommended including an Irish category in official forms, and categorised the Irish as an ethnic minority group (Commission for Racial Equality 1997). The CRE undertook a survey to examine whether Irish people in Britain

experienced discrimination (Hickman and Walter 1995). The news of the survey was met with incredulity by the media, especially tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, which devoted a whole page to Irish jokes, thus ironically proving the need for the survey in the first place. Irish people in 1990s Britain experienced hostile behaviour in the form of graffiti, verbal abuse, physical attacks, vandalism, and excrement through letterboxes (Hickman and Walter 1995). This can be contrasted with how Frankenberg (1993) portrays the subordination of the Irish as something from the distant past for Irish Americans.

The 2001 Census of England and Wales did include a white Irish category (Bosveld, Connolly, and Rendall 2006). The white group was subdivided into the two largest groups (white British, white Irish) and a third group (any other white background). Second, several categories for mixed heritage were included (e.g. mixed white and black Caribbean). Third, the categories for black and Asian groups now included a British aspect (e.g. Asian or Asian British-Indian). It should be noted that an Irish-born person who was not white did not have a category; around 5 per cent of the Irish population do not identify as white (Central Statistics Office 2012).

And yet, unlike the identification as Irish-Americans after several generations, white Irish ethnic identity is not automatically passed down after migration to Britain. There is a phenomenon of 'ethnic group switching' in the second generation (Lievesley 2010). That is, white Irish mothers were found to assign white British ethnicity to their children who had been born in Britain. Hickman (2011) reports that over 90 per cent of second-generation Irish selected an option other than white Irish in the 2001 Census of England and Wales, and some participants spoke of their claims of Irishness being rejected by the Irish-born.

This can be contrasted with the situation of British Asian second-generation children. The term 'British Asian' means this group can continue to identify themselves as different from the majority population of Britain. However, this reveals that 'ethnicity' in the Census is really about skin colour and country of birth, and less to do with cultural affiliation. If all white immigrant parents and children followed the same pattern, all white minorities would become classed as white British within a single generation, but this option is not open to visible minorities. The distinctiveness of Irishness is lost if it is assumed to derive only from country of birth, whereas definitions of ethnicity that include culture, religion, and language would suggest differently. If second-generation children of Indian parents are British Asians, we could argue that second-generation children of Irish parents should be termed 'British Irish' (or 'Irish-British' as suggested by Howard (2006) and Hickman (2011)). However, many Irish people raised with the historical fear of Anglicisation would balk at being called 'British'. For the second-generation white Irish, it is the very fact of their whiteness that allows their Irishness to be forgotten. If white Irish people were not white, their Irishness would not be 'erased' by the second generation. This is the effect of the ethnic identifiers in the Census of England & Wales, along with the tacit collusion of society, and forms another component in my argument that white Irishness is fragile.

It is important to acknowledge the issue of white privilege, and the special privilege of the white Irish in Britain. Whiteness means we don't face discrimination because of skin colour, and we can choose to either hide or flaunt our ethnic identity if it is advantageous to do so. Irish citizens have rights to reside, vote, and work in Britain without visas. However, the implications of 'Brexit' on this are yet to be seen. A further advantage is speaking English as a first language, thus avoiding the language barriers experienced by some migrant groups.

Migration cohort

The experience I draw on in this paper is as a first-generation migrant to Britain arriving in the 1990s. My cohort had certain privileges that previous Irish migrant cohorts did not have, e.g. the Race Relations Acts meant discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or nationality was illegal. The Irish

who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s were not so fortunate, when signs were posted in lodging houses saying ‘no blacks, no dogs, no Irish’ (O’Dowd 2013), although disputes over the veracity of these signs may be another symptom of the denial of Irishness as a distinct ethnic group (Murray 2015). The Irish who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s faced suspicion due to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles were drawing to a close when I migrated, meaning that public fears about my ethnicity and terrorism were waning, but Irish jokes were still common and seen as unproblematic in British society. More recent migration cohorts will be even less associated with terrorism.

Having discussed the historical background to white Irish as an ethnic group in England, I now turn to my performance of the self. I build on Walter’s (2001) thesis that white Irish women in Britain are invisible, by showing how white Irish identity in Britain is vulnerable to erosion by the reactions of others, and therefore is a fragile identity.

‘Doing’ white Irish

Goffman argues that we use certain features of appearance and behaviour to perform the self we wish to put forward. I have pale white skin with freckles, brown hair, and blue eyes. I was born in the Republic of Ireland and lived there until I was 18, then Wales and then England. My father and mother are Irish Catholic and English Protestant respectively. I identify as white Irish, like my father, even though my mother is white British. I have a soft Irish accent; having an English mother meant my accent was always a hybrid of Irish and English sounds. My (married) surname is English, but my maiden name signalled my Irishness. However, having a difficult-to-pronounce Irish name in England is not without problems (Ryan 2007).

Other markers of Irishness are idiosyncratic sentence construction and colloquialisms, e.g. “amn’t” and “usen’t” (Kallen 2013). Because my accent is soft, these markers are more likely to signal my Irishness. Interestingly, Walter (2001) argues that such idiosyncrasies of language have been used to support stereotypes of the Irish as intellectually inferior.

In his symbolic ethnicity theory, Gans (1979) describes white Americans lazily appropriating selected cultural symbols to signal membership of an ethnic group, but not investing in any time-consuming endeavours. This contrasts with my experiences. Growing up in the 1970s and 80s in rural Ireland, I was exposed to the discourse that it was our collective duty to ensure that Irishness does not disappear in the face of the perceived threat of Anglicisation. Supporting this fear, I have been told, repeatedly, during my time in Britain that the Irish are culturally identical to the British. On a macro level this manifests as a denial of the cultural distinctiveness of the Irish, and a confirmation of structural isomorphism (Meyer et al. 1997). This is further substantiated by the history of having white Irish recognised in the Census. The discourse argued that we all represented Irishness, both as individuals and as part of a group, and that it was incumbent on us to keep that group identity alive. Therefore, I argue that my ‘performance’ of Irishness is not symbolic ethnicity, but rather an effort to perpetuate the distinctiveness of an ethnic group.

It is simple for people in England, observing my whiteness, to assume that I am white British. It is up to my performance (my personal front and dramatic realisations) to challenge their assumptions. I used to believe that my performance (through my accent) was sufficient to do so. When confronted with the evidence of my research encounters, it is clear that it is not sufficient in all cases.

The research encounter

The data in this paper come from my experiences conducting interviews, so it is worth considering the research encounter as a specific setting. The knowledge produced from an interview is constructed through the interaction of the people present (Flick 2009). The characteristics and behaviours of those people shape the data that result. Matching the ethnicity of the participant

with the researcher is often expected to generate increased trust (Papadopoulos and Lees 2002). However, Gunaratnam (2003) argues that this expectation is written from the perspective where white researchers expect that black participants will withhold their 'true' opinions. Gunaratnam goes on to question why it is not also assumed that white participants would withhold truth from black researchers. Pointing out this double standard reveals the whiteness norm underlying the ethnic matching argument.

Researchers use their ethnic identity strategically in research encounters. Zubair, a first-generation Pakistani Muslim, describes using clothing with an intention to fit the expectations of different types of Pakistani participants in the UK, e.g. wearing a scarf around her neck rather than covering her head with participants who expected her to be modern, and wearing a headscarf when recruiting participants at mosques (Zubair, Martin, and Victor 2012). Here, Zubair uses clothing as part of her performance of an 'appropriate' Pakistani Muslim in the UK, and varies her personal front with each audience so that her performance is acceptable. She signals through her dress that she is 'like them', and thus indicates that their views revealed in the interview will meet an appreciative audience in her. Bhopal, a British Indian woman, (Bhopal 2010) discusses research encounters with Asian women, and how they assumed she would understand their views about certain topics (e.g. arranged marriages). In contrast, Edwards, a white British woman, (Edwards 1990) discusses the usefulness of interviewing across ethnic difference. She interviewed black women, where the difference between them made that difference an acceptable topic to discuss.

Methodology

In this paper I use extracts from my interviews and fieldnotes from two research projects. The first project was my PhD fieldwork conducted between 2008-9, where I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with older people from five different ethnic groups (the 'PhD project'). The aim of the interviews was to examine justifications for caregiving across ethnic groups (Willis 2012), to compare with quantitative secondary analysis on ethnicity and caregiving behaviour (Willis, Price, and Glaser 2013). I received ethical approval from the University.

The second project was fieldwork conducted between 2012-13, for research on ethnicity and satisfaction with social care services (the 'social care project'). The participants were service users, informal carers, and social care practitioners. The aim of the interviews was to understand reasons for satisfaction with social care, and to examine how ethnicity, language, religion, and culture might have a bearing (Willis et al. 2015). Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Care Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

At the micro level I consider ethnicity in individual interviews, including examples of match and mis-match. At the meso level I interacted with research settings representing the interests of ethnic organisations. The macro level refers to how I represent Irishness in England.

Micro level

Ethnic matching (and sometimes mis-matching) helps with recruitment and rapport, and aids implicit understanding. By contrast, ethnic mis-matching raises the issue of difference, and allows me to hide in plain sight.

My Irishness meant I had a shared topic of conversation with Irish participants, which made people well disposed towards participating. During the interviews, there was sometimes an expectation of shared understanding due to our ethnicity; one participant used the Irish language

without offering a translation. In another interview, our shared experience through migration enabled me to understand what went unsaid behind some statements.

I mean people criticise the NHS [national health service] and all this kind of thing but as far as I'm concerned I think they're God's gift to people.

(Interview extract with white Irish participant, PhD project, 2008)

Having experienced the same transition from a means tested health system (Ireland) into a free at the point of use health service (Britain), I understood his depth of feeling. A British researcher may not have fully understood the sentiment.

Sometimes participants used me to reaffirm their own ethnic identity. In the social care project, one of my participants viewed my online profile before our arranged interview, and immediately engaged with my Irishness when we met. As a second-generation Irish person (who identified as white British) she saw my ethnicity as a bond with me. This is a case of a not-quite ethnic match that resulted in an opportunity for rapport.

We arranged to meet at a shopping centre. I had sent her a link to my profile so she would be able to recognise me. She said that she had read up on me, and was interested that I was Irish. Her Mum is Irish. She said my accent was very strong! She was amazed when I told her that some people don't notice my accent at all.

(Fieldnotes after interview with white British practitioner, social care project, 2012)

On another occasion when interviewing a second-generation Irish woman, I affirmed her identity by being able to spell her surname without prompting. She had the surname of a famous person in Irish history, so our shared knowledge represented more than just knowing how to spell. It was a tacit acknowledgement of our shared upbringing and terms of reference, which were different from those of the country we currently dwelt in.

In the next example, the participant, an Irish woman who migrated to Britain in the 1960s, uses my identity to help her interpret her own experience. She discussed how the Irish are perceived in Britain, and I asked her if she thought the perception was true. She then asked me for my perspective as a fellow Irish woman in Britain, recognising my different cohort.

Interviewer: Do you think the Irish are like that?

Participant: Well, some are I should think, I think so. I don't know dear, I don't know...Do you think yourself, maybe you're not here long enough to regard other peoples' opinion of the Irish?

(Interview extract with white Irish participant, PhD project, 2008)

In interviews with people from different backgrounds to mine, sometimes participants made extra efforts to ensure I understood. I was unsure whether they assumed I was British or Irish, and it is likely they were responding to my whiteness. Here, a Mauritian participant explains something to me as an outsider.

Well, I don't know if you know Mauritius but we've got a cultural...we've got different, we've got Indian, we've got Chinese, we've got different nations, you know, in our place.

(Interview extract with Mauritian participant, PhD project, 2009)

It was only during my PhD research that I became aware that my Irishness was not obvious to every person I spoke to. I realised that I was not always perceived as being an insider or outsider where I expected I would be. Here, I got to the end of an interview with a white Irish man without him realising I was also Irish-born.

At the end of the interview he asked me if I had any Irish links. I said I was from Meath. He wanted to know if I was born in England. He said he could detect something in my accent. I know it's not really strong, but he could hear it. I didn't introduce myself as Irish to him. I wonder if that had any effect on what he wanted to tell me.

(Fieldnotes after interview with white Irish participant, PhD project, 2008)

My accent is obvious enough to some people that they remark on it, but it is not obvious to others. In the next extract I describe finishing a data collection visit at a day centre.

I came back out after the interview and packed up my stuff. I spoke to a few of the ladies and they chatted away to me for a while. One of the ladies asked if I was Irish and I said yes, and told her where from. Then we spoke about accents for a bit, and she told me never to lose my accent.

(Fieldnotes after recruitment visit to day centre, PhD project, 2008)

In interviews with white British people, I expected to be viewed as an outsider because I was not British. However, some of the content of the interviews made me wonder whether the participants assumed I was actually British.

I felt a bit reluctant to identify myself as Irish because she had said some quite right wing things (like 'taking our jobs', that sort of thing) and I thought she might not give her accurate opinion of Irish people, or immigrants in general, if I identified myself as one. This is the first time that I haven't wanted to identify myself as Irish.

(Fieldnotes after interview with white British participant, PhD project, 2009)

She turned to her partner for answers some of the time, and asked him to choose her marital status and ethnicity from the flash cards because she didn't have the right glasses. He actually said some very shocking things about white British as 'superior' and 'purer'. Again, I resolved not to say anything about my being Irish, because I felt threatened by his attitude.

(Fieldnotes after interview with white British participant and her partner, PhD project, 2009)

In these two cases I was hiding in plain sight, because my white skin and soft accent acted as camouflage. It is possible that they knew I was Irish, but didn't associate me with immigrants because I was white like them. Alternatively, it is possible they believed I was white British and expected me to share their views.

Meso level

Part of my interview recruitment strategy involved visiting culturally specific recruitment sites. These were 'ethnic organisations' (McGhee Hassrick 2012) that provided social care facilities for people from specific backgrounds. At the Irish recruitment site I explicitly used my credentials as an Irish person to gain access. I had an initial meeting with the manager, who enquired about my birthplace and how long I had lived in England. At one point the manager introduced me to a service user who came from the same county as me, and then I felt I was expected to perform 'county identity' (as opposed to Irish identity), by reminiscing about villages we both knew in Meath.

At the Asian recruitment site I was a definite outsider. I not only looked different, but I also could not speak the common language. My research experience there was much more formalised, because a staff member assisted me with recruitment and occasional translation during the interviews. The issue of my Irishness was never raised in these interview encounters. I think I was positioned very much as a white Westerner in this setting.

When I asked her about her ethnic group she said Punjabi. When I asked her what being Punjabi meant to her, to get an elaboration of ethnic identity, I think she interpreted

that as 'what does that mean?' from an ignorant Westerner. She told me it meant that she was a Sikh.

(Fieldnotes after interview with Asian participant, PhD project, 2009)

Macro level

I was either recognised as white Irish or assumed to be white British in the interviews, which stems from the history of the two countries. In my more recent research project on ethnicity and social care I was alert for participants' views of me, due to my PhD experiences. I realised that some white British participants were using the word "we" to describe white British people and values. That made me question whether they were including me within "we", so I directly questioned a participant. As expected, this participant did assume I was white British. She was quite embarrassed to have been wrong, and also to have been questioned on it. I noticed that the rapport we had developed during the interview was suddenly damaged by my revelation of new information at the end.

In parts of the interview she was explaining her lack of understanding of Muslim culture by using phrases such as 'we don't know' and 'we aren't familiar'. I got a very strong sense that she was including me in that white British 'we' group. After the interview I asked what ethnic group she thought I belonged to and (she looked very uncomfortable) she said 'I assumed white British'. I said I was Irish she said she could hear I had an accent but she would not have thought it was Irish. I think she found this embarrassing, so I will have to find a better way of asking.

(Fieldnotes after interview with white British practitioner, social care project, 2012)

Similarly, one South Asian participant appeared to include me in his discussion of British culture. He explained that "you do bingo" as a way of contrasting the activities that white British older people like to do from the activities that older Asians like to do (prayer meetings and functions, he said). I decided not to correct him, because I didn't want to risk disrupting the rapport.

In another example, a white British participant began making a generalization about Irish people only to stop himself - perhaps because of a non-verbal cue from me.

Participant: We watched a film last night called *24 Hours in A&E* [accident & emergency], I don't know whether you've watched it. It was an old chap, he was from the Gold Coast, he was an architect, he'd been over here for years. He'd recently become widowed, so he was in grief and he was in stress and he could hardly breathe and this A&E consultant, he was an Irishman so he, I think Irish people have got more insight in the mental health, emotional thing (laughs); you're not Irish are you?

Interviewer: I am.

Participant: Oh right (laughs) sorry about that!

(Interview extract with white British service user, social care project, 2013)

This may appear to be quite a positive stereotype of the Irish as being caring, but could also be seen as a negative stereotype of the Irish as fey or feminised, a strategy that has been used historically to remove power from feared groups (Walter 2001; Appadurai 1996).

As a result of this evidence that I was not always performing 'Irish' successfully, I began to stake my claim more overtly. When interviewing a white participant from Russia, I told him how I identified with his experiences of being unfamiliar with English slang. This was an attempt to build rapport through common ground between us. He then directly challenged my assertion that white Irish was 'different'.

Interviewer: I mean I'm not from this country myself.

Participant: Really, where are you from?

Interviewer: I'm from Ireland.

Participant: Are you? Well, it's nearby (laughs). You guys [Irish and English] have pretty similar culture anyway.

Interviewer: Nah, some bits are different.

(Interview extract with white Russian practitioner, social care project, 2013)

This white Russian participant rejected that white Irish is different from white British. In his view, he is more different from the white British people than I am, because of geographical and cultural distance. This is a challenge at the macro level, rejecting my assertion that the Irish are a distinct group from the British. This is a direct threat to the obligation that Irish people perpetuate Irish cultural distinctiveness. I have experienced similar denials to my claim that the Irish are different from the British over many years living in England, as have other Irish people (Walter 2001).

Drawing together these experiences has made me question how Irish I am. If my performance of white Irish is not authentic enough for other people to recognise, then am I justified in claiming this identity? If white people who are more 'other' than me think that I am not 'different' enough, am I allowed to claim minority ethnic status? If I can hide in plain sight when it suits me (when I am uncomfortable), how can I say that I truly have an experience of being an ethnic minority?

Discussion

I have discussed how ethnic identity must not only be performed, but also accepted by others. Evidence from my research shows how my ethnic identity performance has been welcomed, not recognised, and refuted. My reflexive work has made me question the extent to which I am 'really' Irish. If ethnic identity is an interactional process requiring two people to be in agreement, then clearly I do not always successfully meet the criteria required to be white Irish. Sometimes I do meet the criteria, and this is evidenced by affirmation from people, usually involving positive comments about my accent or interested inquiries about my birthplace. Other times I attempt to claim my difference, only to be rebuffed. This provides further evidence that ethnic identity development is not only derived from a person's internal perception (Phinney 1989), but is also shaped by the extent to which it is accepted and understood by others (Nagel 1994). My sense of ethnic identity is fragile because it is dependent on other people's views of me. Future research could explore the effect of such challenges on ethnic identity status among larger samples.

My Selves 1 and 2 (how I view myself) are intact, but my Self 3 is dependent on other people's decision to validate it (Sabat 2002). Further complicating matters is the historical British refusal to see the Irish as different (Walter 2001). When people do co-operate with my Self 3, e.g. when participants actually ask me where I come from, that gives me permission to establish my identity. However, that question can be interpreted quite negatively if it is deliberately intended to point out the assumed difference of an individual.

As one of my fieldnote extracts indicates, an Irish accent can be perceived as advantageous. Not all accents are considered positively, and some people have a strong reaction to certain accents. In a study of customer services, one participant described her positive reaction to the Irish accent of a staff member, where "she had a lilting Irish accent and it immediately made me like her" (Rao Hill and Tombs 2011, 657). In contrast, during the Troubles, Hickman and Walker (1995) described an Irish woman in England who tried to hide her accent because of fear of reprisals after recent IRA bombings. Accent is the most externally identifiable marker of white Irishness in England, and these studies show how the social construction of accent changes over time. As someone who does not fit the strong-accented Irish stereotype, my identity as white Irish can potentially be deconstructed at every interaction.

The denial of an Irish person's cultural distinctiveness from British people was overt in some instances (the Russian participant), and assumed in others. This can be interpreted as a threat at the macro level to the cultural distinctiveness of the Irish in the face of Anglicisation (Appadurai 1996). The threat is compounded by the apparent difficulty of the Irish ethnic category being transmitted down the generations after migration. What it is to be Irish is lost because primacy in ethnic labelling is given to skin colour and nationality, but not the other aspects of ethnicity. This illustrates the particularly precarious nature of white Irish identity in England.

My own experience 'hiding in plain sight' aptly demonstrates the way I can switch from being an outsider (minority) to an apparent insider (majority); an experience not open to visible minorities. I avoided turning anti-immigrant sentiment on myself by not declaring my immigrant status. Other Irish women conceal their Irishness due to hostile reactions to terrorism (Ryan 2007). The women in Ryan's study were able to hide in plain sight by omitting external signs of Irishness (such as not wearing shamrock on St Patrick's Day). This can be contrasted with Frankenberg's (1993) discussion of Irish American women enjoying parts of symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979) because negative perceptions of Irishness are in the far past for them.

This article has a sample size of one, and is therefore not generalisable. However, the multiple examples from two research projects of how my ethnicity is understood and engaged with by a variety of participants lend weight to my arguments. Furthermore, the article joins a rich body of literature on methodological reflection (Shinozaki 2012), and contributes to both the methodological understanding of research on ethnicity, and the theoretical understanding of ethnic identity and whiteness.

Where does this leave the construction of white Irish as a minority ethnic group? I have shown how the white Irish label struggles to persist into the second generation of migration, and that the Irish part of the identity can be lost if people are not born on the island. Ethnic categories from the Census only allow visible minorities to carry aspects of their ethnicity through from the first to subsequent generations. The 'white' aspect of white Irish carries on, but the 'Irish' is lost in 'British', and therefore becomes seen as 'the same'. The question of whiteness and minority status is also raised here. Perhaps our understanding of white ethnic group categories should be widened to more than simply country of birth, but encompass country of ancestors. And perhaps, those of us who are Irish-born should recognise that our descendants do not need to be born on the island of Ireland in order to share our ethnicity. Thus, the multi-dimensional nature of ethnicity will be upheld.

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