Community, Difference and Identity: the Case of the Irish in Sheffield

Presented to the CRONEM Conference: Diasporas, Migration and Identities: Crossing Boundaries, New Directions
11-12 June 2009, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

Word count: 1, 916

by

Rionach Casey and John Flint

Correspondence to *first named* author at:
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research
Sheffield Hallam University
Unit 10, Science Park
City Campus, Howard Street
SHEFFIELD, S1 1WB
Tel: +44 0114 225 2987
Fax: +44 0114 225 2197
Community, difference and identity: the case of the Irish in Sheffield

R. Casey and J. Flint

Abstract
There is a growing body of work in racial and ethnic studies on the processes of ethnic identity construction and the impacts this has on the experiences of minority ethnic groups. This article seeks to build on this work by identifying processes of ethnic community formation. Based upon twenty-five interviews with Irish people in Sheffield, the article aims to advance three key arguments. Firstly, that although the Irish population is characterised by diversity among and between members a commonality of feeling based on a shared cultural heritage constitutes an enduring source of identity. Secondly, that there is a particular spatial element to community interaction which is not based upon residential proximity. Thirdly, that the accommodation of difference is a key strategy for community making among a diversifying first and second generation and forms the basis for collective demands.

Key words: community, culture, diversity, ethnicity, identity, Irish

Contextualising the Analysis
Sheffield has a relatively small Irish population. The 2001 Census indicates that 3,337 individuals identified themselves as 'White Irish', which amounts to 0.7 per cent of the population of Sheffield. As well as being a comparatively small population the Irish in Sheffield are dispersed and living in 29 wards across the city. This spatial dispersal and lack of residential concentration, combined with the present lack of an Irish centre, and/or a focal point for Irish cultural and social activities in Sheffield, provides a particular context for the construction, performance and interaction of Irish cultural identity and community in the city.
Methodology
The research findings are taken from a study of the Irish population in Sheffield, conducted over an eight month period in 2007 and 2008. The paper is based on data from 25 in-depth interviews conducted with Irish people living in different parts of the city.

The Findings

Community, commonality and difference
The Irish population in Sheffield is made up of a spectrum of people from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The heterogeneity of the Irish diaspora is reflected in the plurality of ways they experience life in the city, construct their ‘Irishness’ and identify with their cultural heritage and collective identity.

Much of the literature on community affiliation and individuals’ embodiment of cultural practices is based upon a habitus that is constructed and reinforced through daily social interaction, residential proximity and the sharing of similar spaces within the city (Bourdieu, 1984; Charleswoth, 2000; Wacquant, 2008). An area or areas of a city synonymous with an ethnic group provides a visible manifestation of ethnicity through buildings, services and facilities and is often important to individuals from that ethnic group, regardless of whether they reside in these areas (Phillips, 2006). However, the lack of an ‘Irish’ neighbourhood and the limited advertising of Irish events beyond an informal network of churches, pubs and word of mouth result in a lack of Irish visibility in Sheffield.

Several younger respondents did not seek out an Irish centre, and equally, it had not occurred to them to do so, suggesting that unlike the situation for previous generations, an Irish community was not automatically sought after, or thought of as a resource for meeting unfulfilled needs. In some cases, there was also deliberate avoidance of Irish gatherings which sprang from a dis-identification with any imagined undifferentiated ‘Irishness’:
‘I didn’t mind the old Irish crowd in bars either, I would go and have a drink with them and have a laugh but I didn’t like the kind of pressure of ‘young Irishness’. It was like a club really, the “when Ireland left Ireland club”.

(Male, early 20s)

‘I had brief contact with an Irish community organisation and to be told constantly that the model was a sort of deficit one, which was about oppression, and that if I didn’t feel that I was being discriminated against on the grounds of my nationality I was in denial about my heritage’ (Female, mid-40’s).

Being Irish was however an important source of self-identity across the generations and age spectrum. When asked to articulate what being Irish meant to them participants pointed to: values relating to religion and faith; a connection with and loyalty to birthplace, a love of Irish culture, music and dance; and perceived collective characteristics such as being articulate, well-read and having the capacity to enjoy life.

**Community making without a ‘home’**

In the absence of daily interaction, spatial proximity or a focal point to host social events individuals adapted by actively constructing a ‘community’ based on sporadic and informal social interaction and cultural practices. There was a seeking out of Irish places and spaces by some respondents across the age spectrum. Individuals adopted different strategies in order to meet other Irish people and take part in Irish social gatherings. One elderly volunteer helped to run a Luncheon Club for a dwindling number of Irish elders despite a shortage of funding and his own advancing years.

Younger Irish people were also actively striving to keep Irish music, dance and sport alive in the city, and to broaden its appeal, despite an absence of formal support. For example, a young, second generation Irish student, spent much of his spare time organising the Gaelic Athletic Club (GAC) in one of the universities. A second generation Irish dancing teacher in her mid-thirties was adapting Irish dancing to a more contemporary (non-Irish) setting, including appealing to a non-Irish audience.

The Catholic Church and Catholic social networks performed the function of an Irish community ‘by proxy’ for older Irish respondents. Attendance at mass was important to
elderly people who viewed it as their one opportunity for social interaction with other Irish people. Chatting on the steps of one local church after mass was viewed as an Irish ‘thing to do’ because it was both reminiscent of the social practice in Ireland and was a site where individuals would be guaranteed to meet other Irish people.

The lack of an Irish community centre could well have signalled the demise of Irish gatherings. Participants held classes in their own homes which were sustained over a long period of time despite, or indeed because of, the lack of any resources from outwith the community. Another strategy was to ‘colonise’ non-Irish spaces for social gatherings, such as working men’s clubs.

What also emerges from participants’ reflections is that Irish ethnicity, as well as being a cultural inheritance, can also be constituted as a ‘conscious choice’.

While the diversity of the population calls into question over-simplified views of an active and cohesive Irish community this should not be read as an undermining of the significance of community for the individual. On the contrary, there was a shared commonality of feeling and perceived social practices that appeared to transcend socio-economic, age and generational differences.

It was important not only to claim an Irish identity, but also to publicly ‘perform it’ with other Irish people of all ages and backgrounds. Irish music, dance and sport were perceived as an important part of the cultural heritage that marked Irish people out as distinct and unique and which was to be celebrated. Importantly, these markers of Irish identity (for e.g. knowledge of Irish songs) did not rely upon daily interactions to be maintained. Rather they were a latent form of belonging which could be enacted in specific and sporadic social settings.

A commonality of feeling was evident, based on cultural and social practices, as well as shared sentiments of home and belonging, and was perceived to be broad enough to encompass difference. Rather than problematising the notion of difference, it was regarded by many as an asset, for pragmatic as well as social reasons.
Community and the re-assertion of Irish identity
That the Irish community was experiencing rapid change from within, in the context of an increasingly diversified multi-cultural Sheffield, which required new forms of collective engagement, was a central theme in individuals’ discourses regarding the community and its future. This was substantiated in individuals’ reflections on the form that any future Irish community centre should take. The traditional Irish centre was considered to be both outdated and undesirable by some participants. It also reflected in part a conscious move away from ‘ghettoised collective formations of ‘Irishness’ (Gray, 2004, p.107).

Interviewees suggested that an opening out of Irish culture to a wider audience was another way to sustain and foster interest in Irish cultural activities. This contention was bolstered by evidence that Irish culture, in particular Irish dancing and music, had the potential to have a broad appeal beyond the Irish community.

Other new and flexible approaches to ethnic solidarity which went beyond the ‘bricks and mortar’ of physical space were also evident. Many respondents articulated the feasibility of maintaining a connection to the Irish community through a loose network of publicised events and web-based communication. Hence, there was a move away from an attempt to simply re-create the ‘Irish Centre’ approach to social interactions towards a mobile city-wide use of a variety of venues.

Conclusions

• Community making is not confined to ethnic specific ‘construction sites’, and in the absence of a focal point will be carried out in both the public and private spheres.

• In the absence of daily spatial proximity, participants adapted to actively constructing a community based on sporadic and informal social interaction and cultural practices.
Community conscious individuals are adopting new goals in response to the shifting demographic profile of post-1970’s immigrants and second generation Irish in Sheffield, whose trajectories are too diverse to fit traditional models of community engagement.
References


