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An exploration of how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the construction of a Nationalist identity in Northern Ireland



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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my late grandparents Christopher and Kathleen Jameson and Patrick and Nora Clarke. Thank you for the role you played in my parents' lives which in turn led to the role you played in my life.

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Abstract

This research was carried to explore how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. Using a mixed methods approach of semi structured interviews and participant observation, the findings of both of the research methods were analysed in conjunction with the literature review.

The evidence that emerged showed that support for the Republic of Ireland soccer team by nationalists in Northern Ireland allows them to express their nationalist identity by rejecting Northern Ireland as a state. By supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team they are able to create an imagined 32 county Irish nation which is defined in terms of people rather than territory. The Northern Ireland soccer team has been 'claimed' symbolically by loyalists in Northern Ireland. This fact coupled with the shared sense of community felt with supporters of the Republic of Ireland soccer team are explanatory factors for the choice of supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team as a method of expressing a nationalist identity. The perception of a united Ireland, the feeling of acceptance and being part of a community is how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the creation of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland.

Chapter One

Introduction

This research will explore the relationship between supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team and the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. The research will be limited to members of a Republic of Ireland supporters club in Belfast who were born in and are currently living in Northern Ireland.

From the outset it is important to define the two most prominent ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. In conducting this piece of research one ethnic group being considered is the predominantly Catholic nationalist group and the other ethnic group being considered is the predominantly Protestant loyalist group. Soccer is a sport enjoyed by both ethnic groups in Northern Ireland.

To conduct this sociological research an overall qualitative approach was adopted. Within this qualitative approach method triangulation was adopted. The first method of data collection used was semi-structured group interviews. The participants for the semi structured interviews were of various ages and were all members of a Republic of Ireland supporters club in Belfast. The second method of data collection used by this research project was participant observation which was carried out throughout the interview process while present in the supporters club in Belfast and throughout several follow up meetings with members of the same supporters club in Dublin. Method triangulation was selected to improve the accuracy of the data selected.

This research project sought to explore the relationship between the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland and supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team. It did this through gaining an understanding of various theories of nationalism that have been put forward by academics. The two theories of nationalism most relevant to the Northern Irish situation are statism and political mythologism. Statism refers to the idea that nationalism is linked to the idea of the state and the boundaries created by the existence of the state (Cronin, 1999:26). Political mythology refers to an image of a nation that may or may not exist. This imagined nation creates a shared sense of community and values amongst the people within the nation (Cronin, 1999:26). These theories are discussed in further detail in later chapters of this research project.

Another theory examined in the literature review is the concept of socialisation which is closely linked to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. This refers to how certain socialising forces such as religion, schools and housing teach members of a society to learn and live in accordance to the norms, values and beliefs of that society (McDonald, 2009:12). Bourdieu's theory of habitus discusses how these shared values, shared norms and shared beliefs are significant in creating a collective identity (Maton, 2008). These two theories will be considered together in the case of a Northern Irish nationalist identity.

Aims

The aim of this research project is to give a sociological understanding of the relationship between supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team and the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. It is intended that this research project will add to the significant body of research and literature in existence with respect to identity theory in a Northern Irish context. There has been a significant amount of research carried out in relation to how sport

interacts with identity creation in Northern Ireland. However in much of this research Gaelic games are often considered to be the key nationalist sports in Northern Ireland in terms of identity creation. In addition none of the existing research has been focused on the views and behaviours of members of a Republic of Ireland supporter's club in Northern Ireland. It is therefore hoped that this research will go some way towards filling this gap.

Objectives

The specific objectives that have been set for this research are:

- To explore whether the process of supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland.
- To explore whether the use of symbols such as flags and songs within soccer contribute to the creation of a nationalist identity?
- To explore whether there is a sense of isolation/inclusion from either the Northern Ireland or Republic of Ireland soccer teams that drives the creation of a nationalist identity?

Rationale

The rationale for embarking on this piece of research stems from my passion and support for the Republic of Ireland soccer team. A number of years ago I lived abroad for some months. During this time my Irish identity became extremely important to me and I embraced a number of sporting arenas to express my Irish identity away from home. I played Gaelic games during this time but what resonated with me more was my involvement with a soccer team based in Auckland, New Zealand. Most of the members of this team were born in New Zealand but many of them had an Irish connection through a parent or grandparent.

What struck me most about these people with Irish roots was their insistence that they were Irish first and New Zealand second. This got me thinking about what it means to be Irish. What is it that drives an Irish identity? There must be more to it than simply being born in a country given the example of the Auckland soccer team.

I decided to dedicate this research project to understanding the link between sport and the creation of a nationalist identity. Specifically it is intended that this research project will afford a sociological understanding of the relationship between supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team and the creation of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland.

Layout of Following Chapters

Chapter two presents a review of the literature available in relation to the chosen research topic. The chapter concludes by highlighting a number of significant points emerging from the literature. Chapter three discusses how this research project was conducted. This chapter discusses the approach taken and methods of data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes by discussing ethical considerations relevant to this research project. Chapter four presents a discussion of the findings from the data analysis phase of this research project. The findings are discussed within the context of the literature reviewed in chapter two. Finally, chapter five offers some concluding points and recommendations to this research project.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

An enormous amount of academic literature has been published on the topic of how sport contributes to the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. This piece of research will focus how the process of supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to a Northern Irish nationalist identity.

As outlined in the introduction to this research project, there are two predominant ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. In conducting this piece of research one ethnic group being considered is the predominantly Catholic nationalist group (hereinafter referred to as nationalists) and the other ethnic group being considered is the predominantly Protestant loyalist group (hereinafter referred to as loyalists).

Soccer is a sport enjoyed by both ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. Given this shared passion it is possible to consider that soccer would be a venue for bringing people together. However as the literature will highlight, soccer in fact provides a platform for conflict (Fulton, 2005; McGee and Bairner, 2010; Cronin, 2000). Gaelic games have long been considered a key nationalist sport in Northern Ireland and play a key role in constructing a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland (Fulton, 2005:142).

It is equally as important to acknowledge that soccer also plays a crucial role in constructing a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. It does seem ironic that soccer plays a part in creating a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland given the sport's historical ties to Britain. However it is argued that by supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team, nationalists are

presented with an opportunity to reject ties to Britain (Hassan, 2005:131; Hassan, 2002:66). The reasons for wanting to reject these ties and construct a nationalist identity are discussed in more detail below.

In order to understand how the divisive nature of soccer in Northern Ireland contributes to the construction of a nationalist identity it is useful to appreciate the source of this division. This division arose at the time of Partition in Ireland. Following Partition, two governing bodies for soccer emerged on the island of Ireland. One of these was the Irish Football Association (IFA) with its headquarters in Belfast. The IFA originally governed soccer in the 32 counties pre-Partition. The other body was the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). These two bodies could not agree on where one governing body, covering the 32 counties would be governed from. From this disagreement rose the creation of the six county team in Northern Ireland and the 26 county team represented by the Republic of Ireland soccer team (Moore, 2015:140).

Theories of Nationalism

Four theories of Nationalism have been put forward by academics. It is useful to consider how this applies to the Northern Irish situation. These theories of Nationalism are primordialism, modernism, statism and political mythologism (Cronin, 1999:26). The two theories most relevant to the Northern Irish situation are statism and political mythologism.

Statism refers to the idea that nationalism is linked to the idea of the state and the boundaries created by the existence of the state (Cronin, 1999:26). The creation of the Republic of Ireland soccer team represents a statist view. The FAI built the team around the idea of a 26 county Ireland (Cronin, 1999:124). Despite the fact that the creation of the team represents a

statist view of identity, the fact that many nationalists support and follow the Republic of Ireland soccer team highlights that the nature of the nationalist identity can best be described by political mythology.

Political mythology refers to an image of a nation that may or may not exist. This imagined nation creates a shared sense of community and values amongst the people within the nation (Cronin, 1999:26). This idea has been further explored and the argument has been made that by supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team nationalists can transcend and symbolically deconstruct the border (Fulton, 2005:141). Hassan also discusses the idea that by supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team nationalists are able to create an imagined 32 county Ireland represented by the Republic of Ireland soccer team (2002:69). The Irish nation is redefined in terms of people rather than territory (Fulton, 2005:153). By supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team the statist view of identity is diluted (Hassan, McCullough and Moreland, 2009:745).

An imagined 32 county Irish nation was also created by the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in Belfast in 1998. The GFA allows all citizens to choose their own citizenship. The GFA recognises “the birth right of all people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose” (Annex A, Belfast Agreement). This recognition led to soccer players who were born in Northern Ireland to be eligible to play for the Republic of Ireland soccer team. This allows for the deconstruction of the border and encourages the idea of a team that represents all 32 counties on the island of Ireland (McGee and Bairner, 2010:438).

A player from Northern Ireland playing for the Republic of Ireland soccer team is very powerful symbolically. These players sing Amhrán na bhFiann (the Republic of Ireland National Anthem) before matches and represent the flag of the Republic of Ireland (McGee and Bairner, 2010:439). For these reasons a nationalist identity is possible in the minds of Northern supporters (Hassan, McCullough and Moreland, 2009:744).

Socialising forces

It is important to understand that a nationalist identity is not just about a united Ireland, it is also about local issues such as equality, justice and the need to recognise a sense of community amongst nationalists (Hassan, 2002: 67). Although the theories of nationalism provide some insight into why supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team adds to the construction of a nationalist identity, these theories on their own are restrictive. It is also necessary to consider why nationalists and loyalists in Northern Ireland cannot come together to support the same team, a team that represents them all.

In order to understand this, the concept of socialisation is relevant. Socialisation refers to the way in which we learn to live in accordance with the expectations of the society we are a part of (McDonald, 2009:12). Socialisation occurs through contact with people. Schools, religion and the workplace are socialising forces in society (McDonald, 2009:13). Lack of common socialisation experiences (e.g. segregation in housing and schools) creates confusion and unease. In the case of nationalists this has been said to create a feeling of marginalisation (McGee and Bairner, 2010:453). Communication and contact between the two ethnic groups is not readily available and the opportunities to create a single shared culture are limited (Murray, 1995:228).

The concept of socialisation is also closely linked to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The concept of habitus refers to how shared values, shared norms and shared beliefs are significant in creating a collective identity (Maton, 2008). Consider these ideas together. In order to create a collective identity you must have shared values, beliefs and norms. In order to have these shared values, beliefs and norms you must have common socialising forces. In Northern Ireland this is not the case between the ethnic groups. As shown by McGee and Bairner (2010) and Maton (2008), in the absence of these factors, a common identity is difficult to form. A common cultural language is crucial in creating a collective identity (Jenkins, 1997). The concept of socialisation is also relevant in understanding why players born in Northern Ireland choose to play for the Republic of Ireland team. They choose to play with the Republic of Ireland team because of the communities they live in and family ties (Hassan, McCullough and Moreland, 2009:741).

Rejection of Northern Ireland by nationalists

The theories of nationalism discussed above provide an explanation for how supporting the Republic of Ireland team creates a nationalist identity in terms of a desire for a united Ireland. The concepts of socialisation and habitus provide an explanation for why nationalist and loyalist identities cannot easily combine into a single identity. These concepts outline how identity construction is dependent in some way on the lived experience of people and the society in which they live. However it is also necessary to consider why nationalists choose to construct their identity around the Republic of Ireland soccer team as opposed to the Northern Ireland soccer team.

A lot of nationalists supported the Northern Ireland soccer team in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's (Fulton, 2005: 144; Hassan, 2002:72). In understanding why some nationalists

switched allegiances to the Republic of Ireland it is important to consider the division and conflict that existed in Northern Ireland in this period (Fulton 2005: 144). This division led to the creation of different socialisation experiences for each ethnic group as discussed above. Ironically, the GFA, which sought to reduce conflict in fact created additional division and segregation in terms of soccer in Northern Ireland. The decision by the GFA to allow people choose their citizenship has resulted in increased tension between the governing soccer bodies, the IFA and the FAI and between supporters of both teams.

The division, conflict and tension in Northern Ireland has resulted in many nationalist soccer fans feeling alienated and rejected from the Northern Ireland soccer team and its administration. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is a view among loyalists that over the years there have been large concessions made to nationalists in Northern Ireland (Fulton, 2005:147). This perception caused many loyalists to cling to organisations such as the Northern Ireland soccer team which became a symbol of loyalist identity during the 1980's. This is evident by the flags flown and the anti-Catholic chants that are sung at Northern Ireland matches (Fulton, 2005:147). Supporting the Northern Ireland soccer team became a way in which loyalists could express their identity and loyalty to Northern Ireland as part of Britain (Bairner, 1997).

Given the argument that both ethnic groups cannot have the same identity due to different socialisation forces and different habitus, the fact that supporting the Northern Ireland team is considered a symbol of loyalist identity meant that nationalists could not support the team and create a nationalist identity. Nationalists feel alienated from the Northern Ireland team due to the sectarian atmosphere experienced at Windsor Park, the home ground of the Northern Ireland soccer team.

Catholic players on the team often suffer sectarian abuse (Fulton, 2005:149) and are often considered to be 'the enemy within' (Sugden and Bairner, 1995). Examples of this are former players Anton Rogan and Neil Lennon. The latter, Neil Lennon was forced to pull out of a Northern Ireland soccer game in 2002 as a result of death threats which he received (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011). In more recent times, current nationalist player, Niall McGinn was sent bullets in the post in 2011 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011).

Hassan also highlights how these factors have led to the alienation of nationalists from the Northern Ireland team (2002:72). Windsor Park is an important place whereby loyalists can construct their identity (Fulton, 2005:151). The significance of sports stadia in constructing identities should not be undermined (Bairner and Shirlow, 1998:164). The role that Windsor Park plays in constructing both loyalist and nationalist identities furthers this argument.

Windsor Park is also the home ground of club soccer team Linfield. Linfield are considered the most successful team in Northern Ireland in terms of Championship titles (Magee, 2005:179). The club has gathered a large loyalist support base and is often regarded as a 'Protestant symbol' (Sugden and Bairner, 1994:131). Historically the club has had a strong relationship with Ulster unionist politics and governments (Magee, 2005:180). Linfield historically adopted a policy of not signing Catholic players (Bairner and Walker, 2001:83). Anti-Catholic songs are often sung at their matches at Windsor Park, one notable game being the 2002 Irish Cup Final between Linfield and Portadown, two predominantly Protestant teams. Anti-Catholic song 'The Billy Boys' was sang after every Linfield goal (Magee, 2005:182). This was despite the fact that the opposing team was not even considered to be a Catholic team.

As previously mentioned the creation of a nationalist identity is focused on equality and justice. Historically, nationalist involvement in Northern Ireland soccer has been met with discrimination and injustice (Hassan, 2005:131). The IFA has shown limited commitment to creating a 'shared future' in football (McGee and Bairner, 2010:445). They have failed to replace the national anthem (God Save the Queen) with something more inclusive for nationalists (McGee and Bairner, 2010:447). The IFA have also done very little to deal with sectarianism in Windsor Park (Hassan, 2002:72).

Rejection and alienation by the Northern Ireland team is an important part of constructing a nationalist identity through supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team. Identification with the Republic of Ireland soccer team is created due to the lived experiences of fans (Fulton, 2005:152).

Embracing the Republic of Ireland team

In addition to considering the alienation and rejection felt by nationalists it is also important to consider whether nationalists experience acceptance by the Republic of Ireland team. In order to create a national identity it is important that a shared sense of meaning is created between groups through social interaction across boundaries (Jenkins, 1997). By supporting the Republic of Ireland team, nationalists can construct a shared nationalist identity with supporters born in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. It allows nationalists to be Irish within the boundary of Northern Ireland (Fulton, 2005:153).

Supporting the Republic of Ireland team also provides nationalists with a platform to demonstrate their desire for Irish unity (Fulton, 2005:154). Nationalists are free to celebrate

their identity in an atmosphere that is not polluted with political grievances and sectarian abuse (Hassan, 2002:74). The songs sung at matches, the flags flown and the colours worn by the team create a sense of belonging rather than alienation.

Conclusion

This literature review has established that supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team does contribute to the creation and expression of identity for nationalists in Northern Ireland. The idea of the Republic of Ireland soccer team puts forward an image of a 26 county nation and represents a statist view of nationalism. However by supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team nationalists are able to demonstrate a political mythological idea of Ireland. They can deconstruct the border and create an image of a united Ireland.

The lack of common socialisation experiences between nationalists and loyalists provides an explanation for why the two ethnic groups cannot create a common identity. The literature highlights how the Northern Ireland soccer team has been claimed by the loyalist community as a symbol of their identity. Because the two groups cannot create a common identity the nationalist group must cling to something else in order to create their identity. The Republic of Ireland soccer team becomes a symbol of their identity. By supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team nationalists can celebrate their identity freely and without fear of discrimination or sectarian abuse.

The perception of a united Ireland, the feeling of acceptance and being part of a community is how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the creation of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

Social research involves the collection of data about a particular area or topic in order to understand the social world and find an answer to a particular question (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013:2). Therefore it is crucial when beginning any research project to develop an appropriate research question which the research aims to answer. Following much consideration of the general topic under investigation, a central research question was formulated:

‘An exploration of how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the construction of a Nationalist identity’

This research question gives the research project focus, sets boundaries and provides direction. This research was conducted using an overall qualitative approach. In order to tackle the area of research effectively and extract meaningful findings, this research adopted method triangulation within the overall qualitative approach. As part of this research participant observation and group interviews with selected key informants were carried out.

This research project employed a concurrent approach and carried out participant observation throughout the interview process. Subsequent participant observation was undertaken in Belfast and Dublin on various dates after the interviews. As part of the research project, an analysis and review of existing literature in the area was carried out. The findings and observations from the review of the literature were used to create carefully worded questions for the group interviews.

Method triangulation was selected to improve the accuracy of data collected. The aim of the research was to produce as complete a picture as possible by combining information from multiple sources. Method triangulation reduces the existence of bias in research findings and also compensates for weaknesses arising from one research method (Grix, 2001).

Sampling Method

Recruitment of an appropriate population is crucial and many make the mistake of jumping straight from planning to interviewing without considering and detailing how the population was selected (Kristensen and Ravn, 2015:723). For example a leading textbook on using interviews as a research method identifies seven stages of qualitative interview investigations as being thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting (Kvale, 1996:81). One crucial flaw with this list is that it does not include recruiting; it jumps straight from planning to interviewing (Kristensen and Ravn, 2015:723).

With this oversight by many research projects in mind, this piece of research was conscious and sensitive to the importance of sample selection in order to obtain reliable and useful data. Given that a concurrent approach was adopted and participant observation was carried out at the same time as group interviews were carried out it is important that the sample selected was appropriate to both research methods.

It is more appropriate when carrying out qualitative research such as participant observation and group interviews to apply substantive criteria i.e. specific features of an individual are relevant when deciding whether or not to include that individual in the sample population (Flick, 2006). When carrying out qualitative research such as participant observation and interviewing, people within the sample should have the relevant knowledge and experience to

take part. A sample must be appropriate and adequate; even if that means that it is not representative of the research population (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013:188).

The first step in selecting a sample for research purposes is identifying the population of interest to the research project or research question at hand. This research project identified the population of interest as being people born in Northern Ireland who support the Republic of Ireland soccer team. Within this larger population this research project then narrowed the research population down to include members of a Republic of Ireland soccer supporters club in Belfast. The sampling methods that were adopted in order to carry out the interviews with the Belfast supporters club were purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Two sampling methods were selected to enhance the validity and reliability of the sample.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling occurs where individuals are selected for a purpose, generally due to their unique position (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013: 97). A member of a Republic of Ireland soccer supporters club in London whom I have close ties with was contacted. His assistance was requested when contacting an appropriate person in the Belfast branch of the Republic of Ireland soccer supporters club. Once introduced by our mutual contact, email correspondence was maintained with the chairman of the Belfast branch and it was requested that he take part in the interview.

The chairman was purposefully selected for the interview population due to his position as chairman. This member of the Belfast branch was selected as he was considered by this research project to be a key informant following discussions with the member of the London Republic of Ireland soccer supporters club.

Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling occurs where individuals are selected because they are identified by other interviewees (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013:99). In essence, snowball sampling involves building up the sample through a number of referrals from key informants (O'Leary, 2004:110). Once the member of the Belfast branch was approached and he agreed to be a member of the sample population, he was asked to identify and reach out to others who would be willing and able to take part in the research.

One of the drawbacks of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques is that there is no guarantee that the sample population will be representative of the research population as a whole (O'Leary, 2004:110). One of the risks of using a small sample size is that it will not be representative of the population as a whole and results will not be generalizable. It is important to note that it is not always appropriate to have a large sample size which is representative of the population as a whole when carrying out qualitative research. More reliable and accurate results may be obtained from a few key informants which will answer the research question more appropriately and reliably.

The sample population was small however it relates to the population as a whole i.e. a group of nationalists living in Northern Ireland who support the Republic of Ireland soccer team were interviewed. Although their opinions may not represent the opinions of the entire population of interest i.e. all supporters of the Republic of Ireland living in Northern Ireland, due to time constraints this was considered the most appropriate sample size to use. The decision to use two sampling methods was taken to mitigate this risk and increase the representativeness of the sample population.

Semi-Structured Group Interviews

In-depth interviewing is defined as “a method of data collection that involves researchers asking basically open-ended questions” (O’Leary, 2004:162). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, formal or informal, carried out in a one on one setting or in a group setting. The primary method of collecting data for this research was carried out through an informal, semi-structured interview in a group setting.

After the research was carried out it was considered whether in fact the research method that was undertaken was more akin to a focus group. A focus group involves unstructured group interviews where discussion on the topic of interest among participants is strongly encouraged by the focus group leader (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013:198). Focus groups are usually carried out among individuals who are unrelated to one another and do not know each other before the focus group begins (Ibid).

On reflection it was decided that the research method was more akin to semi-structured group interviews. This was because interview questions were drafted beforehand and although participants did discuss and elaborate on points in order to obtain unanticipated results, in my role as interviewer, an active part was played in ensuring certain topics were covered. Certain questions were directed at certain participants based on what they had answered for previous questions. In addition, the sample participants all knew each other before the interview. Given the nature of the population and the setting of the interview an informal group interview was determined to be the most appropriate type of interview to carry out.

As with all semi-structured interviews, this research started with some pre-established questions. However the style of the interview was conversational in order to allow for

questions to be asked and answered in a natural order that allows for additional questions to be included as the conversation progresses (O’Leary, 2004:164). The pre-established questions were reviewed by my thesis supervisor in order to ensure that they were appropriate and relevant to the research question at hand.

It is important to recognise that one of the biggest complexities of using interviewing as a fieldwork method is people. In order to carry out an interview you must engage with people which presents problems and complexities that must be considered in order to extract honest and reliable data from the interview. Interviewing as a data collection technique is a complex form of communication and it is necessary to be aware that misinterpretation can occur. The interviewee may misinterpret the questions being asked to them and the interviewer may misinterpret the answers given to them (O’Leary, 2004:162).

Interviewees must feel comfortable with the interviewer, i.e. it is crucial to establish and maintain a rapport with your interview population and in exchange you will receive honest and useful data (Fontana and Frey, 1994:367). An interview should become more like a “conversation with a purpose” (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013:196). In establishing a relationship of trust it is important not to lose your objectivity in carrying out research (Fontana and Frey, 1994:367).

In carrying out the group interviews, a rapport was built up with the initial member of the sample selected through email correspondence and telephone conversations in the lead up to the interview. It was important to be conscious that some members might be wary of the purpose of my research. Any questions they had were answered and consent forms were provided that outlined the research and set out contact details for further information if they

so wished. All this ensured that a degree of trust was built up with the sample population which enabled the interviewees to open up and speak honestly throughout the interview.

Although a level of miscommunication is a risk when carrying out interviews, the opposite is also true. By carrying out face to face interviews it is possible to minimise or even eliminate the level of misunderstanding as the interviewer is present to clarify questions and request clarity in relation to answers. It is however important to be aware that misunderstanding and miscommunication can occur in order to effectively minimise it. Throughout the interview any answers that were unclear were questioned further. Interviewees were asked to further elaborate on certain points in order to extract more meaningful data.

In order to ensure the quality, relevance and reliability of the research findings limited notes were taken throughout the interview by jotting down answers to the pre-drafted questions. However in order to observe (as participant observation was being undertaken at the same time) a Dictaphone was used to record the group interview. This enabled me to take in the surroundings and actively listen to the answers that the participants were giving. Following the interview it was transcribed in the following days in order to ensure that the data was accurately captured on paper in a timely manner.

Participant Observation

The secondary method of collecting data employed by this research project was participant observation. Participant observation involves observing and developing a relationship with people as they carry out their normal everyday activities (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013:184). Undertaking participant observation involves an attempt to 'live' the reality and experiences of the research sample population in order to extract meaningful data to understand the

research question (O'Leary, 2004:121). Participant observation has been described as "the systematic description of events, behaviours, and artefacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall and Rossman, 1989:79).

This research method enables a 'written photograph' to be created which describes the setting using all five senses (Kawulich, 2005). This 'written photograph' complements the other data gathered through interviews etc. and provides reliable and accurate data which accurately reflects the views of the sample population. Participant observation provides context for the data obtained during the group interview process (Ibid).

As stated above, participant observation was undertaken concurrently with the group interviews. Upon arrival at the Belfast Republic of Ireland soccer supporters club I was greeted by and introduced to members of the sample population. They proceeded to conduct a tour of the club pointing out the history associated with it and how it was founded. The pride in their voices was evident and it was clear that this club meant more to them than a venue to watch soccer matches. Throughout the interview members of the sample population referred to their backgrounds and family ties at relevant intervals. A picture was painted of the personal attributes that led to them supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team.

Participant observation was also undertaken throughout the Republic of Ireland soccer match which was watched with members of the supporters club after the group interview. Reactions and topics of conversations between club members were observed throughout the match. This, coupled with the data gathered from the interview questions provided invaluable data to attempt to answer the research question.

A short while after the initial meeting with the supporters club in Belfast another meeting with the sample population was arranged but this time at a Republic of Ireland pre-match event in Dublin. Their actions and behaviour before the match was observed and it was possible to take a mental note of the differences in actions and behaviour in Dublin compared to their actions and behaviour in Belfast. Following this meeting field notes were taken in order to ensure that every detail was captured accurately. It was not appropriate to do so at the meeting as it was a pre-match event in a Dublin hotel surrounded by supporters from other clubs,

Data Analysis

The collection of data is not much use unless it is analysed in an appropriate way so that it can be transformed into findings. The approach adopted to analyse the data collected from the interviews and participant observation was as follows:

1. Transcription (for interviews only)
2. Coding and identification
3. Theming

Following transcription of the interviews as discussed above, the next step in data analysis with respect to the interviews was to identify topics, issues, similarities and differences between the interview responses. Highlighters were used to colour code the data within the interview transcriptions and made notes in the margins. Following this topics were grouped together into themes in order to present the findings in a coherent and meaningful way.

The same approach was followed with respect to the participant observation. These themes were then critically analyzed in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter two. Finally all this information was summarised in a logical way in the findings and discussion chapters.

Ethical issues

There are many ethical issues to be considered when undertaking research of any kind. In particular when carrying out interviews and participant observation it is crucial to obtain informed consent and protect participant's right to privacy and confidentiality (Fontana and Frey, 1994:372). Informed consent involves ensuring that consent is voluntary, not coerced or induced, is obtained from a person competent to give consent and participants should be aware of their right to discontinue the research at any time (O'Leary, 2004:53). Participants must be aware of the use to which their answers will be put (O'Leary, 2004:53).

In order to obtain informed consent from the sample population each member of the sample population was presented with a consent form (attached in Appendix One). This consent form set out the purpose of the research and the uses to which the data would be put. This consent form set out that the participants had the right to refuse to answer any questions and had the right to discontinue the research at any time. The consent form set out that the participants had a right to access the research project and a copy of the interview tape would be made available to them if they wished to hear it.

In order to protect the participant's right to privacy and confidentiality the consent form set out that all tapes and transcriptions of the research would be stored securely. The identities of all participants have been kept confidential and the attached interview transcription contains pseudonyms for all participants.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

When the data gathered from the group interviews and participant observation was analysed a number of key themes emerged. These themes included theories of nationalism, socialisation, rejection of Northern Ireland soccer team and embracing the Republic of Ireland soccer team. The findings in this chapter will be analysed thematically using the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Theories of Nationalism

The two theories of nationalism that emerged during the literature review as most relevant to the Northern Ireland situation were statism and political mythology. The idea of statism was rejected by all of the interviewees. When asked why they supported the Republic of Ireland as opposed to the Northern Ireland soccer team, a typical response was:

“Well, to be honest, I don’t recognise this state [Northern Ireland], I come from Ireland! And personally speaking I think there should be only one team and our clubs view is we should have a 32 county team that represents the whole island” (Interviewee A2).

All of the interviewees rejected the border created at the time of partition of the state and in doing so highlighted their preference for a political mythology view of their nationalist identity. The interviewee’s responses referred to the idea of a 32 county nation which does not currently exist in the form of a state. By supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team they are creating a shared sense of community with people in the 26 counties in the Republic

of Ireland, which almost creates an imagined nation consisting of 32 counties. Supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team allows them to symbolically deconstruct the border (Fulton, 2005:141).

The political mythology view of identity was reiterated many times throughout the interview stage. When questioned whether changes to the national anthem sung by the Northern Ireland soccer team and flags flown at Northern Ireland matches would change their stance in relation to supporting the Northern Ireland soccer team one interviewee responded:

“People often say if the north dropped God Save the Queen and their flag and had a neutral anthem and a neutral flag would the likes of ourselves support Northern Ireland? Number one it’s never gonna happen! And number two, again, it would mean recognising the state, and we believe it should be a 32 county state.” (Interviewee A5).

With respect to partition, it became apparent throughout the interview that the existence of the border did not impact on a nationalist identity:

“Our country since partition, it was luck of the draw what county you were in when the partition came in. That left the State full of people who felt they were Irish and people who thought they were British, it has taken them 70/80 years to get to the stage now where..... you can be British here plus you can be Irish here. And that is a step forward, you’ve got your Irish passport. Apart from living in Britain you’re as Irish as somebody that lives in the 26 counties because you’ve got that right to say you’re an Irish citizen.” (Interviewee A1).

The participant observation also highlighted the interviewee's attitude towards the existence of the border and the Northern Ireland state. While watching the soccer match in the supporters club in Belfast, a thick fog came down on the pitch. This prompted the supporters in the club to break into a chorus of 'The Foggy Dew', a traditional Irish song that discusses the Easter Rising of 1916 and calls for all Irishmen to fight for the Irish rather than the British cause.

During the visit to the supporters club in Belfast, members of the supporters club conducted a tour of the clubhouse as part of the participant observation. Throughout this tour paintings and murals on the walls of the clubhouse were evident. Bobby Sands and other Republican Irish freedom fighters adorned the walls. Quotes from people who died in pursuit of Irish freedom were inscribed on these walls as well.

Following the group interview and initial participant observation in Belfast, several follow up meetings were conducted with members of the supporters club in Dublin. One such meeting took place during another Republic of Ireland soccer match in Dublin in March 2016. At this game the chairman of the club proudly displayed the supporters club's new flag which had an Easter lily on it. Irish republican party Sinn Féin describe the Easter lily as a symbol of peace and remembrance for those who died during the Easter Rising of 1916 while also conveying a republicanism that embraces Pádraig Pearse's sentiment that for as long as Ireland is 'unfree' there will always be unrest (Sinn Féin, 2008). As long as a 32 county nation does not exist in the form of a state there will always be this unrest in the form of a desire for a united Ireland. The chairman also proudly presented pictures from the Easter 1916 commemoration ceremonies that had just taken place in Belfast.

Over the various meetings with members of the Belfast Ireland supporters club several things became clear. The fact that people born from any of the 32 counties of the island are eligible to play for the Republic of Ireland represented a vision of a 32 county nation and team to nationalists living in Northern Ireland. This was particularly evident when watching an interview with James McClean following the match when Ireland qualified for the European Championships. James McClean, a nationalist soccer player born in Northern Ireland, draped in the tricolour flag of the Republic of Ireland, clenched the flag tight in his hands and said 'I love this country' (RTE, 2016).

One of the key points that emerged from the participant observation was the crest used by the Republic of Ireland soccer team. Members of the Belfast supporters club highlighted that the official crest of the FAI always uses the word 'Ireland' as opposed to 'Republic of Ireland'. This to them highlighted that the team represents the 32 counties of Ireland and not just the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. Similarly the official crest of the Belfast supporters club also uses the word 'Ireland' as opposed to 'Republic of Ireland'. This was a very clear indication that the members reject the existence of the border and do not acknowledge the existence of either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. To them it is one united Ireland.

In relation to theories of Nationalism the findings from both the interviews and participant observation showed that all the participants reject a statist view and do not consider themselves to be any less Irish than someone living in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. The existence of the border is irrelevant in terms of their identity and supporting the

Republic of Ireland soccer team allows them to reject the legitimacy of the Northern Irish state and embrace a 32 county imagined nation of Ireland.

Socialising forces

Another theme that emerged from the data was the influence of socialisation with respect to the decision to support the Republic of Ireland soccer team over the Northern Ireland soccer team. As discussed in the literature review chapter, socialisation occurs through contact with other people in schools, religion and the workplace and refers to the way people learn to live in accordance with the expectations of the society they live in (McDonald, 2009:12). As previously discussed this concept is closely linked to Bourdieu's idea of habitus which refers to how shared values, shared norms and shared beliefs are significant in creating a collective identity (Maton, 2008).

Historically the two ethnic groups in Northern Ireland had little contact with one another. They live in separate areas, they attend separate schools and follow different religious beliefs. Throughout the interview it became apparent that the lives of the two ethnic groups do intertwine and they do co-exist alongside each other in some ways, usually in the workplace. When asked whether any of the interviewees had personally experienced tension with the Northern Ireland fans, responses referred to the fact that some of the interviewees work with supporters of the Northern Ireland soccer team:

“I actually work with a couple of them.”

“You have to remember that we work with Northern Ireland fans as well, we all grew up working together during the Troubles. There was people getting blown up and murdered and you would go into work on a Monday morning and happen to sit with people with completely different views on both sides.

Depending who was shot that morning there was just things you didn't talk about. It's the same with the North and Ireland when you're talking about football, you chat and have a bit of banter but there's boundaries you don't cross." (Interviewee A4).

The experience of the interviewees highlighted that there are mixed environments in terms of nationalists and loyalists in Northern Ireland. These mixed environments were highlighted again when the interviewees discussed people born in the six counties who chose to play for the Republic of Ireland soccer team:

"I think you'll find that any of the players from the North who are playing for Ireland, a lot of people have a lot more respect for them, it is a hard thing to do, because you do have to go down the road of upsetting family and friends who are working in mixed environments." (Interviewee A2).

Despite the common socialising forces highlighted in the interviewee's references to mixed environments, the interview responses also highlighted that in many cases support for the Republic of Ireland did pass on from generation to generation through families:

"Obviously we've all sons, so as you can imagine our generation we've all grown up through the troubles supporting the Republic of Ireland. All our sons, on our bus, there's a lot of young people on it so they were all born in 1995 onwards so in a more peaceful state and they're all supporting the Republic of Ireland. So it seems as if the generations are coming through" (Interviewee A1).

Another story shared discussed the case of Niall McGinn, a nationalist who plays for the Northern Ireland soccer team. Niall McGinn owns a restaurant on the Falls Road, an almost exclusively nationalist area of Belfast. If you were to enter this restaurant you would find no evidence of Niall McGinn's sporting achievements with Northern Ireland. It was suggested that Niall McGinn may not take a lot of pride from playing for the Northern Ireland soccer team due to his nationalist background. In addition this memorabilia would be unlikely to be welcome on the Falls Road.

In contrast, Niall McGinn has named his restaurant in the Irish language by calling it Fáilte and displays his worn Glasgow Celtic football jersey on the walls of his restaurant (Ryan, 2012). The fact that he displays this club memorabilia, a club that has Irish and nationalist roots and to this day flies an Irish tricolour over its stadium, suggests that Niall McGinn takes more pride from his nationalist club association rather than his predominantly loyalist international association.

Following the review of the literature it emerged that socialisation within communities was a key reason why the two ethnic groups in Northern Ireland could not come together to support the same soccer team. Many of the interviewee's responses in this respect indicated that in fact there are common socialising forces such as the workplace. Despite the fact that supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team is often passed from generation to generation as a result of family influence, the power of socialising forces in Northern Ireland to explain the reason why the two ethnic groups could not come together to support the same soccer team was found lacking when the data gathered was analysed.

Rejection of Northern Ireland by Nationalists

This leads well into the third theme that emerged from the data which looks at why the Northern Ireland soccer team is rejected by nationalists. Literature in this area highlights that it is difficult for nationalists to identify with the Northern Ireland soccer team as unionist/loyalist groups have symbolically claimed Windsor Park, the home ground of the Northern Ireland soccer team (Hassan, 2002:72). The research findings support this argument as when interviewees were asked how they felt when they saw the Northern Ireland flag and heard the United Kingdom official anthem sang at Northern Ireland games typical responses included:

“I’ve no connection to that, absolutely no connection” (Interviewee A1).

“You would actually be wanting them to get beat, it’s anybody but the north... it’s the flags and the anthems and all that.... And it is sort of, it is a loyalist thing, they try get you to believe it’s not a loyalist thing. Now if you go to Windsor Park, you’ll see it...” (Interviewee A2).

“Turn the station over” (Interviewee A3).

When asked whether any of the interviewees would attend a Northern Ireland soccer game all respondents replied:

“No! No. I’ve no interest.” (All interviewees)

The reason for this disconnect with the Northern Ireland soccer team became apparent when one interviewee recounted a time in his youth when his father took him to a Northern Ireland soccer game:

“My da took me to a few Home internationals back in the day... and I have to say I remember it being very intimidating being in the stand and listening to ‘God Save The Queen’ and me da just saying when this song comes on just stand up.... I was paranoid, what happens if I don’t know the words, are people going to [stops]. I remember the steward saying take him into the stand...., he said don’t take him anywhere near the Kop ... The sectarian songs would have been flying off the terraces then.” (Interviewee A4).

Another interviewee described what it is like approaching Windsor Park, the home of the Northern Ireland soccer team:

“The main road into Windsor Park. On the same lamppost... There are UVF flags and Northern Ireland flags on the same lamppost. I often drive by that and any doubt that would ever be in my head I would just say just have a look at that lamppost. (Interviewee A5).

Before visiting the Belfast Ireland supporters club strict and specific instructions were provided as to how to get to the club. The chairman emphasised the importance of getting a specific taxi to the supporters club. An accent from the Republic of Ireland, particularly on a night when Northern Ireland were playing a match in Belfast, could have caused trouble if directions were sought from the ‘wrong’ person. The conflict between the sides was evident and this was a preview into the types of discrimination and unease felt by nationalists in Northern Ireland who support the Republic of Ireland.

It is clear from the data gathered that nationalists feel that they are met with discrimination and injustice at the home ground of the Northern Ireland team. This has resulted in it being impossible for them to construct their nationalist identity through supporting the Northern Ireland soccer team.

Embracing the Republic of Ireland team

As discussed above, it became clear throughout the data collection phase of this research project that nationalists in Northern Ireland cannot support the Northern Ireland soccer team as part of their nationalist identity. Similarly it has been discussed that by supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team, nationalists in Northern Ireland can deconstruct the border and construct a shared nationalist identity with supporters born in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland.

This research project sought to understand the relationship between supporters of the Republic of Ireland soccer team born and living in Northern Ireland and those living in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland.

When asked about how the supporters club came about and the history of the club, the interviewees were keen to stress the relationship that they have with the FAI:

“I have to say the relationship we have with the FAI is brilliant! Absolutely fantastic! Both with the ticket office and officials. On our 25th anniversary John Delaney [FAI chairman], Johnny Giles, Pat Duffy and Gerry Riordan from the FAI all came up. Last year, here, in the club, we held a charity event and we had Kevin Kilbane [ex Republic of Ireland soccer player] for that. It’s

that sort of contact we have with the FAI which is very good” (Interviewee A3)

This is in stark contrast to the interviewees comments in relation to the IFA. In response to a question about players born in Northern Ireland who choose to play for the Republic of Ireland, the interviewees highlighted that these players get a lot of abuse from the IFA.

When asked how they were treated by supporters of the Republic of Ireland soccer team in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland, the general consensus was that all they generally meet is friendly banter. When they attend a Republic of Ireland soccer game, home or away, their flag is one of the most photographed flags. When asked if anyone from the Republic makes them feel different when at a game, all interviewees emphatically replied no.

All respondents enthusiastically indicated their connection to the Republic of Ireland soccer team when they see the tricolour flag at matches and hear ‘Amhrán na bhFiann’ [national anthem of the Republic of Ireland] being sung.

At a follow up meeting with members of the Belfast supporters club in a Dublin hotel prior to a Republic of Ireland soccer match, the hotel where the meeting took place was adorned with flags of the four provinces of Ireland. This function room in the hotel was full of supporters clubs from all over Ireland, not just supporters clubs from Northern Ireland. Yet the crowd were singing a song about James McClean’s refusal to wear a poppy in remembrance of British soldiers who have died in battle.

Another flag in the room depicted Martin O’Neill (current manager of the Republic of Ireland soccer team and former player for Northern Ireland) alongside Roy Keane (current assistant

manager and former player for the Republic of Ireland soccer team) and a slogan which read 'North men, South men, Comrades All'. Martin O'Neill was born in Northern Ireland and comes from a nationalist background and Roy Keane was born in the Republic of Ireland. This flag represented a 32 county team.

The data collected strongly supports the literature in this area that nationalists in Northern Ireland have rejected the Northern Ireland soccer team and embraced the Republic of Ireland soccer team in the creation and expression of their nationalist identity. By supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team nationalists can celebrate their identity freely and without fear of discrimination or sectarian abuse. The findings here are in line with previous research in this area.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to give a sociological description of the relationship between supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team and the construction of a nationalist identity. This research project commenced with the aim of exploring the impact that supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team has on a group of supporters in Belfast. A number of wider themes emerged from the data collected. These themes in turn directed the findings section of the research. The discussions section now returns to the original perspectives of theories of nationalism, socialisation, rejection of Northern Ireland by nationalists and embracing the Republic of Ireland team to discuss the findings.

This research has discussed in previous chapters how a political mythology perspective of identity symbolically deconstructs the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Fulton, 2005:141). The process of supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team allows nationalists born in Northern Ireland to adopt an image of Ireland based on people wherever they are situated rather than the territory enclosed within the state borders.

The symbolic importance of people born in Northern Ireland playing for the Republic of Ireland is evident from the literature review, interview responses and participant observation. These players have the same accent as their supporters living in Northern Ireland and grew up in their communities. The image of these players draped in a Republic of Ireland flag and singing 'Amhrán na bhFiann' creates the possibility of an all-island team in the eyes of northern Irish nationalist supporters.

This imagined nation of shared values and community is compounded when the northern Irish nationalist community travel to Dublin for Republic of Ireland home matches or travel abroad for away matches. The camaraderie felt whilst singing Irish songs with people from the Republic of Ireland contributes to their sense of belonging to this imagined 32 county nation.

Although this political mythology view dilutes a statist view of nationalism this particular circumstance presents an interesting conflict in this respect. Nationalists born in and living in Northern Ireland reject the existence of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This is evident from the literature in this area and the data collected throughout this research. Numerous times interviewees stated that they do not recognise Northern Ireland as a state. Yet by supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team they are accepting a soccer team that represents a nation made up of 26 counties rather than 32 counties as they desire.

Although this may seem contradictory to an outside eye, this research argues that it is not. Nationalists in Northern Ireland support the Republic of Ireland soccer team, not because it represents the 26 counties of the Republic but because it represents them as part of a wider Irish nation. There is no 32 county team to support and this is the closest thing they can cling to in order to express their nationalist identity. The very fact that the Belfast supporters club omits the words 'Republic of' from their title signifies their belief that the Republic of Ireland team represents the 32 counties on the island. The FAI encourage this by omitting the words 'Republic of' from official Ireland merchandise. This allows nationalists in Northern Ireland to identify with the Republic of Ireland soccer team even more so.

It has also become clear throughout this research why nationalists in Northern Ireland have determined that supporting the Republic of Ireland represents their identity as opposed to supporting the Northern Ireland soccer team. Despite elements of socialisation in Northern Ireland over the years and the fact that both ethnic groups can co-exist largely in peace side by side, this has not changed the rejection and discrimination felt by nationalists with respect to the Northern Ireland soccer team.

It is evident from the interviewee's responses that Windsor Park, the home ground of the Northern Ireland soccer team remains a source of conflict, tension and intimidation for nationalists. The words "*any doubt that would ever be in my head, I would just say have a look at that lamppost*" with reference to the Ulster Volunteer Force (loyalist terrorist organisation) flags and Northern Ireland flags on the same lamppost leading to Windsor Park emphasise the disconnect nationalists have with the Northern Ireland soccer team.

Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland soccer teams qualified for the European Championships 2016 during the course of this research. Following qualification by both teams, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), a nationalist party in Northern Ireland, put forward a motion before Belfast City Council to honour both teams in a joint ceremony in the city (Breen, 2015). This motion was put forward as an attempt to encourage inclusiveness and reconciliation (ibid). However Ulster Unionist members of the City Council opposed the idea and questioned whether they should hold a ceremony honouring all the teams in the British Isles that qualified i.e. England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The City Council failed to recognise the thousands of people living within the borders of Northern Ireland who identify with the Republic of Ireland. Despite the fact that the Good Friday Agreement allows all citizens to choose to be Irish or British or both, the City Council determined that the Republic of Ireland and the people who support it, held as much importance as England or Wales. This creates even more of a disconnection with the state of Northern Ireland for many nationalists.

In contrast, the welcoming nature of the Republic of Ireland allows for nationalists to express their identity openly and without fear of discrimination or conflict. When they come to Dublin and hear the rest of the country singing Irish songs and songs about Irish freedom it gives them hope that the people of the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland have not forgotten about them and the desire for a united Ireland. They see supporters from the Republic of Ireland flying flags with slogans such as 'North Men, South Men, Comrades All'. For nationalists in Northern Ireland the fight for Irish freedom is not over. They took part in the commemorations of Easter 1916 just like the rest of the country however their fight is not over. They are still fighting for their identity. The state border might still exist but in their minds they have created and are part of a united Ireland, united by shared beliefs, values and community.

Conclusion

This research project has engaged a sociological exploration of how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the construction of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. The research was limited to members of a Republic of Ireland supporters club in Belfast who were born in and are currently living in Northern Ireland. This research aimed to add to the significant body of research and literature in existence with respect to identity

theory in a Northern Irish context. As highlighted at the outset, despite the large amounts of research carried out in relation to how sport interacts with identity creation in Northern Ireland, much of this research focuses on Gaelic games as the predominant and key nationalist sport in Northern Ireland from an identity perspective.

By focusing specifically on the views and behaviours of members of a Republic of Ireland supporters club in Belfast this research project explored the impact of the use of symbols such as flags and songs on the creation of a nationalist identity. This research also explored whether there is a sense of isolation/inclusion from the Northern Ireland or Republic of Ireland soccer teams and how this phenomenon drives the creation of a nationalist identity.

The literature review highlights that existing research in this area would indicate that supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team does contribute to the creation and expression of identity for nationalists in Northern Ireland. This support for the Republic of Ireland soccer team demonstrates a political mythological idea of Ireland. Nationalists in Northern Ireland can deconstruct the border and create an image of a united Ireland. The literature review also discusses the reasons behind the inability on the part of both ethnic groups to come together and support a single team. Due to the lack of socialising forces between both communities and the fact that the Northern Ireland soccer team has been 'claimed' through the use of flags and songs by the loyalist community makes it virtually impossible to imagine both communities supporting a single team at any time in the close future.

The findings section of this research emphasised the themes that emerged from the literature review. The sample population indicated their unwillingness to support the Northern Ireland soccer team as this would mean recognising Northern Ireland as a state. They highlighted the

discrimination, injustice and fear that they suffer at Windsor Park. They display their pride in supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team which was particularly evident when they took me on a tour of their clubhouse. The murals and paintings on the walls highlighted that the club was about more than supporting a soccer team. This was their nationalist identity and they are fiercely proud and protective of it.

Recommendations from this research project would be for more acceptance and inclusiveness on the part of all politicians and the respective football associations. The rejection of a joint ceremony to honour both teams for qualifying for the European Championships 2016 was a clear indication that the attitudes of many in Northern Ireland have not changed. In order for every aspect of the Good Friday Agreement to be effective, the right of all citizens to choose their citizenship must be accompanied with a right to express whatever identity is associated with that citizenship. It cannot be denied that enormous inroads have been made in terms of peace in Northern Ireland and all those involved in that process must be commended. It is also important to respect and acknowledge people's other rights.

This paper advocates for the right of all nationalists in Northern Ireland to be able to express their nationalist identity. After undertaking this research it is clear that one way that this can be done is through supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team. The perception of a united Ireland through the symbolic deconstruction of the border, the feeling of acceptance and being part of a shared all-island community is how supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team contributes to the creation of a nationalist identity in Northern Ireland.

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Appendices

Appendix One

Consent Form for Participants

13 November 2015

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project. I, Patrick Clarke, am undertaking a programme of research exploring the identities of people born in the six counties of Northern Ireland who support the Republic of Ireland soccer team.

I am conducting this research as part of my coursework for a third year Sociology course at Maynooth University (National University of Ireland Maynooth).

This interview may take up to one hour and with your permission I would like to tape record the conversation. A copy of the interview tape will be made available to you afterwards if you wish to hear it.

There are no risks involved in this research. The benefit to you is that you will have access to the research when it is finished and you may use it to understand how your experience compares with others or to the wider sociology literature.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the tapes and transcriptions of our conversation safely. Your identity will be kept confidential and I will use a pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions. You may also stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at patrick.clarke.2014@mumail.ie or my research supervisor Peter Murray at peter.murray@nuim.ie phone 017083594

“I have read the description above and consent to participate.”

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix Two

Interview questions for supporter club members

1. Can you give me a brief background on the Belfast Republic of Ireland supporters club? (Where, when, why?)
2. Why do you support the Republic of Ireland soccer team?
3. Does supporting the Republic of Ireland soccer team make you feel more Irish?
4. How does the Republic of Ireland flag and national anthem sung at matches make you feel?
5. How does the Northern Ireland flag and national anthem sung at matches make you feel?
6. Would you attend a Northern Ireland soccer game? Why? Why not?
7. Some quarters would argue that the Northern Ireland soccer team is becoming more inclusive (players and supporters coming from a mix of backgrounds). Do you believe this is true? Why? Why not?
8. If the Northern Ireland soccer team were to become more inclusive would you ever consider supporting them? This does not necessarily mean stopping supporting the Republic.
9. Would you be in favour of an all-island team similar to that in rugby? If yes, would you be willing to accept compromises in relation to flag and anthem (similar to rugby)?
10. What's your view on players that are born in the six counties and play for the Republic of Ireland soccer team?
11. What is your view on players from a Nationalist background born in the six counties that represent Northern Ireland?
12. What about players that have represented Northern Ireland under age and then change allegiance to play for the Republic of Ireland?
13. Do you accept why this would upset Northern Ireland supporters?
14. What's your opinion on Jack Grealish and his decision to represent England at senior level after representing the Republic of Ireland at underage level? Is this similar to the likes of Darron Gibson, James McClean etc?
15. Have you ever experienced tension with supporters of the Northern Ireland soccer team? If yes, please describe.

16. If yes, has this tension increased or decreased since the Good Friday Agreement?
17. What reception do you get from people in the South when you travel for matches?
18. Are you ever made feel different? Either in seriousness or in banter? If yes, how do you feel about this?
19. What is your view on James McClean's refusal to wear the poppy?
20. Do you know anybody from a loyalist background that supports the Republic of Ireland soccer team?
21. Do you know anybody from a Nationalist background that supports the Northern Ireland soccer team?
22. How would you describe the club football scene in Northern Ireland? Is there a lot of tension between clubs from a predominantly Nationalist background and those from a predominantly Loyalist background?