# Locating Belonging in 'Deeply Divided Societies': Exploring the Northern Irish Identity

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# Locating Belonging in 'Deeply Divided Societies': Exploring the Northern Irish Identity

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## Abstract

This study aims to correct the tendency for consociational and divided society literature to focus solely on institutionally accommodating ethnic division and overlook the agency of the individual. The Good Friday Agreement was intended to uphold and respect *two* separate, but equal Unionist and Nationalist "communities," deemed to have intrinsically "diverse identities and traditions" in Northern Ireland (The Agreement, 1998). Twenty-three years later, with the increasing popularity of a 'Northern Irish' identity, this study undertakes in-depth, interpretive interviews to discover why individuals identify as "Northern Irish," and how they understand their own belonging in relation to the formal identities recognised within the Good Friday Agreement. Ultimately it seeks to answer: How does the 'Northern Irish' identity challenge the boundaries within a deeply divided society? This is answered by utilising the theory of belonging to reveal the fluidity and complexity of self-identification in a post-conflict society. Contrary to divided societies' literature which is predicated on entrenched, polarised groups, the existence and increasing use of the Northern Irish identity shows the need for a non-combative and unique identifier. It reveals an inflexibility within the literature that results in an inability to recognise a post-conflict social need for change.

## Table of Contents

## Introduction

"Friends Across the Barricades" brings students from Protestant and Catholic schools together as part of a cross-community building programme. One activity asks the group to list the similarities and differences between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The students struggle to think of any similarities between themselves, despite an emotive speech by the moderating priest concluding with "just think about what's in here [motions to his heart]." After this speech, it cuts to a scene of the students filling out a "differences" blackboard as shown in figure 1, including statements like "Protestants hate ABBA," "distance between the eyes" and "British vs. Irish," before spanning to an empty similarities board.


*Figure 1*

This blackboard scene in the popular comedy *Derry Girls* has become a cultural reference point in Northern Ireland and is currently exhibited in the Ulster Museum titled "Don't believe the Stereotypes." Its power lies in how it explicitly humanises the institutional divisions between two communities and captures a unique way of life. *Derry Girls* centres on the lives of a group of teenagers as they navigate the issues of ethnic conflict and identity

during the Troubles. The popularity of the programme with a contemporary Northern Irish audience highlights how these issues continue to resonate today as it showcases many relatable personal experiences. Within the academic realm, divided society literature centres on institutionally accommodating social divisions that are thought to be enduring and deep. However, as I explore in this study, this view often conflicts with the lived reality of individual identity in a post-conflict society.

## Research Question

The narrative of division that engulfs Northern Ireland typically explains these "differences" as a product of deeply entrenched political, cultural, national, and religious divisions. This perception was polarised further following the Troubles and subsequently informed a peace process that worked to establish democratic institutions intended to uphold and respect *two* "separate but equal" societies. As a result, the Good Friday Agreement defined Northern Ireland on the basis of two "communities," Unionist and Nationalist, understood to have "diverse identities and traditions" (The Agreement, 1998). There is plenty of historical and sociological evidence to show that different traditions do exist in Northern Ireland, but is it accurate to represent all citizens as belonging to only these two discrete groups?

Research completed in 2019 showed "at least 4 out of every 10 people in Northern Ireland describe themselves as neither Unionist nor Nationalist" (Hayward and Manus, 2019, p.140).[1] In a society where nationalisms profoundly shape community belonging and have a long-running salience, there has been a growth in a new "Northern Irish" identity. It has become the preferred identity of approximately one quarter of residents, and crucially, adopted by equivalent proportions of Catholics and Protestants (ARK, 2015). This raises the question: What does it mean to be 'Northern Irish'? In a consociational society which privileges the adoption of identities recognised within the Good Friday Agreement, this study undertakes in-depth, interpretive interviews to discover why individuals identify as "Northern Irish," what this means to them and how they understand their own belonging in relation to the formal identities reified within the Good Friday Agreement. Ultimately it seeks to answer:

[1] This research centres on data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) conducted annually by Queens University Belfast. Respondents were asked "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Unionist, a Nationalist or neither?" and were provided with tick-box options to respond with "Unionist," "Nationalist," "Neither," "Other (write in)," or "Don't know."

How does the 'Northern Irish' identity challenge the boundaries within a deeply divided society?

This new identity lies outside of the Good Friday Agreement which recognised 'the birth right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as British or Irish, or both' (The Agreement, para 1). Therefore, this study found the 'Northern Irish' identity to hold the potential to be a site of inter- and intragroup negotiation, change, resistance and agency. This identity can be understood as: a hybrid identity occupying the 'both' category of the Agreement; a way to dissociate from the ethno-national divide; or indicative of a regional affiliation that speaks to 'home'. The overall fluidity and multiplicity the "Northern Irish" identity can carry for individuals within a consociational setting forces the literature to view identity not as a fixed entity but as an evolving process that is consciously navigated and reshaped in relation to lived experiences in a post-conflict society. This research reveals a range of individual 'sense-making' of one, ostensibly inclusive category, emphasising the individual agency that exists outside of the institutionalised ethno-national divide. Its complexity shows how the "orange vs green," two communities thesis embedded within Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions fails to legitimately recognise the positionality of a growing subset of individuals.

By exploring the Northern Irish identity, this study firstly seeks to rectify the tendency for divided society scholarship to overlook the personal dimension of the individual in favour of social categorisation and structures of power. To do so, the analytical benefits of the politics of belonging are used to explore the agency of individual boundary making, destabilising the institutionally recognised identities within divided societies. Secondly this study illustrates the benefit of extending the politics of belonging, which is primarily employed within migration studies, into the realm of divided society literature. This inverts the focus from mobile individuals moving across borders, to problematise exclusive and fixed ideas of identity in a rooted context following the reorganisation of a political space.

## Literature Review

To recognise the relational dynamic between the institutional and personal, this literature illustrates the need to connect belonging and wider identity theories to the vast consociational and divided societies' literature.

### *1. Deeply Divided Societies*

Boundary making and maintenance are deemed essential parts of life, as individuals order their social world by placing other people and groups into categories (Tajfel, 1974). The creation of group boundaries can divide society along multiple axes, many of which hold the potential to acquire a measure of political salience. However, there is a tendency in the literature to equate deeply divided societies solely with ethnic divisions due to their proclivity for violence. This can be partially attributed to the development of the deeply divided societies paradigm alongside emergent politics of identity and conflict typically deemed 'ethnic' or 'communal,' when political scientists were interested in the applicability of the Western/liberal type of democracy in post-World War II societies. Thus, "deeply divided" was birthed in an era predicated on the idealised, conceptual model of the culturally homogenous, sovereign nation-state. According to this model, the frontiers of the state as an existing territorial organisation should match the frontiers of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). Therefore, the 'deeply divided' framework was first used to describe post-war countries with salient, vertical cleavages that did not conform with this western model and were therefore deemed to gravely threaten the democratic stability of the archetypal nation-state. These cases were viewed as exceptional, necessitating a special type of arrangement, giving rise to wider discussions around consociational theory, power-sharing, and partition. While the initial research agenda examined different systems of governance, it quickly expanded to classify societies at large, stretching the theory and leading to the flawed assumption that political systems are necessarily a reflection of social divisions and compositions (see Lijphart, 1977). Thus, failing to consider the dynamic relationship between the two.

Deeply divided societies are understood as societies with potentially violent vertical cleavages often centred on identity and competing claims to territory, government, resources,

and superiority (Lustick, 1979, Nordlinger, 1972). Lustick determines a society 'deeply divided' "if ascriptive ties generate an antagonistic segmentation of society based on terminal identities with high political salience, sustained over a wide variety of issues" (Lustick 1979, p.325). The term ascriptive stresses a statism generally applied to unchanging identities acquired at birth. This view aligns to a primordial position that understands ethnicity to be an intrinsic, non-rational and fixed aspect of social life. However, many contemporary scholars now understand ethnic identity to be culturally and situationally defined, produced, and reproduced through social interactions, in a two-way dynamic process across a boundary constructing 'us' and 'them' (Jenkins 2008). Yet, MacGinty argues the framework makes no assumption regarding the essentialism of any group or the inevitability of division and instead acts as a descriptor to indicate exceptional cases where divisions threaten the existence of the state (2017, p.4). Nevertheless, the practical use of this descriptor for conceptual convenience in the literature often informs a narrative of naturalness of a given social boundary, thereby reducing any complexity by clearly discerning between the inside and the outside (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p.120). Therefore, the deeply divided societies' framework can be criticised for overemphasising unitary social categorisations through a reified understanding of group boundaries and subsequently requires updating in line with more recent scholarship on identity and the nation-state.

Significantly for this study, within the divided society framework, consociational literature is formulated in a top-down manner, implicitly assuming that post-conflict societies should be appraised primarily at an elite, institutional level. Within this sphere, a wealth of work exists on the advantages and disadvantages of consociational power-sharing, yet scholars remain divided. Those who support power-sharing, emphasise its ability to neutralise conflict and institute a liberal democracy by guaranteeing the inclusion of the minority and reduce the likelihood of conflict recurrence (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009). However, critics argue this comes at the long-term cost of embedding ethnic division and polarisation, preventing cross-cutting politics from emerging that could alleviate ethnic rivalries (Horowitz, 2002). An important aspect of this debate is the extent to which power-sharing systems privilege the groups central to the conflict and deemed most likely to destabilise the political environment, at the expense of less belligerent identities. Agarin argues that by institutionally embedding ethnic groups, consociational systems fundamentally undermine the representation and participation of 'Others', in a phenomenon he calls "exclusion amid inclusion" (Agarin et al, 2018). Within this he defines the 'Other' as "anyone who does not identify with the ethno-

divide" (Agarin, 2018, p.300). This research expands on this critique further by exploring the personal processes and navigation of institutional classifications by individuals who seemingly self-identify outside of the ethno-divide. Recognising human agency and the process of positionality and negotiation within consociational scholarship will provide a more nuanced perspective to challenge the normalised, binary divisions in divided societies.

## *2. Post-Conflict Groupness and Identity*

Standard accounts of divided societies consist of bipartite oppositional structures based on the premise that the ethnic divisions visible in entrenched conflicts are intractable and durable and therefore need to be accommodated across society (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, Guelke, 2012). The debate surrounding the character and persistence of ethnic groupness following conflict is central to contesting the 'grand narrative' that polarised ethnic groups are the bedrock of deeply divided societies. Many scholars of ethnic conflict argue that violence has the effect, intended by the elites, of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). McGarry and O'Leary argue that once mobilised, ethnic identities typically show a high degree of resistance against transformation, becoming "inflexible, resilient, crystallised, durable, and hard" (2009, p.17). Therefore, scholars argue that extreme violence serves to mobilise a heightened sense of ethnic belonging as the long-standing primary identity.

This outlook stands in opposition to the postmodern view of identity as a process that is malleable and multiple, shaped by experiences and institutions and the fact that situational cues can alter which facets of identity are made salient. Contrary to the presumed rigidity of post-conflict group identities, Horowitz argues, the salience of 'ethnic' attributes can alter as "a changing context can work for fission as easily for fusion" (1985, p.69). This results in "the plasticity of group identities," where the boundaries of belonging can evolve and develop in response to changing circumstances (Horowitz, 2002, p.25). Tilly's conclusion that boundaries become more salient under conditions of uncertainty, leads to the theoretical possibility that given an increase in stability in peacetimes, the salience of ethnic cleavages decline (2006, p.51). This viewpoint is currently overlooked within the presumed exceptionalism of the deep and enduring polarisation within the divided societies and consociational framework.

Jenkins views ethnicity as a means of cultural identification, which can be both collective and individual, externalised in social interaction and the categorisation of others, and internalised in personal self-identification (2008, p.16). However, the primary focus of divided societies' scholarship upon collective identification and social relations of contestation and empowerment privileges various forms of identity politics. This problematically subsumes the unique, personal attachments between an individual, their lived experiences, and their 'place' within external social categorisation (Antonsich, 2010). As such, by treating personal self-identification as analytically separate, valuable insights of contradicting intra-group dynamics, changing group boundaries or the everyday fluidity within and between 'divided groups' can be gained.

The conceptual convenience of a static collective identity benefits the state which acts as a strong 'identifier' with the means to impose social categories to do crucial "organisation work" across various social settings (Tilly, 1998). From this perspective, Brubaker and Cooper argue the designation of identity as a possessive condition rather than a continual process, renders it an unhelpful category of analysis, arguing it oversimplifies the nexus between the individual, social and political (2000, p.17). They view identity as a multidimensional entity, including identification, ascription, belonging and narration and therefore, grouping them together creates a "a blunt, flat, undifferentiated" tool lacking analytical clarity (*ibid,* p.2). Therefore, to overcome this ambiguity, this study focuses on 'belonging' to critically assess how individuals conduct or perceive their own self-identification in relation to social processes and attachments.

## 3. *The Politics of Belonging*

Belonging is often deemed a self-explanatory term that subdivides societies into nations, cultures, classes, ethnicities, religions, among other things. However, at the intersection of these social boundaries, simplistic notions of national and ethnic collectivities and their boundaries are deconstructed (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Intersectionality, founded within feminist literature, is powerfully utilised within the politics of belonging to emphasise multiplicity and positionality, providing the lens of analysis to recognise fluid and permeable boundaries (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p.122). If an individual's 'traditional' group identity weakens in salience, it follows that the primary influence over their belonging and self-perception can

originate from either a superordinate (civic) or subordinate (personal) identity. The challenge of creating a durable civic identity that successfully bridges societal divisions has been well documented, particularly in the case of Bosnia (McGarry and O'Leary 2006, Pickering, 2006). However, privileging the personal dimension of belonging brings an "autobiographical insideness" to the fore, revealing the nuances of an individual's positionality in relation to their political space (Antonsich, 2010, p.126). As a result, this context-sensitive approach can recognise the competing variables of belonging in a post-conflict society, revealing a dynamic process which can result in unstable and ambiguous social boundaries.

The politics of belonging is the "arena of contestation" for people and groups with similar senses of belonging to maintain and reproduce the boundaries of the community (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p.18). The literature often resorts to notions of belonging that are tied to territoriality, family and culture which are reinforced in both the context of migration and divided societies. While its primary use in migration studies focuses on questions of citizenship and transnationality, extending this approach to a rooted, conflicted multinational society provides a fresh understanding of how national belonging can assume different types and strengths of attachments within an individual. Northern Ireland's circumstances of contested legitimacy and meaning, alongside its recognition of dual-citizenship, creates a territory where national belonging takes on an inherently different meaning. Current literature on Northern Irish consociationalism, focuses on contested national identities as for many, Northern Ireland is the territory, but it is not their 'homeland' (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009). Moving beyond this to focus on place attachment within the concept of belonging, serves to highlight how a narration of place resonates with two different moments in an individual's life: social and personal (Antonsich, 2010). Personal place attachment is generally associated with feelings of 'being at home,' familiarity and belonging, whereas social place attachment is viewed in relation to the homeland or nation (Antonsich, 2010). While these two positions cannot be deemed mutually exclusive, separating them analytically and aligning them to personal belonging and divided society social categorisations respectively helps to explore the complex relationship between individual place attachments and national belonging.

Identity caters to dichotomous characterisations of the social while belonging rather highlights its situatedness and the multiplicity of boundaries creating commonality, mutuality, and attachments (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p.115). Focusing on the concept of belonging aims to avoid the trap of earlier studies that conceive of the 'social' or 'cultural' as

something existing on itself, beyond the lives of individuals. A persistent theme in constructivist writing is that social identities are produced and reproduced though the everyday actions of ordinary people as "interpersonal transactions" are "the basic stuff of social processes…compound into identities, which create and transform social boundaries" (Tilly, 2006, p.6). However, these "interpersonal transactions" may lead to feelings of attachment or commonness that do not resolve into the group boundaries formally embedded within a power-sharing agreement. Therefore, the growth of individuals identifying as "Northern Irish" or "neither" Unionist nor Nationalist could illustrate either an active or passive challenge to the formal boundaries of the "two communities" thesis. This adheres to Butler's argument that once the boundaries of specific identities have been constructed there is always something left outside (1993). Employing an intersectional approach highlights the dynamic process of construction and negotiation of self along multiple axes; thus, providing the ability to explore individual disidentification, misrecognition and unbelonging within a society predicated on two separate and deeply constructed groups.

Understanding the ongoing process of navigating multiple forms of belonging against each other, uncovers how boundaries in everyday experiences are created, transcended or blurred. Coakley views the "Northern Irish" identity as an emerging middle ground, due to long-term trends of deconfessionalisation at the level of religion, disaffiliation at the level of national identity, and dealignment at the level of communal identification (2021). However, rather than assuming this reflects an interdependent pattern for a neutral 'middle ground', it also needs to be considered that the design of the binary itself could be producing ambiguity. The decision to pick an ostensible "middle identity" could be used to convey: a dissociation from the divide; a degree of uncertainty and internal dilemma; or it could mark a decisive rejection of the assumption behind the question that there is a binary divide (Baka et al. 2012). Therefore, the "Northern Irish" identity may create the space to redefine permissible social boundaries along a continuum, shaped by the interplay of new and old attachments in the context of peace times. This dynamic is evident in Piacentini's argument that dissociation and disdain for ethnopolitics is fuelling a more interest oriented and ethnically blind identity of "Bosnian Herzegovinians" (2020, p.2). Thus, the adoption of a "Northern Irish" identity may illustrate the desire to opt out of political and social structures characterised by ethnic divisions that are no longer deemed the primarily defining characteristic within an individual identity.

This literature review has shown how divided society scholarship is predicated upon durable, ethnic groups and problematically overlooks the agency of the individual. While the institutionalisation of polarised identities has been widely challenged by the critics of consociationalism, they tend to stop at formal democratic design, leaving the personal and everyday less explored. The theory of belonging provides the means to conceptually unpack and explore the nuances of the personal within a consociational society, illustrating the misconceptions perpetuated by the use of discrete ethnic frames to interpret reality in top-down analysis. Bringing these literatures together reveals the tension between the static, group identities recognised within the "two communities" consociational agreement and the complexity of belonging in the post-conflict years that follow. The extent of this problem could be reflected in the growing relevance of the space created by the 'Northern Irish' identity that seemingly sits outside of the institutional divide.

## Data and Method

To understand why individuals chose to identify outside of the ethno-national divide, I conducted 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews via online video calls with individuals who self-identify as "Northern Irish." The significance of this study lies in addressing the lack of attention given to the agency of individuals in a deeply divided society. Therefore, adopting a bottom-up approach enables an exploration of how individuals construct their own belonging through their lived reality and reflexivity, in relation to formally institutionalised ethnic categories in a divided-society.

Northern Ireland has been consistently coded as a "deeply divided society," and its consociational power-sharing agreement institutionalises a clear, communal fault line. This context, alongside its position within peace and conflict studies as a model success story for ethnic conflict creates a strong pathway case for this research. Adopting an interpretative method enables humans to be restored to the centre of consociational research to understand "how meaning is developed, expressed, and communicated" within a 'divided society' (Dvora, & Schwartz-Shea, 2013, p.12). Due to the top-down tendency of consociational systems, great value can be attained by enquiring into how individuals negotiate the tension between their experiences and the analytical categories employed to generalise about them (Weeden, 2013, p.90). Therefore, in-depth interviews enables the focus to move away from the ascriptive notions of collective identities embedded within the consociational system and uncover nuanced 'thick descriptions' of an individual's sense of belonging in a deeply divided society.

## The Sample

Several studies of post-Agreement Northern Ireland have identified that the changing political environment in which different generations have been socialised has led to different displays of outlooks and behaviours (Tilley and Evans, 2011). Therefore, seeking to encompass these comparative differences and/or similarities, my sample was equally comprised of 'old' and 'young' Protestants and Catholics. These categories were chosen to provide insight to the potential difference of meaning-making between those who lived through the conflict of the Troubles and the 'post-Troubles' generation who have known only peace-times. Moreover, a cross-community approach was adopted to ensure a wide coverage

of social processes, meaning and identification across the most ostensibly divided demographics of society.

It's important to recognise that the structural divisions in Northern Ireland infuse all socio-cultural aspects of life and can impact choices on education, media consumption and area of residence among other things. Therefore, while this study doesn't intend to make any specific demographic claims in its overall argument, it's legitimate to note the religion and ages as interviewee identifiers in my analysis, but in the knowledge that they are not prescriptive.

To quantify these groups, I interviewed individuals born into each respective religious group. In delineating the age categories I considered Cairn's assessment of the effect of political violence on children's social identity. He asserts that children are aware of the distinct social categories in Northern Ireland by the age of 5, influenced by the fact that about 90% of children in Northern Ireland attend segregated schools (Cairns, 1987). Therefore, the 'old' category refers to those born in 1963 or before, taking 1968 as the beginning of the Troubles and considering individuals to be shaped by the ethnic conflict thereafter. The 'young' category comprises of those born in 1993 or after, taking the 1998 Good Friday Agreement as the end of ethnic conflict and therefore, taking those born after this date to not have personally experienced ethnic conflict in their life-time. As a result, my two age categories are 58 and over and 18-28. This gave me an equitable sample of 6 Old-Catholic (OC), 6 Old-Protestant (OP), 6 Young-Catholic (YC) and 6 Young-Protestant (YP) as detailed in Appendix B.

This sample was accessed through association and the snowball method of referral and therefore a level of personal recommendation existed within the transaction that increased my trustworthiness and accessibility as an interviewer. I am satisfied my interviewees cover a range of geographic areas and backgrounds to ensure an array of viewpoints. However, this study reflects Yanow's methodological split that moves away from abstract large-scale analysis and instead focuses on a contextualised study that focuses on in-depth insight to the process of human meaning-making, meaning the sample is not intended to be representative or generalisable (2013, p.17).

## The Interviewer Effect

As Yanow argues, "interpretive work rejects the possibility that a social sciences' researcher can stand outside the subject of study, which renders positivist-inflected objectivity an inapplicable criterion" (2013, p.69). Instead, I adopted a "rigorous subjectivity" by closely considering and candidly revealing my own positionality as an interviewer (MacLean, 2013, p.78). As an interviewer I undertook a highly reflexive approach, however, I recognise that as a Protestant born and raised in Northern Ireland I am automatically positioned within the framework of the Northern Ireland conflict. Having grown up in times of peace and belonging to a family and neighbourhood that had no direct experience with the Troubles, I consider the 'ethnic and emotional baggage' I carry as a researcher to be relatively minimal (Arthur, 1987). Moreover, despite having grown up in Protestant areas and attended largely Protestant schools, I spent the first six years of my adult life studying and working in Dublin. Therefore, having been raised 'British,' I related increasingly less with this identity and now identify as 'Northern Irish.' Therefore, through this research I occupy a 'hybrid insider-outsider' position sharing characteristics with both groups such as the Northern Irish identity, but I was excluded in certain ways by the religion I was born into (Baser et al, 2018). Therefore, I adopted Baser and Toivanen's position that researchers need to look at particular moments of insiderness and outsiderness, rather than taking insider and outsider positions as a static starting-point for understanding researcher positionality (2018, p.2069). In moments of outsiderness, to overcome any inherent bias as best as possible and prevent individuals from withholding certain views or altering their response for consideration of my own views, I followed the successful example of Reed in his study of Ulster Loyalism, by emphasising the academic nature of my work and my lack of personal motives to "build credibility and access a more intimate testimony" (Reed, 2012, p.210).

To create an open interview environment and pre-emptively address any preconceptions, I began each interview by sharing my own positionality. In many ways, my own personal interest in the subject and a shared "Northern Irish" identity allowed a more natural rapport and in-depth discussion to be established between myself and the participants. This supported a conversational style and created an atmosphere allowing the interviewee "to reflect on and explore their own ideas, to reveal not only strong views but also worries and uncertainties," helping to attenuate the risk of social desirability bias of not wanting to appear bigoted or 'old-fashioned' in their views (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p.118). Ultimately, as Fuiji argues,

relational interpretivist interviews consider "the researcher's own values, beliefs, and positionality to shape, rather than distort, interactions with interviewees" (2018, p.8). While the advantages of this position can equally be viewed as disadvantageous, I believe the multiple identities I carry as an interviewer placed me on equal footing with the majority of interviewees and help me hear and engage with the complexities and reasoning of their Northern Irish belonging.

## Findings

Throughout the analysis of my interviews, three main themes reoccurred: the challenge of mixed or low sentiments of Irish or British national belonging; the fluidity and multiplicity the Northern Irish identity can carry in differing circumstances; and the regional identification relating to 'home.' I will explore these themes under the headings: (i) The misrecognition of national identity, (ii) The agency of disidentification and (iii) The commonness of a shared place.

### *1. The Misrecognition of National Identity*

The Good Friday Agreement designated dual citizenship to all citizens of Northern Ireland, allowing formal membership to being both Irish and British. However, belonging can be understood as a thicker construct of citizenship, centring on informal, personal attachments and feelings of comfort and familiarity; therefore, the two do not necessarily go hand in hand. The binational position of Northern Ireland can create a dual frame of reference that can complicate a lived experience of belonging in relation to the separate 'traditions' recognised within the power-sharing agreement. This led both Andrew and Mícheál to utilise a Venn diagram descriptor to explain that they view their Northern Irishness as being both British and Irish but as a result, something distinct, as evidenced in figure 2 (YP2, OC1).

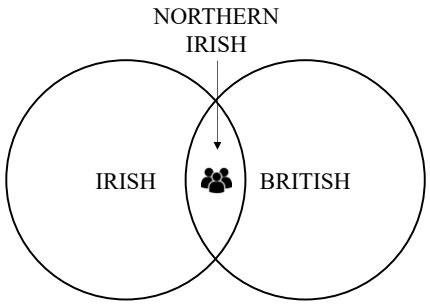


*Figure 2*

Viewing the Northern Irish identity as a mix of both Irish and British identities, implicitly challenges the exclusivity and contention of the national divide. Unionist and Nationalist have typically been treated as zero-sum identities which depict two distinctly imagined communities belonging to different homelands. Due to a long history of conflict and political

division, national belonging remains highly contentious throughout society and something to cautiously navigate as each national identity continues to carry "connotations of staunch, extreme political views" (YP1). In contrast, the Northern Irish identity has the capacity to evade the baggage of extreme division and conflict, providing an ambiguous, third space. This position is expressed in Laura's view that being Northern Irish is an "escape" to "no man's land" because "Irish or British are so weaponised in our politics, it's difficult to associate with either" (OC3). For many, the end of the conflict and the equal recognition afforded to both communities in the peace agreement, removed the need for strong identities. "The removal of everyday battle lines" gradually reduced the need "to pick a side" allowing a new phenomenon to emerge of being both "British and Irish at heart" (OP2). This mix moves against the polarised exclusivity of belonging to different 'homelands' and indicates an alternative sense of national belonging during peace times. The evolution of David's identity from polarised 'battle lines' to a more fluid and complicated entity depicts this shift:

> I think it [national identity] was a very deliberate reference point to show what side you were on because that was the way of the time. That changed after the Good Friday Agreement legitimised all people. Up until then it was a real badge of honour to be Irish and be struggling against the Protestant/British majority for your rights. But after the peace, you can say you're a bit of both, or neither and take a more vague and comfortable stance. It allowed you to think it's not just orange and green it's much more complicated. (OC4)

This statement reflects an instrumental view of identity, illustrating how the salience of group boundaries vary in line with material and political interests. Therefore, the increased political stability in peace times gave individuals licence to recognise their positionality and complexity of belonging in the 'grey', which requires a more complicated identity based on a "selective-hybridity" of national belonging (OP1). Within a divided society the malleability of the 'Northern Irish' identity allows individuals to "cherry-pick" and "lean into both sides depending on what suits" (OC4, YC3). Therefore, the 'other' position enables individuals to recognise elements of affiliation to both 'sides', in contrasts to the hardened boundaries of division maintained within a divided society framework.

## Community Gatekeepers

The "two communities" thesis speaks to Andersonian imagined communities that continue to divide the world between 'us' and 'them' based on religion, culture, heritage and political views. These divided boundaries are maintained and ideologically reproduced by a whole system of symbolic 'border guards' (Armstrong, 1982). This references how the continual process of separating members from non-members is enforced by both, institutional gatekeepers within a consociational system and informal every day social interactions within and between groups. The interaction of both gatekeepers is evident as the extensive group labels and identifiers institutionally perpetuated within a consociational society become inescapable facts in the day-to-day life (MacGinty, 2017). This relational dynamic creates living boundaries that are constructed and maintained through social practices, creating a 'hidden transcript' of belonging which individuals are forced to navigate even if they recant or moderate their views in peace times.

The overarching influence of the normalised 'us' and 'them' dichotomy was evident in the regularity with which interviewees slipped between meta-commentary on Northern Irish practices and narratives about their own challenges and experiences of belonging. As Jenkins argues, "identification is never a unilateral process", as "external identification – by others of us – undoubtedly has an impact on our internal definition(s)" (2008, p.59). The effect of external identification on individual belonging is exemplified by Laura's experience as a child of a religiously mixed marriage. Throughout the Troubles she was taught to actively "suppress and hide my religion and culture so as not to offend my father's family" (OC3). Therefore, despite citing her Catholicism as central to her identity, she experienced social exclusion and accusations by members of her own community of being a "castle Catholic" and a "turncoat" for assimilating into a pro-British establishment; making clear that within individual experiences there are no clear dichotomies between belonging and not belonging (OC3). As Laura explained:

> I didn't and don't feel British, I just feel less Irish…it was a Northern Irish upbringing not a Southern Irish, *Irish* upbringing. I was made to feel unwelcome in my own 'team,' so I've always felt a bit in-between and a real oddity (OC3).

This experience illustrates a process whereby the failure to be viewed by others as part of the in-group's collective substantially affects how an individual understands their own belonging and identity.

Within a consociational society built to accommodate a constitutional division, the mix of attachments formed to both national identities can often be deemed to contradict one another and cause an element of discomfort, destabilising the sense of belonging in one's own self. As Molly notes, "if you're confronted with extremes on either end at home or people who are *actually* Irish or people who are *actually* British, I think you have no choice but to say you're Northern Irish" (YP4). Therefore, despite formally belonging to both national groups, the means of everyday differentiation from 'true group members' culminates in a feeling that being from Northern Ireland makes you a "fraud", "imposter" or "superficially" Irish or British (YC1, OC3). This indicates that by "having one foot in and one foot out" and therefore not strictly adhering to the collectively imagined practices and norms associated with opposing Unionist/British and Nationalist/Irish group identities, individuals are prevented from comfortably attributing their belonging to the collective identity (YC1).

Jenkins argues that ethnicity is a matter of cultural differentiation which involves a dialectical interplay between similarity and difference (2008, p.15). However, consociational literature focuses solely on the politically salient moments of this interplay, framing them as intractable as a result of conflict. As such, these boundaries of difference are hardened and institutionally maintained and enforced by many individuals as collective gatekeepers of their identity. This is reflected in the fact that participants often talked about their British or Irish identity being "challenged" by others, due to not conforming to certain voting behaviour or attributes within their perceived community (YP1, YC2). Therefore, the continual process of trying to navigate this relational process and parse through the contradictions of personal positionality versus group collectivity to locate a sense of belonging is evident in Maeve's statement:

> I look at my social circles and try to position myself on some kind of scale in comparison to them. I have to really try and work out if I'm British, Irish or Northern Irish. It's very fluid to me. You do compare views, family backgrounds, cultural traits and things like that to suss out where you're allowed to stand. I use these things to almost try and dictate what I am (YC1).

This practice of comparison to try to deconstruct and understand the associated ideologies of sameness and difference speaks to trying to decipher feelings of comparative cultural competence and attachment to discern a position of inclusion or exclusion (Antonsich, 2010). Therefore, in instances where Maeve fails to internally locate her belonging as part of a recognised collective, it alters how she self-identifies, as she concludes "I'm forced to be that 'other' bit in the middle" (YC1). The lack of a safe and stable connection to the collectivity and homeland, threatens an individual's identity, resulting in a process of reflexivity and reconsideration of social location; in this case through the Northern Irish identity (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

As a result of community gatekeepers and the unique constitutional position of Northern Ireland, individuals can feel "pushed out by both sides and ending up somewhere in between" (YP1). This results in disidentification and dissociation from either national identity as Laura notes, "I've always felt in the cracks" and "sometimes I think it's a lot easier if you just feel strongly on one side or the other" (OC3). In a constitutionally divided society, the presence of formal and informal incentives to adhere to a national exclusivity is reflected in the sentiment that being 'Northern Irish' isn't a 'real' or legitimate identity, but merely acts as a "cop-out" reflecting an unsustainable "in-between state" before "you're always forced to choose one or the other on documents, your passport or when it comes to the constitutional question" (OC3, YP6, YC4). This speaks to broader power relations where the complexity and contradicting attachments within an individual's sense of belonging does not clearly resolve into the social categorisations on offer, leading to a sense of dislocation, compounded by the idea that "neither side wants us" (OP6). As Andrew notes:

> Part of saying there is a Northern Irish identity is acknowledging the fact that there isn't a Northern Irish identity. I am British and I am Irish. Our identity is both, which means it's not fully either. But that mix isn't really recognised, or it can't be recognised. (YP2).

This sentiment reflects how the fixed, exclusive national and ethnic identities enshrined in the Agreement, negate the reality of belonging which is situationally defined and shaped in relation to the everyday interactions and positionality of individuals. The lack of social legitimacy afforded to the identity is reflected in Emily's statement that the "ambiguity of the identity can make me feel a little more lost" (YP1). Individuals are then caught wanting to belong and wanting to become "fully one or the other," and can find it "hurtful when people

tell me I'm not *really* Irish or British" asking, "then what am I?" (YP5). As a result, fuelled by a yearning of place, individuals can adopt the "Northern Irish" identity as the most safe and accurate reflection of belonging. This understanding of self in relation to the community boundaries equates the Northern Irish identity as a "default position" which reflects a sense of lack of belonging to either 'homeland' (YC5). The process of exclusion from the bounded communities and national categories is evident below:

> I've been slowly pushed into the Northern Irish identity through a series of events rather than always feeling like it…I almost feel like I've claimed it as a choice now, but I don't think it was. I don't think it's something you choose. (YC1).

Therefore, belonging can be about attributions, designated to you formally or informally by others. However, when these don't align to an individual's experiences or sense of belonging, they may try to cleave to a clear group identity that will relieve misrecognition.

2. *The Agency of Disidentification*

<u>Dissociating from the Divide</u>

The construction of belonging by those who are socially rooted in divided societies is complicated and challenged by the difficulty to 'escape' their communal ties and constraints. Due to broader formal and informal power relations, Unionist and Nationalist are presumed to be bounded, composite identities, resulting in characteristics of 'cultural and national stickiness' that can appear descent-related and mutually descriptive within society. Bell argues collective identity is constructed and maintained by the tacit agreement to perform and sustain discrete cultural fictions (1999, p.3). This raises the question of where individuals locate their belonging in an institutionally divided society when they opt out of this implicit agreement and cease to adhere to the group's normative self-perception.

When asked at the beginning of the interview to tell me about themselves most interviewees began speaking for considerable amounts of time about the origin of their ancestors, their religion, views of their parents, their school, the sports they play and the traditional community alignment of their neighbourhood. All of which are known in Northern Ireland as everyday identifiers of community belonging. Paradoxically, the tendency to be externally

categorised with these stereotypical everyday identifiers against their will was frequently referenced as a point of frustration. As Harry notes "as a person you're constantly pigeon-holed and put into boxes by your religion, school, sports you play, name, where you live and loads of other things. But that just isn't the case, like who cares?" (YP3). Therefore, it becomes a question not just of who is accepted as a member of a collectivity but also the extent to which a person opts to remain within their socially defined group boundaries, or if they strive to reshape or reduce their allegiance with their communal ties.

The use of familial descent to rationalise individual's collective belonging aligns to Horowitz's view of the connection between ethnicity and kinship (1985). However, Horowitz continues "while birth and choice are typically viewed as mutually exclusive principles of group membership, all boundaries are infused with components of both" (1985, p.55). Therefore, while identifications and emotional attachments can be reproduced from generation to generation, it is always in a selective and relational way. Consequently, while an individual can be accepted as a 'true' group member due to their religion and cultural heritage, they can also have very different political or cultural values and therefore feel uncomfortable within their 'traditional lines.' The Northern Irish identity's ability to convey gradation of group belonging in opposition to the extremism associated with British/Unionist or Irish/Nationalist identities is captured in Harry's explanation:

> As a Protestant-atheist, if I were to say I am British, I would be instantly thrown into the mix of the deeply religious DUP, TUV and general loyalist culture…who I strongly disagree with morally and would be really uncomfortable being associated with. (YP3)

This illustrates how people can 'belong' in many ways through different means of attachment. Therefore, in a divided society, the hard boundaries of 'community' belonging fail to be a one-size-fits-all and hold the capacity to be deeply contradictory and conflicted.

Religion and cultural upbringing often acted as clearly demarcated lines to start the conversation, which were then complicated and reworked as the interview progressed by trying to make sense of contradicting experiences, values, goals and social interactions among other things. The extent to which the Northern Irish identity assists in overcoming these correlative identities, is evident in Andrew's assertion that, "I was born a Protestant, so in that sense I'm *actually* British, despite feeling like I'm both and wanting to be both, which

is why I say Northern Irish" (YP2). Each interview followed one of two similar processes: attempting to explain how the Northern Irish identity can be interpreted to reshape the boundaries of their traditional community belonging or how it overcomes community bounds entirely. The difficulty of this process is emphasised in Laura's statement:

> What I am is extremely difficult to answer. It's something I don't think many people openly talk about because it's a long, personal conversation. You do have to work through your own upbringing, emotions, biases and experiences to try and understand where you sit with it all. (OC3)

The complexity of the process detailed above depicts how context-sensitive an individual's sense of self can be and the difficulty of comfortably associating with rigid, opposing social categories in the aftermath of ethnic conflict.

Appreciating that an individual's belonging is a "reflexive achievement," prevents naturalisation and situates it within a continuous negotiation between external collectivities and internal sense of self (Giddens, 1991). Recognising the composite construction of 'Unionist' and 'Nationalist' allows us to unpack the lived reality of negotiating and oscillating between the push and pull factors of single or multiple collectivities to achieve a sense of belonging. Shifting the lens of power away from the political and social infrastructure to the agency of individuals serves to reveal a process of individual distancing from key social and symbolic divisions. As Mark notes:

> I think to be 'Northern Irish' requires a bit of an identity crisis and a lot of soul-searching to look beyond the boxes and typical markers we've all been trained to use to tell you what camp you're in. (YP6)

Thus, the Northern Irish identity provides the space to emphasise how the multiplicity of life experiences and resultant positionality provides a range of repertoires rather than a given set-package collective identity. Therefore, the space provided by the Northern Irish identity can be viewed as a means to actively distance yourself from the "rules" practically and ideationally of a divided society and instead capture the fluidity and nuances of life experience. As Emily notes

> It's very personal. Due to my own experiences, I don't feel like I belong in either camp…So if I say I'm Northern Irish, there's more ambiguity and it's

> up to you to establish your own answers of what you are outside of your designated "community." To me it's very freeing not having to pick a side and I can try and do what's best for me. (YP1)

This highlights an awareness of how conflicting experiences serve to negate the formal boundaries of the "two communities." This results in Emily emphasising her agency and individuality, as opposed to adhering to the prescriptive political and national belonging provided within the formal social categorisations in Northern Ireland. This follows Antonsich's view of belonging as a "sense of self" narrated by a personal and existential dimension rather than a social and cultural resource discursively used to draw boundaries (2010, p. 647). The ability of the Northern Irish identity to challenge given assumptions and reframe a type of identification that reflects the complexity and uncertainty of self, creates a space where individuals can say "this is where I'm most comfortable and I will define it for myself" (OC1).

By embracing complexity, the Northern Irish identity facilitates the creation of more fluid, permeable boundaries. This gives it the ability to act as "a shape shifting identity" that recognises the multiplicity of individual identity and enables individuals to accentuate different aspects of themselves "to fit into whatever narrative is best in whatever environment you're in" (YP6, YP4). The extent of this process is explained by Eimear:

> For the past 10 years if you'd asked me monthly what I was, it probably would have continually changed based on my stage of life, my recent experiences and wider political events like Brexit and the collapse of Stormont etcetera. It would also be different depending on who asked, the context and how comfortable I felt in that situation… Generally, I probably slide up and down some sort of scale. (YC5)

This view aligns to Tilly's view of the hybrid, postmodern person (1998). He argues that all people have more than one way of being as they move in and out of different contexts, cultures, and sets of ideas (and/or between the different parts of themselves), they think differently, and behave differently in relation to others. Their self—and their identity—are not fixed, but continually in process, as the boundaries between themselves and others, and between the different parts of themselves are continually negotiated (Tilly, 1998). From this Freudian perspective, the unitary self, bound within one identity and one social group will

always be problematic. These conflicting, multiple ways of being can explain the many instances of contradiction within a single interview, where some recognised, they were a "walking contradiction" (YC5), while others showed less awareness of these nuances and felt caught out when asked about perceived contradictions stating "ah, I see what you're doing here" (OC4). It is only when this process is broken down and the contradictions and nuances within are recognised that individuals are freed from their community bounds. The "Northern Irish" identity can be understood as something that allows an individual's belonging to be continually negotiated and changed depending on the circumstance. This perspective sits in direct opposition to the fixed, collective groups institutionalised within consociational agreements.

There was a strong message that the interview was the first opportunity many individuals had had to openly discuss the complexity and challenges of their own belonging. This was attributed to a culture of silence and general reluctance to discuss this topic within their own social circles, which many feared would be controversial or uncomfortable. This sentiment aligns to MacGinty's coping mechanism of 'everyday peace' in which individuals avoid contentious subjects, or construct ambiguity and conceal their identity or opinion to avoid conflict or ill-will (2017, p.549). As a result, many expressed their delight at being given the opportunity to "talk it all through," finding it "cathartic," and "good for me." That said, several found it difficult to clearly articulate their thoughts as "nothing about this is clear cut," admitting they struggle to truly understand it themselves as it's "difficult to explain emotional, knee-jerk responses" (YP2, OC1). This solidifies the complexity of belonging, which informs a multi-layered process of self-identification riddled with ambiguity and a mix of rationale and "gut reaction" (OC4).

This journey of reflexivity depicts a process of challenging socially prescribed identities to establish an accurate sense of belonging based upon an individual's own changing positionality and experiences. When ordinary citizens continually rethink the codes of division in their everyday practices, it is evident that situated and changing everyday belongingness is rooted in choice and experiences instead of reproducing strong, divisive identities. As such, the 'Northern Irish' identity can be used to emphasise the agency of belonging in Northern Ireland in opposition to the unidimensional, collectivities within the divided society framework. Exploring the multifaceted nature of belonging forces a

postmodern view of identity as an evolving entity in continual flux; this view is presently omitted within consociational and divided society literature.

### *3. The Commonness of a Shared Place*

While 'identity' highlights the homogeneity of any given collective unit, 'belonging' stresses commonness, but not necessarily sameness (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p.118). Apart from sharing a moderate political position, there is no evidence that the interviewees shared any sense of common national or political organisation. Being 'Northern Irish' holds the capacity to encompass: a hybrid of both Irish and British, "one type of Irish," a "region of the UK just like Scotland and Wales" or "not a British or Irish thing, but totally unique" (OP1, YC2, OP2, OC1). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a 'Northern Irish' identity may mean something completely different for all individuals who chose to adopt it and can be seen as coterminous with their differing constitutional and national preferences as evidenced in figure 3.

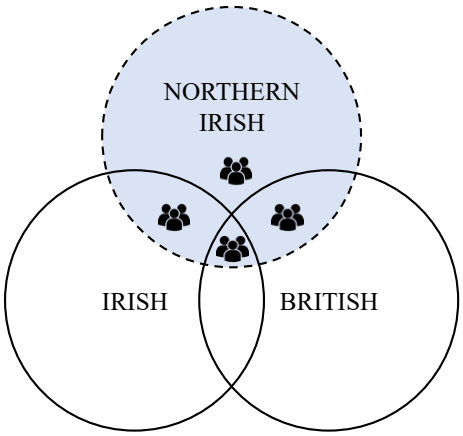


*Figure 3*

In this sense, the Northern Irish identity aligns to Jenkins' assertion that identity merely signifies a collectivity of members who recognise its existence and their membership of it, with no implication of homogeneity, definite boundaries, or coordination of collective action (2008, p.25). This identity then moves against the assumption of an overlap between the boundaries of an 'imagined community' and territorial organisation. Instead, it can focus on an overarching common belonging based on the idea of 'home'. This marks a distinction in 'Northern Irish' as an organisational identity of political and national "others" and as a

regional identity reflecting a socio-cultural commonality. This is evident in Andrew's statement:

> Saying that I'm Northern Irish is describing who I am and where I'm from, it's not making any overt political statement. It embraces the uniqueness and wee idiosyncrasies that I share with *all* Northern Irish people. (YP2).

As Antonsich emphasises, the boundaries of belonging are often spatial and relate to a specific locality/territoriality and not just to constructions of social collectivities (2010). The recognition that being Northern Irish conveys "home and reflects the place that I feel most comfortable in" illustrates the primacy of personal place attachment in contrast to depicting a type of nationality (OP1). The concept of belonging underlines that people share significantly more than common identity markers, including sharing common knowledge, meanings and a tacit way of being (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p.118). This perspective questions the extent to which an Andersonian imagined community interpretation of national belonging, should claim a privileged position in the multi-layered constructions of identity. The regionalism conveyed within 'Northern Irish' can reflect a strong personal narration of place and the cultural familiarity of 'home,' as is evident in Sophie's statement:

> Northern Irish means that if you're not from here, nobody can explain, or actually relate to what it feels like to live here. It embraces that we're totally different… it lets you relate to your home, who you are and everything you've gone through because of that home. (OC5)

This illustrates the influence of place and situatedness as a source of individual attachment and identity. The process of self-reflexivity through the rooted "Northern Irish" identity that deconstructs social classifications and recognises the conflicting attachments and contradictions within oneself, enables individuals to better understand and recognise the positionality of 'others.' This leads to a recognition of commonness out of the acceptance of difference. Bhabha recognises the changing boundaries of nationally imagined communities between 'us' and 'them' by understanding that articulations of cultural hybridity do not resolve the tension between cultures but allows a new cultural common denominator to emerge in the in-between spaces as the result of these practices of differentiation (1994).

As Pfaff-Czarnecka argues, commonality and attachments stabilise belonging, by forging a strong and binding sense of naturalness that is obvious to the collective insiders (2020,

p.120). This 'naturalness' is evident in Martin's view that nationally and politically he's "Irish at heart" but due to his everyday interpersonal interactions, he is "Northern Irish" because "I have more affinity and more in common with people from the North of Ireland, Catholic *and* Protestant, than I would have in common with someone from Cork or Dublin because I'm not from there" (OC6). This view places social relations at the centre of social process and reflects how people can decide who they want to share an identity with by asking who they identify with and who they feel a "fondness and different sense of being when you're together" (YC4). The extent of this collective cultural distinctiveness is evident in Maeve's belief that being Northern Irish "goes beyond the typical boarder question now that it's so culturally embedded" (YC1). Therefore, the counter-narrative being propagated by those who locate their belonging within the fluidity of the Northern Irish identity both evokes and erases the "totalising boundaries" of national identity (Anthias, 1992, p.27).

The characteristics of a shared commonness within the concept of belonging can be driven from a commitment to 'something' that is collectively at stake (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p.115). The 'something' at stake within "Northern Irish" belonging is a safe and stable 'home.' The commitment to Northern Ireland as a home is expressed in the sentiment of accommodating "a bit of give and take" to try to avoid conflict and division to "make this place work so our children don't have to experience what we did." (OC4, OP3). As an identifier "born from pain and conflict" (YC4), the label accurately reflects an "emotional identity" that "encompasses a background of conflict" which has shaped the complexity of individual belonging and cannot be overlooked (OP1, YC2). The Northern Irish identity captures and translates the influence of the past which has created a shared knowledge and cultural particularity, as explained below:

> By saying Northern Irish I'm recognising how the conflict shaped us, even as the younger generation. It shaped our families, education, where we live, how we see ourselves and how we interact with each other. (YP5)

This illustrates that while individual belonging can be constructed by different attachments, those who resolve their belonging within the 'Northern Irish' identity implicitly recognise the influence of the past while not being stuck in it, making them adaptable to changing circumstances and social interactions following the end of a conflict and reorganisation of political space.

While focusing on individually lived experiences leads to the conclusion that belonging within the Northern Irish identity has no definitive sameness of meaning, not all is lost to particularity. A commonness is derived from a shared connection to home and knowledge of the nuances of society and legacy of conflict which naturalises 'Northern Irish' belonging as part of everyday practice. Ultimately, this identity is no static entity as it interacts with the multiple and conflicting layers that contribute to its being. Its lack of political resolution and state of continual compromise creates a state of perpetual negotiation that navigates more divisive political lines such as the constitutional question, Brexit, united Ireland poll discussions and individual experiences of conflict among other things. Within this dynamic, the institutionalisation of division can be seen to create a self-fulfilling cycle leading to the feeling that when push comes to shove "people retreat back to their 'battle lines' and what they know best" (OP4). The everyday influence of the structural divide is evident when individuals endeavour to disengage from division by cautiously avoiding contentious political discussions, instead choosing to base their social interactions on the "substance of the people, rather than divisive labels" (OC5). This illustrates a conscious effort to peacefully navigate the complexity of home and its unique ways, in order to "get on with life rather than being forced to look at the past all the time" (OP6).

## Discussion

The "Northern Irish" identity first and foremost denotes a 'home'; swiftly followed by the complexity of being that comes with the commitment and attachments of this place. In a politically volatile place, navigating the personal belonging of your own narrative can be a story with many twists and turns as conflicting attachments are selectively activated by differing situational cues. The 'Northern Irish' identity provides the space to look beyond the neatly bounded categories of the ethno-national divide and recognise the agency of individuals and their lived reality of belonging in a post-conflict place.

When individuals do not identify with the collective identities institutionalised throughout a consociational society, their sense of belonging is either prevented or reduced. Therefore, they may respond by self-categorising at a superordinate level of abstraction which recognises elements of both groups in their identity and asserts an inter-group commonness, or they may self-categorise at a personal level of belonging that navigates their own self-reflexive narrative. I argue the Northern Irish identity can do both.

This research has shown the benefits of deconstructing collective and individual identities into the various elements of belonging that collectively construct and maintain social boundaries. To this end, this lens of analysis forces us to view identity not as a fixed entity but as an evolving process that is consciously navigated and influenced by multiple internal and external, push and pull factors of belonging. As a result, emphasising the personal dimension in a post-conflict society, enables a more nuanced analysis from which the shortcomings of consociational and divided societies literature are made clear.

The Northern Irish identity has been shown to be move away from the zero-sum identities of Unionist and Nationalist. While the lack of political organisation behind this identity can be due to the lack of legitimacy attributed to it in a consociational structure, it also speaks to an enduring state of constitutional compromise. While the politics of belonging helped us analyse the construction process of belonging to this particular collective, the differing national and political preferences make viewing this identity as a political project with shared goals and values difficult. Tilly's distinction between embedded and disjoined identities highlights the oscillating dynamic between those that inform routine social lives by selective

fortification of certain social ties and divisions and those which appear in public life but rarely govern everyday social relations (1998). This distinction lies on a continuum but prevents understanding identities in contentious politics as simple activations of pre-existing, individual attributes, or as discursive constructions with no grounding in social organisation (1998, p.220). Deconstructing the Northern Irish identity has shown there are multiple layers of self-identification at play, which due to the consociational structure are typically viewed as disjoined. However, there is benefit to building on this study by undertaking social-identity theory based research to understand in more detail how the various layers of this identity interact with each other in different circumstances to help assess its potential influence as an embedded identity.

Divided society and consociational literature's concern with institutional mechanisms has left a glaring blind spot with regards to the lived reality of ethnic division and conflict. Contrary to consociational literature that takes the durability of polarised ethnic groups as its starting point, the existence and increasing use of the Northern Irish identity shows the need for a non-combative, unique identifier that is not borrowed from times of conflict. It reveals an inflexibility within the literature that results in an inability to recognise a post-conflict social need for change. This highlights the need to review and assess not only consociational agreements after a certain timeframe of peace, but also the wider divided societies' literature to correct its unquestioning acceptance of intractable divisions by incorporating a modern understanding of the fluidity and multiplicity of identity through belonging. The valuable insights gained from this case can be used to analyse other "deeply divided societies" to discover if there are similar patterns of dissociation and emerging inter-identities, further confirming the need to reassess the existing literature.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

The length of the interviews varied from 40 minutes up to two hours, with most interviews taking an average of an hour. The following questions provided the framework for these questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. What does being "Northern Irish" mean to you?
3. Why do you choose to identify as "Northern Irish"?
    a. What does this identity achieve for you?
4. Have you always identified as "Northern Irish"?
    a. When did you start to identify this way?
    b. Where did it come from?
    c. Any particular experiences or events that changed your outlook on your own identity (if relevant)?
5. Do you think Northern Irish, Irish and British are mutually exclusive?
    a. If yes/no why?
    b. Do you think Northern Ireland is distinct from Ireland and/or Britain?
    c. In what way?
6. Have you always lived in Northern Ireland?
    a. Do you think this has affected the way you identify?
7. Are there moments when you feel more or less Northern Irish? What are they and why?
8. How do you feel this identity fits within Northern Irish society?
    a. Do you think it relates to either a Unionist or Nationalist identity in any way?
    b. Do you think it has more of a social, political or both meaning to you?
9. Is your identity influenced by your religion?
10. Do you think the constitutional question of belonging to a united Ireland or the union is central to your identity? Religious? Cultural distinctiveness?
11. What are your thoughts or how do you feel about the upcoming Northern Ireland centenary this year?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

Appendix B: Interview Participants

It's important to note that all participants have been kept anonymous in this study to encourage a more transparent and honest interview while ensuring confidentially as the topic includes sensitive and personal information. Their pseudo names are as follows:

| **Category** | **Catholic** | | | **Protestant** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Code | Name | Age | Code | Name | Age |
| **Young** | YC1 | Maeve | 25 | YP1 | Emily | 19 |
| | YC2 | Maraid | 21 | YP2 | Andrew | 24 |
| | YC3 | Daniel | 26 | YP3 | Harry | 26 |
| | YC4 | Bronagh | 25 | YP4 | Molly | 28 |
| | YC5 | Eimear | 20 | YP5 | Harriet | 25 |
| | YC6 | Eoin | 28 | YP6 | Mark | 27 |
| **Old** | OC1 | Mícheál | 63 | OP1 | Stephanie | 58 |
| | OC2 | Orla | 67 | OP2 | Natalie | 59 |
| | OC3 | Laura | 61 | OP3 | Kathy | 61 |
| | OC4 | David | 71 | OP4 | John | 66 |
| | OC5 | Sophie | 59 | OP5 | Ben | 60 |
| | OC6 | Martin | 62 | OP6 | Robert | 59 |