National and religious identification processes can be seen as the basis of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and over the course of the conflict preferred social and political identities became increasingly oppositional and entrenched. This paper reviews this evidence using population-level studies of self-categorized national and religious identity. In an attempt to explore the bases of these identities, two interrelated qualitative studies examining the constructions of national and religious identification are reported. The findings presented suggest the continuing predominance of national and religious identities that have generally been constructed as opposing. Evidence of complete overlap of the identities is evidenced in conflation of religion and nationality in adolescents’ essays. Theoretical sampling of adults living on the border between Northern Ireland, the republic of Ireland, and those in mixed marriages highlight the strategic use of national and religious identities that may act to support divisions in post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

KEY WORDS: Social identity, Northern Ireland, Strategic use, Oppositional identities, Identity preference
In situations of intractable political conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflict in the Basque region, and that in Northern Ireland, typically a struggle over territory, power, or resources prevails that is particularly resistant to resolution or change (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). To an extent the struggle over identity can take on a similar meaning as the struggle over power or resources themselves, and as such it can be argued that collective identification plays a pivotal role in political conflict (Kelman, 2001). Often these identities are perceived as both oppositional (e.g., Catholic and Protestant or Arab and Jew) and negatively interdependent (Kelman, 1999). This negative interdependence results in increasing strength or status of one group being viewed as a loss of status or strength by the other.

The conflict in Northern Ireland can be viewed as arising from competing positions between two ethno-national groups with religion acting as a socially determined boundary (Trew, 2004; Whyte, 1990). The two main protagonists to the conflict can be seen as differing on a range of dimensions, central to which are religion and nationality. Religion and nationality are also associated with a host of other factors in Northern Ireland such as group status, political aspirations, and economics; irrespective of this, religious and national identity therefore lies at the heart of the Northern Irish conflict.

The centrality of national and religious identification to the conflict in Northern Ireland is illustrated in the pioneering work of Rose (1971) and Moxon-Browne (1983) on self-categorization in Northern Ireland. These and the subsequent series of population surveys, between 1989 and 2003, have used virtually the same questions to monitor self-categorization in terms of religious and national identities.

A number of papers have employed these survey data to examine historical changes in identification (e.g. Breen, 2001; Coakley, 2002; Curtice & Dowds, 1999; Fahey, Hayes, & Sinnott, 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003; Trew, 1994, 1996). Rose (1971) showed that in 1968, before the period of sustained violence known as “The Troubles,” 39% of the Protestant respondents categorized themselves as British, 32% saw themselves as having an Ulster identity, and 20% described themselves as Irish. A decade later (Moxon-Browne, 1983), two-thirds of Protestant respondents saw themselves as British, one-fifth chose the Ulster identity, but only 8% chose to categorize themselves as Irish. The shift away from the Irish identity among Protestants has persisted with no more than 3% of Protestants seeing themselves as Irish in any survey conducted post-ceasefires and post-Agreement (Trew, 1996; Fahey et al., 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003).

There was far greater consensus among Catholic respondents than among Protestants in the 1968 survey (Rose, 1971). Three-quarters of the Catholics categorized themselves as Irish, and 15% saw themselves as British with only 5% choosing the Ulster identity. In post-Agreement surveys approximately three in five Catholics continue to prefer the Irish identity (Fahey et al., 2005; Ruane & Todd, 2003), and only a small proportion categorize themselves as British.
Further the Ulster identity is rarely embraced by Catholics. These trends have contributed to the establishment of oppositional national identities in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Irish identity which was not presented as a national identity choice in the 1968 and 1978 surveys is preferred by one in five Catholics in the post-Agreement surveys. Following its introduction as an option in surveys from 1986 onwards, which in and of itself suggests the emergence of a new identity, the Northern Irish identity was also selected by a minority of Protestants. Just over one in five categorized themselves as Northern Irish in the 2003 Life and Times Survey. There are age trends in identity self-categorization also. In 2003 and 2004, all young people in Northern Ireland who celebrated their 16th birthday in February were asked to participate in the Young Life and Times Surveys (YLT) (Devine & Schubotz, 2004). Catholic 16-year-olds show a greater tendency to categorize themselves as Irish than the adult sample. However Protestant 16-year-olds in 2003 categorized themselves as Northern Irish or Ulster more often than their adult comparators. It does seem that a different pattern of national identification is evident in the younger population.

Despite the changes in the political landscape in Northern Ireland the survey evidence indicates the majority of both Catholics and Protestants continue to categorize themselves into one of the two main religious groups. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 2003 (2005) found that only 8% of their sample identified themselves as not having a religion, and the Census data (2001) indicated that 84% of the population identified themselves with a religious group. Although there has been an increase in the proportion of people not identifying themselves as religiously affiliated (Mitchell, 2004), this proportion remains low and it does seem that religious identification remains important in Northern Ireland. As Fahey et al. (2005) suggest, the “pace of secularization is still restrained” (p. 54).

Overall therefore current patterns of self-categorization point to a high degree of inclusion and overlap in religious and national identification patterns (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) as well as the oppositional nature of these identities and their negative interdependence (Kelman, 1999, 2001). Importantly, self-categorization is recognized as a fundamental tenet of collective identification and can be seen as the heart of collective identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Categorizing the self as a member of a given social group is an essential precondition to all other dimensions of identification (Phinney, 1992). However, collective identification is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional construct (Brown, 2000). It denotes not only categorical membership but also a set of cognitive beliefs, values, and affect together with behavioural aspects (Ashmore et al., 2004). While numerous investigators have argued against unidimensionality and provided empirical support for their position (Deaux, 1996; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Phinney, 1990), there is less consensus on the important dimensions of collective identification processes.
Psychological Understandings of Identity in Northern Ireland

The most common psychological framework that has been employed to explore these identification processes in Northern Ireland has been Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987). The social identity perspective emphasizes relationships between groups, as well as intragroup behaviour. Available research evidence has supported many of the fundamental tenets of Social Identity Theory. Social categorization on the basis of religious denomination has been demonstrated, and the functional salience of this categorization for adults has also been established (Cairns & Duriez, 1976; Stringer, 1987, 1989; Stringer & Cairns, 1983). The approach has provided a useful explanation of involvement and support for paramilitary violence (Cairns, Wilson, Gallagher, & Trew, 1995). Other studies have demonstrated some evidence of both ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias on the basis of religious markers (Kremer, Barry, & McNally, 1986; Stringer & Cairns, 1983).

Recent developments in the study of collective identity, however, would suggest that identification processes are dynamic and subsequent to contextual shift. This shift can be explained as a function of the changing definitions of the self across contexts (Self-categorization theory; Turner et al., 1987). For instance, Waddell and Cairns (1986) found that national identification in Northern Ireland was sensitive to changes in immediate social contexts, and more recently, Cassidy and Trew (2004) found changes in religious identification over time in young people making the transition from a religiously homogenous school environment to a religiously heterogeneous university environment. Similarly, others have argued that fluidity and change in identity is often strategic (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Focusing specifically on nationality and nationhood, Reicher and Hopkins (2001) argue that identity shift is essentially political and definitions of nationhood, self-categorization, and categorization of others as similar or dissimilar are shaped by structural factors.

These more recent approaches embrace qualitative methodologies allowing greater explication of the content and understandings which underpin social identity processes. It is now increasingly acknowledged within both the psychological literature (Ashmore et al., 2004; Muldoon, 2004) and literature relating to identity in Northern Ireland (Todd, 2005) that the previous explicitly quantitative orientation has meant the bases of self-categorizations have not received the attention they merit. The current paper aims to attend to content and processes that underlie collective identity self-categorization in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. By necessity, this paper focuses on only two dimensions of identity, namely religion and nationality. The paper aims to illustrate the complexity and richness of religious and national identification processes, as well as the strategic use of these identities in two related qualitative studies.
Method

Study 1

Sample. The first study examines narratives from in-depth qualitative interviews with two groups of adult participants across three generations, grandparents, parents, and young adults. These participants, 23 in total, were theoretically sampled from two groups. Nine adults were interviewed in Northern Ireland’s border region. Northern Ireland has a 220 mile (360 km) land border with the Republic of Ireland; the border area has seen significant levels of political violence and security responses during the Troubles. The nine participants were recruited from this area as the presence of the border, its altered visibility and impact subsequent to the Agreement and the Europeanization of Ireland more generally, allowed for discussion of identity-related issues. In-depth interviews were also conducted with individuals in mixed Protestant-Catholic marriages, again sampled because of the salience and relevance of identity related processes for this group. Approximately 6% of all marriages in Northern Ireland are between mixed Protestant-Catholic couples. Again in this sample, therefore, identity-related issues are drawn into sharp relief.

Interview Process. The interviews were conducted by the third and fourth authors using a common topic guide which was designed to elicit narratives about the nature of and changes in national and religious identity. The interviews, which averaged between one and one-and-a-half hours, were transcribed in full, coded for ethno-national identity, religious identity, and changes in each form of identity. The discussions under each category were compared for individuals of different generations, religions, gender, places of present and of original residence (two of the samples had moved across the border from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland).

Study 2

Sample. The second study sampled young people again in the Eastern border region of Northern Ireland as the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey and the Young Life and Times survey suggested that patterns of self-categorization in the younger, post-Agreement generation tended to differ from that seen in adults.

Essay writing study. Young people’s views and experiences of national and religious identity were explored using an essay writing study. This method of data collection was seen as the most suited to the purpose of this study. It allowed young people to engage with the study in a familiar and readily identifiable way and avoided the restricting effects that the presence of others can have in group interview formats. Individual interviews with young people are problematic in the context of the Children’s Order; the Order restricts access to lone children (1995). In total, 115 young people between 13 and 17 years old (mean age = 14 years)
participated. All of the young people attended secondary schools and were from both urban and rural areas. Seventy boys completed the study; of those 54 attended a Roman Catholic school and 16 went to a Protestant school. Of the 45 girls, 30 went to a Roman Catholic school and 15 to a Protestant school. The underrepresentation of Protestants in the sample is reflective of the demographics of the border populations. Each respondent completed a different combination of two essay questions (in addition to some personal details) which included titles related to nationality and religious affiliation. The data were analyzed using the guidelines of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both studies were conducted subsequent to the 1998 Agreement and as such particular emphasis on the changing nature of identity in the post-Agreement political climate is central to these analyses.

Findings 1

In open-ended interviews, adult respondents emphasized the continuing salience and importance of religious and national identity. Although most retained attachment to the traditional categories (Protestant/Catholic, British/Irish), they discussed their identities in an open and reflexive manner. All participants downplayed the themes of division and opposition in their own identity, emphasizing instead the common ground and common values which all shared. The discussions, however, differed considerably between the two sets of interviewees (the border adults versus those in mixed marriages), in terms of both their initial self-categorizations and the relative importance of religious and national identity.

The border interviewees all identified themselves clearly and unambiguously as Irish, even though several acknowledged the situation in Northern Ireland and the link with Britain. This acknowledgment often downplayed the importance or relevance of this link as something imposed by others. For instance, one second-generation Catholic in asserting her Irishness stated “yes its governed by Great Britain or United Kingdom or whatever way they call Northern Ireland.” Others downplayed the Union which incorporates Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom by distinguishing identity from citizenship. It is interesting to note, however, in the proceeding talk that there is an implicit acknowledgment for this second-generation Catholic, that the idea he would assert Britishness is so ridiculous it is funny for his children, and also that a consequence of embracing Britishness is a denial of his Irishness. For example, one interviewee stated “I actually myself have a British passport and my kids really pull my leg about it you know, that I have a British passport but the actual story behind that is that . . . when we got our passports, the British passport was half the price of the Irish passport and . . . that was really all, it wasn’t because I wanted to be British and I was disowning my Irishness, maybe I’ll come around to getting an Irish one, most of the kids have an Irish passport you know” (second-generation Catholic).
For some of the third-generation Catholic interviewees, they believed this sense of being Irish was now expressed more strongly than before; for instance, one interviewee stated “I think people are becoming more confident... I hated, you know, like, saying it at the end of the Troubles, but now I’m much more confident about saying I’m Irish and I’m proud to say I’m Irish because it seems to be... less attack on that notion of Irishness.” This new-found confidence may be behind the increasing numbers of respondents who chose to categorize themselves as Irish in the Young Life and Times survey. The border interviewees (mostly, but not exclusively, Catholic) clearly rejected British or Northern Irish identification. Importantly, these are rejected because of the implied religious and political associations of these labels, suggesting that the national labels go well beyond simple statements of nationality. For instance, one interviewee stated “So I feel strongly I’m definitely not British and I’m definitely not Northern Irish or I’m definitely not Ulster and that’s because of the connotations that that has for me” (third-generation Catholic).

For some interviewees, Irish identity had a clear cultural, linguistic, and/or historical content. Those who felt most strongly Irish often pointed out the common ground with those whom they differed politically and nationally. Although the national identity of border interviewees was often internally complex, combining historical and religious content with a clear civic and egalitarian content, nonetheless they tended to use one simple category (Irish). This position allowed them to maintain their opposition to others while still appearing to acknowledge their traditional enemies: “I can identify with a lot of... individuals and they might be the exact opposite of me in terms of their identity and beliefs, people like David Ervine, you know, who I really admire and I really, I respect him, you know, I don’t agree with... he has just one outlook, I’ve another outlook, but I really like how he carries himself” (third-generation Catholic).

Interestingly, the British identity was associated more with state-belonging. Although some Protestants interviewed on the border shared the clear and unambiguous sense of Irish identity, there is some indication that categorical complexity may be more typical of Protestants than of Catholics. For example, one second-generation Protestant mentioned all the possible national categories, while explaining the senses in which she felt each: “I would have to say British, and the only reason I say that is because I have a British passport. . . . I suppose I should say Northern Irish because that’s where I live... where do I feel I belong to? . . . well Northern Ireland obviously but England as well... because most of the things you would hear on TV would be mostly England oriented... most of the news is England... I mean our country is governed by English rule as such...” and later “You see I don’t know if I have ever made my mind up if Ireland is all one, north and south, or if it is two different countries.”

Interviewees from mixed-marriage families differed from the border interviewees both in the degree to which they reported identity change and in their explicit discussion of the social significance of national identity. Many of these
individuals gave complex and nuanced views of their national identity: “I was brought up in an environment where we’re British . . . I suppose I saw myself as a mixture, you know both” (first-generation Protestant); “I consider myself Irish in the broadest sense of the term. I’m Irish more than I’m British” (second-generation Catholic); “I’ve got both a British and an Irish passport. I don’t really think about it, . . . but if you did push me I would probably say I have probably more Irish leanings, sort of more nationalist than unionist leanings at the moment but sort of the jury’s still out” (second-generation Protestant). Many of this group reported change in national identity, although such change was neither “conversion” to a different identity (from British to Irish) nor generalization to an encompassing category (Northern Irish), but a holding of several identities which they felt could overlap (British and Irish, British and Northern Irish, more Irish than British)—boundary blurring rather than boundary crossing (Alba, 2005).

All interviewees reported experience of considerable segregation and social division in their own lives and environments. Three border Catholics (two second-generation, one third-generation) reported that they had “never really met a Protestant” during their upbringing in the area; the mixed marriage interviewees all reported experience of prejudice and stigmatization. For those interviewed religious identity, while strong, was often referred to in the first instance in terms of religiosity, spirituality, and as essentially related to personal rather than social identification issues. The taken for granted and indeed ascribed nature of religion in the Northern Irish context is also clearly evident. One religiously devout Catholic stated: “religion . . . well I always class myself as a Catholic you know because I was brought up that way and basically that’s about it . . . religion for us was just . . . we just practiced our religion, we were Catholic and because we were Catholic, like . . . go to mass, confessions, communion and try to live by your commandments . . . but it wouldn’t have been a thing that we’d have sat down and talked a lot about” (second-generation Catholic). For others there was evidence of the increasing privatization of religion and the trend towards “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1994). Thus while the social relevance of religion was often explicitly denied by recourse to the essentially private nature of religion, it was implicitly recognized. For instance, one female interviewee stated “I think its better being a good Christian than a good Catholic because sometimes a good Catholic is not always a good Christian” (second-generation Catholic).

Amongst mixed marriage interviewees, while the individual spiritual component of religious identity was also emphasized, they also reported numerous instances where the religious difference between Protestant and Catholic had led to prejudice or rejection by their extended families. A typical response was to move towards an overarching “Christian” identity: “I was brought up in East Belfast in a Protestant family. First and foremost, I’d say I was a Christian. Not strongly Protestant although I go to a Church of Ireland church, but I wouldn’t take it as my identity that I am a Protestant, I would take it that I am a Christian” (second-generation), or “I still consider myself to be a Catholic, but not as strong as I
consider myself to be a Christian” (second-generation). Paradoxically, and perhaps attesting to the continuing centrality of religion to life in Northern Ireland, individuals in mixed marriages often made recourse to religion and morality to negotiate the divisions they encountered as a result of religion. One interviewee contrasted the “terrible, horrible old doctrinal divisions and theology that seems to bog other people down” with “a true Christian spirit that rises above it, that’s able to see the wood for the trees” (second-generation). A key aspect of this morality, and one which guided child rearing practices, was openness. A contrast was drawn between those who “want to embrace their hatred and bigotry” and those seeking to overcome this “ignorance” and “prejudice.”

The key issue which highlighted the social importance of religion, however, concerned mixed marriages: “I thought I was so broad minded . . . so liberal but then it hits your own front door, it makes you think and I want to . . . I want to be understanding, I’m trying to be understanding but it still hurts, you know, it’s still there, it’s the grounding that I’ve had” (second-generation Catholic). Children of mixed parentage were also seen to continue to have particular problems: “well, if you send the child to a Catholic school with a Protestant name in [the town] it’s . . . that is a situation on its own . . . still now . . . if you send the child to a Protestant school, if it’s found out its mother is a Catholic there’s still an issue . . .” (second-generation Catholic). This is doubtless related to the role of the Churches in generating and perpetuating religious segregation not least in the school system. One first-generation Protestant woman stated “The churches had a big part in dividing people because they provide a place for people to go on Sunday but they also provide social things for them to do, they’ve got halls, and they can provide a whole . . . lifestyle for people so that they can stay with their own kind of people . . . so the churches played a big part in dividing people up, in my opinion . . . to this day, yeah. . . .”

Findings 2

Young people’s views are illustrated via the qualitative data collected for our second study. The majority of young people who participated in our essay writing study appeared to attach a great deal of significance to their national identity, irrespective of whether they identified themselves as Irish or British. Significantly, while respondents were quick to report their identity and the pride they associated with it, a few stated that it was not so important that it justified fighting over. For instance, one participant remarked, “I don’t think that nationality, religion etc. should be that important because you only live once why fight over religion” (14-year-old female identified as British and Protestant).

For the most part young people in Northern Ireland viewed their nationality initially in terms of either being British or being Irish. Interestingly nationality was referred to as achieved identity and subject to choice, in direct contrast to the views
of religion apparent in the adult interviewees. For instance, one Protestant female reported, “My nationality means that I am from Britain and I am connected with England, Scotland and Wales. My nationality means a lot to me as I have been brought up like this and intend to stay this way the rest of my life.” For others, largely Catholics, while they lived in Northern Ireland, evidence of the oppositional nature of nationality in Northern Ireland was in evidence, as in the adult data. One 14-year-old Irish Catholic male remarked, “I do live in Northern Ireland but I do not sing along to ‘God save the Queen’” (British national Anthem) or salute the British flag. I salute the tricolour and sing along to, “Soldiers are we” (Irish national anthem).

When the young people were asked what their identity meant to them, a variety of responses were provided. Sport, sportspeople, culture, and characteristics such as friendliness and sense of humor were readily voiced by respondents who self-categorized as Irish. For instance, one 14-year-old Catholic male stated, “I sometimes play Irish instruments and I have learned the Irish language in school.” Another wrote, “Irish people are dead on and happy to say hello when you walk down the street” (14-year-old male self-defined as half-Irish and half-English). Generally, and in line with the findings from the adult study, those who identified as British provided a more limited number of cultural meanings associated with national identity. Often the cultural meanings assigned to Britishness were conflated with religion, including events such as band parades, the 12th of July, and football (many of the preferred teams in Northern Ireland have followings from one or other community). One 14-year-old Protestant participant wrote his nationality was most important to him, “At the twelfth of July and at band parades, because that is a time when most people celebrate and go to watch bands and be proud of their religion.”

This conflation represents a pervasive theme throughout the data which was the belief that nationality and religion were interchangeable. When the young people were specifically asked about their nationality or religion, they would often answer the question without distinguishing between the two or suggest that the two were equivalent. The strength of identification across emotional cognitive and behavioral dimensions, where this overlap of religious and national identity occurred, was clearly evident. It is exemplified by the following extracts: one 15-year-old Catholic female who wrote, “I love being called Irish because if I said that I was British you would think that I was a protestant (sic) so I say I am Irish and Catholic and proud to say I am Irish.” Another 14-year-old female wrote, “My nationality means what I believe in. It means what I don’t and do believe and which Church I go to whether Catholic or Protestant” (self-identified as British and Protestant).

As well as the greater array of cultural meanings associated with Irishness, collective memories were more prevalent in the essays of those who identified as Irish in comparison to British identifiers. Some referred to specific events such as Bloody Sunday (the 1972 shooting dead of 13 civil rights protestors by the British army), and the 1916 Easter rising, while others tended to refer more generally to
historical happenings. These memories were often used as the basis for declaring oppositional identities and positions. For instance one 15-year-old female who identified herself as Irish and Catholic wrote, “I would be annoyed if someone called me British because of all the trouble in Ireland and how the British treated the Irish.” Stereotypes also appeared to influence tolerance of the other group and in doing so strengthened their own identities. One female who identified as Irish reported, “I’d hate to be English because everyone always seems to be fighting, and are also very rude.” Similarly a 14-year-old Protestant British male again invoking stereotypes wrote, “The Irish are always making trouble and always use violence.”

The data also revealed variability in the emotional meaning of national identity and the influence of context. Respondents described how at different times or after different events nationality represented either something to be proud of, or a source of shame. For example, one boy described how when he goes on holiday he always says he is from Ireland as opposed to Northern Ireland which in his opinion is synonymous with “the Troubles.” He explains, “When I am on holiday and someone asks me where I am from I would say Ireland and not Northern Ireland because I am embarrassed because of the troubles going on and the person asking me might get the wrong impression” (14-year-old male who identified as Catholic and Northern Irish).

There was also variety in the meanings attached to religious identity. Similar to the findings from the interviews with adults, sometimes religious identity was viewed as personal in terms of faith, morality, and worship. For example, one 15-year-old self-defined Irish Catholic male remarked, “As a Catholic I should go to Mass every Sunday at least and try to act in a better way like a Christian. My family and parents would like me growing up in a way that I am not a bad person, but am mannerly and not getting into trouble for doing the wrong thing.” While on other occasions religion was viewed as a collective identity, intrinsically political rather than spiritual. Interestingly, while religion was most often seen as ascribed, the sectarianism associated with the division was not. For instance, on one 14-year-old Catholic male wrote: “Some parents could grow up hating Protestants and their babies would hear their parents talking about Protestants in a bad way and the baby would grow up thinking the same things.”

**Discussion**

Findings from our qualitative studies suggest that collective identification in Northern Ireland is likely to continue to be a source of division and dissent in the post-Good Friday Agreement climate. A number of findings are suggestive of identification processes and patterns that are particularly associated with political conflict. For instance, there is evidence that religious and national identification are frequently conflated in the minds of adolescents and to some extent adults.
Where a high degree of overlap between identities is perceived, such as between religion and nationality in Northern Ireland, this is generally associated with less favorable outgroup attitudes and intergroup tolerance (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). This is in line with the importance attached to the meaning of national identification amongst young people across affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions.

Second, our data suggest that religious identification continues to occupy an important and central place in Northern Ireland. Self-categorization on the basis of religion remains extremely high (Fahey et al., 2005). Consistent with the view of Reicher and Hopkins (2001), this identity has a basis in structural, institutional, and associated everyday markers of the division. This religious division has been further institutionalized at a government level by the Good Friday Agreement (Tonge, 2004). It is perhaps not remarkable therefore that none of the respondents in our studies explicitly mentioned the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in relation to their own identities; both relate to the extant divisions.

Many of the adults interviewed declared an acceptance of diversity and difference associated with or justified in the context of religion. Indeed discourse around religion predominantly emphasized its private, moral, and spiritual nature which formed a bedrock of this declared tolerance of others irrespective of their group membership. This construction of religion as a weapon against prejudice is in direct contrast to the often implicit and sometimes explicit acknowledgment of religion as the major source of persistent, age-old, apparently inescapable, and entrenched divisions in Northern Ireland. Indeed this attested interest in inclusion and diversity is at odds with current voting patterns in Northern Ireland and highlights how the coupling of religion and socio-religious identification allows the strategic management of apparently contradictory interpersonal and intergroup positions.

Interestingly, the strategic and political value of national identification is acknowledged by adult interviewees who demonstrated an awareness of identities being used in this way. It can be said that there was less ambiguity for Catholics than Protestants at least in terms of national identification. Irish identification (preferred by Catholics) was often imbued with cultural meaning. Catholics were often very clear about rejecting what they believed they were not—namely British. This is interesting, not least because of the divisive and oppositional nature of identity in Northern Ireland; relational-identity definitions (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) of “what you are not” are as strategically important as “what you are.”

The meaning of British identification (preferred by Protestants) was often linked to the state in our interviews with adults. Many of our interviewees made reference to Britishness in relation to passport ownership. For some, holding a British passport was considered meaningless to their own identity. Frequently, this allowed for a (strategic) denigration of the British identity by those who viewed themselves as Irish. Young people who identified as British appeared to have some difficulty ascribing meaning to their national identity which they often imbued
instead with religious meaning. Adult Protestants interviewed along the border often shifted between British, Northern Irish, and Irish identities. Importantly, however, the singular Irish identity was rarely embraced by Protestants; in effect they rejected the notion that they were solely Irish.

Individuals in mixed marriages provided an important window into national and religious identification processes. These individuals were extremely articulate about their identity and processes of identity change which typically were recounted as beginning before the marriage and having continued since. Interestingly, boundary-crossing and boundary-blurring in the family background were often mentioned. Sometimes it was territorial boundary crossing (South to North, England to Ireland) or sometimes previous mixed marriages (close or distant relatives of the “other” religion). Whether or not individuals in mixed marriages have more boundary crossing or boundary blurring in their family backgrounds than do others is difficult to know. Irrespective of this, their recourse to these instances of boundary blurring provided them with a sense of intergenerational continuity and justifications for the marriage choice they made in the subsequent difficulties they encountered.

In conclusion, our studies illustrate the bases of self-categorized religious and national identity in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. Our research suggests that for the most part, national identities continue to be constructed as oppositional and negatively interdependent. The high degree of overlap between national and religious identification is illustrated by its perception as complete overlay, evidenced as conflation of the two identities in young people’s writings. Our findings also highlight the strategic function of collective identification processes. The overtly strategic and political use of national identification was acknowledged as a reality by adult interviewees. A more subtle and disingenuous discourse surrounded the use of religious identification. Given the continuing and acknowledged centrality of religion to the structural and social divisions in Northern Ireland, recourse to religion as the vehicle to promote tolerance and pluralism would appear ill conceived. Given the association between identities, conflict, and structural and institutional division, the post-Agreement landscape would be better served by reducing the influence of the political, national, religious, and historical structures that divide Northern Ireland.

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