The Cost of Conflict: Children's Reasoning about Ethno-religious Identity in Northern Ireland

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With the help of the Andrew W. Mellon Pre-dissertation Research Fellowship provided by the Council for European Studies, I was able to conduct an exploratory study investigating children's early reasoning about ethno-religious identity in Northern Ireland during the spring of 2010. In Northern Ireland, there are two ethno-religious groups, Catholics and Protestants. To an outsider, these groups may seem very similar – Catholics and Protestants have few perceptual differences between them, while having in common European descent and a Christian background. Yet, in Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants make up two distinct national, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups with a long history of Sectarian conflict. My research explored the development of young children's social reasoning about these two ostensibly similar, yet culturally distinct, ethno-religious groups in Northern Ireland. During a three-month trip to Northern Ireland, I was able to administer an exploratory survey to children attending Catholic, Protestant, and Integrated schools, questioning identity, national-
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ity, beliefs about conflict, and reasoning about the stability of group membership. The goals of this research were twofold. First, research on the developmental origins of social categorization can inform our understanding of the nature of social bias and violence in a society with a long history of conflict. Second, this research offers theoretical insight into the nature of children’s social group formation and early in-group preferences more generally.

Since the late 1990s, Sectarian violence in Northern Ireland has largely subsided. The diminished levels of violence result in most children having little to no direct experience with conflict. However, 20 years after the beginning of the peace process, the majority of Northern Irish children still attend segregated schools, live in segregated neighborhoods, and observe evidence of Sectarianism at the borders of their respective communities. According to the 2001 UK Census, 83 percent of all wards in Northern Ireland have a population that is at least three quarters Catholic or Protestant. In their respective communities, children are regularly confronted with symbols representing Catholic or Protestant identity, such as political murals on the sides of housing estates, national flags, and painted sidewalks denoting community boundaries. In addition to housing segregation, Catholic and Protestant children have different hobbies, access different media, and are likely to visit different places on vacations.

Northern Ireland also maintains a vastly segregated educational system in which about 95 percent of pupils attend either Catholic schools or Protestant schools. In fact, many adults on both sides of the divide blame the segregated school system as being “one of the many causes of division in the community” (McEwan and Salters 1993, 164). Stemming from this line of thinking, there has been an emergent interest in integrated education, for which schools must keep an enrollment of at least 40 percent of children from the Catholic tradition and 40 percent of children from the Protestant tradition. The introduction of integrated schools offers an interesting case study of the impact of increased contact between Catholic and Protestant children on social reasoning about ethno-religious identity in contrast to children attending segregated schools. Thus, the current context in Northern Ireland presents a unique opportunity to study children’s developing ethno-religious awareness and its effects on reasoning about group membership as the society is transitioning toward more peaceful times, but the possibility for the transmission of social bias still persists.

From a theoretical perspective in psychology, researchers in the United States studying race, gender, and age have historically argued that children’s differentiation of in-group and out-group members is based on basic visual perception of surface features, such as skin color or gender cues (e.g., Aboud 1988). Yet, in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant group members generally look very similar as they descend from a common ancestry on the British Isles. In fact, an empirical study testing Northern Irish adults’ ability to categorize faces found that they were unable to reliably label ethno-religious group membership based on the visual face stimuli alone (Stringer and Cairns 1983). However, this visual similarity across groups does not prevent the deep societal divide that has persisted for hundreds of years. Recent psychological findings indicate that children in fact hold deeper beliefs about social categories, beyond what is provided by visual cues alone. For instance, children reason about national and linguistic group membership as particularly important social markers, even when not visually available (Carrington and Short 1995; Kinzler and Dautel 2012). Children also rely more on conceptual information (i.e., being labeled as a boy or a girl) than perceptual information (i.e., looking like a boy or a girl) when making gender-based inferences about properties that an individual might have (Gelman, Collman, and Macoby 1986). Thus, this exploratory study sought to investigate whether children make deeper inferences about ethno-religious identity, beyond what is perceived.

I chose to conduct this study with children from the city of Belfast, in Northern Ireland, for two reasons. First, the population of Belfast is made up of roughly equal numbers of people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. Second, Bel-
fast offers three types of primary schools in which children’s exposure to diversity differs dramatically: State Controlled schools (majority Protestant background), Maintained schools (majority Catholic background), and Integrated schools (both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, as well as other ethnicities). Five schools participated in this study: two Protestant schools, two Catholic schools, and one integrated school. Sampling children in Catholic, Protestant, and Integrated schools provided an opportunity to study the effect of exposure to diversity through early school environment on children’s reasoning about ethno-religious identity.

Across the five schools, 150 children – ranging in age from 5 to 11 years – who returned parental permission forms were asked to respond to a series of eight questions in a structured interview. I surveyed each child individually in a quiet classroom. The questions were asked as follows (with the labels ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ presented in counter-balanced order between children): 1) Are you Catholic, Protestant, or something else? 2) What does it mean to be Catholic? 3) What does it mean to be Protestant? 4) What country do you live in? 5) What is the capital city of your country? 6) Do Catholics and Protestants generally get along, or not so much? 7) Are you born to be a Catholic or Protestant, or do you become Catholic or Protestant as you grow up? 8) If you are a Catholic or a Protestant as a child, can you change to be a Protestant or a Catholic as a grown up? Children’s answers were recorded, and then children were thanked and sent back to class with a small prize.

Initial evidence from children’s responses suggests two interesting patterns of results. First, children’s knowledge and the complexity of their responses increased with age. Second, children in different school environments had vastly different beliefs about identity, nationality, conflict, and the heritability and stability of ethno-religious group membership.

First, children’s identification of their own ethno-religious identity was compared with parents’ reports of their children’s ethno-religious identity. Only about one fifth of children 5 to 7 years old attending segregated schools were able to accurately report their ethno-religious background. This contrasted significantly to children 8 to 11 years old attending segregated schools, of which almost every child was able to accurately report being a Catholic, Protestant, or other ethno-religious background. Interestingly, there was also a difference by school type, such that across both age groups, segregated school children were more accurate in their ethno-religious self-identification than integrated school children. While with age, children begin to have increased awareness of their own ethno-religious background, most children, irrespective of age and school type, struggled to verbally define what it means to be Catholic or Protestant. Of those children who attempted a definition, the majority of definitions were about differing beliefs. The most common responses from both Catholic and Protestant children involved the presence or absence of a belief in God, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary. For instance, one child said, “We believe in God, and they don’t,” while another responded, “Protestants believe in God, but not as well as the Catholics do.” While it seems that children gain awareness of their own ethno-religious identity with age, explicitly defining what this means remains difficult.

In terms of nationality, children were asked what country they lived in, and what the capital of their country was. Children attending Catholic schools were most likely to report that the name of their country was Ireland and the capital of their country was Dublin. On the other hand, Protestant and Integrated school children were more likely to report their country to be Northern Ireland, and the capital of their country to be Belfast. Again, there was an increased tendency to give a response with age. Here, we see that beliefs about nationality pattern quite closely with ethno-religious background. Also, integrated school children’s beliefs seem to differ from segregated school children’s beliefs about the severity of conflict and the origins of ethno-religious identity. Overall, about 50 percent of children reported that Catholics and Protestants get along, while the other 50 percent reported that they do not generally get along. Children attending integrated schools were significantly more likely to
report that Catholics and Protestants generally get along, compared with children attending Catholic schools or Protestant schools. Children’s beliefs about whether Catholics and Protestants generally get along were generally tied to a specific event. For instance, one 10-year-old Catholic child responded, “No, [they don’t get along], because when Rangers play a match, there is always murder.” Alternatively, another 10-year-old Catholic child responded, “Some do and some don’t [get along]. I know someone who lives near Protestants, and they get along.”

Lastly, children attending segregated schools were more likely to report that an individual is born with a religious identity rather than acquiring a religious identity as he or she grows up. For example, one 10-year-old Protestant child said, “If you are born a Protestant, you stay a Protestant, unless you get sent to the Catholics,” while an 11-year-old integrated school child responded, “You are born that way, but if you were born without a religion, you could grow up to be either.” Both children state that there is a likelihood one will be born with a religion, but the nuanced responses hint at the possibility for environmental influences in certain cases. Overall, the majority of integrated school children stated that religion is acquired, rather than inherited. Interestingly, across all ages and school types, children who reported that Catholics and Protestants were more likely to get along were also more likely to report that you could change from one group to another. This provides early evidence that perhaps perceptions of group conflict are related to children’s reasoning about the rigidity of group boundaries. These divergent beliefs across children in different schooling environments may have important consequences for cross-community friendships and intergroup interactions, and thus, deserve further exploration.

These exploratory data I collected during my time in Northern Ireland laid the groundwork for future research using experimental methods in developmental psychology. These findings show that children do, in fact, make deep inferences about identity, nationality, intergroup relations, and the stability of group boundaries. Research in psychology and philosophy proposes a mechanism by which children may reason beyond visual cues to make deeper inferences about category members: psychological essentialism. Essentialist reasoning is defined as reasoning that construes some categories as ‘real’ or ‘natural,’ and a basis for rich inferences about non-obvious properties (Gelman 2004). Often, essentialist reasoning is observed in human’s reasoning about natural kinds, such as ‘tigers’ or ‘diamonds’. For example, adults state that these are ‘natural’ categories that will maintain a constant identity over time. Knowing something’s category identity (e.g., being a tiger or being a diamond) will identify it as having tiger or diamond properties or features (e.g., ferocious or hard). In some cases, research suggests that children extend essentialist reasoning to social categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and language (Diesendruck and Halle 2006; Hirschfeld 1996; Hirschfeld and Gelman 1997; Kinzler and Dautel, 2012; Taylor 1996). Might children’s reasoning about ethno-religious identity also fall prey to an essentialist mode of construal? Preliminary data collected during my CES fellowship provide initial evidence that children may reason about religion as an inherited, stable, and immutable category. Future research will seek to investigate to what degree children growing up in a context of conflict believe that one’s ethno-religious identity is an essential and representative part of a person, and how resistant these views are to change based on one’s exposure to diversity through the school environment.
References


