INTRODUCTION

Northern Irish (NI) devolution is distinctive in that it is set in a context of political and social division, and is moreover, seen by many as a potential route towards dislodging these community divisions. However, the evidence suggests that community divisions have endured, if not intensified, in post-devolution Northern Ireland (KuusistoArponen, 2001, Shirlow, 2001). Primarily as a result of this, the constitutional process has proved uniquely unstable; the NI Assembly has been repeatedly suspended, and is currently dissolved pending the outcome of a formal Review. \(^1\) In addition, recent research and opinion polls demonstrate a sharp division between Catholics/nationalists and Protestants/unionists in terms of support for, and satisfaction with, devolution and the peace process. Such research has demonstrated markedly higher levels of support among nationalists than among unionists, many of whom feel ambivalent, or in some cases, antithetical, towards the devolution process (e.g. MacGinty, 2003, The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, 2003, Wilford et al., 2003). In fact, the meaning of devolution itself is ambiguous in Northern Ireland. For those who aspire towards unification with the Republic (i.e. nationalists/republicans), the process can be seen as a first step towards separation from Britain. For unionists/loyalists, on the other hand, devolution could strengthen the position of NI as a constitutional region within the UK. Additionally, the absence of an uncontested ‘Northern Irish’ identity (Graham, 1998) means that devolution at the global level is unlikely to engender commonality of identification, in the same way that devolution in Scotland or Wales may be expected to intensify ‘Scottishness’ or ‘Welshness’.

This study set out to examine the impacts of NI devolution at the micro-level of everyday identity expression and community experience, and thus to increase our understanding of how identity cleavages are maintained and/or transformed in the face of socio-political change (see Addressing the Aims and Objectives, below). In addition, the findings of this research provide insights into the previously remarked divergences between nationalist and unionist perceptions of the political process. Thus, the study offers a qualitative perspective on existing quantitative research, through examining not only participants’ orientation towards political change, but also how this political change is oriented to in terms of everyday community experience and discourse. In turn, this has implications for the process itself, and particularly

\(^1\) The NI Assembly was dissolved on 28 April 2003, having been suspended from midnight on 14 October 2002. http://www.ni-assembly.gov.uk/

The strength of persisting political divisions was also highlighted in the most recent elections to the suspended Assembly (November 2003), which demonstrated a markedly increased polarisation of the electorate.
for politicians and policy makers who implement constitutional reform in Northern Ireland. Finally, this study offers an important corrective to the tendency to see NI identities in terms of ‘simple’ dualities. While the data do clearly reflect the continuing community divisions and alignments, they also illustrate the complexity of identification underlying such dualities. All of these issues will be discussed further in the Main Findings section, below.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Theoretical Framework

The study takes a broadly ‘discursive’ approach to cultural and place identity, seeing these categories as constructed in discourse and interaction (e.g. Condor, 2000, Meinhof, 2002, Reicher and Hopkins, 2001, Stapleton and Wilson, 2004, in press, Wilson and Stapleton, in press, Wodak et al., 1999). This engenders a dual focus on the macro-level discursive structures (e.g. cultural narratives, ideologies, and meanings) that structure identities within a given culture, and the micro-level discursive processes (e.g. self-narratives, identifications and delineations) through which identity is constructed and negotiated in talk. Specific attention is given to the empirical Discourse Analysis (DA) paradigm outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987; see also Edwards, 1997, Edwards and Potter, 1992). DA is characterised by a view of language as action-oriented and functional, whereby identities are actively constructed and negotiated in everyday talk and interaction. Such analyses are also centrally concerned with the ideological structures and ‘ways of seeing’ through which people interpret, categorise, and make sense of the social world.

The research attempts to maintain a balance between the description of participant produced discursive themes and their cultural and historical positioning, and a detailed analysis of how such positionings become negotiated within the interactional construction of talk. Within the limits of this report, and the time-scale of the research to date (twelve months) we could not detail all the elements of this balance. The aim, therefore, is to articulate the way in which participant discourse has created identity positions within the devolution process for Northern Ireland, and to highlight some of the ways in which participants make use of talk in interaction to situate themselves and others. A number of sample interactions are provided in Appendix 2, which the reader may further explore in relation to the details of our claims.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through community groups, contact with representatives within the community and voluntary sector, and informal networking by participants themselves.

Three separate groups participated in the study:

- East Belfast: Members of a community education programme, and friends
- West Belfast A: Community leaders/representatives
• West Belfast B: Voluntary community workers and friends

Each group comprised 5-10 people and met (separately) for focus group discussions at roughly monthly intervals, commencing in December 2003.\(^2\) Sessions were conducted by a researcher from the University of Ulster. For an overview of the sessions held and topics covered, please see Appendix 1. Each month, a particular topical event or socio-political development, here termed a Critical Social Incident\(^3\), was identified as the focus for discussion; specifically, the participants’ responses and reactions to the events in question. However, the sessions followed an open-ended format, which allowed the respondents to discuss their more general perceptions, concerns and aspirations regarding their everyday lives. Indeed, the general aim was that the data approximate as closely as possible to ‘real-life’ conversation. Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed in accordance with Discourse Analysis conventions (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 188-9).

Data Analysis

Note: Two groups were established in West Belfast because the first group (West Belfast A) was limited mainly to community leaders rather than simply community workers/friends in general. Given the small number of sessions held with West Belfast A (see earlier), and also the fact that this group generally focused on formal political analysis, it was felt that the East Belfast (EB) and WB B (henceforth WB) groups provided the most appropriate comparative analysis. Therefore the analysis has primarily focused on data from these two groups. However, data from West Belfast A, whose members volunteered to participate as community representatives, have provided insights on the role of opinion leaders in community expression, and on the comparison of public discourse with ‘grass-roots’ narratives and accounts. We are, of course, aware of the problems of generalisation in terms of such groups and their limited representation. Nevertheless, both groups do represent those with a clear community and political awareness.

In line with DA principles, the study did not establish a priori the content or issues for analysis, but sought to allow themes to emerge from the talk itself. However, general discursive categories were used to guide the analysis. These included:

- Explicit self-positionings and ideological stances.
- Self-narratives, including types of narratival themes, and the construction of protagonists and antagonists.
- Socio-cultural categories and references; the factors (local, regional, national, global) which constitute the discursive context(s) of interpretation.
- Identifications and patterns of alignment; i.e. participants’ identifications with, and in opposition to, different individuals, groups and institutions.
- Modes of self-other construction and delineation; the strategies and points of reference through which participants construct themselves as ‘similar to’ and ‘different from’ other social entities and groups.

\(^2\) Due to its members’ work commitments, West Belfast A only met for two focus group sessions.
\(^3\) This follows Wilson’s 1998-1999 piloting of the technique in a study of people’s changing orientations to the NI Peace Process/Belfast Agreement. CSI is an extension from the Critical Incident Technique, developed by Flanagan (1954) and now widely used in qualitative research.
• Modes of practical reasoning and interpretation; the practical reasoning structures through which participants account for ‘the world’ and hence, construct particular worldviews.

These categories were initially explored in depth in *Phase 1* of the analysis (i.e. following each recording). *Phase 2* of the analysis ran concurrently with *Phase 1* and compared the datasets qualitatively across time. In this way, cumulative comparative analyses were obtained for each of the two groups, across the duration of the research. This approach allowed for examination of participants’ identity shifts, realignments, and maintenance strategies, in response to developments within the socio-political domain.

**MAIN FINDINGS**

What follows is a summary of participant orientations to the main substantive issues surrounding devolution and identity. These were generally constructed differently by EB and WB, and moreover, were not noticeably modified during the period of the research. Sample data extracts illustrating the main points below are given in *Appendix 2*.

1. Devolution itself: Starkly contrasting views from East and West Belfast. EB respondents see this as primarily negative and regressive for their community. WB respondents see devolution as positive for their community. Each recognises the viewpoint of the ‘other’ community. (See *Appendix 2*, Extracts 1-5).

2. ‘Bread and butter’ issues: Both communities focus overwhelmingly on issues of housing, employment, education (etc.) in their analysis of the political situation. The political process is constituted and experienced through these day-to-day concerns. Again, the groups offer contrasting accounts of what the process has meant for their community. EB respondents perceive a sharp decline in economic and social conditions, while WB respondents feel that these conditions have improved somewhat under local administration. (See *Appendix 2*, Extracts 1-5).

3. Future of the process: Both communities express frustration at the perceived stalemate/‘failure’ of the progress. However, on the whole, WB respondents feel confident that this must resolve itself in the long-term. EB respondents are ambivalent about the restoration of the devolved institutions; they are generally sceptical about whether they will ever ‘work’, and some respondents feel that it would be better if they were not restored. (See *Appendix 2*, Extracts 6-11).

4. Politicians: Both communities see republican politicians (SF) as effective regarding their own agenda, and see both unionist (UUP/DUP) and ‘moderate’ nationalist (SDLP) as less effective. There is agreement between the communities on this point, although clearly personal orientation towards the politicians in question depends on the groups’ respective political stances. Views of their ‘own’ politicians are
linked to the respondents’ general perspectives on devolution (positive/negative). (See Appendix 2, Extracts 7-19)

5. Identity: While identity issues permeate the research as a whole, there were a number of occasions on which the respondents directly addressed the question of their ‘own’ identity, which is generally formulated in community terms – i.e. as Protestant/Catholic, or as unionist/nationalist. In these contexts, the groups’ responses again contrast sharply. EB respondents feel that, as a community, their identity and ‘worth’ is being eroded and ‘taken away’ – a process that has been escalated since devolution. WB respondents, on the other hand, feel that they have a strong unchanging identity, that has (if anything) been enhanced by the political process. (See Appendix 2, Extracts 20-21)

6. Constitutional issues: The constitutional status of Northern Ireland remains a salient issue for both groups. However, this is generally addressed indirectly, emerging in discussion of other issues, and typically grounded within accounts of community development and social concerns. Nonetheless, both groups feel that devolution has increased the possibility of Irish unification, and this clearly also affects their orientation to the political process as a whole.

7. British and Irish governments: As may be expected, EB respondents show a generally negative orientation to the Irish government, while WB respondents feel similarly negatively towards the British government. However, WB respondents also attach some ‘blame’ for the perceived failure of the process to the British government (as well as to unionist politicians). EB respondents take a more ambivalent stance on the role and actions of the Irish government in the political process. Interestingly, both EB and WB groups feel that their respective ‘parent’ governments are increasingly less committed to their political interests/concerns (EB feel that they are being ‘sold out’ by the British government; WB feel that the Irish government is no longer interested in Northern nationalists/republicans). However, the groups appear to diverge in their views of each other’s ‘parent’ governments here; WB respondents feel that the British government is still (at least partially) committed to the unionist cause, while EB respondents feel that both British and Irish governments are disengaged from Northern Ireland.

In light of the above, other salient features of the analysis can be noted:

- Community divisions are still highly prominent in the respondents’ accounts and identifications. ‘Our’ and ‘their’ communities provide a primary point of reference in any discussion of political or social issues.

- The devolution process itself, as perceived by the respondents, may be expected to heighten such divisions, given the sharply contrasting community narratives that it engenders. (Tellingly, the groups produce
largely convergent accounts of what devolution has meant for their own vs. the other community).

- All of the participants negotiate both their own (community) position and their views of the devolution process, within a framework of community and political division. This suggests that despite shifts in socio-political discourses, these newly available ‘ways of talking’ will not necessarily dislodge the underlying community divisions. Thus, even if the relationships and modes of alignment have changed in some ways, the basic distinction still holds, and is in fact, reinterpreted and adapted to fit the ‘new’ political context of Northern Ireland. For example, in Appendix 2 we see how EB have begun to interrogate the concepts of ‘violence’ and ‘terrorism’. Their community still suffers from violence, but it is no longer as easy to explain, as it is now a mix of general criminal activity, and organised Protestant paramilitary crime visited upon their own community. In such a context, words such as ‘violence’, ‘crime’, and ‘terrorism’ are becoming reconstructed and interrogated since they no longer simply apply to the ‘other’ (e.g. IRA). Equally, in WB the perennial problem of policing becomes reconfigured to suit established ideologies. Although the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland is meant to achieve a balance of 50% Catholic/50% Protestant, informants view any Catholics who join the PSNI as not ‘real’ Catholics.

- There was little evidence of overt political ‘shifts’ in the respondents’ accounts during the period of the research. However, some intensification of unionist opinion might be discerned among EB participants following the Assembly elections, when the group, as a whole, endorsed the position of the DUP more vociferously than previously. Also, the WB may be seen to have marginally hardened their opposition to unionist politicians as the ‘stalemate’ continues in the Assembly. Finally, the WB group feel increasingly let down by the Irish government – again, this feeling might be seen as marginally intensifying over time.

ADDRESSING THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Devolution and Identity (Theory-oriented)

To provide an in-depth exploration of the particular impacts of devolution on NI identities, and through this, to (a) contribute to general understanding of devolution and identity processes; (b) understand the specific issues entailed in devolving government to divided societies; (c) explore the general mechanisms of devolution through a unique perspective on (temporary) ‘devolution breakdown’.

Findings: NI identities remain closely aligned with community divisions and cleavages. This configuration is, in fact, likely to be heightened by the devolution/peace process, which highlights ‘parity of esteem’ principles, and thereby implicitly promotes single-identity politics. Additionally, the ‘meaning’ of devolution itself should not be assumed a priori. Rather, it is constituted in the community narratives and constructions within which individual identities are
formulated. In the case of Northern Ireland, these community narratives offer sharply contrasting trajectories (of progress/confidence vs. decline/alienation). This in itself is likely to reinforce community divisions, as each group continues to use the other as a reference point, and to measure the impacts of the political process in these terms. Such impacts are also formulated overwhelmingly around bread and butter issues, such as housing, employment and education. In this sense, the communities appear to perceive a 'competition' situation in which a ‘gain’ for one community means a ‘loss’ for the other. This context is unlikely to foster identity commonality, or even allow for greater fluidity of identities within/between the groups.

Politicians, particularly local politicians, clearly have an important role to play in community perceptions of the political process. In this context, the EB group show some cross-identification with republican politicians on the basis of working-class politics, and community advocacy. However, they also perceive that such politicians are duplicitous and enemies of the Protestant community. This, then, leads to feelings of envy, rather than commonality with working-class Catholics. Perceptions of the ‘parent’ (i.e. British and Irish) governments are particularly interesting, as each group feels let down by their own traditional ‘parent’, but WB participants feel that the British government is steadfast in support of the unionist cause, while EB participants feel that both governments are increasingly disengaged from Northern Ireland. With regard to the current ‘stalemate’ in the political process, WB participants are keen to see the Institutions restored, while EB are more ambivalent. Ultimately, devolution is viewed pragmatically by the communities – it is only significant insofar as it produces tangible effects for one’s ‘own’ community.

2. Discourse, Identity and Society (Theory-oriented)

To contribute to discursive theories of identity, by providing a unique longitudinal analysis of identity negotiation and identification processes, in the context of shifting socio-political structures and ideologies.

Findings: In general, the participants did not display overt shifts in identity/community alignment across the research period. However, as indicated earlier, there are a number of complexities underlying this duality. It should firstly be noted that the respondents’ discourse may be seen as shifting within a socio-historical context. For example, the EB emphasis on working-class politics differs considerably from a socio-historical view of unionism as conservative and traditionalist. Consequently, this group feels frustrated, by and large, with their own (unionist) politicians (see Main Findings 3). Thus, the period of the research may simply have been too short to witness the discursive identity shifts that occur in this type of context. Other points of complex alignment and counter-alignment between the two groups include convergent views of politicians (both unionist and nationalist), a common orientation towards working-class politics, views on the issue of immigrants in Northern Ireland, and a shared opposition to the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In addition, the changing socio-political climate makes available new discourses and ‘ways of talking’ for community members; e.g. both groups alternately draw on discourses of culture/history/belonging and citizenship/multiculturalism/civic rights. However, such discourses are used almost invariably in attempts to establish/legitimate the position and aspirations of the speaker’s ‘own’ community.

A further strategy in this context is the reinterpretation of information to ‘fit’ new contexts, while leaving the original identity-implicative position unchanged. This may be seen as the discursive management of cognitive dissonance. A particularly good example of this can be seen in both groups’
opposition to the PSNI. The WB nationalist group, which has traditionally opposed the police (formerly the RUC), negotiates its continuing opposition to the (reformed) PSNI through a number of strategic discursive moves (i.e. particularisation, generalisation, and categorisation). On the other hand the EB unionist group, which has traditionally supported the police, uses the same type of strategies to negotiate a position in which they now oppose the (reformed) police service. By using these strategies, both of the groups are able to maintain both a consistent identity position, and also, the essential distinction between themselves and the ‘other’ community.

3. Language and Politics (Theory-oriented)

To explore (a) how everyday talk becomes and/or remains politicised; (b) how socio-political ideologies are reproduced through this ‘mundane politicisation’ of language; (c) how such processes are related to concepts of identity.

Findings: As indicated earlier, the emphasis on concepts of ‘identity diversity’ and ‘parity of esteem’ are freely utilised by both groups, but usually with the effect of highlighting single-identity politics. The implicit perception of community ‘competition’ and hierarchy, engendered partly by the political process itself, is also highly significant in maintaining politicised identities. When the effects of devolution for ‘our’ community are formulated through bread and butter issues, this competition, and indeed politicisation, is intensified still further. The continued use of ‘us’ and ‘them’ demarcations and comparisons is thus a primary means of mundane politicisation, and of reproducing traditional socio-political ideologies in post-devolution Northern Ireland. Additionally, newly available discourses and concepts (e.g. diversity, multiculturalism), are, in fact, commonly appropriated to sustain such ideologies and divisions. Finally, as in classic cognitive dissonance theory, new information that does not ‘fit’ existing frameworks (e.g. the reform of the police service) is simply reinterpreted and reformulated to uphold the conventional modes of sense-making within the respective communities. These processes, in turn, allow for the maintenance of traditional identity alignments and demarcations, and in particular, politicised community affiliations.

4. Models/Techniques of Identity Exploration (Methodology-oriented)

To develop and assess (a) the ‘Critical Social Incident’ technique, as a means of investigating the interaction between societal contexts and personal identity; and (b) a longitudinal discursive model for the exploration of devolution and identity issues more generally.

Findings: In the present study, both the CSI and the longitudinal discursive model have proved fruitful means of identity research. These techniques have facilitated the exploration of identity within a changing socio-political context; in particular, how events in the public domain impact upon everyday identity processes, mediated through community narratives and accounts. Moreover, while few overt identity shifts were noted in the present study, the research techniques allowed unique insights into the processes and strategies through which identities are maintained in such contexts (see above). We would therefore propose that these techniques have a wider applicability
beyond the present study, to investigate other contexts of identity maintenance and/or identity change.

5. Societal Processes: Northern Ireland and Beyond (Practice-oriented)

To (a) identify the processes/ideologies which perpetuate division at the local levels of devolved NI society, and to suggest potential means of dislodging these structures; and (b) discuss these issues in terms of the policies and practices of devolution (and, indeed, ‘devolution breakdown’) in divided societies.

Findings: The analysis reveals a number of key discursive patterns through which traditional divisions and identities are perpetuated in post-devolution Northern Ireland. Crucially, it has also shown how the discourses around devolution itself may work to reinforce such cleavages. Particularly important aspects of this process include:

- Divergent constructions of devolution, constituted through contrasting community narratives;
- Perceptions of competition, hierarchies and zero-sum politics, enacted through the devolution process;
- Perception that politicians are ‘using’ devolution more or less effectively in the interests of their ‘own’ community;
- Dissatisfaction with bureaucracy and its impacts on bread and butter issues;
- Availability of new discourses (e.g. multiculturalism, cultural diversity), which are readily appropriated to serve single-identity politics;
- Rejection and/or reinterpretation of information that is incompatible with existing identity positions;
- Perceptions (particularly among EB participants) that identity and cultural categories are being determined and imposed from above;
- Indifference towards the ongoing devolution ‘stalemate’. This is particularly true for EB participants who are ambivalent, or even antithetical, towards the process as a whole. However, in a different way, it can also be said of the WB participants, who see the process as having been ‘hijacked’ and ‘blocked’ by both unionist intransigence, and by British and Irish government antipathy and bureaucracy, but who are confident that the process ‘must’ resolve itself in the long-term.

The above processes highlight the particular problematic of devolution in divided societies. While socio-political discourses may have shifted, these available ‘ways of talking’ will not necessarily dislodge the underlying community divisions. Tellingly, in this study, ‘the other community’ continues to be used as a primary point of (self-)reference and delineation by both the EB and WB groups; suggesting that even if the relationships and modes of alignment have changed in some ways, the basic distinction still holds, and is in fact, reinterpreted and adapted to fit the ‘new’ political context of Northern Ireland. Indeed, as a number of writers have suggested, the foregrounding of ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘parity of esteem’ in post-devolution Northern Ireland, may actually perpetuate cultural divisions and/or single-identity politics (e.g. Brown and MacGinty, 2003; Wilson and Stapleton, 2003). Additionally, the sharply contrasting community narratives and perceptions, illustrated above, can only serve to intensify the extant divisions and perceptions of ‘them and us’ among the grassroots communities, in that the generally positive Catholic experiences of devolution
are countered by the Protestant group’s feelings of regression, frustration, and alienation.

From an external perspective, this particular configuration of responses may appear surprising. While Northern Ireland is constitutionally part of the UK, it was, until the imposition of Direct Rule from Westminster in 1972, run by an Ulster Protestant administration. It might be expected then, that Protestants/unionists would support the present devolution process, as a return to local administration within the UK. On the other hand, Catholics/nationalists who view themselves as Irish, and aspire to unification with the Republic, might be expected to boycott, or at least see as irrelevant, any constitutional arrangement that explicitly recognises Northern Ireland as part of the UK, and is moreover initiated by a British government. Hence, the analysis has illustrated not only the ways in which community responses are shaped by differing constructions of devolution, but also that such constructions cannot be assumed in advance of their contextualised negotiation and expression. Ultimately, NI politicians and policy makers are faced with the challenge of finding a mode of discourse which fosters a common identity, while simultaneously allowing all members of the community to feel equally valued, and free to express, and indeed define, their own cultural identity (see Benhabib, 2002). At different levels, this same challenge faces UK devolution more generally, and has particular relevance for EU regionalisation, whereby ethnically contested regions are increasingly claiming, and gaining, constitutional recognition.

REFERENCES


