

## **The Minority-Majority Conundrum in Northern Ireland: An Orange Order Perspective**

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*Researchers have argued that, depending on the framing of the Northern Ireland conflict, each group could either be a minority or a majority relative to the other. This complicates macrosocial explanations of the conflict which make specific predictions on the basis of minority or majority positions. The present paper argues that this conundrum may have arisen from the inherent variability in microidentity processes that do not fit easily with macroexplanations. In this paper the rhetoric of relative group position is analysed in political speeches delivered by leading members of an influential Protestant institution in Northern Ireland. It is apparent that minority and majority claims are not fixed but are flexibly used to achieve local rhetorical goals. Furthermore, the speeches differ before and after the Good Friday Agreement, with a reactionary "hegemonic" Unionist position giving way to a "majority-rights power sharing" argument and a "pseudo-minority" status giving way to a "disempowered minority" argument. These results suggest a view of the Northern Ireland conflict as a struggle for "symbolic power," i.e., the ability to flexibly define the intergroup situation to the ingroup's advantage.*

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In this paper we discuss various difficulties in determining the minority or majority position of each group in the Northern Ireland conflict. We argue that these problems arise from assumptions of the homogeneity of representations of

minority or majority positions which ignore variation in identity processes at the microlevel. Drawing upon recent advances in the analysis of identity processes in talk (e.g., Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) and the application of these methods to the study of group processes (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), we suggest that the relative group position of each group in Northern Ireland may be better reconceptualized as a resource and an accomplishment in political rhetoric than as an enduring trait. The empirical question thus becomes: when and to what purpose are these claims made?

### *Framing the Minority-Majority Conundrum*

Since the beginning of the phase of conflict in Northern Ireland commonly referred to as “the troubles,” researchers have attempted to elucidate the relative position of the two social groups in conflict. As the border between North and South was originally drawn to yield the maximum amount of territory controllable by a Protestant/Unionist majority (Bardon, 1992), the Catholic/Nationalists of Northern Ireland have been popularly depicted as the minority group. This has been further supported by their generally lower economic status, higher unemployment, evidence of anti-Catholic discrimination and political underrepresentation. These factors are generally thought to have led to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s in Northern Ireland which followed the minority rights zeitgeist across the world at that time (Whyte, 1990).

This popular depiction has been challenged by academic commentators over the past three decades on two grounds. In the first instance, the Unionist-majority, Nationalist-minority model relies on a framing of the conflict within Northern Ireland. If the framing includes the British state rather than simply the Unionist population, as historically claimed by the Republican movement, then the Nationalist numerical minority is accentuated. If the situation excludes the rest of the British state and includes the Republic of Ireland, then the Unionist population is in the minority. In fact Gallagher (1995) discerned six conceptually discrete ways of carving up national identities on the island of Ireland.

Secondly, a diagnostic approach to the issue of relative status has argued that each side can adopt a different frame of reference, such that *both* can be minorities or majorities. This more “psychological” approach therefore relies on the ability of researchers to analyse the groups’ display of status characteristics to see which model fits best. For example, Jackson (1979) argued that fear and perceived threat play as much part in status as economic or political power and that, as the Unionist population could never rely in the support of the rest of the United Kingdom, they were effectively a minority on the island of Ireland. In turn, this vulnerable position within the United Kingdom is further considered by Douglas and Boal (1982), Poole (1983), and Kennedy (1988) who point out that the insecurity of the Protestant people within the Union fosters a “double-minority” mentality within this group. In other words, while the framing ques-

tion above asks what the proper frame of reference should be, the more psychological approaches ask what it looks like from the perspective of each group.

### *The Social Identity Perspective*

Within the current social psychological literature, most work on issues relating to majority-minority status in Northern Ireland draws on the "Social Identity" model developed by Tajfel (1974, 1978, 1982). This model proposed that shared understandings of the inequality, legitimacy, and stability of intergroup relations will combine with social cognitive processes to effect societal change. Research within this tradition has typically discerned three axes of minority/majority difference: "numerical size," "status" or prestige, and "power." However, as Simon (2004) points out, although these factors are in principle experimentally dissociable, they are generally conflated in the real world, especially in democratic societies in which numerical strength and political power co-vary. Consequently, many real life studies in this area have focused on situations in which minority classification is clear-cut, occurring on several dimensions simultaneously. In contrast, as argued above, relative group position in Northern Ireland is inherently ambiguous, and in addition the situation has endured substantial political and social upheaval over the past four decades. Thus the conflict provides an ideal situation to examine relative group position in flux.

The social identity perspective was first applied to the Northern Ireland conflict by Cairns who argued for a "Double Majority" model of intergroup relations (Cairns, 1982, 1987). Early work on stereotypes held by the two groups (O'Donnell, 1977) indicated that both groups generally rated their autostereotypes positively, thus indicating the positive self-esteem assumed to be characteristic of majority positioning. Secondly, research on the development of categorization and identification in children failed to show the misidentification with the outgroup characteristic of young members of minority groups (Cairns, 1987). Thirdly, Cairns pointed out that each group has at its disposal an array of positively evaluated cultural resources, including rituals, symbols, music, folklore, and sport as well as attendant institutions for their preservation and perpetuation.

The elusive nature of the status of each group in Social Identity explanations, however, emerged from early inconsistencies in the research findings pertaining to intergroup discrimination. Indirect measures such as the "lost letter" paradigm, using Catholic and Protestant name cues, showed little evidence of ingroup bias in a peaceful area, but inferred discrimination on the part of Catholics in an area of high tension (Kremer, Barry, & McNally, 1986). In contrast, evaluations of face photographs rated as stereotypically Catholic or Protestant found outgroup discrimination among Protestants and evidence of ingroup denigration among Catholics (Stringer & Cairns, 1983). As Trew (1992) points out, this has contrary implications for inferring the position of each group, as majority groups would

certainly not be expected to show ingroup denigration, while in situations of conflict, outgroup denigration should theoretically be ever-present.

In order to clarify this issue, one avenue of research has pursued Cairns' emphasis on the role of self-esteem in determining the perceived relative status of each group (Hunter, Platow, Howard, & Stringer, 1996; Hunter, Stringer, & Coleman, 1993). However, these produced conflicting results, compounded by methodological problems and the distinction between global self-esteem and positive esteem associated with particular self-images. This fits with a more cautious approach in the wider Social Identity literature when attempting to elucidate the relationship between self-esteem and identity (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Other recent contributions have aimed to establish more directly group members' perceptions of intergroup relations in Northern Ireland. Irwing and Stringer (2000) enlisted 121 undergraduate students to generate statements they thought would be representative of their denomination's perspectives. Catholics were found to demonstrate a "social change" pattern, whereby the authority of the British state and the Unionist hegemony was challenged and the ideal of a united Ireland advocated. In contrast, the Protestant respondents adopted the counter, such that their overall strategy was to defend the status quo, which, by implication they viewed as legitimate if not stable. This then would suggest a Catholic active-minority, Protestant reactive-majority model. Likewise Niens and Cairns (2002) in their examination of identity management strategies found that Catholics identify themselves as a minority, struggling against oppression and an illegitimate government. In contrast, Protestants see themselves as living under a legitimate government, though anecdotal evidence of the perceived inequity of the Good Friday Agreement suggests that this may well be changing.<sup>1</sup>

However, these findings do little to explain the inconsistent findings noted above and Trew's earlier critique still stands. As she points out, both Jackson's Double Minority model and Cairns's Double Majority model can still each explain some but not all of the findings outlined here (Trew, 1992). In essence, she argues, the failure of the Social Identity model to effectively capture the essence of group position in Northern Ireland is down to the fact that the situation "on the ground" is much more complex and variable than any one generic explanation will allow. On this basis, Cassidy and Trew (1998) examined the variability in identities within each community and found that for Protestants their group's identity processes are contingent upon the fact that they are potentially a minority in both the island of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Thus the alternative of a "triple minority" was suggested.

Despite this more flexible and contextually sensitive approach, it is evident that the survey methods used in the research above still present an obstacle to the examination of identity processes at the micro level. One exception to this general

<sup>1</sup> Social anthropological research suggests that assumptions that the government privileges the interests of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland have been undermined by police and independent advisory body decisions to ban or reroute Loyalist parades (Jarman & Bryan, 1996).

pattern was Gallagher's (1989) rhetorical analysis of 16 interviews with members of all the main political parties in Northern Ireland. He found a high degree of variability in identity construction at this level and, in particular, all the "Protestant" political representatives evidenced two competing notions of group loyalty; one to the British State and one to Ulster. Thus, if an independent Ulster and a Unionist aspiration can occur within the same interview this means that the comparative framework of the conflict can shift within this microlocation. In other words, it would appear that variability in the relative position of groups can occur at the level of the moment to moment changes in interpersonal interaction. In turn this suggests that attributing a group or person with a minority or majority label is a misleading venture as these positions are liable to change with the local rhetorical context as well as the broader political context.

### *Empirically Addressing the Minority-Majority Issue*

The present paper aims to develop Gallagher's work in the light of recent developments in discursive psychology which allow a microfocus on identity-in-action in talk (e.g., Antaki & Widdicome, 1998), as well as theoretical developments in Self-Categorization Theory (e.g., Hopkins & Reicher, 1996; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) which have paid particular attention to group-identity construction and dissemination in the language of leaders in the political arena. On the one hand, discursive psychologists have recently emphasized the inherent flexibility of identity at the microlevel. They argue that this is due to the changing demands of conversation interaction in which identity is both an *accomplishment* ("doing being" a social category member) and a *resource* to achieve other interactive goals (e.g., claiming the entitlements associated with a group membership). Thus discursive psychologists have argued that the identity processes of categorization (Billig, 1985; Edwards, 1991, 1998), identity salience (McKinlay & Dunnett, 1998), intergroup differentiation and prejudice management (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), and ingroup identification (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995) are best understood at this level. However, to date, no systematic study of the discursive use of relative group position has been undertaken within this tradition.

On the other hand, Self-Categorization theorists acknowledge this microvariation, but view it as part of larger scale identity processes by which understandings of the social world are contested and shared between group members (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). The exemplary site of this activity is the political arena, in which elected or appointed leaders "represent" the followers: both in the sense of standing for their interests and also in providing a construction or "representation" of the group back to itself where it can then be further contested or consensualized. Echoing Bourdieu (1991), this "labour of representation" means that the analysis of political discourse is one key to the elucidation of how group and intergroup understandings are constructed, disseminated, and thereby facilitate collective action.

The present study examines a corpus of political speeches recorded over more than a decade at the main annual parade of the Orange Order on the 12<sup>th</sup> July in Belfast, Northern Ireland. This Institution is an exclusively Protestant fraternal society that claims to represent the values of the Protestant community by standing for Loyalty to the Crown, Union with the rest of the United Kingdom, and promoting the Protestant Faith.<sup>2</sup> For present purposes then, that the Order provides a potential platform from which to address the numerical majority in Northern Ireland as well as the fact that this demonstration is part of the public political sphere (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999) suggest these speeches as a fruitful site to investigate the use of relative group position in political discourse.

### Method

The data consist of 10 years of speeches delivered by members of the Orange Order at its annual 12<sup>th</sup> July celebration of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne. Each year three resolutions are set forth by the Grand Lodge of Ireland concerning the core axes of the Order—Faith, Loyalty, and State. These are addressed or “spoken to” at all demonstrations across Northern Ireland by invited Orangemen who hold positions relevant to the resolution (i.e., politicians for speeches on State and Loyalty, clerics on Faith) or members of the County level of the organization. The speeches are delivered at the half-way stage of the parade, when marchers, accompanying bands, and onlookers rest at a public park, known as “the field.” They are prefaced by a religious service of scripture reading, prayer, and hymns as well as an act of remembrance for the War Dead. Attendance at these speeches is usually very low (in our experience, ranging from approximately 50 to 200 onlookers), but they are recorded and broadcast by the Northern Ireland print and television media and so in effect the potential audience is much larger.

#### *Methods of Analysis*

These speeches were recorded at the Belfast demonstration for the years 1993–97<sup>3</sup> and from 2000 to 2004. All were transcribed verbatim and coded using text-tagging software (ATLAS ti). All instances in which political, national, and religious social categories were mentioned were tagged. From these extracts, the

<sup>2</sup> At its peak the Institution claimed a membership of 120,000 (the equivalent to one-third of all male Protestants in Northern Ireland), though this figure has dropped to 30–40,000 in recent decades. During the Stormont government (1922–72) the majority of politicians and cabinet ministers were Orangemen (Farrell, 1980; Haddick-Flynn, 1999) and the Order maintained a bloc vote on the governing body of the largest Unionist party in Northern Ireland until March 2005. The organization’s main public activity is marching and the parades controversy over the past decade meant that the Institution still occupies a central place in the political landscape of Northern Ireland (Bryan, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The authors would like to thank Dominic Bryan of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queens University Belfast who recorded the first set of speeches as part of his own research into the Orange Order and donated them to the present research.

instances in which minority or majority characteristics were an aspect of the description were extracted. Following Simon's review of the Social Identity research on minority-majority relations (Simon, 2004; Simon, Aufderheide, & Kampmeier, 2001), these were defined as any mention of the relative *size*, *status*, or *power* of ingroups or outgroups. Tagging involved incorporating sufficient co-text from the speech in the extract to understand the speaker's argument but also allowed the analyst to return to the original place in the speech to further contextualize the extract if required. This recursive engagement with the original data allowed a fuller understanding of the rhetorical flow of the speeches than simple fragmentation of the data would allow.

The extracts were divided according to the social category mentioned, such that groups of extracts concerning political, national, and religious categories were studied separately.<sup>4</sup> Within each social category, the claims to group position were examined from a discursive perspective to elucidate both how group position was achieved and how it is actively used to achieve local rhetorical goals in talk (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). From the analysis of individual extracts in each category, explanations of the data which exhaustively account for all the data were generated. Particular attention was paid to deviant cases which failed to fit the pattern as these were used to modify the explanation, split the category, or merge with another category (Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2001). For example, as we shall see below, majority and minority claims for national and political categories were made on the same basis so that these are considered together. On the other hand, the political claims before and after the Good Friday Agreement have qualitatively different characteristics and were henceforth considered separately.

## Results

Before outlining the analytic findings it is worthwhile examining a couple of extracts from the speeches to illustrate the kinds of minority and majority claims that are present in the data. The first is a fairly typical example of Unionist political discourse which argues for the maintenance of the Union with the United Kingdom and against the possibility of unification with the Republic of Ireland:

### Extract 1

- 1 I, just like you today, I am simply a British Ulsterman. I am proud of my country,
- 2 I am proud of my heritage, and I am proud of my tradition. I, like every other,
- 3 Orangeman and woman desire to live in harmony with our neighbours next door
- 4 and those who inhabit the neighbouring country, the Irish Republic. We have no
- 5 animosity whatsoever against those around us. I personally respect the right of
- 6 those in the Irish Republic to have their government for their own country, but I

<sup>4</sup> The uses of religious categorization are not considered in this analysis as they differ so substantially from political and national categories as to deserve attention in their own right.

- 7 equally demand that they respect our right, and if they do respect our right they  
 8 will prove it by keeping their interfering nose out of our affairs

Here the speaker distinguishes between the two countries, asserting that the people of Northern Ireland have the right to self-determination and that the Irish government's attempts to intervene are thereby illegitimate. However, the simplicity of the argument masks the nuances of politics in Northern Ireland and specifically that the Nationalist and Republican population within the province do aspire to a United Ireland and therefore would welcome more input from the Republic of Ireland. In other words, the term "our affairs" at the end of the extract indicates a Unionist agenda to stay British, rather than spanning the entirety of opinion in Northern Ireland. Thus, implicit in this argument is the assumption that as the Unionist community is in the majority, it is their will that dictates the future of Northern Ireland and not that of their non-Unionist "neighbours." Therefore the extract displays all the characteristics of a majority claim: positive self-esteem as well as political majority and an explicit claim to power.

The second extract has a broader frame of reference, including the British, Irish, and American governments to position the Unionists as a minority group in relation to power:

Extract 2

- 1 Alas, we have seen our Unionist position compromised because of the intolerable  
 2 treachery of our own British government. Daily, British government ministers  
 3 undermine the Union to placate Dublin and also the lackeys of the Clinton  
 4 administration in the United States of America. Those also who abuse our loyalist  
 5 platforms to sedate what they call "the natives" with their messages that the  
 6 Union is not in threat "for our Prime Minister has assured us" etcetera etcetera.  
 7 They do so whilst all the while Ulster is being sold out to Dublin like cattle on the  
 8 hoof.

In extract 2, Unionists are positioned both within the category of British government ("our own," line 2) and also outside the category ("our loyalist platforms," line 5) to illustrate the illegitimacy of action by the government and the relative powerlessness of the Unionists ("cattle on the hoof," line 7). In a speech that contrasts the politically powerful position of the British government and the U.S. administration with their weak position on Dublin, the speaker is careful to note the weaknesses as arising from particular political personnel rather than a rejection of Unionists by the nations per se. Here the Unionists are portrayed as a minority group, lacking equal status within their own government.

The question therefore arises as to why the same social category should be presented as both powerful and powerless, as having both sovereign status and subordinate status: occupying both a majority and a minority position. One possible answer might be that the speeches were delivered in different years, in different political contexts. Another may be that the speakers come from different

political parties with different opinions as to the position of the Unionist community. Alternatively, one speaker may be a local politician while the other may be a Member of the British Parliament or Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In fact, none of these explanations are the case as these quotations are taken from the *same speech* on State delivered in 1995, and only a couple of utterances separate the two extracts. This is not to say that the global political context of the speech did not affect the content of the speeches—as we shall see below, this is certainly the case—but this does nicely illustrate the flexibility and rhetorical context-contingency of minority and majority claims in the speeches. Furthermore, the discrepant claims are clearly not a contradiction in the speech, as each performs specific rhetorical work within its own context. Rather, echoing the work of Gallagher (1989), it appears that the varying themes in Unionist politicians' talk are matched by varying claims to relative group position.

Having seen the types of claims made in the dataset, we can briefly review the general characteristics of the data derived from the analytic procedure outlined above and use these to structure our findings. Examination of the dataset revealed that firstly, political majority claims were made through an explicit appeal to numbers, but this was done implicitly in the national frame through elision of the category of Ulster/Northern Ireland with that of the Unionist/Protestant population. Secondly, political minority claims were made through a depiction of threats or attacks from an illegitimate outgroup within Northern Ireland or a conspiracy of powerful outgroups external to the province. These were both rhetorically pitted against the legitimate hegemonic status of the political ingroup and can be considered “pseudo-minority claims.” Finally, claims to numerical majority were much more prevalent in the first dataset (1993–97) than the second (2000–2004), and minority claims in the second set were predominantly of a low-status, low-power type not seen in the earlier speeches. Taking these findings in turn we can begin to unpack the identity processes implicit in each of these types of claims.

### *Numerical Majority: “We Are the People”*

Claims to a numerical majority status could be made explicitly with phrases such as “the majority,” “the Unionist majority,” or “the greater number of people in Northern Ireland.” More often though, these claims were made implicitly as in Extract 1. Below we see a similar example, and we can begin to unpack the dynamics of this argumentative trope:

Extract 3 (State 1996)

- 1 And what consent means, what democracy means, consent means, because of
- 2 what we know of the views of the people of Northern Ireland; consent means the
- 3 preservation of the Union, for the Union is founded on that consent, and this is

- 4 what the people of Ulster want. Consent rules out the sort of fancy schemes
- 5 contained in the Frameworks Document which some people would wish to
- 6 impose upon us.

As in Extract 1, the numerical majority political viewpoint is taken to be representative of the entire population of Northern Ireland. As we know from the work of Edwards and Potter (1992) on political interviews, establishing consensus is an important device in warranting such an account. This concept of consensus is prefaced by an empirical warrant “because of what we know of the views of the people of Northern Ireland” (line 1), explicitly suggesting that this information is common knowledge shared with the audience (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Mercer, 1987). No mention is made of how this consensus has been measured or exactly how representative this opinion actually is: we can infer that the speaker is using his “category entitlement” (Potter, 1996) as a well-known politician to make this claim. Consequently, the majority is Unionist and within the framework of majoritarianism, the others do not count.

However, the word used here is not consensus, but “consent,”<sup>5</sup> and this has implications in the rest of the extract. On the one hand, “consent” is used to refer to consensus, whereby the view of the speaker is taken to be representative of that of the entire population. On the other, the word “consent” has the additional connotation of agency: consent is *given* by the electorate and furthermore can be *withdrawn* by choice. Thus consent also implies “veto” such that without this consent any other potential viewpoint will be discounted. In other words, this extract contains a claim to power.

This is reflected in the juxtaposition of the phrases “this is what the people of Ulster want” (line 4) with “some people would wish to impose” (line 5). The former is a concrete and empirically warranted statement of popular desire, while the latter is the speculative undemocratic aspiration of an unspecified (hence unrepresentative) number of individuals. The “imposition” of undesirable wishes suggests the use of force rather than negotiation, thus attesting to the illegitimacy of the arbitrary interests against the known will of the populace. Therefore we can see that the claims to majority status are based on the assumption that the political framework of Northern Ireland is both inherently legitimate and encodes the wishes and values of the Unionist numerical majority.

All claims to political majority position within the first set of speeches share this specific understanding of intergroup relations whereby the numerical majority of the Unionist population give rise to a situation in which the Unionist voice is (and should rightfully be) the dominant one. This situation is of course that of the

<sup>5</sup> This term derives its political significance from the Anglo-Irish negotiations of the 1980s whereby the Republic of Ireland promised to revoke its territorial claim to Northern Ireland and recognized that the “consent” of the people of Ulster would be necessary in order to establish a United Ireland. Ironically, at this time the term “consent” was also mobilised by residents’ groups opposed to the Orange Order’s parades passing through predominantly Nationalist/Republican areas (Jarman & Bryan, 1996) and provides another example of the symbolic terminological struggle in Northern Ireland.

Unionist-dominated Stormont government in Northern Ireland which existed for the 50 years before “the troubles,” and we can see that the language used by all the speakers is essentially conservative and indeed reactionary in nature, both in its investment in a Unionist hegemony and its emphasis on refusal to change. This of course fits closely with the general findings of Niens and Cairns (2002) that Protestants see themselves as living under a legitimate government which is fair to both Catholics and Protestants and those of Irwing and Stringer (2000) in which they found a heavy investment among Protestants in defending the (legitimate and fair) status quo. However, this begs the question of what the claims to minority position may achieve for the speakers in these speeches.

*Political Pseudo-Minority Positions: Threats and Victimhood*

In practical terms, the Protestant community cannot claim to be a numerical minority in Northern Ireland and so claims to minority status are made on another axis, that of power. These claims take two main forms—the first form of minority position is of a list of grievances and traumas suffered by the Protestant people of Ulster at the hands of the IRA or Catholics in general, while the second type lists external conspirators against the Unionists, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Irish government, and the United States government. Both operate to construct a state of threat to the ingroup. In the next extract we see the same speaker on State in 1995 who provided Extracts 1 and 2—the present extract is in fact the intervening segment between them. As evident above, the speaker has previously been making a claim for Unionist self-determinism, but here he shifts focus to talk of the threats to the Union:

Extract 4: State 1995

- 1 Over the past few years, it has been proved that our constitutional position
- 2 within the United Kingdom is in great peril. The Unionist population has
- 3 endured a concerted attack from IRA murderers; they have sought to butcher
- 4 us and to break us by their diabolical and their bloody campaign of murder,
- 5 through the bomb and the bullet. Yet our people in Ulster and in this
- 6 Institution have remained resolute and determined as they did in Portadown
- 7 and on the Ormeau Road. It is true, it is true that we as a community have
- 8 walked but we have not weakened, we have slowed but we have not
- 9 surrendered, we have been bowed but we have not been broken.

In terms of the framing of the conflict, the main rhetorical work done in the early part of the extract is through the conflation of the threat to the Union with the IRA campaign. As the two social categories employed in this extract are the Unionist community and the IRA, the nonviolent Republican and Nationalist midground which opposes the Union is omitted. As in Extract 1, the speaker rhetorically removes those Republicans and Nationalists who legitimately wish to see their future outside of the British state through political means. Thus the

inference offered by the speaker is that all anti-Union threat is in the mould of terrorism which in turn is unequivocally condemned as an illegitimate and evil attack: “butcher us and to break us by their diabolical and their bloody campaign of murder” (line 4).

Broadly speaking, these claims of threat and injury establish the victim status of the ingroup. Discourses of victimhood can be seen to have recently gained international political currency (Novick, 1999). Although ostensibly depicting powerlessness, they operate to validate the negative experiences of the group and imbue it with moral superiority by stressing the injustice of past injuries. Within Northern Ireland these discourses now have particular significance as those who have suffered in the course of “the troubles” seek official recognition and compensation for their suffering (Hamber, Kulle, & Wilson, 2001).

In the second part of the extract, the speaker develops the notion of an oppressed minority ingroup through a series of figurative descriptions of a community resisting attack. This time through, it is apparent that the claim to minority status is performing a rather different function to that of Extract 2 above. There the Unionist community was depicted as powerless against a range of conspirators, whereas here the threats and attacks suffered by the Unionist people actually attest to their resolve. In other words, the status (if not the power) of the ingroup is actually *bolstered* by this external threat.

A second function of minority claims in the first set of speeches is to inoculate against claims made by the outgroup that they have been maltreated by the Unionist majority. We can see this much more clearly in the next extract from a particularly political speech on Faith. Immediately prior to the extract the speaker has been listing the various oppositions to Orange parades in specific areas of Belfast and the persecution of Protestants in rural areas of Northern Ireland:

Extract 5 (Faith, 1993)

- 1 [These] all indicate the evil campaign of Romanism, not during the last 23
- 2 years but for generations: move into Protestant areas, the Protestants
- 3 move out, and then the cry goes up of intimidation and persecution of
- 4 these poor underprivileged Roman Catholics who appear to be all too ready
- 5 in many cases to be persecuted to be insulted and to be intimidated.
- 6 They love it!

Over the past decades in Northern Ireland (the past 23 years as mentioned by the speaker here in line 1), the outgroup has claimed that the Unionist hegemony has treated them unfairly. Here the argument concerns population shifts in Northern Ireland, more usually compared to the “white-flight” phenomenon in which a higher-status group voluntarily moves out as a lower-status group takes up residence—a form of voluntary segregation.

The speaker here negotiates this challenge to the fairness of Protestants by adopting a minority rather than a majority position. He does this through the same rhetorical device noted above, by working up the outgroup threat. Thus the social

categories are extended over time by asserting that the Roman Catholics have been attacking Protestants “for generations” (line 2), and the deliberate and calculated nature of the attack is emphasized by claiming that this is a “campaign” (line 1) rather than a spontaneous reaction to the changing political context.

In turn, the outgroup’s claim to minority status is systematically undermined. Most obviously, the root cause of the trouble is attributed to Roman Catholics as it is they who move first, prompting the Protestants to move as a direct consequence (lines 2–3). Moreover, it is not any territory that is at stake, but “Protestant areas,” and hence the Roman Catholic move is *de facto* illegitimate. However, the main thrust of the argument is that Roman Catholic claims of persecution are counterfeit, and this is done in three ways. Firstly, the claim is presented as unprovoked as no cause for the claim of “persecution and intimidation” is offered. As a result the claim to oppression is cast as an ungrounded and spontaneous one: “the cry goes up” (line 3). Secondly, the outgroup is presented as actively seeking this oppression, as being “all too ready” to experience injustice. Thirdly, the outgroup is reported as revelling in this underdog position—“they love it!”—and hence the ingroup, who have been rhetorically removed from the equation, is absolved from any responsibility.

In sum, the outgroup’s claim to oppression is treated as malicious and calculated and thereby unfounded, while that of the ingroup is taken to be veridical. Thus the speaker has turned the tables on the outgroup by claiming that the phenomenon of “white-flight” is a result of the oppression of the Protestant people rather than their numerical minority counterparts. This can be seen to reflect a “competitive victimhood” in Northern Ireland, whereby state and international recognition of one group’s suffering is perceived to be at the expense of the moral integrity of the other community (Hamber, Kulle, & Wilson, 2001).

It is important to stress that this minority framing of the extract does not in any way imply that Protestants are a negatively evaluated ingroup. In fact, as in the previous extract, this persecution operates to undermine the claims of the outgroup and hence legitimize the ingroup position. In effect, these ingroup minority claims can be considered “pseudo-minority” arguments in both claiming minority persecution but also retaining the status of the rightfully dominant group in Northern Ireland. Thus the minority claims here are effectively the counternormative exceptions that prove the “majority rule.”

#### *2000–2004: A Shift to Substantive Minority Status*

The examples considered in the previous section share the common feature of adopting a minority position to illustrate injustice and demonstrate their rightful claim to hegemonic position. It will be noted, however, that all of the examples so far have come from the first set of speeches from the years 1993–97. After this the political landscape changed radically in Northern Ireland. The Belfast Agreement,

proposing power sharing between all parties in Northern Ireland (as well as indirect input from both British and Irish governments), was ratified by a substantial majority of the population of Northern Ireland in a referendum.<sup>6</sup> Thus at a stroke, the predominantly anti-Agreement Orange Order hierarchy was deprived of its claim to represent the majority opinion in the province.

This is reflected in the second set of speeches where claims to numerical majority are absent for the years 2000–2002. Of course, given the small dataset considered here which could not be claimed to be representative of Unionist discourse in general, this “absence of evidence” cannot be taken as solid “evidence of absence.” Turning to another body of evidence, examination of the minority claims during this period reveals the emergence of a range of very different group positioning strategies. The following brief extract is from the 2001 speech on state:

Extract 6 (State 2001)

- 1 Far too many of our people—worn down by violence, weary of constant murder
- 2 and intimidation, furious at the lack of a powerful security policy to defeat
- 3 terrorism, advised by people in high places in churches, businesses, and politics
- 4 that it was all a good deal for Ulster—voted for it in the referendum.

The form of the argument presented here is familiar to us as the grievance listing form of minority claim in the previous sections: the Unionist population is depicted as the victim of “violence,” “murder and intimidation,” and as let down by their own government. Secondly, we see a list of unspecified agents which are depicted as conspiring to influence the political process. In the light of the previous extracts above, we can see that these threats are being used in concert to here undermine the political position represented by the referendum.

In this extract, however, it is not the behaviour of the outgroup which is being held accountable, but that of the ingroup. In effect, given the majority vote for the referendum, the speaker is employing resources which were hitherto used to bolster the Unionist political will to undermine the very choice of Unionists themselves. The list of grievances which has previously always been presented as strengthening the resolve of the Unionist community is here presented as having broken its will.

A second extract further illustrates this shift in position. Here the speaker on Loyalty from the same year bemoans the loss of majority dominance:

Extract 7 (Loyalty, 2001)

- 1 The Union has never been in so much danger; every constitutional agreement
- 2 has now an input from the Irish government. The majority has lost its rights,
- 3 and now we must be loyal to ourselves. It is now time for Unionists of all

<sup>6</sup> Overall 71% of the electorate voted for the Agreement. Of the Protestant population, 57% voted in favour (Hayes & McAllister, 2001). Many thanks to Steve Reicher for his astute observation that the very title of the Agreement as “Good Friday” was in itself a site of symbolic terminological dispute between parties who approved of or objected to the religious connotations.

- 4 shades of opinions to come together in a common purpose of our forefathers.
- 5 There must be real effort within Unionism based on a defence of the Union.

Again we can see that the arguments presented here are of the form noted previously, and this time threats from an illegitimate external source in the form of the Irish government (line 2) and an implicit indication that the British government cannot be relied upon “we must be loyal to ourselves” (lines 2–3).

The difference this time is in the assertion that “The majority has lost its rights” (line 2). This is particularly important for two reasons. Firstly, as in the previous extract, it is an absolute statement of powerlessness and is not mitigated by any appeal to a political framework of majoritarianism in which this situation will be rectified. It would appear that the threats of previous years have become an actuality. Secondly, this is the first time in the data set that the term “majority rights” has been used in relation to the Unionist population. Previously the majority was taken to be synonymous with the government and hence the notion of rights was used solely in relation to the numerical minority group. Now, evidently with the establishment of power sharing, the rights of the numerical majority cannot be taken for granted, and here are claimed on their own basis.

The majoritarian argument does re-emerge in 2003, perhaps reflecting the groundswell of Unionist opposition to the Agreement and hence the feasibility of appealing to the majority once more. However, it is apparent that as with the minority claims in the previous two extracts, the assumptions underlying majority claims have also shifted. The following example is from the speech on state in 2003:

Extract 8 (State 2003)

- 1 The Belfast Agreement in its present form is finished, and there is a real need
- 2 to negotiate a new one. The present agreement is not inclusive; it excludes
- 3 Unionists, because we are anti-agreement. We are told we are against peace
- 4 as if peace were the sole prerogative of pro-Agreement factions including the
- 5 war lords. At a stroke the majority of the decent law abiding people in this
- 6 community and this province of ours have been insulted and offended.
- 7 Brethren and friends, only a coalition of likeminded Unionists can negotiate a
- 8 new agreement. We want no other false agreements, only one that is inclusive
- 9 and recognizes the rights of the majority though it.

We can certainly see the same arguments noted in section two above: the rhetorical recruitment of the majority (line 5), the alignment of the wishes of the outgroup with illegitimate terrorism (lines 4–5), and the assertion of the will of the (Unionist) majority (line 9).

Beyond these superficial similarities, though, the argument is qualitatively different. Most obviously, the Unionist population is depicted as unwillingly omitted from the political process: “it excludes Unionists because we are anti-agreement” (line 3). In contrast to the previous majority arguments in which Unionists were cast in the role of holding the key and the veto to political process,

here they are positioned as disempowered. Consequently, the conservatism and reactionary rhetoric of the previous speeches, which emphasized resistance to change, has been replaced with a new form of political aspiration: “Only a coalition of likeminded Unionists can negotiate a new agreement” (lines 7–8). In contrast to the surefooted argument that the majority rules, Unionists are here on the “back foot” and looking towards future power rather than defending an inherited position of dominance. This is reflected in the final attribution of agency to the political process rather than to the Unionist population in the very majority claim itself: a future agreement is required to be one that “*recognizes* the rights of the majority” (line 9).

In sum, it would appear that the patterns of minority and majority claims noted in the speeches of 1993–97 have been somewhat reversed. The assumptions underlying the earlier claims—that the Unionist numerical majority is sufficient to dominate the political process and defend the status quo and that a minority status is a threat rather than an actuality—have been shaken. In their place is the use of minority claims to bemoan the new status quo and an aspiration to claim the rights of a majority within the wider framework of a power-sharing arrangement.

### Conclusions

Two broad conclusions may be drawn from the results. Firstly, in line with Gallagher (1989), claims to relative group position would appear to vary at the microlevel in this political rhetoric. Thus the persisting conundrum of which group in Northern Ireland “is” a minority or majority may result from the inherent variability of group position claims at this level. These results could of course be due to the unique position of the Orange Order in Northern Ireland, being able to rhetorically appeal to the entire Unionist majority regardless of party political allegiance or Protestant denomination. Hence, the data here cannot attest to the relevance of these findings throughout Unionist political discourse much less that of the Nationalist or Republican movements. However, if these results were indeed found to hold throughout Northern Ireland, it would suggest that the conflict may be better viewed as each group’s struggle for the ability to flexibly define themselves as minority or majority according to changing situational demands, rather than simply making a straightforward bid for majority status.

Theoretically, this finding speaks to two traditions of research. In showing how relative group position can be used as a rhetorical tool, it builds upon a growing body of work (e.g., Billig, 1985; Edwards, 1998; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) attesting to the utility of examining how identity processes are manifest at the microlevel in social interaction. Secondly, it also fits with a general trend within the mainstream Social Identity literature towards reconceptualising elements of the social context of intergroup relations as resources as well as determinants of group action (e.g., Ellemers & Van Rijswijk,

1997; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). From this perspective, the social context may well provide feedback to group members about their relative group position, but may also afford a range of strategies to group members to address identity-related concerns. The study of such strategies has largely focused on whether category members adopt an individualistic or group response to identity threats (e.g., Ellemers & Van Rijswijk, 1997; Niens & Cairns, 2002). Thus the present research provides an example of relative group status being used in a similar fashion, as the speakers use group position to negotiate moral threats from the outgroup (cf. Ellemers et al., 2002).

Of course, one reason why relative group position may be so amenable to strategic deployment in Northern Ireland may be the unusually narrow margin of numerical and power difference between the groups, so that in other conflicts group position may not be “up for grabs.” Elsewhere though, the discourse of victimhood and the phenomena of “competitive victimhood” have also been well documented in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict in which each party claims minority status to gain the moral high-ground and elicit international support (e.g., Gee, 1998; Novick, 1999). Also, there is evidence that even in conflicts where relative group position is more clear-cut, a majority group may still claim minority status: Byford and Billig’s (2001) examination of anti-Semitism in Yugoslavia during the war with NATO illustrates how conspiracy theorists construct threats from influential international groups to justify antagonism towards a relatively small and powerless Jewish minority within the country. Likewise, Sapountzis (2003) illustrates how Greek political representatives justify nationalist antagonism towards the much smaller and less powerful Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia through allegations that international forces illegitimately support this new neighbour. This general tendency for groups commonly perceived to be majorities to claim minority status may well reflect a general international trend towards the increasing visibility and accountability of the interests of dominant ethnicities due to the competing tensions of globalization and subnational minority rights (Smith, 2004; Kaufmann, 2004). However, Bruce (1988) also documents how the “Moral Majority,” a relatively small group of right-wing fundamentalist Christians in the United States, attempted to exert an influence disproportionate to their numerical size by claiming to represent the moral values of the wider population. Thus the present findings add to a growing body of research which points to the importance of “symbolic power” (cf. Bourdieu, 1991), the ability to flexibly define the intergroup situation, including relative group position, to one’s own group’s advantage.

The second broad finding is that the changing sociopolitical context before and after the Good Friday Agreement appears to impact upon the rhetoric of group position claims within these speeches. This complements previous research which hints at a tectonic shift in Unionist position at this time (Niens & Cairns, 2002). To be sure, on the basis of the 71% endorsement of the Agreement, the rhetoric of majoritarianism was at that stage adopted by the pro-Agreement lobby. However,

this rhetorical gerrymandering would appear to mask a deeper move in Unionist thinking away from the mindset of Stormont, where the interests of Unionism were exclusively enshrined in the Northern Ireland statelet, towards a powersharing mentality, where both groups compete for resources within a broader framework.

Within the Social Identity framework this shift provides a rare, real-life dissociation between power and size in the context of a society in transition: a larger group perceived to be hegemonic (albeit threatened) becomes disempowered and thereby comes to view this new arrangement as illegitimate. In a similar vein, research by Herrera and Reicher (1998) has illustrated how the same events can be categorically organized in very different fashions by those holding divergent political viewpoints of the legitimacy or otherwise of intergroup behaviour: hence the first Gulf war was construed as either “civilization against a tyrant” or as “illegitimate business and political interests against the people of Iraq” by Spanish respondents. The present research puts these findings in a temporal frame, such that from the point of view of the ingroup, the “legitimate” system of intergroup relations, whereby size guaranteed power, has given way to an “illegitimate” system whereby the larger group must compete for resources with the smaller one. From this it would appear that the assumed relationship between numerical size and political power constitutes part of the “social context” of intergroup relations, such that changes in intergroup position are interpreted against these assumptions. Consequently, while it is often assumed by Social Identity theorists that the axes of majority and minority position are inconveniently conflated in real life and that the difficulties in dissociating them through experimentation are an artefact of poor design (e.g., Bettencourt, Miller, & Hume, 1999), the findings here would suggest that in fact the perceived relationship between these axes forms part of the social context within which the legitimacy of intergroup behaviour is contested.

A final comment that can be made in relation to this study is that it does of course deal only with a particular perspective from one side of the conflict in Northern Ireland and begs the question of whether Nationalist and Republican rhetoric also employs minority and majority strategies in the same fashion. Recent research into religious and national identities within the Catholic population of Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 2003) suggests that this would indeed be a profitable line of inquiry as traditional Catholic claims of victimhood are now being accompanied by claims to equality. Thus, the next step in this line of research would be to examine how each group flexibly employs minority and majority position in their political interactions within one another, to elucidate how the variable and shifting discourses of equality and injustice are moulded by the language of the outgroup as well as the perceptions of the ingroup.

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