Chapter 3

Vernacular Constructions of 'National Identity' in Post-devolution Scotland and England

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Introduction

The political process of UK constitutional change was accompanied by a set of moral panics concerning potential, possible or impending crises of national identity. Concerns were expressed that devolution would lead to a decline in 'British identity' which would in turn further undermine the legitimacy of the UK state. Similarly, concerns were expressed that the establishment of a Scottish parliament would precipitate a rise in 'Scottish identity', which would in turn lead to increased calls for Scottish political independence. However, the most colourful rhetorical formulations involved the spectre of a rise in English national consciousness threatening not only the constitutional status quo, but sometimes the very foundations of civilised society, as illustrated by John Barnes's comments to the House of Commons Select Committee on Scottish Affairs in 1998:[1]

> I think that we tend to feel that [English] people are more rational, more cool, more calculated than, in fact, they are, and I think with some skill, you could find a demagogue, shall we say, an Enoch Powell,[2] who could stir those passions in some rather strange quarters [...] I think these passions are there to be moved, and I think there are some very ugly forces who would love to move them.

Although these kinds of argument were typically presented as statements of mere common sense, existing academic analyses did not necessarily confirm the presuppositions on which they rested. For example, the idea that the legitimacy of the British state depended crucially on the construct of 'British identity' overlooked

[1] Hansard: House of Commons Select Committee on Scottish Affairs Examination of Witnesses, 24 June 1998 (paragraph 276).

[2] Reference to the MP who in 1968 made a controversial speech against immigration. The immediate response included displays of popular support from some Trades Unions, and his immediate sacking from the Conservative Party. Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech has subsequently come to be attributed with a dual legacy, as popularising 'racialist' understandings of Anglo British nationhood, but also as prompting a subsequent consensus on the part of mainstream British political parties against such formulations (Favell, 1998).

the enormous variety of ways in which Britishness is, and has been, understood (R. Cohen, 1994, Davies, 1999, Samuel, 1998) and the capacity for political institutions to be legitimated without direct recourse to the construct of 'identity' (cf. Kenny, 2004). The association in Scotland between Nationalism as a political force and national identity as a psychological condition appeared to owe more to the categories of formal political rhetoric than to those of common-sense (A. Cohen, 1996). Images of English people lacking reflexive awareness of the atavistic potential of their dormant national passion paradoxically represented a popular stereotype used at the time by English people themselves (Condor, 1996).

This chapter reports findings from a study conducted as part of an extensive programme of research, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, designed precisely to monitor the effects of constitutional change on orientations to national identity in England and in Scotland.[3]

National Identity in the Vernacular

It is so common now to encounter the term 'national identity' in political rhetoric or academic writing that it is easy to suppose that it constitutes an enduring feature of the lexicon of nationhood (cf. Billig, 1995). In fact, the term is of surprisingly recent provenance, rarely being used in the UK before the late 1980s. 'Identity' is a notoriously polyvalent term and a consideration of its use in the current literature on nationalism reveals a common tendency to elide the 'national identity' construct with pre-existing academic categories such as nation, nationality, nationalism, national character, citizenship, or imagined community. In addition, the ambiguities of the referent of the term 'identity' afford slippage between 'the nation' as an object of literary or political rhetoric and assumptions concerning the subjective self-consciousness of individual citizens.

This inconsistency in the use and understanding of the national identity construct may have contributed to a relative lack of direct empirical work on the ways in which ordinary social actors construct themselves as nationalised subjects. In practice, most scholarly accounts of national 'identities' in the UK have been based on the author's own interpretation of social structure or symbolism (e.g. R. Cohen, 1994, Edensor, 2002, Haseler, 1996, Kumar, 2003, Weight, 2003). Studies of talk and text have tended to focus on elite representations, in popular and high literature (Giles and Middleton, 1995, Pearce, 2000), the media (Creeber, 2004, Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002, Jacobson, 2002, Rosie *et al.*, 2004) or political rhetoric (Billig, 1995, Chambers, 1989, Reicher and Hopkins, 2001).

Of course, some research has focussed on ordinary social actors' orientations to nationhood, using either survey or interview methodology. However, a good deal of this work has still tended to treat 'national identity' as an analysts' construct rather than a participants' resource. For example, social psychological work on national

[3] The 'Nations and Regions' programme, coordinated by David McCrone http://www.

identity has often been informed by general theoretical perspectives provided by social identity and self-categorization theory (e.g. Reicher and Hopkins, 2001, cf. Billig, 1996), and a dominant strand of sociological enquiry approaches the national identity problematic from a symbolic interactionist perspective (e.g. Bechhofer *et al.*, 1999, Kiely *et al.*, 2001, McCrone *et al.*, 1998).

Whilst we would not question the validity of these approaches in their own terms, in this chapter we adopt a rather different perspective. Following Billig's (1995) injunction that 'the psychological study of national identity should search for the common-sense assumptions and ways of talking about nationhood' (p. 61), and drawing on insights from discursive approaches to national representation (e.g. Hester and Housley, 2002, Windisch, 1990, Wodak *et al.*, 1999), we consider the ways in which ordinary social actors may construct nation-ness as a matter of subjective identity. To refer back to the quotation on page 1, we may note the prevalence of psychological assumptions and terminology: of rationality, calculation, skill, passion, and strategic intentionality. In this chapter we consider how ordinary social actors may – or may not – orient to nation-ness as a psychological state or trait, as a matter of knowledge, awareness, rationality, emotion, habit, character, agency, self-control and so forth (cf. Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998, Edwards and Potter, 1992, 2005).

Billig's suggestion that research should focus on 'common-sense assumptions and ways of talking about nationhood' begs the question of '*whose* common-sense?'. Billig's (1995) own account of the common-sense nature of 'British national identity' has subsequently been questioned for its implicitly Anglocentric focus (Abell *et al.*, 2006, Rosie *et al.*, 2004). A more general consideration of the question, 'whose common-sense?', reveals a lacuna in the extant academic literature on national identity. Although a good deal of work has considered how constructs such as nationhood and citizenship may be understood differently within and between different state bureaucracies or populations (Brubaker, 1992, Conover, Crewe and Searing, 1991, Favell, 1998), authors tend to treat the process of national *self-identification* as a pan-cultural universal. Comparative research has considered how people may vary in terms of the strength of their identification with a national category, or in terms of the object of this identification (for example, in a UK context, whether an individual identifies themselves as British, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, English, Pakistani etc.). However, it is generally supposed that the socio-psychological process, and subjective experience, of identification (whether understood as an outcome of self-categorisation processes, of the proffering and receipt of identity claims, etc.) is invariant (see A. Cohen, 1996 and Reicher and Hopkins, 2001: ix for explicit statements).

In contrast, our work adopts a comparative approach that follows from a general theoretical concern over the cultural specificity of societal and self-representation (Billig *et al.*, 1988) and over national representation in particular (Condor, 2001). Our particular concern has been to investigate the pervasive, and often subtle, differences that currently exist between discourses of nationhood used in Scotland and in England. Our analytic perspective involves a commitment to ethnomethodological indifference (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970) and to symmetrical accounting procedures (Bloor, 1976), which rather than evaluate vernacular accounts and displays of

national identity against some prior definition or theoretical model, seeks instead to understand them in their own terms.

An initial study drew attention to a potential incommensurability between the ways in which nationhood was understood in relation to values of cultural integration and assimilation in pre-devolution Scotland and England (Faulkner *et al.*, 2002). Subsequently we have considered how people in post-devolution Scotland and England may employ different lay geographies and historiographies, and understand the construct of Britain in different ways (Abell, *et al.* 2006, Condor and Abell, 2006). In this chapter, we consider how ordinary social actors in Scotland and in England orient to nation-ness as a matter of identity.

The 'Nationals and Migrants' Study

Study Design

The data considered here have been taken from a five-year panel study conducted jointly with David McCrone, Richard Kiely and Frank Bechhofer at Edinburgh University.[4] The study involved repeat-interviews with people born and living in Scotland (N=60) and in England (N=100) conducted between 2000–2004. Panel respondents were recruited with a view to ensuring maximum sample diversity. Key sites in England and in Scotland were first selected on the grounds of their contrasting character: Glasgow and rural Perthshire in Scotland; Greater Manchester and rural East Sussex in England. Within each site, panel members were then recruited through a combination of open and theoretical sampling to ensure heterogeneity in terms of age, gender, political affiliation, and socio-economic status.

A narrative interview technique was employed whereby the interviewer started out by asking the respondent to 'tell me something about yourself', and once the respondent appeared at ease would start to shape the conversation to issues germane to the research interests, such as local, national and European identity, social inclusion and constitutional change. Interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 4 hours, with most lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Analysis and Reporting of Findings

Discursive psychologists sometimes elide the activity of 'analysis' with the account provided of the specific extracts presented in an academic article (Antaki *et al.*, 2003). For present purposes, however, we would wish to distinguish the summary report of our findings presented in this chapter from the analytic procedure by which an understanding of the data was originally arrived at.

Following the standard recommendations for inductive qualitative research (e.g. Silverman, 2000), analysis started at the point at which the first interview

[4] Whilst the study was conducted jointly, the responsibility for the present analysis is, of course, the authors' own.