

# IDENTITY

Ireland today is a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. Minority ethnic communities include the Traveller community, an indigenous minority ethnic community with a distinct culture and history of nomadism, and one of the largest minority ethnic communities in Ireland. In recent years, Ireland's ethnic and cultural panorama has changed in an unprecedented manner with the arrival of new communities of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. They are from myriad ethnic backgrounds. The wide range of countries from which these groups originate denotes the complexity of ethnic diversity of the newly emerging communities. An integral characteristic of Ireland's ethnic communities is that the situation is not static. It is rapidly changing and evolving, especially with respect to the newly emerging minority ethnic communities, which give Ireland its distinctive ethnic mix. Returning Irish make up large proportion recession

In this climate of negotiation and settlement of new communities from diverse ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds into Irish society, the prevalence and significance of the question of identity has now more than ever, it could be postulated, risen to the forefront of both the newcomers and Irish native peoples' consciousness. Moreover, beyond our own Irish shores the question of identity seems inextricable from a somewhat universal modern preoccupation with what has received pejorative connotations of navel gazing, which encapsulates the notion of dedicating excessive amounts of time absorbed in thoughts about oneself. Yet if we were to assume a more diluted sense of the notion of navel gazing perhaps this inward self-examination and analysis is an unavoidable and consequently a useful step in the negotiation process of identity formation. Critical events can cause people and its society to question and reassess their identity. In the Irish case, our current socio-cultural context of increased immigration flows has sparked local, national and global debate. There is the long standing Western tradition of 'know thyself' based on concepts of individualism, independence and self-reliance. However, with the arrival of diverse groups of people from across the globe Irish people have begun to call into question what it really means to be Irish, could we speak of a national identity and what are its distinguishing features and ultimately did we all really know ourselves and belong to the same national identity.

The intrinsic shaping of human identity is constructed at the intersections of a multitude of diverse and complex dimensions. Indeed against the background of globalisation of the economic and communications dimensions of life, individuals can be viewed as being at the heart of a concentric universe so that the circles circumscribing each individual on the continuum of humanity which intersect at a multitude of divergent points. This produces a network of potential identities which in principle to which each and every individual is open. Essentially this is the meaning of concentric identities, many overlapping possible spaces of social interaction. Each space represents a social identity which can be attributed to membership or allegiance to a particular group. For the interculturalist scholar, Gudykunst (1998) social identity is the individual's self-concept which derives from his/her recognition and knowledge of membership of a social group or groups together with the value

and emotional significance attached to that membership. Memberships can be demographic; national, ethnic, gender etc, the societal roles we play; student, teacher, nurse, patient; membership of an organisation; choir, football, book club; association or vocations; business, voluntary. More challenging is being a member of socially disadvantaged and stigmatized group like the gay and lesbian community, disabled group, Traveller community and the more recent addition of the ethnic minority groups to the fabric of Irish society. The process of negotiating the stigmatized or what the sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) referred to as the 'management of the spoiled identity' is undoubtedly a more complex activity. However in all identity negotiation, there is a tension between our need to be seen to be similar to others and our need to feel unique. This tension is exacerbated when a specific aspect of an individual's identity is called into question or challenged. Similarity can be observed as a general process of inclusion, whereas through the display of a unique facet of one's identity a process of differentiation occurs within our social milieu.

Language is one of the most crucial distinguishing features of an individual's cultural identity profile. Clearly in the context of immigration, language is recognised as one of the most if not the most challenging barriers to overcome in order to successfully adapt and 'fit in' to a new country. If we take the metaphor of the iceberg to denote an understanding of a nation's culture, we could say of the visible one tenth components, language is the prime identity marker. On the other hand, cultural symbols that make up our identity like our beliefs and values and individual traits would be less easily detectable.

Language as a social interaction has to satisfy two conditions. Firstly, to convey the content, that implies the comprehension of the literal sense of a dialogue. Secondly it must communicate the implicated content in order to establish and maintain the relationship. This is often indirect, for instance in a polite command or conversely innuendo or joking slang. The inherent oblique nature of this second component makes it more difficult for a non native speaker to grasp. Diverse dialects and accents make it even more challenging for someone learning the language. Yet that is the very richness of language itself, which in the case of someone learning in Ireland they have the opportunity to learn the Irish English flavour of the language and in doing so discover more about Irish culture as Gaelic words are sprinkled through peoples' everyday dialogue. A side effect of the increase in immigrant population has meant that Irish people are also encouraged to learn other European languages from native speakers. Moreover, as foreigners take an interest in our native language Gaelic, some Irish people themselves who have lost touch with it and regaining a sense of pride in their native tongue. In this way our language is reaping a cultural renewal through contact and intermingling with other European languages and importing into our vernacular new vocabulary through the introduction of new cuisine for instance croissant, cappuccino, fashion; beret, anorak and a wider appreciation of musical tastes for example in salsa. True integration involves a genuine intercultural dialogue or indeed a 'multi'logue whereby the host culture in our case Ireland engages in a real and dynamic way with new people from diverse cultures which will enable each interlocutor in this intercultural conversation to learn

from and impact upon and positively alter our ever evolving similar yet unique  
i d e n t i t i e s .