

Migration

Despite immigration not being a completely new phenomenon to Ireland it is nevertheless an island more traditionally accustomed to an outward flow of its population. However, the 1990s saw the emergence of a very different Ireland. In that decade, Ireland experienced unprecedented levels of prosperity and consequently almost half a million new jobs were added to the Irish economy heralding high levels of immigration in the latter years of the decade. Furthermore, what was especially exceptional was the pace of change in Irish patterns of immigration. In the period 1995-2000, approximately a quarter of a million people migrated to Ireland, of whom about half were returning Irish. It was the time of the economic boom in the country and the now well hackneyed term "Celtic Tiger" has been used to refer to the country itself at this time, and to the years associated with the boom. The first recorded use of this phrase is in a 1994 Morgan Stanley report by Kevin Gardiner.

Ireland's trend of net emigration was reversed as the country became a destination for immigrants. This significantly changed Irish demographics and resulted in expanding multiculturalism, particularly in the Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway areas. At the same time, many of the Irish Diaspora now saw the opportunity to return and benefit from increased employment opportunities. The aggregate figure for immigrants (including Irish returnees) in this five-year period is estimated at roughly 7% of the 1996 population (3.6 million).

Diverse groups of immigrants for a multiplicity of motivations have come to Ireland. The movement of people across Europe has taken place due to various push and pull factors. For instance, the potential for better living conditions and higher salaries undoubtedly attracted many. Conversely, however, others arrived in Ireland in search of a safe haven. Certainly those with the greatest difficulties are refugees and asylum applicants, fleeing from war, famine, persecution or discrimination.

Comparing Ireland to other European Union countries emphasizes its rapid changes. During 1990-1994, Ireland was the only country among the member states of the EU-15 with a negative net migration rate. However this is a stark contrast, to the situation between 1995 and 1999, when Ireland's average annual net migration rate was the second highest in the EU-15, exceeded only by that of Luxembourg. Moreover, according to recently released Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data, by 2002, the estimated share of non-nationals in Ireland's population had surpassed those of the UK and France, countries with much longer immigration histories.

Yet we may often forget that statistics are about a real person's life, not a nation or ethnic or religious group. Migration is about the movement people. People who for varying motivations choose to leave their own country to live in another. In packing up their lives in their own country they bring with them their own distinct culture, traditions and values. Many who move may not have prior experience of living away from their own familiar home environment, so it can be a daunting experience. They will have to make adjustments to how they have carried out their lives before. For some the modifications to their daily lives are dramatic. Therefore, within the statistics it is important to recognise that the overriding motivation for the individual migrant's decision to leave their country is crucial for planning for integration. Successful integration relies on the recognition that the responsibility rests with both the individual themselves and the host community to facilitate a smooth transition from one culture at another.

Nonetheless, in the face of difference it is within our human nature to often respond with hesitation and our innate human anxiety with the unfamiliar and unknown is heightened. Today there is a move away from speaking about separate races and we are encouraged to replace the idea racial differences and instead speak about diverse ethnicities. This stems from the biological understanding that is only one race; that is to say the human race. The reality of immigration is that Ireland has become a multi ethnic society in a very short period of time. Some sectors of Irish society have felt threatened by the arrival of new comers into the country. This is ultimately bred by fear through a deficient in knowledge about 'where these people are coming from' in all senses of this notion.

Social scientists speak about how our identity is formed, through our membership to certain social groups and essentially it is by constructing our social borders that we primarily create and shape our own sense of self and moreover our attachment to particular groups. Immigration poses the challenge for the host community in how it will negotiate sharing its traditional established spaces within its society for example, education, health, social welfare institutions. A division may form between the native dwellers and the newcomers, whereby an 'us' and 'them' mentality can arise originating in the Darwinian idea of the survival of the fittest. Groups are pitted against one another which results in membership of certain social groups are revered in favour of others and this breeds prejudices. When our social identities are threatened one response is to move into a defensive mode and put down the 'out-group' or 'outsider' which poses a threat to the status quo. In doing so our own collective self-esteem increases through the affirmation of one's own dominant majority position within society. (Tajfel, 1978)

Discrimination on the grounds of ethnic difference is certainly a negative impact of increased migration. However it would be unfair to say that Ireland has not experienced this before as the Irish Traveller Community can attest to. It is interesting to note that Irish travellers have sought to gain respect by adopting the

status as ethnic minority at this time of immigration. Whereas some new ethnic minorities within Ireland are reluctant to employ this term the Irish Travellers view their recognition as a distinct group within Ireland, with its own language, cultural and religious values as a positive step towards being more fully accepted and respected within Ireland as a whole.

Language is a powerful tool and how we choose to employ it is critical, especially in discussing the sensitive issue of immigration. The terminology and labels that society adopts for people from different countries affect not only how people are perceived but also how they perceive themselves. It seems that the key to appropriate use of language appears to rest with the meaning that is ascribed to the word. Collier (1988) spoke about the difference between the concept of avowal and ascription; that is how we view ourselves and our relation with others in the wider community and how the world perceives and categorises us. It is often the clash between these understandings that may lead to negative self and group images which in turn may hinder, most specifically in the case of a migrant their capacity to develop the confidence to voice their difficulties in 'fitting in' to a new culture. Certainly this challenge to speak up and highlight the negative repercussions of migration upon the individual is more extreme if the individual is struggling with the very instrument which may alleviate the issue, language itself.

Today, the phenomenon of migration touches the lives of more people and looms larger in the economic, social, and domestic policies and international relations of more nations than at any other time in Irish and European history. And yet for all the challenges which migration poses for both the Irish community and the migrants themselves the benefits and rewards undoubtedly supersede them. Currently in Ireland and across Europe, the cultural diversity created through migration extends the potential of positively enriching all our lives through intercultural dialogue in the workplace, schools and universities and community groups allowing us the unique prospect to learn, work and socialise together within a truly global community within our own local settings.

