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Celtic Football Club and Irish Identity

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BA in Public Administration

This project examines the role that Celtic Football Club plays in the reproduction, maintenance and expression of Irishness for its supporters. The data was collected from a purposive sample of 8 respondents by means of interviews, and a grounded theory approach was used as the method of data analysis. The study examines social identity, Irish identity, ritual, symbolism and the history of Celtic Football Club. Ultimately it finds that supporters of Celtic Football Club express their interpretation of Irish identity in varying ways. The study received ethical approval from the University of Limerick AHSS Research Ethics committee.

Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the role that Celtic Football Club plays in the reproduction, maintenance and expression of Irishness in its supporters. As a fan of Celtic Football Club my interest in the club and its fans influenced my decision to choose this topic. The first section of this paper outlines the methodology used. The second section reviews existing literature on the subject of Irish identity and Celtic Football Club. The next section of the paper presents the findings of my research. Within this section I will show the different types of identity which help Celtic supporters express their Irishness. It will show that ‘Diaspora Irishness’ and ‘Nationalistic Irishness’ are essential for the expression of Irishness for Celtic Supporters. The final section will offer conclusions on the varying ways in which supporters express their Irish identity.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used for this project. Jupp (2006, p.248) defines qualitative research as research that investigates aspects of social life which are not amenable to quantitative measurement. Associated with a variety of theoretical perspectives, qualitative research uses a range of methods to focus on the meanings and interpretation of social phenomena and social processes in the particular contexts in which they occur. Cresswell (1998, p.15) also describes qualitative research as a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social problem, with the researcher building a complex holistic picture, analysing words, and reporting the detailed views of respondents. The methods used in qualitative research, often in combination, are those which are open minded (to explore participants' interpretations) and which allow the collection of detailed information in a relatively close setting.

Ethical approval was received from the College of Humanities Research Ethics Sub-Committee within the University of Limerick prior to the recruitment of my sample. My purposive sample consisted of 8 individuals who I felt were theoretically meaningful and would reflect important aspects of my research question. I selected my participants on the basis that they were Irish (not just born in Ireland but also second or third generation Irish raised abroad) and that they supported Celtic Football Club. Six of the participants were born in Ireland, with one of those six now living in Scotland while two of the respondents were born in Scotland but were of Irish decent. All of the respondents were male and ranged in age from twenty one to forty five. All of the respondents were from a middle or working class background. The respondents ranged from being season ticket holders in Celtic Park (Celtic Football Club's home ground) to people who had a more passive interest in the club. The candidates were drawn from Celtic supporters clubs. Three of these

interviews took place over the phone due to the fact that those participants were based in Scotland. Interview times ranged from eight minutes to twenty minutes.

I used grounded theory as my chosen method of data analysis, as it was the most suitable for developing emergent theory. As I was using grounded theory, it enabled me to use an inductive process in which theory is built and modified from the data collected. Grounded theory provides a procedure for developing categories (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), building a story that connects the categories (selective coding) and ending with a set of discursive theoretical propositions (Creswell 1998, p. 150).

Social Identity

The most substantial contributions to the study of identity have grown from developments of Social Identity Theory, which was pioneered by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s (Abrams and Hogg 1990, p.1). Tajfel defines social identity as ‘the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership’ (cited in Abrams and Hogg 1990, p. 2). According to Brown and Capozza (2006, p.4) the theory includes two basic concepts. One concerns the need for self-esteem. ‘Individuals wish to evaluate themselves and be evaluated positively. This need regards both the personal and the social self; that is, the groups an individual belongs to’ (Brown and Capozza 2006, p.4). The other concept is that ‘the value of self and value of the in-group are defined through comparison; namely, the in-group is positively evaluated if it is perceived as being superior to relevant out-groups on salient comparison dimensions’. Moreover, Jenkins (2008, p.89) speaks of group membership as being ‘meaningful to individuals, conferring social identity and permitting self evaluation. It is a shared representation of who one is and the appropriate

behaviour attached to who one is. Group membership in itself, *regardless of its context or meaning*, is sometimes sufficient to encourage members to, for example, discriminate against out-group members. Group members also exaggerate the similarities within the in-group, and the differences between the in-group and the out-group' (Jenkins 2008, p.89).

The use of and participation in shared ritual is another way of marking membership of a group. Any formal actions following a set pattern that express, through symbol, a public or shared meaning can be defined as rituals (Abercrombie et al., 2000). Rituals are considered part of a generational process that fosters a sense of identity for individual members and is reflective of the community's shared belief system. The symbolic significance attached to a community's rituals is considered central to the force of those rituals (Fiese 1992).

Identities always involve both sameness and difference. Thus, if you are British, you are considered to be like other Britons and different from non-Britons. There is, then, a tendency to see identities as being fixed or given. Sociologists, however, argue that identities are fluid and changeable and that we can acquire new ones. The concept has been used by sociologists in a number of different but related contexts. In an article in the *Global Gazette* by Kyle Betit¹, he speaks about what it means to be Irish and how much it means to be Irish on days like St. Patrick's Day. He commented 'I have found that many people have the perception that "Irish" means both Gaelic and Catholic, thus eliminating anyone

¹ Kyle J. Betit is a professional genealogist, lecturer and author residing in Salt Lake City, Utah. Kyle specializes in Irish & Eastern European immigration, and religious records research. The *Global Gazette* is a Canadian family history magazine.

who doesn't fit into those categories'. Parallels can be drawn with the notion that Celtic Football Club is both Catholic and Gaelic in nature. While it is true that the majority of the supporters are indeed Catholic, the club has always had an appeal to many supporters who were non Catholic and the ethos of the club has always been inclusive. Some of Celtic's most famous players are Protestant, including Kenny Dalglish and Danny McGrain, while Jock Stein, who managed Celtic to European Cup glory in 1967, was also of the Protestant faith. Such examples show that Celtic football club has always tried to be inclusive.

There is more than one type of Irish identity expressed in supporting Celtic. There is a 'Diaspora Irishness' involved in supporting Celtic. This shares similar understandings about Ireland as those expressed by Irish-Americans. These understandings are often quite different to, and fail to keep pace with social changes in, the experience of actually being and living in Ireland. Another type of Irishness expressed in the support of Celtic surrounds a politicised or nationalistic form of Irish identity. This is, in fact, a very particular one and for many it maintains strong links between republicanism and nationalism. It is also powerfully and publicly associated with Celtic, despite the club's best efforts. While it is clear that Celtic, and its fans, may be bound to the past and to religion, the club has worked hard to disassociate itself from sectarianism and political agendas, instead emphasising its role as a football club, and as a business. Illustrating this, Celtic's mission statement reads as follows 'Celtic Football Club is a Scottish football club with proud Irish links. The primary business of Celtic is as a football club. It is run on a professional business basis with no political agenda. The aim of the club is to maximise all opportunities to disassociate the Club from sectarianism and bigotry of any kind. To promote Celtic as a Club for all people, regardless of gender, age, religion, race or ability' (Celtic Football Club 2010).

Celtic Football Club and Irish Identity: A Brief History

The Celtic Football Club was founded by emigrant Irish religious and lay leaders in 1888, with a Marist Brother named Walfrid to the fore. The first aim was to raise funds to provide food for the poor of the East End of Glasgow, an area of the city that was greatly impoverished and had a high rate of infant mortality. Within the East End was a large Irish immigrant community and friction was growing between the native Glaswegians and the new influx of Irish. Brother Walfrid saw the need for social integration and his vision was a football club that Scottish and Irish, Protestants and Catholics alike could support. A new football club would be a vehicle to bring the communities together and this was the second aim (Celtic Football Club 2010). The support given by Irish and Scottish Catholic communities was generous and unconditional. Since it was founded it became, for many communities in Western Scotland, a symbol of their heritage and tradition. The club has since come to represent a badge of Irish identity around the world (Warfield and Daly 2008, p.1).

Brian McGuirk (2009) former Leinster representative of the Association of Irish Celtic Supporters Clubs, and the author of *Celtic F.C The Irish Connection*, wrote ‘We didn’t just happen to support Celtic; Celtic is part of us. Celtic for us is so much more than a football club. Celtic is an institution, an identity and a celebration of being Irish or being of Ireland. Celtic is a legacy passed from generation to generation. Celtic is a way of life’. The comments made by both Warfield and McGuirk point towards an out-of-Ireland Irishness or a ‘Diaspora Irishness’. However referring back to the comments made by Kyle Betit this is also an exclusionary or possibly quite a disconnected way of viewing Irishness concerned primarily with articulating a closed Irish nation that is accessible only to a certain type of Irish person.

This is powerfully echoed in the ritual use of song. The use of song and story is essential to supporters in maintaining and expressing their identity. The Irish in Scotland and their descendants have expressed their faith and patriotism differently because of the events of history. The power of music and song has shown this. The ballads sang by supporters represent the three strands of musical expression that colour the song lore of Celtic fans. These are Sporting Anthems, Patriotic Ballads and Irish Songs (Warfield and Daly 2008, p.1). Interestingly, for many the Celtic jersey has been used as a symbol of nationalism in Northern Ireland during the troubles. With such a visible divide between Catholics and Protestants, Celtic and Rangers have become the symbol of each side. The green and white coloured hoops which make up the Celtic jersey have become a symbol of nationalism and are an easily visible sign used to distinguish one side from the other. In that context, Celtic has, as noted, done everything it can to disassociate itself from sectarianism. Measures taken by the club include banning the singing of pro-IRA songs at its stadium. However, such songs continue to feature, particularly at away games. Celtic has sought to control and to minimise associations with sectarianism. Its mission statement further states that ‘The Club aims to maximise all opportunities to disassociate the Club from sectarianism and bigotry of any kind’ (Celtic Football Club 2010). However, as will be seen in the findings of this research, this has not been totally successful. For supporters of the club, it has been difficult to change the meanings that they have historically, in their own life course, associated with the club.

Research Findings

Bradley (2006) argues that the act of supporting Celtic is involved in the reproduction, maintenance and expression of Irishness in its supporters. However is supporting Celtic a family legacy or was it a choice made by each individual supporter? For each supporter it involves the expression of a

particular form of Irish identity. For some it shows a Diaspora Irish identity. When asked if he inherited his support for Celtic or was it a choice because of the Irish connection, Tony who was born in Scotland replied “being of Irish descent I didn’t have much choice”. James who is an Irish student in Scotland replied:

“Well to be honest, I hadn’t much interest in it all til I came over here. The Irish lads kinda stick together like. Started goin to a few games like and I suppose that’s where it started”.

This form of Diaspora Irish Identity was also seen when respondents were asked about wearing the Celtic jersey abroad or seeing someone else wear it abroad. Paul who was born in Ireland but lived and worked in London for a short time commented:

“It’s unbelievable, if you see a Celtic jersey, you’d spot it a mile away cos it stands out a mile. When you see it, you just get a burst of pride. You’d see someone on the street and you might have an inclining that they might be Irish because they might have red hair and freckles, a beer belly or whatever, you know like if they have a Celtic jersey, they’re either Irish or 1st, 2nd generation Irish”.

Another form of Irish Identity which has been associated with Celtic supporters is that of a Nationalistic Irish Identity with a sectarian and politicised element which has seen the Celtic jersey come to represent the side of the Nationalists in Northern Ireland just as the Rangers jersey has come to represent the Loyalist and Protestant tradition. Respondents spoke on their views of the Nationalistic Irish Identity associated with Celtic and the Celtic jersey. The respondents interviewed took it for granted that Celtic would be associated with Nationalism in Northern Ireland. Tony commented “It shows the support for an independent Ireland from Irish descendants in Scotland”. Paul added “It comes back to identity and especially in the North and if you see someone with a Celtic Jersey, you know where his loyalties lie”. The issue of sectarianism was clearly seen in

2006 when a young Catholic boy called Michael McIveen was beaten to death in Ballymena. McIveen had friends on both sides of the religious divide, something that was visibly demonstrated at his funeral where his coffin was carried by young people wearing both Glasgow Celtic and Rangers football tops. (Mulholland 2006 Online).

Both Celtic Football Club and The Gaelic Athletic Association have served similar purposes for Irish communities and they have found themselves positioned as the flagships of Irish identity (Daly and Warfield 2008 p.3), particularly in a diasporic context. From the laying of the first sod at Celtic Park in 1892 by Michael Davitt right through to the Tyrone Gaelic footballers visiting Celtic Park with the Sam Maguire Cup in recent years, that link has been continuous and maintained. David speaks about the link between the G.A.A., Celtic and Irish nationalism as he sees it:

“Just look at the boys in the North like, Mickey Harte and them. They’d appreciate being Irish more than we would like. I don’t know if you’d put them together but Tyrone went over to Celtic with the cup after winning and there’s a picture of them on youtube² as well there like with the cup at Aiden McAnespie’s³ grave. Mickey Harte, Canavan, Brian Dooher and a few more of em”.

The rituals surrounding the expression of identity

Burdsey and Chappell (2003) point out the most effective way for many football supporters to articulate the elements of their identity is through their behaviour at a match. This is due to the fact that not only are similar individuals brought

² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chth81liKk4>

³ Aiden McAnespie was a twenty four year old Catholic Civilian who was shot in controversial circumstances at an army checkpoint at Aughnacloy Co. Tyrone on February 21st 1988 while on his way to a Gaelic football match (Warfield and Daly 2008 p.262). The ballad which was written to commemorate this event is sung by Celtic supporters particularly at away games.

together in the same setting, but the opposition supporters are also present in close proximity. This provides both groups of supporters with a relatively safe environment in which they can express elements of their identity and behave in a manner that may not be socially acceptable elsewhere.

For the supporters of Celtic this is no different. The literature showed that the singing of Irish songs at games and the wearing of the jersey were all actions that were sacred to Celtic supporters and helped them express their Irish identity. Respondents spoke about the symbolic nature of the scarves and the flags in the ground. The scarves with phrases such as ‘God Bless The Pope’ and ‘God Bless The Irish’ undoubtedly showed how the Celtic supporters expressed their Catholic faith which in turn can be seen as a symbol of Irishness. Such gestures can be seen associating Celtic with Republicanism and indeed Catholicism. Kevin spoke of his Celtic Park experience:

“Only been there once I must admit. All I was expectin was You’ll Never Walk Alone and The Fields of Athenry and the huddle before the game. Its undescrivable like....I remember lookin at the scarves durin You’ll Never Walk Alone and one was God Bless The pope and the other one was God Bless The Irish”.

For many supporters of Celtic Football Club the green and white hooped jersey of Celtic is seen as essential to expressing their Irishness. No matter where one travels in the world the Celtic jersey is often seen. All the respondents spoke of how they are proud to wear the Celtic jersey both at home and abroad. David stated:

“I’d always have the Celtic jersey on underneath. Wouldn’t leave the house without it. It’s my holy medal”.

Tony who is a member of the Irish Diaspora in Scotland commented: “the Celtic crest doesn’t just represent the club, it represents the supporters and the heritage behind it”. Accordingly, I would argue that these findings illustrate,

that for these supporters, the simple action of wearing a Celtic jersey helps them to maintain, express and reproduce their sense of Irish identity.

Analysing the role of songs and Irish icons in the creation of identity

For many supporters of Celtic Football Club, the singing of songs has been essential for the expression of their identity. When asked if the singing of songs was essential for the expression of one's identity as a Celtic supporter, all of the respondents agreed that it played some part in helping them express their identity. For Carl who is a season ticket holder, it helps in particular to express his Nationalistic Celtic identity:

“Aye, I know about 70 rebel songs. You sing it because you're passionate about it. Sometimes I regret some of the songs I sing but you get caught up in it for ninety minutes”

Similarly Paul states:

“The Boys of the Old Brigade and it's just sang at Celtic because it's an Irish song and obviously it has republican connections but Celtic songs that I like. I used like the Nakamura one, He eats Chow Mein votes Sinn Fein”.

Burdsey and Chappell (2003) spoke about how a number of players have played a part in maintaining and promoting the identities of Celtic football club. In recent years the Irish connection with Celtic has been maintained with the large number of influential Irish players and staff at the club.

The findings noted in particular that two men in particular had helped supporters express and maintain their Irish Identity. The men in question are Martin O'Neill and Neil Lennon. David comments:

“Definitely, Martin O' Neill especially. T'would have been through Martin O' Neill that I got interested in Celtic. Maybe because he was successful but even Lennon would make you feel more Irish. The picture of Martin O'Neill with his arm

*round Lennon would have the blood boiling. Fierce pride in it like. You'd defiantly say it would make you connect with Celtic alright"*⁴.

Neill Lennon is a Catholic from Armagh in Northern Ireland and a former Celtic captain. Having received death threats in 2002 prior to an international with Northern Ireland, he decided to retire from international football. The fact that he was an Irish Catholic made him a target for abuse from Rangers supporters. However for Celtic supporters he was seen as an icon and because of his Catholic Irish background many supporters identified with him as part of their expression of a Nationalistic and Catholic Celtic identity.

Conclusions

In conclusion supporting Celtic has offered each of my respondents an outlet to express their Irish identity. For each respondent it has offered a different kind of Irish identity with a Nationalistic Irish identity and a Diaspora Irish identity coming to the fore. The strongest ways for the respondents to express their Irishness in this public context has been through the use of symbolism and rituals which connect Celtic and Ireland, most particularly through song and visible signs of belonging such as scarves and jerseys. This study has not just shown that Celtic is involved in the reproduction, maintenance and expression of Irishness in its supporters but it has also shown how it does so. As a result of its Irish origins and strong contemporary Irish links, Celtic Football Club will continue to be a badge of Irish identity for many thousands of people

⁴ The event David speaks about is after Celtic were defeated 2-0 by Rangers at Ibrox, the home of Rangers Football Club in November 2004. When the game was over Martin O'Neill put his arm around Neill Lennon, clenched his fist, and marched towards the 7,500 Celtic fans in the Broomloan stand to show his solidarity with Lennon who had been subjected to sectarian abuse for the whole game from the Rangers supporters.

throughout the world. However, as demonstrated, it can be seen as a closed identity based on nationality and on religion, no matter how hard the club tries to disassociate itself from that. I conclude with the words of Brian McGuirk (2009) ‘Celtic is part of us. Celtic for us is so much more than a football club. Celtic is an institution, an identity and a celebration of being Irish or being of Ireland. Celtic is a legacy passed from generation to generation. Celtic is a way of life’.

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