Even in England, where the proportions of respondents in most cases being Scottish or Welsh, as important. Three-fifths of respondents choose a national identity, in some form or another. In Scotland and Wales, almost is clear that for most people, national identity matters choose a national identity. This varies by territory, but it identity. Further, when asked to choose key identities, many opt out of both these.

Almost all respondents in different parts of the UK are different again, with a polarisation between British and Irish identities are less easily distinguished from each other in Northern Ireland. As does the most popular form of national identity is chosen with more frequency than the state identity of Britishness. In England, state and sub-state national identity is much more evenly balanced, and neither proves consistently more popular across all measures of national identity. This supports the notion that state and sub-state identities are less easily distinguished from each other in England than in Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland is different again, with a polarisation between British and Irish identities and the presence of a substantial minority who opt out of both these.

Almost all respondents in different parts of the UK are willing to claim some form, or combination, of national identity. Further, when asked to choose key identities, many choose a national identity. This varies by territory, but it is clear that for most people, national identity matters in some form or another. In Scotland and Wales, almost three-fifths of respondents choose a national identity, in most cases being Scottish or Welsh, as important. Even in England, where the proportions of respondents choosing a national identity are relatively low, almost half of respondents choose being British and/or English as a key aspect of identity. In Northern Ireland, religious-national identities are as salient as national identities in Scotland and Wales. In other words, national identities matter in the United Kingdom in terms of how respondents describe themselves, and the importance they attach to them.

Conclusion

The salience of national identities differs between the four territories, as does the most popular form of national identity. In Scotland and Wales, the relevant sub-state national identity is chosen with more frequency than the state identity of Britishness. In England, state and sub-state identity are much more evenly balanced, and neither proves consistently more popular across all measures of national identity. This supports the notion that state and sub-state identities are less easily distinguished from each other in England than in Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, there is a conflict between being British highly. Most people in Scotland and Wales give priority to ‘national’ over ‘state’ identity, while in Northern Ireland there is a conflict between alternative identities. A substantial minority in England do not describe themselves as British ether.

Policy Implications

These findings suggest a difficulty in the UK government’s requirement for newly naturalised British citizens to pledge their ‘loyalty to the United Kingdom’. Whilst this may seem reasonable in the legal sense of British citizenship, the ceremonies designed to make ‘new Britons’ sit uneasily with the fact that a considerable proportion of all Britons do not regard themselves as British, or do not rate being British highly. Most people in Scotland and Wales give priority to ‘national’ over ‘state’ identity, while in Northern Ireland there is a conflict between alternative identities. A substantial minority in England do not describe themselves as British ether.

Related Publications


National identities in the UK: do they matter?

Briefing No. 16, January 2006

Key Points

• National identities in every part of the United Kingdom are multiple and/or plural.

• In England, Scotland, and Wales most people assign themselves to a ‘state’ (British) identity and/or a ‘sub-state’ (English; Scottish; Welsh) identity. Dual identities are common.

• In Northern Ireland there is no obvious and uncontroversial ‘state’ identity, and people describe themselves variously in terms of being Irish, British or Northern Irish. Very few people are both British and Irish.

• People say that national identity matters to them personally, and this is particularly true of Scottishness in Scotland and Welshness in Wales.

• There is some evidence of a close coincidence between – and complex intertwining of – national and religious identities in Northern Ireland.

The research programme on Constitutional Change and Identity was set up in 1999 with funding from The Leverhulme Trust to investigate the importance of national identity and constitutional change in the UK. The research team comprised sociologists, social psychologists, social anthropologists and political scientists at universities in Scotland and England, and was coordinated by David McCrone at The University of Edinburgh.

Further Information about the programme as a whole

See the programme website at http://www.institute-of-governance.org/forums/Leverhulme/TOC.html or contact the coordinator, Professor David McCrone at the Institute of Governance, University of Edinburgh, Chalmers House, High School Yards, Edinburgh, EH11 1LZ.

Tel: 0131 601 2459 Fax: 0131 601 6345; email: d.mccrone@ed.ac.uk
Introduction

Accounts of national identity must be accounts of identities because identities are multiple, heterogeneous and flexible; multiple, because people identify with many social categories; heterogeneous, because identities may mean very different things to different people; flexible, because they change according to the contexts in which people find themselves.

In this paper we use surveys to explore similarities and differences in the patterns of national identity across the four constituent territories of the United Kingdom. For conceptual clarity, we refer to British identity as ‘state identity’ and English, Northern Irish, Scottish, Welsh identity as ‘sub-state identity’. We use the terms state or sub-state identity, taking the word national as read.

Methodology

This paper draws upon the following surveys: British Social Attitudes Survey 2003; Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey 2001 and 2003; Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2003; Welsh Life & Times Survey 2003. The surveys are funded by a wide variety of governmental, quasi-governmental and other grant-giving organisations (including the Leverhulme Trust). More information on the surveys, and the organisations funding them, can be found at the UK Data Archive (www.data-archive.ac.uk).

Findings

National identity

First of all, respondents were asked to choose from a list of national identities, as many as they felt applied to them. Overall ‘British’ together with ‘English’, ‘Scottish’, or ‘Welsh’ are the options chosen by most respondents in these three territories. One minor exception to this pattern is the relatively large proportion of respondents in Wales (13 per cent) who say they are English. The major exception is Northern Ireland where no single identity commands a majority and where ‘British’, ‘Irish’ and ‘Northern Irish’ are prominent:

Table 1: Multiple choice national identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| British  | 70      | 59       | 3     | 71%
| English  | 59      | 84       | 3     | 53%
| Scottish | 56      | 16       | 2     | 93%
| Welsh    | 49      | 1        | 72    | 23%

People in Scotland and in Wales are more likely to prioritise their sub-state identities (‘Scottish’ and ‘Welsh’) than are people in England. Dual identities, however, are very common, in particular in Scotland where almost half of respondents are both British and Scottish. Substantial minorities in England and in Wales also adopt a dual identity. In Northern Ireland, very few respondents identify themselves as both British and Irish, unsurprising given the competing nature of these identities. Further, a substantial minority in Northern Ireland choose neither of these identities. Of this minority, nearly three-quarters regard themselves as Northern Irish, suggesting that it is a potential ‘escape identity’ for those uncomfortable with the historic British-Irish cleavage.

We see, then, the salience of complementary identities in the constituent parts of Britain, and of competing identities in Northern Ireland. What, however, is the relative weight which respondents place on their national identities, particularly where dual identities are in evidence? This is explored in table 3 by asking respondents about the relative weight given to state/sub-state identities. The options (where X = English, Scottish or Welsh) are as follows: X not British; More X than British; British X only; More British than X; British not X; Other/none of these.

Table 3: National identities

<table>
<thead>
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| X not British | 17      | 31       | 23    | 26%
| More X than British | 19      | 34       | 27    | 31%
| British X only | 19      | 34       | 27    | 31%
| More British than X | 13      | 4        | 8     | 9%
| British not X | 10      | 4        | 7     | 48%
| Other/none of these | 16      | 14       | 6     | 15%

Dual identity is more evident than in table 2, possibly because the offered responses remind respondents of dual identities. Most people in Scotland (65%) see a British identity as either of little relevance or as less important to them than Scottishness (few (8%) prioritise Britishness. In Wales, half prioritise Welshness, with less than one-fifth (17%) prioritising Britishness. In England, responses are rather more symmetrical, suggesting possibly that the question allows Englishness a higher salience than the measures explored earlier, or that, for some, Englishness and Britishness coincide.

Do national identities matter?

So far, we have examined how respondents describe themselves, but we have not yet investigated how important national identities are compared with other social identities. Respondents were asked to choose their most important identity, followed by their second and third choices, from a list. The wording of the question was:

People differ in how they think of or describe themselves. If you had to pick just one thing from this list to describe yourself – something that is very important to you when you think of yourself – what would it be?

Table 4: The three identities most important to respondents

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| Parent   | 48      | 49       | 50    | 49%
| Family   | 34      | 31       | 29    | 37%
| Gender   | 26      | 27       | 29    | 26%
| Working class | 21      | 25       | 22    | 24%
| Working person | 30      | 30       | 29    | 30%
| British  | 27      | 13       | 22    | 14%
| ‘Sub-state’  | English, Scottish, Welsh | 21      | 49     | 39    | 15%
| Irish     | 13      | 13       |      | 13%

The identities shown in table 4 represent the most popular choices, and in many respects the four territories are quite similar. In Northern Ireland, however, rather more people choose a spousal, gender, and working class identity (although fewer choosing being a ‘working person’). To some extent this is explained by the much lower proportions of Northern Ireland in which a choice of Irish national identity is relatively uncommon. In England, respondents were also offered ‘English’ in Scotland, ‘Scottish’ in Wales, ‘Welsh’ and English in Northern Ireland. Irish, Ulsterman/Ulsterwoman and Northern Irish.

The full list of options was: working class; British; elderly; a woman/man; not white; Asian; unemployed; other; none of these. In England, respondents were also offered ‘English’; in Scotland, ‘Scottish’; in Wales, ‘Welsh’ and English; in Northern Ireland Irish, Ulsterman/Ulsterwoman and Northern Irish.

Table 5 shows how often Protestants and Catholics choose the relevant religious and national identities simply put, the proportions of Protestants who choose ‘being British’ and/or ‘being British’ and conversely the proportions of Catholics who choose ‘being Catholic’ and/or ‘being Irish’. The identities shown in table 4 represent the most popular choices, and in many respects the four territories are quite similar. In Northern Ireland, however, rather more people choose a spousal, gender, and working class identity (although fewer choosing being a ‘working person’). To some extent this is explained by the much lower proportions of Northern Ireland in which a choice of Irish national identity is relatively uncommon. In England, respondents were also offered ‘English’ in Scotland, ‘Scottish’ in Wales, ‘Welsh’ and English; in Northern Ireland Irish, Ulsterman/Ulsterwoman and Northern Irish.

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