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# 'I'm not Catholic and I'm not Protestant': Identity, individualisation and challenges for history education in Northern Ireland

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## Abstract

Teaching sensitive histories in post-conflict societies makes particular demands on educators to understand students' identities and their relationships to the past. This paper expands our understanding of post-conflict youth identities and experiences of history education through a small-scale study of students' life stories in Northern Ireland which defied sectarian boundaries in different ways: some were children of interfaith marriages, while others attended integrated schools or were part of cross-community peace-building organisations. Participants saw themselves as forging new identities and 'moving on' from the past, although this process was fraught with ambivalence. I describe these expressions of identity through Ulrich Beck's (1992) model of triple individualisation. For these 'post-sectarian' students, school history was seen largely as a tool towards achieving qualification, far removed from their everyday struggles of self-fashioning.

**Keywords:** history education, conflict, national identity, individualisation, Northern Ireland

## Introduction

The politically charged nature of history education is often especially palpable in deeply divided societies where anxieties about plural historical narratives and identities are always close to the surface. Deeply divided societies are characterised by battles over the fundamental legitimacy of the state – battles which have left not only a legacy of violence, but also different accounts of the causes and culpability for this violence (Guelke, 2013). These different accounts or 'contested narratives' reverberate through party politics, public spaces, media representations and everyday conversation. How and whether to traverse particular contested narratives is a fundamental issue for high-school educators in such contexts, in the knowledge that their students are continuously (re)shaping their beliefs and identities within and beyond the school gates.

The most frequently cited examples in the academic literature about deeply divided societies are Israel/Palestine, South Africa and Northern Ireland (Guelke, 2013). This paper will look at how some young people form alternative identities in one of these cases, Northern Ireland, and will look in particular at young people living in its most conflict-affected region: the Belfast Metropolitan Area (Cox et al., 2006: 14). It also foregrounds how these young people experience formal history education, in particular their impressions of learning about the history of the sectarian conflict of 1968–98, known as the Troubles.

A group that has been of significant scholarly and media interest are those young people whose identities lie outside (or invest less importance in) the traditional linear binaries of Catholic/Irish/nationalist and Protestant/British/unionist (Bingham and Duffy, 2017; *Belfast Telegraph*, 2012; Meredith, 2016; Hayes et al., 2007). While many young people do have strong attachments to traditional binary identifications (Furey et al., 2017), with some involved in paramilitary activity (McAlister et al., 2018; O'Carroll and Carroll, 2021), others identify as 'Northern Irish' as opposed to 'British' or 'Irish', and/or identify as part of a political project to transcend the divisions of previous generations (McNicholl et al., 2019). These latter youth identities have been invested with optimism, popularly seen as cause and consequence of 'a new dawn' for Northern Ireland (McNicholl, 2017). The participants I interviewed were all implicated in this political project of post-sectarianism and its uncertainties.

Being South African, I was alive to the ambiguities of a space at once hopeful and thwarted in the creation of a new society. Experiencing different phases of the post-apartheid trajectory made me aware that my interviews were bound up with a particular moment in Northern Ireland for these young people, and that these internal and external landscapes were always subject to change. South Africa had been experiencing heightened contestation about the contemporary legacy of past injustices, particularly since 2015 and especially in universities, with narratives of having 'moved on' being severely criticised in my own circles. Far from being simply a 'neutral outsider', I felt the weight of these concerns from home during the interviews and data analysis.

Although at the time of the interviews in April 2017 there was already significant anxiety about what Brexit would mean for peace and stability in Northern Ireland, the Belfast milieu was far from the violent unrest that later emerged in April 2021. Since 2005 – when participants would have been in early childhood – to the time of the interviews, sectarian incidents recorded by the police had nearly halved (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2021). This sense of both anxiety and hope was also mirrored in party political cross-currents. In January 2017, a financial scandal initiated the collapse of power sharing between the two largest political parties, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), parties that are polarised in terms of nationalism and unionism respectively. However, the intense cross-community anger generated by the scandal contained within it a moment of possibility for a broader shift in the political orientation of public discourse away from partisan issues (McBride, 2019). This context of ambivalence poses the question of how to conceptualise processes of self-fashioning for youth trying to 'move on' in the face of an absent-and-present past.

## Conceptual framework

I use individualisation theory as a lens with which to view participants' identities and think through their meaning for history education, particularly drawing on influential German sociologist Ulrich Beck's (1992: 128) model of triple individualisation, which he explains as a combination of:

... disembedding, *removal* from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the 'liberating dimension'); the *loss of traditional security* with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (the 'disenchantment dimension'); and – here the meaning of the word is virtually turned into

its opposition – re-embedding, *a new type of social commitment* (the ‘control’ or ‘reintegration dimension’). [Emphasis in original]

This early theoretical framework of individualisation resonated with the ambiguities of participants’ dislocation and relocation.

Beck’s (1992) ideas were taken in different directions by two further canonical sociologists, with Anthony Giddens developing and integrating them into the intellectual architecture of Tony Blair’s New Labour (Crouch, 2007), while Bauman (2000, 2001) elaborated a more critical understanding of individualisation as a form of privatisation. This privatisation occurs at multiple levels, including self-fashioning: ‘It is Bauman’s view that the privatising of life-strategies transforms identity “from a given into a task” (2001: 144), with social responsibility for self-determination now falling “primarily on the individual’s shoulders”’ (Branaman, 2007: 7–8). Failure is also privatised, with the individual taking the blame for an inadequate performance, although the resources to succeed are extremely unevenly distributed (Bauman, 2000, 2005). Comparing Bauman and Beck, Beck (1992) underplays the situatedness of individualisation, at times creating an impression of ultra-autonomous, hermeneutically sealed individuals driven by a blanket process of individualisation (Dawson, 2010; Rasborg, 2017). However, a more nuanced conceptualisation acknowledges its inequalities (Bauman, 2000), and additionally how it is influenced by proximate social relations such as the family, school and neighbourhood (Savage, 2000). Thus, I resisted the tendency of particular readings of individualisation to universalise its processes and experiences (Dawson, 2012).

Similarly, it was necessary to conceptualise individualisation as taking a specific form in the particular national context where it coexisted side by side with a lack of individualisation and a loyalty to ‘historically prescribed social forms and commitments’ (Beck, 1992: 128). Each of the three prongs of Beck’s (1992) model had a distinctively post-conflict edge, as we will see, with particular kinds of baggage attached to: historically prescribed social forms; institutional and social consequences for rejecting these forms; and, last, ‘new types of social commitment’ that are nevertheless bound up with older conflicts, a relation which I explain with reference to the image of ‘the sacrificial stranger’.

While social identity theory informs a significant amount of research on Northern Irish identities (McCully and Reilly, 2017; Barton and McCully, 2005), Beck’s model of individualisation offers a complementary (and complicating) perspective to this framework. Social identity theory is attractive in the context of deeply divided societies, as it speaks to the processes and reasons for identifying with particular groups and regarding them more favourably than other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). If entering group membership is the point of departure for social identity theory, individualisation’s point of departure is the inverse: liberation from (and loss of) particular group memberships. Throughout this paper, I demonstrate that such liberation/loss coexists in complex ways with the kinds of allegiance emphasised in social identity theory.

History education research that makes use of social identity theory also emphasises allegiance, and it uses this framework to explain and analyse how engaging with the past can be an emotional undertaking for young people (Curran, 2013; Létourneau et al., 2013; Goldberg, 2013; Bilewicz et al., 2017). As Goldberg (2013: 56) puts it: ‘The emotional process was that of social identification whereby students tended to feel they belonged to one group or the other, shared its status, and were impacted by its historic image.’ By contrast, individualisation allows for an exploration of how particular subjectivities can create an emotional distance from the past, a

feeling of insulating oneself from its entanglements. I argue that these subjectivities have profound consequences for how history education is experienced, and I outline the challenges this may pose to history teachers.

## Methodology

As shown in Table 1, five of the six participants were recruited from spaces where these post-sectarian identities were more likely: an integrated school, a non-denominational church and a peace-building organisation. It is important to emphasise that these purposefully cross-community spaces are the exception and not the norm. For instance, only 7 per cent of students in Northern Ireland in 2014/15 attended an integrated school (Department of Education, 2020).

Participants were told before agreeing to take part that I would be asking about how they learnt about the Troubles, and that this would include questions about current politics, as well as about their family and their school. In the case of the two participants who were under the age of 18, I asked participants to have their parents consider the research information pamphlet and sign parental consent forms before the interview, in addition to the consent forms signed by all participants themselves. Furthermore, in order to allow for interviewees to moderate what sensitive information they were willing to share, I did not ask direct questions about violence that they or their family had experienced, nor about their voting intentions, although participants could bring these subjects up in the course of their narration if they chose. In addition to the use of pseudonyms, certain details about the participants have been altered to protect their anonymity.

I conducted semi-structured one-to-one interviews with each participant in a quiet part of Queen's University Belfast. As the research was concerned with the meaning that young people made of the past, as well as with the processes and spaces of this meaning making, I drew on Seidman's (2006) guidance for a style of interviewing which facilitates participants' reflection on the meanings they give to the particular themes explored by the research *through* establishing broad and specific contexts for that meaning making. The way I operationalised what Seidman (2006) refers to as a combination of life-history and focused, in-depth interviewing was to ask broad, open-ended questions about participants' childhood, parents, schooling, spirituality, neighbourhoods, friends and life events (for example, moving house and divorce) in order to establish a life-history context, as well as to ask questions more specific to the research. In terms of the latter, I asked participants about their understanding of the Troubles and their legacy in modern Northern Irish society, as well as asking about their experience of history education. The overall process of the interviews was geared towards constructing participants' subjective understandings, as well as the contexts and forces interacting with these understandings (Seidman, 2006).

Initially, I coded the transcripts broadly in three codes: (1) expressions of self-identity; (2) formal history education; and (3) encounters with the past. After sweeping the corpus of transcripts, I further refined the coding scheme with nesting and additional codes.

## Findings and discussion

### 'There's no box on the form for that': Exploring participants' individualised group identities

Literature on young people in Northern Ireland often categorises them in terms of a sectarian dichotomy: either a young person is a Protestant or they are a Catholic



(Robbins, 2012; Francis et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2013). There may be caveats to this use of a dichotomy in the literature, as illustrated by this example from *The Troubles Aren't History Yet: Young people's understanding of the past*, published by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council: 'The authors recognise that these binary terminologies are indeed somewhat arbitrary; however they are used for the purposes of simplicity' (Bell et al., 2010: 36). What emerges from the interviews, and will be further explored here, is that while the identities espoused by participants do not reflect a sectarian dichotomy, neither do they indicate any shared alternative or clear third way among participants. Instead, the range of identity solutions is suggestive not only of being uprooted or disembedded from former social structures, but also of uncertain self-fashioning.

The individual responsibility for one's own identity work, and the enduring role that specific proximate social (and wider cultural) relations play in that identity work, is illustrated by the three participants (Ollie, Gracie and Adam) who each had one parent from a Protestant background and one parent from a Catholic background (Table 2 summarises how participants described their parents' positionalities). Ollie, Gracie and Adam had each adopted different strategies for presenting their identities to others in a context where their family structure defied cultural expectations. Gracie expressed that she felt uncomfortable when she had been asked if she was Catholic or Protestant, and refused to answer within the dichotomy:

I would rather not answer because I'm like, 'I'm neither, but I'm a half-blood princess' ... Or I'd say I'm just a Christian ... If I say nothing, they don't leave me alone. If I say that I'm both, they're like 'you can't be both', or I'd be like 'I don't care, I'm a mixed background', but if you say you're Christian, then they usually leave it.

Adam forged a different path, describing himself as 'in between, like mixed, because my parents were mixed'. However, when I asked, 'If someone asked you how would you identify, how do you respond?', he replied, 'I'd say more Protestant.' While Ollie did not use terms such as 'mixed' or 'in between', he rather expressed that politically he aligned with his Protestant father more than with his Catholic mother. When I asked why he felt that way, he replied, 'So he's Protestant, so he supports the DUP and the Protestant side for unionism, so I just more align myself with that.' However, he still distinguishes his own identity from his father and his grandfather on his father's side, saying that his grandfather was 'like my dad, but worse ... he was very unionist, and I'm very equal'. These identities conveyed Bauman's (2001: 144) sense of 'task' rather than 'given' in that, while perhaps 'mixed' might offer a third way, this was generally treated by the participants as insufficient, uncertain and requiring further qualification. Moreover, they reasoned through their identities ('I am \_\_\_ because \_\_\_'), rather than asserting them ('I am \_\_\_'), demonstrating their contingent rather than essential nature. These participants' creative strategies undermined the binary, as Gracie played upon the binary's submerged commonality of 'Christian', while Adam and Ollie refashioned the binary into a continuum by stating that one can be 'more' or 'very' Protestant/unionist.

All six participants demonstrated some degree of disembedding, where previous guiding norms had loosened, specifically destabilising the assumed linear relationship between religious belief, political preference and cultural identity. Within this assumed linear relationship, all Catholics identify with Catholic culture and Catholic faith and are nationalist, and vice versa for Protestants. One feature of participants' non-linear identities was the way in which (non)religious identification was disarticulated from its political and

<b>Table 2: Participant profiles</b>					
<b>Participant</b>	<b>How is the participant situated at the time of interview?</b>	<b>What does the participant's formal history education look like?</b>	<b>What are the participant's school and school friends like?</b>	<b>What are the participant's parental backgrounds?</b>	<b>What is the participant's relationship to spirituality?</b>
Ollie	17 years old In fifth year of high school	Ollie has taken history GSCE, but is not sure if he will take the subject further to A level.	Ollie describes his school as: 'mixed, so it's integrated. A lot of different people go there from different backgrounds so we get to see all parts of life from it ... and like Protestant and Catholic and Muslim, and some are like Buddhist – they all come.'	Ollie's mother is Catholic, and politically she supports Alliance or Social Democratic and Labour Party.  His father is Protestant and supports the Democratic Unionist Party.	Ollie is an atheist.
Gracie	18 years old Working part time as a barista, and aspiring to be a singer	Gracie took history GSCE, and thereafter left school.	Gracie went to a school which was technically integrated, but 'the majority would be quite strongly identifying Protestants ... In my class there was only one Catholic.' She describes the school ethos as Christian. All of Gracie's high-school friends are Protestant, but her boyfriend is Catholic.	Gracie's mother identifies as Christian and is from a Protestant family.  Gracie's father is from a Catholic background, but he is not religious.	Gracie attends a non-denominational church and helps with the children's ministry.
Kajus	16 years old In sixth year of high school	Kajus was pursuing history at A level at the time of the interview.	Describing his school, Kajus said that although 'they have a Christian ethos ... there are a lot of other religions in school', and 'it's really mixed so you'll find people from a lot of countries'.	Kajus emigrated from Lithuania to Northern Ireland with his family when he was quite young, but he goes back to Lithuania every year, and still considers it home.  His parents are practising Roman Catholics and often go to a Roman Catholic church with many other Lithuanians.	Kajus is an atheist.

Table 2: (continued)

Participant	How is the participant situated at the time of interview?	What does the participant's formal history education look like?	What are the participant's school and school friends like?	What are the participant's parental backgrounds?	What is the participant's relationship to spirituality?
Luke	19 years old Studying physics at a university in Belfast	Luke took history up to third year, but did not continue with it.	Luke described his high school as: 'a very diverse school. It's one of a few schools in Northern Ireland which caters for people from a lot of backgrounds, because there are a lot of schools in Northern Ireland which segregate into Catholic or Protestant areas depending on the religious background ... It's a very academic school, so they emphasise that you get your head down and "nose to the grindstone", sort of thing.'	Luke's parents are both Protestants from unionist backgrounds. His mother supports the Social Democratic and Labour Party or Alliance. His father would support the Ulster Unionist Party.	Luke identifies as Christian more than as Protestant.
Adam	20 years old Working in an electrician business	Adam took history up to third year, but did not continue with it.	Adam described his school as a 'mixed' school. He said it had a student body of mostly Christian background, but that there he and his friends interacted with people of all backgrounds. His friends were rugby players, mostly Protestant and from the same part of town as him, where unionist iconography was common.	His mother is a nurse and Catholic. His father is a policeman and Protestant. As Adam put it, 'dad would have been in the police and he would have been like – when the nationalists and the Catholics would have been rioting a lot – he would have been on like the other side of mum [laughs].'	Adam regularly attends a non-denominational church.

**Table 2: (continued)**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>How is the participant situated at the time of interview?</b>	<b>What does the participant's formal history education look like?</b>	<b>What are the participant's school and school friends like?</b>	<b>What are the participant's parental backgrounds?</b>	<b>What is the participant's relationship to spirituality?</b>
Hannah	20 years old Studying mathematics at a university in Belfast	Hannah took history GSCE, but not A level.	Hannah went to an all-girls Catholic school, which she describes as: 'awful. I absolutely hated my school. It had very bad support mechanisms and not a great environment.' 'The idea is we're all in this together, we're all one community, which we're not, because my school is absolutely terrible at recognising community and recognising issues like bullying.'	Hannah's parents are both Catholic.  She noted: 'My Dad I think is religious. My Mum can take it or leave it. I think she's definitely pro-people-should-be-going-to-mass.'	Hannah is religious and identifies as both Catholic and Christian, but moving between her home village and her student accommodation meant that she does not 'feel like I'm part of any particular congregation'.

cultural 'counterparts', particularly through Christian and atheist identification. Gracie spoke to a 'Christian' identity as a means of escape from/alternative to sectarian identifications, while for Luke and Hannah (both children from intra-faith marriages), 'Christian' coexisted with sectarian identities, albeit uneasily. Luke said:

I wouldn't call myself a hard-core Christian. I'm sort of Christian-lite ...  
I'm not a Catholic, I am technically a Protestant, but I wouldn't really call myself a Protestant, I just call myself a Christian.

Hannah was more assertive about being Catholic as well as Christian, adding that she 'knew that I was Catholic and that Catholic and Christian were the same thing – which they are and they aren't'. However, being Catholic did not imply a compelling political obligation for Hannah, who said, 'I don't think I have a very strong identity one way or the other in terms of nationalism or unionism.' In another kind of disjuncture, Ollie refused to join the rest of his family in regular congregation, citing an inability to reconcile suffering with an all-powerful God. For him, Protestantism was not a religious identity; when I asked how he thought about his alignment with Protestantism, he responded that for him, it was 'mostly about being with the UK and stuff – I think is better for our economy'. This contrasts with Adam, who expressed that his alignment with Protestantism was more a matter of religious preference than being informed by the political project of unionism or politics generally. Furthermore, Gracie mentioned her boyfriend Finn, who is 'a Catholic by background, so he loves his background, but he's not Catholic by religion'. However, being 'Catholic by background' is 'a big part of his life, and he has like pride in that and he wants a united Ireland, so that's why he has an Irish passport, like he loves Ireland and stuff'.

Kajus as an atheist from a Lithuanian family is also 'Catholic by background, and not Catholic by religion', but, unlike Finn, Kajus would prefer Northern Ireland to remain in the UK. While it is perhaps unsurprising that Kajus would not be invested in a united Ireland in the way that Finn is, it is important to acknowledge the way that migration, like dual Catholic-Protestant parentage, increases the need for young people's identity work. Both these structural conditions require young people to be reflexive about their necessarily awkward relationship with the communal identities, pasts and tensions of wider Northern Irish society due to a lack of obvious positions to take. Nevertheless, Kajus was not alone in rejecting the religious identification of his family; he was joined in this by his peers Ollie and Finn, while the others tended to frame their spirituality as an active choice, again reinforcing this sense of identity responsibility. These (non)religious identities thus demonstrate a partial unmooring from stricter social scripts, a disembedding.

For participants, older social scripts were often tainted by the past, whereas they saw themselves as embodying a new, different and crucially less sectarian generation. Although this broadly united participants, they differed in the degree to which they felt their generation had 'moved on'. Adam had quite an optimistic outlook, saying that 'we've come so far from the Troubles'. Gracie described belonging to 'a fresh generation'. When I asked Gracie about whether sectarianism would ever come up in her peer discussions in her integrated school, she replied 'no one would have viewed each other that way'. However, Ollie, Hannah and Kajus all described sectarianism as nominally present, but diminishing over time. According to Ollie:

... [at] our age it's a bit passionate, but [for] the older generations, it's very passionate ... we just get bored of the politics, and we just want to get it sorted and move on to stuff that's happening now.

Hannah suggested:

There's definitely a movement forward, and a lot of people who are trapped up in the past about it are the older generation, and they're slowly dying (as morbid as that is). You know, the toxicity of it is just slowly degrading and it's giving us more opportunity for more open conversation ... We're not in a position where if someone's going to say the wrong thing we're going to take a gun out and shoot the other.

Exemplifying this 'new generation of politics' was the convergence of Luke's and Hannah's politics in their support for more 'centrist' parties despite their different parental backgrounds. They both expressed being caught between support for the moderate nationalist (and historically anti-sectarian-violence) Social Democratic and Labour Party, and the explicitly cross-community party founded to offer an alternative to traditional binaries, Alliance. While brought up by fewer participants than the 'new generation' motif, Ollie, Luke and Gracie mentioned their being 'Northern Irish', but they did not frame it as a political project; rather – for the three of them – it seemed a natural consequence of being born in Northern Ireland and extremely normalised. For example, Gracie explains that:

I wouldn't like being called Irish, not because of political reasons, but just because I'm not, because I'm Northern Irish ... but I'm not British, so I would just call myself Northern Irish.

Participants' re-embedding within a distinctive generational identity was not, however, without its discordances.

While individualisation theory recognises the liberatory aspect of fashioning new identities and breaking away from some of the rigidity of traditional identities, individualisation also points to the inevitability of problems arising from the loss of the norms and assumptions which had accompanied traditional identities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). This is the 'disenchantment dimension', where previously well-oiled institutional processes premised on a certain set of identities now produced frictions with participants' newer identities. Participants were frustrated by the institutions and bureaucratic processes to which they were subjected, which seemed incapable of legitimating their new identities or visions for a post-sectarian society. For instance, Gracie described filling in a job application that requested that she specify whether she was 'Catholic', 'Protestant' or 'Other'. In a distressed tone she explained:

I phoned my Mum, and I've no idea what to answer to this, like what do I give in, because I'm not Catholic and I'm not Protestant and I don't know if I should give Other or not.

Similarly, Luke recalled that in high school, when he opened his first bank account:

... the person there, I just distinctly remember them asking me, 'Do you define yourself as British or Irish?', and that's kind of the first point where I would have thought about it and, you know, I just said I am a person from Northern Ireland, you know, I wouldn't really identify myself as such as British or Irish.

The persistence of parallel schooling systems for Protestant and Catholic communities was also singled out for censure. Hannah expressed that 'hopefully one day we can get rid of Catholic schools', while Gracie argued that:

... it seems silly that it's even called an integrated school in 2017, that there's a school for people to go from different backgrounds, and really that should just be every school.

Thus, for participants, the problem was not cast as lying with their identities, but rather with the outdated institutions which thwarted them.

History teachers could contribute to this sense of disconnect between students' self-perception and how they are positioned from without. Hannah recounts how her history teacher:

... at one point said that everyone in the room was going to be a nationalist ... that's a big judgement to make, you know, in a class full of 14 year olds. And granted, while 14 year olds might not be the most politically aware group of people, they are still a group of people that are intelligent enough to form their own political opinions, regardless of how well-informed they are, and at the same time I was studying GCSE journalism as well, so I was aware of different things and politics, and I was, like, well I can form my own political opinion.

She goes on to describe how she disidentified with the narrative set out by the teacher:

Every now and then, when he was talking about actions that maybe the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] or the UDF [Ulster Defence Force] had done, or the British Army ... he'd be talking about those, and about how wrong their actions were. Like, yeah, but the IRA [Irish Republican Army] did some pretty bad things too, and I find he seemed to be defending the IRA a fair bit.

A social identity theory approach to this interaction would construct Hannah and her teacher as belonging to different political groups, centrist and nationalist, and would suggest that this produces their responses to (and investment in) these historical narratives. The contribution of theories of individualisation is to bring into the frame how this classroom dynamic is also shaped by the way in which group membership has become more unstable and un-clustered. They draw our attention to the friction produced by disembedding more specifically here: the potential for teachers to underestimate students' disembedding, and to assume that they have a linear cluster of identities. Another dimension of this friction is that Hannah is also irked by her teacher's negation of her (and her classmates') capacity to choose their political stances. It is not simply that another group membership has replaced or added to an older one, but that *the relationship* to membership has changed. 'The normal biography thus becomes the "elective biography", the "reflexive biography", the "do-it-yourself biography"' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 3). The denial of their sense of reflexivity is therefore another means by which students who are disembedding/re-embedding may come to feel misrecognised by teachers.

### **Individualisation, powerful knowledge and a challenge to the social utility of history**

Individualisation also has implications for what Kitson and McCully (2005) call the 'social utility' of history education, which in a context of contested historical narratives especially refers to the potential of the subject for facilitating greater social cohesion. The post-2007 curriculum explicitly included dimensions of social utility in the statutory requirements, such as developing mutual understanding and exploring how history has influenced students' own lives, as well as discussing the moral and ethical dimensions

of history (CCEA, 2007). Learning about the causes and contemporary consequences of the partition of Ireland is also stipulated in the history curriculum for Key Stage 3, which is compulsory for all students. McCully and Reilly (2017) identify the need for history education to both maintain 'disciplinary rigour' and to embrace social utility. As McCully and Reilly (2017: 304) point out, these aims of disciplinary rigour and social utility are not necessarily at odds with one another:

... history teaching which adheres to the subject's disciplinary process, thus giving students access to the provisional and contested nature of historical knowledge ... can provide a greater understanding of the nature of conflict and challenge prevailing ideological certainties, which are often biased in divided societies ... [and can] open up possibilities for greater mutual understanding by acquiring insight into the thinking of the 'other'.

Literature in the field acknowledges that teachers may often, for a range of reasons, avoid channelling the disciplinary process towards these aims of social utility, and may instead – as McCully and Reilly (2017: 316) put it – 'retreat' into a more removed, insular disciplinarity (Kitson and McCully, 2005; Barton and McCully, 2012; Barton, 2009). Without classroom observations or teacher interviews, it was difficult to determine if this was the case among participants' teachers. However, this absence might usefully background the question of the role of teachers in facilitating social utility, and instead enable a greater consideration of how students themselves might also be expanding or narrowing the purposes of history education. In this section, I argue that participants' overriding characterisation of history education was in terms of an insular type of disciplinarity – suggesting that the peace-building aims of the history curriculum were not apparent or significant to participants – and, moreover, that this positioning of history is bound up with individualisation.

The characterisation was communicated in how participants described the value of history in terms of the marks and qualifications it offered (or failed to offer) them. Kajus explained that he took A-level history because 'I want to go on to uni, so I decided I should get a subject that I could do well in.' Likewise, Ollie took GCSE history 'mostly' cause I'm good at it'. Hannah did not elect to do A-level history, as:

I'm not great with essays and, realistically, I would perform better in more mathematical subjects, because A levels aren't about what you enjoy. They're about what you're good at.

Wilkinson (2014) similarly found that the perceived instrumental value of history (or lack thereof) for qualification was an important part of how Muslim boys in England related to the subject. However, he demonstrated that this concern with qualifications existed alongside their articulations of the social utility of history, while, in contrast, the focus of the participants in the present study was more firmly on the former.

As a corollary to the emphasis on marks and academic success, participants' formal education was heavily shaped by examinations. This is reflected in how Luke explains what activities history entailed, and how these activities were geared to tests:

... we were given kind of essay practice for exams ... we did a couple of exams in third year, like, end-of-year things that were very heavily essay-based, sort of thing. So a lot of our homework was just kind of writing details or accounts of different historical events.

Ollie said his GCSE history class did not go on excursions, as 'these two years – 'cause they're really important – they mostly try to keep us in school and try not [to] take us

out'. Being successful in examinations was perceived by Gracie to be about factual recall: 'you just had to give like the facts out [snaps fingers in quick succession]'. Success was also defined in terms of being objective. Luke said that history class involved 'source work – trying to find a good source of information that's unbiased', and Gracie explained that:

... you had to give basically the two sides still and be unbiased. Yeah, it was about that in the marking scheme, rather than your opinions necessarily.

It is worth noting that these comments were framed in general terms, irrespective of content, rather than in relation to contentious aspects of Northern Irish history. In fact, participants only spoke about content when asked, while what the subject of history more automatically evoked for them was navigating assessment and being strategic about how best to advance.

This resonates with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2001: 60) argument that individualisation must be seen in the context of interlinked labour markets and education systems where there is:

... a kind of trickle-down 'competition for places' ... *growing pressure to perform and to compete*. More than in the past, educational institutions become places where everyone must learn to make judgements and to win through against others. [Emphasis in original]

In addition to re-embedding within a generational post-sectarian identity, participants were also re-embedding into different institutions which govern their lives. This latter process is one of ceaseless striving:

While people are becoming detached from traditional norms and rules they are simultaneously bound by the demands, constraints, and prerequisites produced by the institutions that have spread with modern society (e.g. labour market, welfare state, education, legislation, bureaucracy etc.) ... Such is the institutional framework within which men and women today have to steer their life course, from one stage to the next, as best they can ... when it comes to the provisions inherent to modern society, one has to do something, make an effort. Here one has to conquer, to keep up and succeed in the competition for limited resources – and not just once, but day after day. (Beck-Gernsheim et al., 2013: n.p.)

The particular implications for youth are summarised by Thompson (2011: 788): 'young people face more complex structures of opportunity, and are expected to engage in the reflexive navigation of these opportunities in order to construct a marketable self'. This broader atmosphere of competition and striving contextualises the assessment-framing that participants gave to formal history education.

Participants' description of the content of their history classes was another level at which social utility appeared to be marginalised. The content appeared to be focused on the political epic of nations, heads of state, treaties, armies, attacks and paramilitaries. For example, multiple participants expressed that their curriculum heavily featured the First World War, but it was only narrated in terms of states, and not discussed in terms of how the symbology of the war was used to mark unionist space by many residents of Belfast. I asked Gracie whether there was any discussion in her classes about First World War remembrance being contentious in Northern Ireland, and she replied: 'I don't know much about that, but the way I was taught, it was just like everyone went [to fight in the war].' I asked Luke the same question, and he responded:

... they kind of really taught us the structure of the war ... there are a lot of people – well unionists – who support, you know, the soldiers from the Northern Irish regiments who fought in WWI [but in class], it was really more just the structure of the war, the two major Axis powers and stuff like that.

The erasure of the local significance of the First World War, with the city dotted with unionist-coded First World War murals, underscored the disjuncture between students' lifeworlds and the narratives they learnt about. This focus on the political epic was also apparent in the choice of documentary film shown to classes. Luke explained that the videos teachers had played featured major political figures, and interviews with them, as well as footage of bombings, adding: 'they never really showed the ordinary citizen in the video. It was more to do with the overall picture sort of thing, the wider picture of how governments interacted.' Similarly, when participants spoke about being taught about the Troubles, they referred to armed groups such as the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Ulster Defence Force or the British Army; to leaders such as Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley; and to treaties such as the Good Friday Agreement. In this way, history is defined as the temporally bounded narratives of a small subset of actors who participated in armed violence or high-level political negotiations, and thus largely divorced from students' everyday lives or the ways in which the past shapes (contestations within) the present. These findings resonate with Barton and McCully's (2005) critique of the disconnect between history education and students' contemporary encounters with the past outside the classroom in Northern Ireland.

While students typically exercise little direct control over the content of their classes, here I raise the question of how this disconnect could to some extent be reinforced by students. Kitson and McCully (2005: 36) give one answer as to how students play an indirect role in the reluctance to venture into modes of teaching history that are more informed by social utility; they note that this reluctance can be produced by teachers' expectations that opening up these discussions would provoke students to assert their traditional identities and narratives, such that the exercise would 'only fuel sectarianism'. While this social identity explanation certainly holds for many cases, below I offer an individualisation perspective, which suggests that another dynamic may also be in play.

I argue that some students would not easily support modes of teaching history informed by social utility because they are less relevant to their individual goals of advancement than is learning the political epic. The remoteness of history as described above was not seen as a problem by participants, but rather, history *qua* political epic was what they expected to recite for examinations, and therefore they did not assert any alternative vision for history education. The political epic in the curriculum is clearly identifiable as 'powerful knowledge', so named because it is vetted by a community of disciplinary experts (Young, 2007). This knowledge is defined in contrast to 'the everyday concepts of experience that pupils bring to school' (Young, 2016: 189). If history is valued by some students principally for its provision of 'powerful knowledge', then discussions which bring into the frame students' own everyday knowledge are less valuable than the insular disciplinarity of learning to organise and evince the political epic. Ollie complained about lessons where the connection between the class activities and assessment were unclear, noting with vexation: 'because they could be teaching us about something important for our exams to get more marks'. When teachers broaden the scope of their teaching, they may not only be risking heated

discussions or fuelling division, but also contending with some students' frustration or disengagement on the grounds that this scope is misaligned with these students' own goals within competitive education systems.

### **The sacrificial stranger**

Returning to participants' 'new generation' motif, I argue that this group identity still needs interrogation, in that 'group identity is given shape by who is marginalised and who is excluded from the group' (Seixas, 2000: 23). A useful way of conceptualising this is offered by Dillabough and Yoon (2017: 1); in researching 'multicultural' Canadian cities, they use Kearney and Taylor's (2005) concept of the 'sacrificial stranger' – 'that person or group who threatens the collective consciousness of such tolerance and represents a spectacle of unacceptability'. The need for a sacrificial stranger arises from the fragility of the normative sameness of 'multicultural' environments, a sameness which disguises the persistence of social conflict among 'the tolerant' (Dillabough and Yoon, 2017: 1). In other words, an outsider is blamed for not conforming to the group's ideals, and this attention placed on the outsider distracts from the group's internal fissures. All participants hinted at discordances and conflict within their new generation, often with a hasty follow-up to mitigate the potential damage to the image of the new generation. For instance, Gracie described how in the bus on the way to a school dance, her Protestant classmates were:

... singing sectarian chants the whole time, and then the Catholic in the front was getting really annoyed [laughing] ... he was letting them bother him more than it should – like, he doesn't care that much.

Such instances were framed as 'banter', and participants emphasised that this was distinguishable from 'real' sectarianism. I propose that a particular sacrificial stranger in the re-embedding discourse of participants is the figure of the 'true sectarian' against which the new generation defined itself and obscured its own internal conflicts. According to Gracie, such people:

... hate for no reason ... the reason it's still alive – [laughs] like this could offend some people – but the reason it's alive is because of the parents teaching their biased views to the children.

Adam feels that:

... the Catholics will riot when the parades are going past and it's just loads of them have been brought up like that – to do that and they don't know why they're doing it, just it's done every year.

Ollie raised another spectre of unacceptability with regard to football allegiances:

... when they say they support Ireland, and they're from Northern Ireland, that gets me really annoyed. Because they're born Northern Irish, but they support Ireland as their first team ... They always support Ireland and buy Ireland tops. That annoys me, because I always think, 'You're Northern Irish, support your team.'

This latter example in particular raises the question of the ways in which supposedly inclusive identities such as 'Northern Irish' may be deployed prescriptively while shunning difference, as well as the way particular visions of 'moving on' can themselves be an exercise of power and intolerance. These sacrificial strangers are positioned as a kind of failure of agency, at once socialised into miscreant roles (unlike the perception

of a freely self-fashioning new generation), and also liable for their failure to break free of these roles. This finding moderates the temptation to see this disembedding and re-embedding as full departures from the past. It instead exposes the fragility and contradictions of this process. Not only is it no coincidence that the spectres of unacceptability for the two Protestant-leaning young men are framed as Catholic rioters and Irish football supporters, rather than as Protestant Orangemen; moreover, these vignettes show that concerns of sectarianism have not disappeared from these identities. Rather, the contours of these concerns have changed.

Research from Ulster University found a similar phenomenon of young people, particularly in integrated schools, framing 'true sectarians' as unthinking troublemakers:

... the 'other' is just constructed differently within the integrated school and is characterised chiefly by those who lack the 'intelligence' to move beyond identity-based struggle. This is an important finding because it illustrates something of the limitations of intergroup contact for facilitating participants to see division as anything more than a problem of intolerance that is the preserve of those who lack the emotional and intellectual sophistication to 'move on'. But more importantly, it also suggests a limited awareness of the processes of social disadvantage that fuel division and conflict. (Furey et al., 2017: 149)

Looking beyond the political epic, history education might be a space to make visible these 'processes of social disadvantage that fuel division and conflict', as well as to interrogate some students' perceptions of a post-conflict society bifurcated into the sensible and the irrational, the 'moved on' and the 'stuck in the past'.

In line with this bifurcation, participants presented themselves as reasoning through their own understandings, but implied that the understandings of others were shaped by forces of socialisation. Despite the general impression of a remote history education, there were three instances when participants recounted a more heated classroom dynamic, but crucially they located that passion as coming from elsewhere, with the self as unimplicated in it. We have seen that Hannah positioned herself as being capable of gathering evidence and drawing conclusions through her allusion to GCSE journalism, while she positioned her teacher as emotional: 'my history teacher did have a few prejudices ... a lot of feelings about Northern Irish history'. She thus retains her image of objectivity and does not, for example, locate her criticism of the IRA in her own family history, within which the IRA had played a menacing role, at one point threatening her mother's life. Also placing themselves beyond identitarianism, Ollie described how the question of Martin McGuinness's legacy divided the class between Protestants and Catholics, while not locating himself in the contestation, and Kajus described some of his classmates as outspoken during discussions about Northern Irish history, 'because of the family they were raised in; they have a strong like, maybe, Catholic Irish background'. Over and above the social comparison between 'the rational' and 'the irrational', which is visible through a lens of social identity theory, there is also an individualisation edge to this dynamic. The aloofness of the subject from their own socialisation, and the conditions which make their disembedding and re-embedding possible, is part of the meta-narrative of individualisation: that the subject is in control of their biography, 'an image of society in which individuals are not passive reflections of circumstances but active shapers of their own lives' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 24). To acknowledge otherwise would moreover jeopardise the freedom from the past on which the image of the new generation is premised, the mystification of continued divisions among its members and their superiority to

the true sectarian. History teachers might therefore face another layer of resistance to teaching informed by social utility, if this teaching attempts to trouble individualised students' sense of their own objectivity.

## Conclusion

Much academic literature on Northern Irish history education primarily focuses on students who are understood to have a strong sense of identification with separate communities (Barton and McCully, 2005, 2007; Curran, 2013; Smith, 2005). This paper has sought to make room in the literature for circuitous identifications by exploring, in depth, the perspectives and life stories of a few individuals inhabiting a range of liminal positions. While such non-linear identities and individualisation may reduce the temperature in discussions about the contested past, they also pose their own complex challenges in educational contexts. The preceding sections have outlined three challenges that individualisation poses for history teachers: misrecognition of student identities; students' narrowing of the purpose of history education; and students' subjectivities of autonomy-from-the-past. The overarching challenge may be framed as seeking to teach students about the past in a meaningful way when they might see themselves as already having overcome it. Individualisation should therefore be considered as a complicating factor for teaching contested histories; that is, it should be considered alongside the strong identifications that have understandably been the focus of much literature in this field.

This discussion leaves unanswered the question of the extent to which individualisation is occurring among young people in Northern Ireland, and to what extent it is concentrated among young people in particular spaces or positions. However, it is clear that even students who are disembedding and re-embedding find themselves in a political space in which traditional identities continue to have deep significance. The dismissal of those who are visibly engaged in identity-based contentions as 'the irrational other' suggests that an additional axis of mutual understanding should be considered by history teachers: developing understanding between those who emphasise a vision of a new, unencumbered generation, and those who emphasise the continued role of traditional identities/commitments and the persistence of historical issues in the present. Without surfacing and exploring these views – students' 'everyday concepts of experience' (Young, 2016: 189) – an exclusive focus on powerful knowledge and disciplinary procedures is not fit for purpose in an education system which stipulates ambitions for history to facilitate social cohesion. New forms of intellectual and emotional inquiry are needed to assist students in exploring their own imbrications with the past, not in the service of artificially realigning their complexity with cultural expectations, but to deepen their opportunities for critical awareness and self-knowledge.

Students' reflection in this sphere could be encouraged by teachers modelling this for students, similarly to Barton and McCully's (2007: 15) suggestion that teachers share 'their own doubts, confusions, and uncertainties so that students can feel safer when they too feel a lack of clarity'. However, particularly to challenge bifurcation, I place special emphasis on teachers sharing contradictions in their own identities and, having established this complexity, sharing what personal influences they feel have had some bearing on their views of past and present contestations. It could also be beneficial to use the auto/biographical writing of others tackling these themes (Delano-Oriaran and Parks, 2015). This modelling of self-confrontation could precede students' own attempts at unpacking their assumptions. Journaling activities in which students reflect on 'how dominant institutions, such as education and religion, or ideologies, viewpoints, norms,

and expectations, influenced their relationships and identity' (Danowitz and Tuitt, 2011: 51) could be shaped specifically to address students' relationships with the present-past. This would also allow students to define these relationships themselves, as opposed to having them be assumed by teachers, as in Hannah's experience. Students might be invited to read a passage of their journal in the final class, and thus open up a sharing of perspectives outside more antagonistic modes of discussion. While difficult to effect in an age of powerful knowledge, pedagogical experimentation is vital for realising a greater appreciation of how both self and others make sense of the present-past from within a complex web of relationships.

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The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Cambridge University Research Ethics Committee.

## Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work.

## Notes on the contributor

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