Findings from The Leverhulme Trust's research programme on Nations and Regions

Identity Briefings

Whither Britishness? The accounts of Scottish and English people living in Scotland

Briefing No. 2, January 2006

Key Points

• It is quite mistaken to assume that there is one uniform and explicit meaning to being British, which most people in these islands, or indeed in Scotland, share. People regularly interpret the meaning of Britishness in quite different ways.

• By exploring the accounts and understandings of Britishness provided by Scottish nationals (people born and still living in Scotland) and English migrants (people born in England and now living in Scotland) we have gathered strong evidence that different conceptions of Britishness have developed within Scotland and England. In England, for example, “race” and ethnicity play a much greater part in accounts of Britishness. This is perhaps to be expected given that only 2% of Scotland’s population belong to ethnic minorities compared with 9% in England (2001 Census).

• Many English migrants to Scotland reassess how they construe Britishness in the light of the new Scottish context in which they find themselves.

• Context is key to understanding how people make sense of their national identity. National identity is usually taken for granted and not contentious, until people have to negotiate it afresh in a different context or they find their view of identity disputed by others.

• There are also significant variations in the meanings attached to Britishness within the Scottish national and English migrant groups, as well as between them.

• Survey work conducted in Scotland in the last two decades has thrown considerable light on changes in national identity. A qualitative methodology helps us to go beyond these statistical findings to explore the processes people use in deciding how to relate Scottish and British aspects of identity.

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Conclusion

Scotland and England have developed distinctive understandings of national and state identities. This research shows that we cannot understand these other than in the context in which they are used. What may resonate well in one national context may not play well in the other: something to which English migrants into Scotland can attest.

Policy Implications

Recent proposals from the UK government have included plans to provide classes for incomers in how to be British. Such policies are based upon trying to identify and then set down certain shared tenets of Britishness. Given our research findings, such an unthinking, taken for granted view of Britishness seems deeply misplaced. We conclude that, at least in the short-term, differing and sometimes competing understandings of what it means to be British will continue to co-exist. These are unlikely to take on a more homogeneous form, and certainly not as a consequence of any top-down imposition of Government guidelines on being British. There remains substantial evidence that existing British citizens, let alone newcomers, do not have much of a shared understanding of the term.

This Identity Briefing was written by Frank Bechhofer; Richard Kiely and David McCrone of the Institute of Governance, the University of Edinburgh, who carried out the Nationals and Migrants project in Scotland (http://www.institute-of-governance.org/forum/Leverhulme/summaries/mig_nat_summary2.html). For further details, email d.mccrone@ed.ac.uk

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 can be found on the programme website at http://www.institute-of-governance.org/forum/Leverhulme/TOC.html or contact the coordinator, Professor David McCrone at the Institute of Governance, University of Edinburgh, Chisholm House, High School Yards, Edinburgh EH1 1LZ. Tel 0131 650 2459; fax 0131 650 6345; email d.mccrone@ed.ac.uk.

The Leverhulme Trust
Introduction

The increasingly problematic nature of national identity is an ongoing feature of social and political life in the United Kingdom. Constitutional changes have introduced question marks over what it means to be British, leading to longer-term questions about the future of the UK. Similarly, the increased importance of ethnicity, especially in England, has implications for the meaning of Britishness. One of the key aims of the 'Nationals and Migrants' research project, carried out during the initial years of Scottish devolution, was to make sense of how people currently handle the question of being British by exploring the views of English migrants to Scotland and of Scottish nationals.

Methodology

The study was primarily based on a qualitative methodology, carrying out repeated interviews with a panel of respondents – 60 Scottish nationals (people born in Scotland or staying in Scotland) and 72 English migrants (people born in England but now living in Scotland, with a length of residence ranging between one and sixty years). The majority of Scottish nationals were chosen at random from the Electoral Register. A minority of English migrants were recruited that way, while most came via associational and occupational groups, advertising in the local media, and snowballing from those already interviewed.

During the study, three waves of interviews were conducted with the panel, in 2000/01, 2002/03 and 2004. We recruited respondents in two distinctive contexts, a large urban centre, Glasgow, and rural Perthshire. Potential respondents were contacted and were selected for interview after initial screening in order to build up a sample balanced by social class, gender, age, and ethnicity, and for the English Migrants, differing lengths of residence in Scotland. Although not statistically a nationally representative sample, it gives us material from a wide cross section of people.

We carried out topic-driven, conversational interviews with all respondents lasting, on average, one and a half hours. During these interviews, we discussed a wide range of topics, primarily around questions of local, national, and state identity, as well as issues relating to constitutional change. All of the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and entered into Hyperworks – a computer package that aids qualitative analysis. The research team followed procedures of repeated reading and tagging extracts from interviews that highlighted a particular issue, and the extracts were then collectively examined to agree on their interpretation and so as not to do the respondent an injustice. The analysis was strengthened by systematically searching for counter-examples: respondents whom we may have expected to express a particular view, but who did not, or those that we may have expected to disagree, but did not.

We accompanied these interviews with a short set of more structured questions on national identity including a Likert-type scale. The version below was for Scottish respondents; the version for English migrants replaces 'Scottish' with 'English'.

Which of the following statements best describes how you see yourself?

(Please circle or tick one)

- Scottish not British
- More Scottish than British
- Equally Scottish and British
- More British than Scottish
- British not Scottish
- Other (please state)

Respondents were then asked to give detailed reasons for their choice.

Findings

English migrants in a new context

Most English migrants spoke of their migration to Scotland as having an impact on their sense of national identity. Many stressed that before arriving in Scotland they would never have described themselves as English, regarding themselves as simply as a member of some unspecified national identity. Some saw these identities as fairly interchangeable but said they tended to use the British term more often. It was clear that many used British rather than English because they had come to see it as a more inclusive identity, one that recognised the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity evident in England. For some, it was evident that they avoided claiming to be British, lest it was thought that they held narrowly nationalistic, even racist views.

However, English migrants came to recognise that in Scotland they were not seen as fellow 'Brits' but as English and to an extent as culturally different from the Scots among whom they'd come to live...