In other words, one’s ‘sticking out’ could paradoxically facilitate one’s ‘fitting in’.

Conclusion

Our studies do indeed suggest a link between how people identify themselves socially and their willingness or otherwise to relocate. It is important to stress, however, that we are not suggesting that identity is a conservative influence which always serves to limit mobility. In the first place, even where people identify strongly with a spatialised category such as Scotland, its impact upon mobility depends upon its salience. In other words, even the proudest Scots do not always see themselves and their world through a Scottish lens, and do not always define home as a function of nation. In some contexts other identities are more relevant and consequential, such as one’s age – some of our respondents saw themselves as different in terms of being young. Secondly, even when one thinks of one’s identity in spatial terms, one does not necessarily stay in the ‘home’ territory.

Policy Implications

Identity may be of consequence for economically significant activity such as labour mobility and is not restricted to the domain of cultural expression such as the arts.

While labour mobility is influenced by a range of economic and social factors, issues of identity are also important. Policy makers need to address how identities are understood and represented. Encouraging short term mobility will be easier than long term.

Related Publications


Identity and spatial mobility

Briefing No. 15, January 2006

Key Points

- Identity shapes our sense of where we feel ‘at home’ and where we feel ‘out of place’.
- Identity is not singular or fixed, but is variable.
- Our sense of where we would relocate to is dependent upon which identities are relevant or salient.

This Identity Briefing was written by Nick Hopkins (n.p.hopkins@dundee.ac.uk), Department of Psychology at Dundee University and Steve Reicher (sdr@st-andrews.ac.uk), Department of Psychology at University of St Andrews. Further details of the research can be found at http://www.institute-of-governance.org/forum/Leverhulme/summaries/yp_mobility_summary.html

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/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.

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The Leverhulme Trust
Introductions

Identity often have spatial dimensions, and so carry implications for our sense of where people do or do not belong, where we feel most ‘at home’, where we have rights (including the right to be accepted), and so on. These associations between identity and place are readily apparent when group members actively exclude non-group members. However, they may also be apparent in people’s choices about where they themselves would like to go. We tend to take for granted the practices of everyday life in the ‘home’ environment, which produces both a sense of ease and nearness to fellow group members, and a subjective sense of distance from non-members. In turn, this may mean that places people by those who are ‘other’ disappear over the mental horizon. That is, places beyond the boundary do not even enter into the decision process when people consider to relocate. The link between mobility is obvious. For example, are those who identify with a spatialised category (e.g. ‘Highlander’, ‘Scottish’, ‘British’) less likely to take a job with the designated space (i.e. in the Lowlands, in England, in Europe)?

We would be mistaken, however, to assume that identity always has such consequences. Regional or national identity may not always be relevant to how people see themselves and others. For example, several of our research team were born in England, but do not necessarily think of themselves as Scots or as living in Scotland because of work opportunities raised some issues such as distance from family and friends. However, as they did not identify strongly as ‘English’, they did not have a strong sense of belonging across the breadth of the country, the UK as a unitary labour market. Yet, it is clear that for others the border between Scotland and England is much more significant.

Indeed, one member of the team was asked by a Scottish student shortly after their arrival ‘What made you emigrate to Scotland?’ The question came naturally to her, for, in terms of Scottish identity, the recent arrival had moved across an identity boundary, and so was an ‘emigrant’. However, for the person she was talking to, the question seemed rather less obvious. Psychologically-speaking, she had not crossed any boundaries, and she didn’t feel as if she was an emigrant. The more general point is that whilst the burden of emigration may make us think twice about the anonymity associated with size meant that one was free from many pressures to ‘fit in’. However, respondents also used categories with a spatial dimension when they discussed where they would and would not wish to relocate. For some, the relevant category was ‘Britain’, in which case the Scotland/England border was of little significance. For example, one argued:

‘It might be a personal thing but I’m not sure, but definitely because I’m British, and I’m in Britain, you know, the way of life is pretty much the same, so you just need to get your bearings, work out where everything is, you can go on from there.’

Yet, for others the Scotland/England border was significant. Thus one respondent asked about the possibilities of studying in England replied:

‘I’m just not used to that kind of just the people and stuff (…) I would be quite self conscious in case people reacted quite badly to me because I’m Scottish.’

Later, she continued:

‘When you are in Scotland, people can associate with you, they can relate to your experiences but when you’re in England, it’s like a totally different place, and I feel quite isolated and wouldn’t have the confidence to go and talk to people as much as I would in Scotland (…) I feel a wee bit safer being in Scotland because you’re home and that’s it (…) I think I would fit in because I’m that different because of my accent, my culture, my background (…) because they’ve been brought up in a completely different place, a completely different style of living.’

One aspect of this concern about relocating to England was that everybody life you’d be complicated. This one interviewee said she felt uncertain about how to behave in London:

‘I don’t feel independent enough (…) And I never know what to say when I’m on a bus, or, like, do you ask the guy in the taxi before you get in? Or when you’re in? Or just things like that kind of remind you that you’re not used to city life.’

It was clear that her concerns were not restricted to London but were assumed to be relevant throughout England. When asked if the had a similar uncertainty in cities such as Glasgow, she answered:

‘No, it’s not the same, you just feel a lot more confident in Glasgow for some reason (…) I think I’d probably be the same. I think kind of having the same accent as somebody really helps (…)’

It does make a lot of difference because people feel that they can identify with you less I think if you’ve got a different accent.’

Another aspect of our interviewees’ caution about relocating to England was that they feared they would be stereotyped. Some were concerned that this stereotyping would be negative, that would be looked down upon. Others thought that this stereotyping would not be so negative, but that they would be thought of solely in terms of their Scottishness, and that the rather crass and clichéd stereotyping that they would be subject to would be tedious and limit their ability to be themselves. One observed:

‘When you start meeting English people some of them are like “Talk like this!” Let’s hear your accent. Say “Och Aye the Nao”, and you never say that, and they think you stuff like that.

Our interview also shows that ‘stick out’ in terms of one’s Scottishness was not always regarded as problematic. Thus one person, reflecting on the dynamics of entering small close-knit communities, observed that national differences in character and the fact that Scots would ‘stick out’ in England could actually ease one’s transition into English communities, and so make relocation to England more attractive. More specifically, when asked about the relative difficulties of fitting into a small community in England or Scotland, she replied:

‘It might actually be easier in England. I know it sounds strange but Scottish people are quite, especially in small places, they like to keep their cards to their chest sort of thing, but maybe if you are, you are a bit different…. “Oh a Scottish person, you must be quite interesting, you’re different”. You know it might be easier to integrate that way you know as you are a kind of new attraction in some way.’

Methodology

We carried out a series of interviews in locations across Scotland and England to study how identity processes shape decisions to move. We also conducted a number of experiments with undergraduate students. This research was based on the assumption that it is because when their national identity was salient, they believed that they would not ‘fit in’ if they went to England. Such effects were not found when relocation was specified as short-term. The wider implication of our results is that we who are telling us where we will be at ease, and where we are at ease where we prefer to be.

...who we are telling us where we will be at ease, and where we are at ease where we prefer to be.

Experimental results

Our experimental results show that when participants’ national identity was made salient, and they were asked to contemplate long-term relocation, there were stronger preferences for Scottish locations over English locations. Furthermore, our interviewees reported that it is because when their national identity was salient, they believed that they would not ‘fit in’ if they went to England. Such effects were not found when relocation was specified as short-term. The wider implication of our results is that we who are telling us where we will be at ease, and where we are at ease where we prefer to be.