METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Theoretical Framework

The study takes a broadly ‘discursive’ approach to cultural and place identity, seeing these categories as constructed in discourse and interaction (e.g. Condor, 2000, Meinhof, 2002, Reicher and Hopkins, 2001, Stapleton and Wilson, 2004a, 2004b, Wilson and Stapleton, in press a, in press b, Wodak et al., 1999). This engenders a dual focus on the macro-level discursive structures (e.g. cultural narratives, ideologies, and meanings) that structure identities within a given culture, and the micro-level discursive processes (e.g. self-narratives, identifications and delineations) through which identity is constructed and negotiated in talk. Specific attention is given to the empirical Discourse Analysis (DA) paradigm outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987; see also Edwards, 1997, Edwards and Potter, 1992). DA is characterised by a view of language as action-oriented and functional, whereby identities are actively constructed and negotiated in everyday talk and interaction. Such analyses are also centrally concerned with the ideological structures and ‘ways of seeing’ through which people interpret, categorise, and make sense of the social world.

The research attempts to maintain a balance between the description of participant produced discursive themes and their cultural and historical positioning, and a detailed analysis of how such positionings become negotiated within the interactional construction of talk. Within the limits of this report, and the time-scale of the research to date (twelve months) we could not detail all the elements of this balance. The aim, therefore, is to articulate the way in which participant discourse has created identity positions within the devolution process for Northern Ireland, and to highlight some of the ways in which participants make use of talk in interaction to situate themselves and others. A number of sample interactions are provided in Appendix 2, which the reader may further explore in relation to the details of our claims.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through community groups, contact with representatives within the community and voluntary sector, and informal networking by participants themselves.

Three separate groups participated in the study:

- East Belfast: Members of a community education programme, and friends
• West Belfast A: Community leaders/representatives
• West Belfast B: Voluntary community workers and friends

Each group comprised 5-10 people and met (separately) for focus group discussions at roughly monthly intervals, commencing in December 2003. Sessions were conducted by a researcher from the University of Ulster. For an overview of the sessions held and topics covered, please see Appendix 1. Each month, a particular topical event or socio-political development, here termed a Critical Social Incident, was identified as the focus for discussion; specifically, the participants’ responses and reactions to the events in question. However, the sessions followed an open-ended format, which allowed the respondents to discuss their more general perceptions, concerns and aspirations regarding their everyday lives. Indeed, the general aim was that the data approximate as closely as possible to ‘real-life’ conversation. Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed in accordance with Discourse Analysis conventions (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 188-9).

Data Analysis

Note: Two groups were established in West Belfast because the first group (West Belfast A) was limited mainly to community leaders rather than simply community workers/friends in general. Given the small number of sessions held with West Belfast A (see earlier), and also the fact that this group generally focused on formal political analysis, it was felt that the East Belfast (EB) and WB B (henceforth WB) groups provided the most appropriate comparative analysis. Therefore the analysis has primarily focused on data from these two groups. However, data from West Belfast A, whose members volunteered to participate as community representatives, have provided insights on the role of opinion leaders in community expression, and on the comparison of public discourse with ‘grass-roots’ narratives and accounts.

We are, of course, aware of the problems of generalisation in terms of such groups and their limited representation. Nevertheless, both groups do represent those with a clear community and political awareness.

In line with DA principles, the study did not establish a priori the content or issues for analysis, but sought to allow themes to emerge from the talk itself. However, general discursive categories were used to guide the analysis. These included:

• Explicit self-positionings and ideological stances.

1 Due to its members’ work commitments, West Belfast A only met for two focus group sessions.
2 This follows Wilson’s 1998-1999 piloting of the technique in a study of people’s changing orientations to the NI Peace Process/Belfast Agreement. CSI is an extension from the Critical Incident Technique, developed by Flanagan (1954) and now widely used in qualitative research.
• Self-narratives, including types of narratival themes, and the construction of protagonists and antagonists.

• Socio-cultural categories and references; the factors (local, regional, national, global) which constitute the discursive context(s) of interpretation.

• Identifications and patterns of alignment; i.e. participants’ identifications with, and in opposition to, different individuals, groups and institutions.

• Modes of self-other construction and delineation; the strategies and points of reference through which participants construct themselves as ‘similar to’ and ‘different from’ other social entities and groups.

• Modes of practical reasoning and interpretation; the practical reasoning structures through which participants account for ‘the world’ and hence, construct particular worldviews.

These categories were initially explored in depth in Phase 1 of the analysis (i.e. following each recording). Phase 2 of the analysis ran concurrently with Phase 1 and compared the datasets qualitatively across time. In this way, cumulative comparative analyses were obtained for each of the two groups, across the duration of the research. This approach allowed for examination of participants’ identity shifts, realignments, and maintenance strategies, in response to developments within the socio-political domain.

REFERENCES


FOCUS GROUP TOPICS

East Belfast
FG 1 (Nov. 2003): Devolution and identity (General)
FG 2 (Dec. 2003): Election results
FG 3 (Jan 2004): Political splits, Paisley and Europe

West Belfast (A)
FG 1 (Dec. 2003): Devolution and identity (General), Election results
FG 2 (Feb. 2004): Review of the Agreement

West Belfast (B)
FG 1 (Jan. 2004): Devolution and identity (General), Political splits
FG 2 (March 2004): Review of the Agreement, Irish politicians, UUP (Trimble leadership)
FG 3 (April 2004): The Cory Report, Policing, UUP (Trimble leadership), Irish politicians, Review of the Agreement
KEY TO TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(.) Brief (untimed) pause

(n) Timed pause (in seconds)

(***) Unintelligible material

// Beginning of overlapping portion of speech

___ (underlining) Prosodic emphasis on word or phrase

R: Researcher

M1: Male 1 (etc.)

F1: Female 1 (etc.)