



community
dialogue
the Community in Dialogue

Identity In Northern Ireland: What Is It?

Community Dialogue Worksheet Series Number Two

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Introduction: Identity is how you see yourself and how others see you. This worksheet explores some general aspects of identity in NI.

Components: Identity is a combination of different components that play varying roles in who we are, how we are treated and how we feel.

Some Examples Of Components That Make Up Identity

Sex-	<i>Male / Female</i>	Language-	<i>Irish / English</i>
Religion-	<i>Christian / Muslim</i>	Politics-	<i>Nationalist / Unionist</i>
Class-	<i>Working / Middle</i>	Ethnicity-	<i>Traveller / Chinese</i>
Age-	<i>Teenager / Elderly</i>	Sexuality-	<i>Heterosexual / Gay</i>

Questions: *Can you list all the components of your identity? What do they say about who you are? How do they affect the way you are treated and how you feel?*

Relationships: Identity involves relationships with others. More important relationships e.g. family are central to our identity; less important ones e.g. sport are peripheral.

Questions: *Which aspects of your identity are most important to you? Why?*

We Are Who We're Born: The accident of birth is very influential in determining our identity e.g. if you are born into a Jewish family it is likely that you will always feel Jewish. Where we live and go to school further reinforce this.

Question: *How was your identity influenced by birth?*

Resources: Money and education can free people from aspects of identity they were born with by giving them choices they might not otherwise have.

Question: *What role has money and education played in making you who you are?*

Who We Aren't: Identity defines who we aren't and whom we are opposed to. Most of us grew up in NI identifying strongly with one community e.g. Catholic, Protestant

or Chinese. We do not tend to mix with those outside our community, viewing them with suspicion and applying negative stereotypes to them.

Questions: *Do aspects of your identity define whom you are against? In what way?*

Being Boxed: Society may see us differently to how we see ourselves leaving us feeling boxed in e.g. a man with Black ancestry born, educated and living in NI may regard himself as British and / or Irish but because of his skin colour some people may always view him as a Black.

Questions: *In what ways have you been boxed in? How did it feel?*

Symbolism: People display identity through murals (Loyalist, Republican), parades (Orange Order, Gay Pride) and sport (Celtic, Rangers). This is interpreted differently by different groups e.g. many Protestants see Orange parades as celebrating culture and religion, but many Catholics see them as intimidating displays of triumphalism.

Questions: *How do you display your identity? Why? What do others read into it?*

Time: Identity changes through time. Many Catholics felt they were oppressed in NI but gradual political change brought more equality resulting in a growing sense of freedom and confidence. The Anglo-Irish Agreement left many Protestants feeling that the government, instead of protecting their British identity, threatened it. Consequently some began focusing their identity on a narrower Ulster Scottish aspect of Britishness.

Questions: *Has your identity changed through time? How?*

Threat: When identity is threatened it becomes more important e.g. tension around Orange parades can heighten awareness of political, cultural and religious identity.

Questions: *How has your identity been threatened? How did this affect you?*

Conflict: Tension between identities often leads to conflict; NI has a long history of conflict between political (Nationalist, Unionist) and religious (Catholic, Protestant) identities.

Questions: *Have you been involved in conflict because of your identity? Why?*

Diversity: NI is becoming more diverse. Ethnic and other identity groups are increasing and there has been a consequent rise in racist and other (e.g. homophobic) violence.

Some Of Northern Ireland's Diverse Identity Groups:

Travellers, Italians, Indians, Protestants, Lithuanians, Algerians, Jews, Angolans, Brazilians, Muslims, Catholics, Kenyans, Libyans, South Africans, Chinese, Sikhs, Afghans, Sudanese, Hindus, Nigerians, Albanians, Romanians, Lesbians, Hare Krishnan's, Macedonians, Croatians, Humanists, Moldavians, Serbians, Gays, Slovakians, Portuguese. The list goes on.

Questions: *Should we encourage people to respect and value diversity in NI or would it be better if everyone were of the same race, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexual orientation and political persuasion?*

The Community Dialogue Worksheet Series

Community Dialogue promotes dialogue in NI on the critical issues affecting our future. Our Worksheets are dialogue aids designed for use by groups and facilitators and provide accessible summaries of complex issues. To find out more contact:

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