

Mapping Frontiers, Plotting Pathways: Routes to Cooperation on a Divided Island
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Living on the Border

**Spatial Behaviour and Political Attitudes
in Irish Border Communities,
North and South, Catholic and Protestant**

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Research questions

- What is it like to live near the border? What difference does it make to everyday life?
- How does it shape people's identities? And how do identities shape people's attitudes & behaviour in relation to the border?
- How do border effects *decline* for different activities with increasing distance from it?
- What - and where - are '*border* regions' and 'communities'? Do they cross the border? And how far do they extend on either side?

- In some respects the whole of Ireland is a 'border region', or two 'border regions'. Edna Longley likes living in Belfast because it
- *"...lets you live in three places at once.... As local and Irish-British media intermingle, you can move, mentally at least, to another public domain when a particular set of voices becomes too annoying. This is what it means to inhabit a European borderland, even if not every citizen reads every newspaper or has the inclination or freedom to culture-surf. The downside is that you can be politically depressed in three places at once."* (Longley 2005, 123-4).

- Well said. But what of such 'postmodern sensibilities' in immediate borderlands around Clones or Newtownbutler? What's the added value or extra depression for people who experience the other side of the border, not just mentally in the media, but in the social materiality of their daily (or perhaps weekly or monthly) life?

Research approach, and general border research problems

- Answers vary border to border but issues and patterns recur. To try finding them:
- **A questionnaire survey** - stratified random sample of 200 rural households: 50:50 North/South *and* 50:50 Catholic/Protestant - within 12 miles of the Fermanagh-Monaghan-Cavan (FMC) border, divided into three distance zones on either side [0-3 miles; 3-7 miles, 7-12].
- [Repeated for 200 households on the Armagh-Monaghan (AM) border with H.D. - for comparison, and for combined 400 sample to reduce the 'small numbers' problem when data sub-divided. Work in progress.]
- **Approach** is a response to **general problems** of borders research, including: official data disjunctures; 'border regions' = arbitrary admin. districts; difficulties separating 'border effects' from all the other factors shaping behaviour and attitudes - gender, age, class... *and* cross-border & cross-community asymmetries; and also difficult separating out ethno-national identity from other factors. Tendency to look for, exaggerate or rush to judgment on 'border effects' and 'identity' differences as causes....
- And to particular *Irish* ones

Irish research gaps and preliminary analysis

- **Irish research gaps** - a Fawly-esque 'don't mention the border' pre-1990s, continued in immediate border localities (with some exception e.g., O'Dowd studies), though more recently interesting local studies (eg., Triskele) and anthropological work (e.g., Donnan, Wilson). But some lack comparative perspective - study only one 'community', or only one side of the border, or one section; & how *representative* are findings from interviews or focus groups with relatively few 'local notables'.
[Worse case scenario: they re-cycle stereotypes or dodgy conventional wisdom.]
- **Preliminary analysis:** To off-set problems and gaps: questionnaire surveys covering different groupings; what they actually *do* as well as what they *think* - starting with relatively uncontentious questions about different activities - work, education, shopping and social - and how they are constrained by the border; and then how that relates (or not) to more contentious attitudes to the border and partition.
- For FMC survey we can compare: all (100) Northern households and interviewees with all (100) Southern ones (both religions); all (100) Catholic ones with all (100) Protestant ones (both N & S); and the four distinct territorial/religious groups (of 50) - Northern Protestants and Northern Catholics, Southern Protestants and Southern Catholics. [then to be compared & combined with the 'AM 200']
- But questionnaires too have limitations (re. interpreting 'facts'): ideal - large-scale questionnaire surveys, followed by interviews/focus groups to 'interpret the facts'.

The study area and its asymmetries

- The area had a particularly conflictual local history around partition, with some continuities; and sizeable 'minority communities' on both sides of a very 'crossable' section of border. But asymmetries across the territorial and religious divides also shape behaviour & attitudes: e.g., towns larger and nearer the border on Southern side – helps explain directional 'bias' of more North-to-South movement;
- Southern Catholics as a group have the lowest occupational status; Northern Protestants the highest; the other two groups similar and in between; tendencies, with exceptions, for more social inequality South of the border; and greater disadvantage in the South, and among Catholic households on both sides - which tend to reduce mobility, cross-border contacts and participation in organised co-operation projects.
- Against this, educational levels tend to be lower among Protestants (as is their ownership of newish IT appliances, e.g., home computers), in part reflecting their older age profile on the Southern side, which, along with gender disproportions (more female interviewees) also reduces mobility (or reported mobility?).
- On some issues there is no difference between Protestants and Catholics, more between North and South; in other cases this is reversed. The 'mixed messages' warn against 'jumping to conclusions' about the effects of borders and nationalisms.
- **Giving just a selection of findings - mainly about *political attitudes as spatial behaviours and networks* are more difficult to summarise briefly.**

On travel patterns and cross-border movement

- Today fully two-thirds of all (200) of these rural households are *not* involved in farming [= more travel & potentially more cross-border travel, than in the past]. Half of all the interviewees travel out to work (with 'male bias'); but the figure rises to around 60% for the North and drops to around 40% for the South.
- Of over 300 household trips to *work* or *education*, 12% are cross-border; and with a strong 'distance zone' factor, most being from within three miles of the border (including trips which go long distances on the *other* side, suggestion perceptions here as important as distance *per se*). They have a strong North-to-South 'bias'; as do the much more numerous shopping and social trips.
- A substantial proportion of the whole sample, Catholic and Protestant, does live life on both sides of the border. In the South the Protestants tend to have the stronger links with the North; while in the North it is the Catholics who have more links with the South. But there are many exceptions, and often very little difference between the groups; or their differences are due not to attitudes associated with religion/politics, but to different age, gender and/or class composition.
- The three main reasons for crossing the border are, firstly, visiting relatives and friends; secondly, buying petrol/diesel (Northerners only); and, a poor third, work-related reasons (which are important for a fifth of respondents). Cross-border shopping is less important but still significant.

Social networks and the border

- Half of all the interviewees cross the border at least once a week (and a majority of those at least twice); Northerners do so at twice the rate of Southerners (reflecting larger towns along the Southern border; and higher economic activity rates, social status and mobility among Northerners). Frequency is strongly related to distance zone, generally being very high within 3 miles of the border.
- Cross-border trips are involved in 10% of church-going; 16% of visits to relatives (twice as many North-to-South); and the pattern of visiting close friends is similar.
- While about 60% of Northern interviewees reported having close friends in the South, only 30% of Southern ones reported close friends in the North (though some of this disparity is due to 'biases' of greater age, more female interviewees, and lower class status in the Southern sample).
- Much of the 'South-to-North' friendship involves Protestant interviewees, and places which are widely dispersed throughout Northern Ireland with less than half in Fermanagh. The 'North-to-South' friendship patterns are both more similar in religion terms, and more numerous; and more are highly localised (e.g., destination Clones). Usually Southern links are stronger among Northern Catholics than Protestants, but in the case of friends in the South, Northern Protestants have equally strong links.

Use of the mass media

- **The local weekly newspapers** - have remarkably little cross-border penetration: their readerships, which might be taken as an indicator of 'community', are highly 'partitionist', and while the Southern papers have mixed Protestant-Catholic readerships, the Northern ones appear to cater largely for just one or other side of the religion divide. The border-crossing sensibilities of 'postmodernism' seem *not* to stretch to the *Fermanagh Times*, *Impartial Reporter* (also Fermanagh), Cavan's *Anglo-Celt* or Monaghan's *Northern Standard* – together the most used local weeklies in 90% of all the households (There may be 'county partitionism' as well as the North-South variety?).
- **Daily papers** - the Belfast dailies do not cross the religion divide, unlike London and Dublin ones (though a third of households do not get any daily).
- **TV news** - is markedly more used, and more border-crossing and cross-community in usage patterns. Overall the Belfast and London stations tend to predominate South as well as North, though there is also substantial use of Dublin channels in the North.
- **Radio** - numerous stations (local, Dublin, Belfast and London) with complex usage patterns defying a quick summary. But very high rates of border-crossing, including for a local station based in the Southern border region.

National and political affiliations

- **On national identity:** **Northern Protestants:** 73% say 'British', 17% say 'Northern Irish', and just 2% say 'Irish' (no surprises there);
- **Northern Catholics:** 68% say Irish, 14% British (which might surprise) and 12% Northern Irish; **Southern Catholics:** 92% Irish (again no surprises), and 4% British;
- **Southern Protestants:** 72% say Irish (more than Northern Catholics), 20% say Southern or Northern Irish, and 6% say British (most of them over 65). Confirms (?) Ian McCracken's (2004) Donegal view that Southern Protestants are no longer 'a passive remnant of pre-partition Ireland' but 'identify as being Irish'. Perhaps not so simple - for some may be just a factual statement of the jurisdiction they're in?
- **On political affiliation:** over a third declined to answer (mostly Southern Ps and Northern Cs – contrast no refusals on national identity). Religion divergence greatest on this question of identifying as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'neither': 79% of all Protestants described themselves as 'unionist', only 1% of Catholics; conversely, 73% of Catholics said 'nationalist', but zero Protestants.
- 92% of the Northern Protestants said 'unionist' with zero 'nationalist'; conversely, zero Northern Catholics said 'unionist', but only 60% declared themselves 'nationalist' (40% being non-responders). Southern Catholics are 88% nationalist, 2% unionist.
- Remarkably, among Southern Protestants, (92% of whom said 'Irish' or 'Northern or Southern Irish' as self-identity), 70% declared themselves 'unionist', and not a single one declared him/herself as 'nationalist'. Despite most probably voting Fine Gael and not having had a unionist party to vote for since the 1920s. Is this because of identification of 'nationalist' with Sinn Fein? Contemporary solidarity with unionist co-religionists across the border? Or a 'remnant' of pre-Partition *Irish* unionism'?
- A questionnaire survey is not best suited to teasing out such complexities.

Attitudes and co-operation across the divides

- **Local cross-border activities or groups:** over two-thirds of all interviewees do *not* participate in them; more Northerners than Southerners do; and on both sides of the border participation drops sharply with increasing distance. No Protestant-Catholic difference; but very low for the lowest occupational class. Sport the main type of cross-border activity; church-organised activities largely a Protestant phenomenon.
- **Activities supported by EU or 'Peace' money:** only 14% of respondents are involved in these; mostly in social or cultural rather than economic activities. Contrary to popular stereotype, the supposedly 'individualistic' and 'uninvolved' Protestants outnumber Catholics by 2 to 1 (though will the 'AM 200' confirm this?).
- **Activities across the religion divide:** here nearly half the interviewees are involved; but nearly twice as many on the Northern side; no discernable difference between Catholics and Protestants, but a significant fall off with lower social status.
- **Support for c-b co-operation:** widespread and greatest in the 'low politics' spheres of agriculture, education and health, less on the 'high politics' issues of 'security' and 'decisions about Northern Ireland's future'. But general opposition relatively muted and from only minorities across the board. On Northern Ireland's future, Protestants (26%) are most opposed to cross-border inputs, though a decidedly bigger proportion of Protestants (43%) says it supports co-operation (cf. 46% of Catholics) (though interview data often *under-states* such opposition).

Attitudes to partition and border-related issues

- ***Whither Northern Ireland and partition?*** Northern Protestants tend to be at one attitudinal extreme, standing out from the other groups as most unified/strongest in its attitudes (pro-partition). Northern Catholics tend to be at the other, though usually without their Protestant neighbours' uniformity or strength of conviction; indeed pro-United Ireland sentiment seems marginally stronger just South of the border, though usually the two Southern groups fall somewhere in between the Northern ones.
- ***Cross-border economics:*** there is a high level of general agreement that "Cross-border co-operation will lead to prosperity in the border region"; much less for the idea that "Northern Ireland should join the euro": only 19% of Northern Protestants agree, compared to 56% of Northern Catholics, 74% of Southern Protestants and 81% of Southern Catholics. Here the border is a bigger differentiator than religion.
- ***Security and/or inconvenience:*** The re-opening of border roads after the cease-fires is widely welcomed but the earlier closures bring out sharp political differences - one person's 'security' is another's 'inconvenience': over 80% of the entire sample agrees 'border checkpoints and road-blocks were essential', nearly 40% 'very strongly'. The figure rises to 93% for Northern Protestants, but 92% of the Southern Protestants and 90% of Southern Catholics agree with them. On this issue it is the Northern Catholics, or at least half of them, who stand apart from the others.
- The issues are complex – possibly involving cross-border empathy, arguments that road blocks are 'only symbolic', other arguments that road blocks stopped unionist as well as nationalist paramilitaries from crossing the border (especially after the 1974 Monaghan bombing) - again too complex for the questionnaires on their own.

Attitudes to border-related issues (contd)

- ***Territorial and religious divides. Living on the other side:*** Responses to the statement "If moving house, I would happily move across the border to live in [adjacent and similarly 'rural' counties]" showed that many people, and particularly Northerners, would *not* be 'happy', significantly more Northerners disagreeing (57%) than agreeing (32%). Not surprisingly, more Protestants are happier moving North and more Catholics are happier moving South, but in each case very substantial proportions would not be happy moving across the border at all (30% of Southern Protestants; 46% of Northern Catholics, though that compares with around 66% of Northern Protestants opposed to the idea).
- ***Integrated schooling:*** only 50% of the Northern Protestants agreed with it, cf. Northern Catholics 88%, Southern Protestants 74%, and Southern Catholics 69%.
- ***Border minority grievances: against co-religionists across the border, and co-religionists at the centre of the group's own state:*** to gauge legacy of 'partition abandonment' and/or contemporary grievance; and the extent to which people perceive their group to be a differentiated and disadvantaged 'border community'.
- ***Southern border Protestants*** - only a small proportion (16%) say definitely that they now feel 'let down' by Northern Unionists, though their pattern of answers (incl. non-responses) is hardly a ringing appreciation of cross-border solidarity.
- ***Northern border Catholics*** - more of them (24%) agreed they'd been let down by Southern Nationalists; and only 36% disagreed (compared to 56% of Southern Protestants). Dublin governments have been actively engaged with the on-going conflict, mainly 'on behalf of' the Northern Catholics (but doing enough?)

Attitudes To conclude

- There is no counterpart to cross-border 'Dublin help' for Southern Protestants. But they may have mixed reactions to individual Belfast unionists speaking 'on their behalf'; or may sometimes find Northern unionism an unsettling embarrassment (e.g., during the 'Drumcree' episodes, or in the on-going sectarian attacks on Catholic minorities settlements in east Ulster allegedly in the name of 'Protestantism').
- **Southern border Catholics** - the only 'non-minority' of the four groups - does not feel especially 'peripheralised' by their own state, and their sense of being a specific 'border community' seems weak. Only 17% agreed they have been let down, and 42% disagreed (but feelings of 'let down' are stronger in border towns like Clones).
- **Northern border Protestants** - again the group which really stands out - half feeling let down by Unionists in the rest of Northern Ireland (with only 30% disagreeing - still substantial but the lowest 'disagreement' of the four cases). Reasons may include their pre-cease-fire feelings of vulnerability to nationalist paramilitaries coming over the border and the state not doing enough to protect them? The category 'Border Protestants' being given wide media currency in allegations of 'ethnic cleansing' (with nothing comparable defining the other three 'border communities'); and/or the syndrome of sectarian aggression by 'brave majorities' elsewhere putting associated 'minorities' on the defensive (as also for Southern border Protestants, above)?
- In these cases, the questionnaire provides more questions than answers. But that's part of the exercise. Combining data from the two samples will clarify some questions. Others are hypotheses for further investigation by such complementary approaches as in-depth interviewing.