IN THE GREEN FIELDS OF KILBURN: REFLECTIONS ON A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF IRISH MIGRANTS IN NORTH LONDON

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ABSTRACT:

This paper considers some of the emotional encounters experienced by the researcher while carrying out a study of Irish migrants in London. Although quantitative research takes little cognisance of the emotional impact of research, this paper suggests some of the ways in which a standardised, closed-ended questionnaire may provoke emotional responses in both the researcher and the researched. The emotional landscape of the research is intimately connected with the physical landscape in which the research is being carried out. Researching Irish migrants in areas such as Kilburn requires a consideration of the complex and dynamic spaces in which an Irish translocal community has been materially constructed and symbolically invented. Kilburn is not simply a backdrop to the research; it forms part of the emotional terrain which has to be negotiated in doing this research.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Irish are the oldest and largest migrant group in Britain (Hickman and Walter 1997) they are a vastly understudied population. The scant research that does exist suggests the Irish have particularly high morbidity and mortality rates (Wild and McKeigue 1997). In fact, research statistics show that Irish-born people living in Britain not only have worse health than the British population as a whole but also have worse health than those Irish people who remain in Ireland. It is not just the physical health of Irish people that suffers in the migratory process; the Irish in Britain also have poor rates of mental health (Bracken *et al*. 1998). In particular, Irish-born have high rates of hospitalisation for depression and other mental health problems (Walls, 1996). Indeed, statistics suggest that Irish-born people have higher rates of depression than any other ethnic group in British society (Bracken *et al*.1998).

In November 2001, I embarked on a two-year project researching the possible impact of migratory processes on the mental health of Irish-born people living in London. This is a quantitative study that aims to recruit approximately 400 participants in total. It is a case control study comparing depressed persons with non-depressed controls. Participants are approached initially through their GPs. Once participants have returned the screening questionnaire confirming they were born in Ireland, a selection are asked to participate in a more detailed face-to-face questionnaire administered in their own home or in their GP's surgery. However, as is often the case in these studies, the questionnaire has also been administered in work places, in cafes, in pubs, or just about anywhere that is convenient for the participants.

The study is based in North London and cuts across several areas including Camden and Islington, Brent and Haringey. One of the areas in which we have had particularly good recruitment is Kilburn, which witnessed a steady rise in the numbers of Irish-born residents between the 1950s and 1980s. Kilburn spreads across the London boroughs of Brent and Camden. Brent has the highest Irish population of any London borough with 9% of residents born in Ireland (1991 census). The two wards on either side of the Kilburn High Road have particularly high rates of Irish-born residents, 11% and 13% (Weindling and Colloms 2002: 130). However, these figures under-estimate the total Irish population because they exclude the British-born children of Irish migrants.

LOCATING KILBURN

One participant told me that Kilburn had changed completely in recent years and was unrecognisable as the place it used to be. According to this 50-year-old man, Kilburn was now full of Eastern European migrants who would work for £10 a day. The Irish were moving away and the character of the place was changing. Like many other participants he mourned the loss of a very Irish place in the heart of London. Kilburn is more than simply a place where lots of Irish people live. It is a strong symbol of the Irish presence in London. For decades it has shaped and been shaped by Irishness. The famous Catholic Church on Quex Road, the many Irish-run boarding houses, the patterns of employment, even the local shops and pubs have all informed and were informed by the Irish experience in north-west London. For decades 'County Kilburn' has been hailed as the 33rd county of Ireland, an Irish enclave, a safe space, where one could buy Irish newspapers, meet Irish friends and hear Irish accents on the streets. This perception of Kilburn is reinforced in popular culture such as in the recent novel *Father Frank,* plays such as *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*, and films like *County Kilburn*. Kilburn represented not simply a 'home away from home' but a locale in which a London-Irish identity could be constructed.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to test the veracity of claims about the Irishness of Kilburn, but to offer a critical reflection on my own experiences as a researcher engaged in a quantitative study in the field in Kilburn. It is necessary to clarify my own relationship to Kilburn and to the subject matter under investigation in this study. I am a sociologist by training. My PhD was on feminism in Ireland and most of my publications over the last ten years have been based on qualitative studies drawing on feminist approaches to research. Issues of empathy, empowerment, reflexivity and subjectivity are thus central to my research methodology. Before I began the present study, I worked on an oral history study of older Irish women migrants which enabled me to employ all my feminist training as I listened to women re-telling and remembering their life narratives (Ryan 2002). I was attracted to my current research post partly to gain new experience in quantitative research but also because I am interested in the topic and committed to the importance of doing more research on the health needs of Irish people in London.

I am an Irish migrant. Like many thousands of Irish people I came to London in one of the great waves of Irish migration in the twentieth century. I left my native Cork in the late 1980s. Like many of those who came to London in the 1950s, those of us who arrived in the 1980s were usually economic migrants who came to Britain as young adults seeking employment. However, unlike the migrants of the earlier period, those who came in the 1980s tended to be well-educated and seeking white-collar jobs. Many of the more recent migrants have sought to distance ourselves from the traditional stereotype of the Irish as labourers and navvies. Although I have always identified myself as an Irish migrant and most of my friends in London are Irish, I have never sought to live in an Irish enclave. I live in south London and until I started to do research with the Irish community had never been to Kilburn.

NEGOTIATING AN EMOTIONAL TERRAIN

In his recent study of African migrants in New York, Paul Stoller argues that most anthropologists have until recently regarded space as a static 'given'. However, Stoller adds that in recent years there has been a shift towards a more dynamic view of space. Stoller supports the view that space is not given but is constituted. Space "is continuously negotiated and renegotiated" (2002: 126).

On the other side of the Atlantic one sunny afternoon in July 2002 I went to meet 'Sean' in a pub in Kilburn. After the usual preliminaries, he completed the questionnaire, while I read a book and sipped a coffee. To the casual observer we must have looked a little odd. Two people sitting together at a table in a pub but not speaking to each other: one person reading a book; the other filling in a form. It was one of Kilburn's Irish pubs; not one of the new chain of trendy Irish pubs, but an older more traditional pub. There was a brisk lunch time trade and several Irish accents were audible. It was quite a cosy atmosphere and I was feeling relaxed as I occasionally glanced at Sean to ensure that he was managing to complete all the sections of the questionnaire. Suddenly, without any warning, Sean burst into tears. I asked him what was wrong and he told me that the questions about Ireland and his family had made him unexpectedly homesick and reminded him about his mother who had recently died. I talked to him about his grief and I told him that the information sheet, which we give to all participants in the study, contained information about bereavement counselling. Sean spoke to me about his sense of loss and feelings of homesickness. I listened not just as a researcher but as an Irish migrant who could empathise with him. Although we were from different socio-economic backgrounds, different ages and different sexes, Sean and I both assumed a common basis of understanding and experience. In that moment Sean and I were two Irish migrants sitting in an Irish pub in Kilburn. We were away from home, in a foreign city, but in a uniquely Irish space. Our experiences were not simply shaped by leaving Ireland, leaving home, but also by being Irish migrants in London, in Kilburn. We were positioned in a particular context and our encounter was influenced by the long history of Irish migration to that place. Our conversation about Ireland had probably been rehearsed in that pub by many other people on numerous occasions before.

For me as a researcher one of the main differences between doing quantitative and qualitative research is reflexivity. There is a tacit assumption in quantitative research that feelings can be controlled or excluded from the equation. However, the closed-end questionnaire asks many questions that elicit highly emotive responses. For example, there are questions about experiences of discrimination as Irish people in London, there are also questions about feelings of belonging in London and the desire to move back to Ireland. For Irish migrants these questions are loaded with feelings and emotions. In addition, there is also a standardised questionnaire on social support which asks about having someone who loves you or someone who hugs you. For those people who have no one to love them or hug them these questions can raise all sorts of emotions. In addition, researching experiences of migration also raises emotional issues for me as a researcher and a migrant.

I would like to cite an extract from my research diary that I wrote on the train one day as I returned home from two particularly upsetting interviews:

> *'Today was a bad day. I have done two interviews with women who told me harrowing stories of violence, abuse and childhood neglect. I am feeling very upset not just about these women but also about the terrible things that have gone on in Ireland and from which young women have had to escape, coming to London alone and without any support'.*

The younger of the two women, 'Siobhan', is a single mother with three daughters. She is university educated and came to London in the 1980s. In this respect, she is someone I could easily identify with. I got on well with her and we chatted together at her kitchen table. She completed the questionnaire, while I read a book. I glanced in her direction every now and then to make sure that she was getting on alright. Although the questionnaire requires tick box answers, Siobhan, like most other respondents, talked through and elaborated her answers. The story that emerged was far more vivid and painful than the simple answers on the questionnaire could ever possibly reveal. Siobhan was abused by her uncle when she was a child. She told her mother about this but her mother refused to believe that her brother could be

capable of such a thing. Siobhan not only had to cope with the abuse by her uncle but also felt rejected by her mother. In order to escape from her unhappy home life, Siobhan married at a young age but soon felt the marriage was a mistake and so she ran away to London to start her life afresh. Her relationship with her mother remains very strained and is clearly a source of sadness for Siobhan.

The second woman, 'Maura', was older, and she had come to London in the 1960s. She seemed a bit hesitant and unsure of herself, so I suggested that we fill in the questionnaire together. When we came to the section of the form about leaving Ireland I was immediately aware that her answers were guarded and a little puzzling. She had left Ireland alone at the age of 15 without a job or any accommodation and had not informed her family that she was coming to London. The next question, one of the few open-ended questions in the questionnaire, asked: "What was your main reason for leaving Ireland?" At this point Maura hesitated and I could tell she was deciding whether or not to tell me the whole story. After a long pause she answered that she had become pregnant outside of marriage. Her boyfriend had abandoned her and her parents sent her to a convent where she could deliver the baby in secret. Once the baby was born Maura was forced to give her up for adoption. Even then Maura's parents refused to allow her back home and so she set off for London alone and without any means of support. Maura got a job in a department store in London and she eventually married and had other children. However, it was clear that she felt very sad for the baby she had given away, and was very resentful of her parents who had rejected her when she needed them most.

For me one of the most ironic aspects of Maura's story was that she has been in the convent or mother-and-baby home where I had done my social work placement in the 1980s. She and I came from the same part of Ireland and although separated by 20 years we had both spent time in the same convent, she as a 15-year-old expectant mother, me as a student. As she told her story I could visualise the convent spaces. Sitting in her flat in North-West London, I was acutely aware of how shared social spaces can create links and forge a sense of empathy.

To have interviewed these two Irish women in the same day was pure coincidence, but the impact was intense. The carefully completed questionnaires gave no real clue to the level of emotion these stories had provoked in me or in these two respondents. Nonetheless, I felt a strong urge to reflect on these stories drawing on my experience as a feminist qualitative researcher. Was this going against the grain of quantitative research? Was I somehow failing to come to grips with the ethos of quantitative empiricism? Or was I merely finding a way of dealing with the kinds of issues that quantitative methodology tends to ignore or perhaps undervalues?

For me this raises questions about empathy, reflexivity and identity. I may be a highly qualified and experienced researcher but I am also an Irish migrant. One of my strengths in going to interview migrants in Kilburn or any other part of London is that I share a similar experience of migration and can understand some of the issues involved. This is part of the deal when one carries out research on one's 'own people' so to speak. I share so much in common with the people I am researching that it is difficult to define myself outside of these parameters. I am a graduate and a professional but my day-to-day experiences of London are continually defined by my Irishness, my migrant status, my foreignness, my accent, my background, my education, and now even the subject matter of my job underlines my Irishness.

One evening as I entered a tube station in central London I overheard two men talking. They spoke loudly and confidently in London accents. One man was telling the other a 'joke' about an Irish funeral. The punch line of the joke was based upon the stereotype of the drunken Irish. Both men guffawed loudly. I was offended though not entirely surprised. It is still considered socially acceptable to tell anti-Irish 'jokes' although most people are probably wary about relating other kinds of racist 'jokes' in public places. I challenged the men and told them I was

offended by this so-called joke. Wanting to avoid further confrontation, I quickly walked away while they were staring at me in stunned silence. Although one could argue that this is harmless humour, the repeated references to Irish drunkenness, violence and stupidity serve to remind all Irish migrants that we are outsiders. Incidents such as this are very common and form part of the process through which Irish people in Britain continue to be defined as different or 'other' (Hickman and Walter 1997; Gray 2002).

Of course the questionnaire asks specifically about experiences of anti-Irish discrimination and offensive behaviour including jokes. Every time I ask that question I am reminded of the many times I have heard such so-called jokes. Interestingly, several of the Kilburn respondents reported little experience of anti-Irish discrimination, perhaps because, unlike me, many of them have lived and worked in an Irish enclave surrounded by Irish friends and working with mostly Irish colleagues. The protective nature of the ethnic density effect has been discussed by a number of researchers (Halpern and Nazroo 1999). While ethnic density may involve elements of ghettoisation and marginalisation from 'mainstream' society, it can also result in high levels of social support and group solidarity (Furnham and Shiekh 1993).

Although Kilburn is a new environment for me, it seems strangely familiar because of its Irishness. Perhaps it seems familiar because I have encountered Kilburn through Irish people. By the nature of the research all the people I meet and speak with in Kilburn are Irish-born migrants. When I meet these people we talk about Ireland and about experiences of being Irish in London. We relate to each other not simply as researcher and researched but also as Irish people. One of the first questions all the respondents ask me is where in Ireland I come from, and the next question usually concerns when I came to Britain. Several respondents have also asked if I miss Ireland and would I consider returning to live there. The fact that I am Irish is significant for the respondents and helps to locate me.

Despite my heritage I remain a tourist in Kilburn. I am a visitor who encounters this London-Irish space as both familiar and foreign. It represents a particular experience of a London-Irish identity that I do not share. Ultimately, Kilburn is not my home, and I do not belong there. Kilburn is a community in which I feel simultaneously an insider and an outsider. I can share the symbols of Kilburn, its inventedness, but I have never lived there, and so I am not part of its social or institutional structures.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Carrying out a research project on Irish migrants in London has been a thought provoking experience for me. While remaining in London, a city where I have lived and worked for many years, this study has, nonetheless, involved me making a journey both physically and emotionally. I have gone into the field, in this case Kilburn. I have encountered Kilburn not as a neutral or even a given space but as a locale invested with meanings and implicated in the dynamics of Irish migration and settlement. Narratives of Irish migration have become interwoven with Kilburn and although I did not share the Kilburn experience, I remain affected by the contextual framework of 'county Kilburn'. The powerful symbolism of this 33rd county of Ireland overreaches its actual geographical limits. Of course, it is important not to reinforce a reified image of Kilburn. This is a vibrant and dynamic place. It is not static but is constantly changing and being reshaped by its inhabitants – both new and old.

Although this is a quantitative study using a questionnaire that usually requires little more than tick box answers, the nature of the questions has raised an array of emotional responses for the respondents and for myself. My journeys to Kilburn frequently coincided with emotional journeys into my own experiences and memories. Travelling to Kilburn, albeit a short physical journey, was often a voyage of discovery about myself as well as the people I encountered there.

However the constraints of quantitative research offer little space to explore emotional and reflexive issues, at least within the formal remit of the study itself. The act of writing this short paper has allowed me to begin the process of reflection and start to explore what has proved to be a deeply emotional landscape.

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