

# Sport and identity formation



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Sport and Identity: Essay ProposalHow Does Rugby Union Shape And Reflect Identity In Northern Ireland?

Despite the increased interest and understanding of identity, the concept itself remains something of an enigma (Fearon, 1991, cited in Hooti & Mahmoudi, 2013). The meaning of 'identity' as we now use it, is not well captured by dictionary definitions. Our present idea of 'identity' is a recent social construct, and a rather complicated one. Even though everyone knows how to use the word properly in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings (Gleason, 1983, pp. 910-930). A short definition by Hogg and Abrams (1988) state that identity is " people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (p. 2), and when a set of people who hold a common social identification are categorised together they form a social group. These groups of collective identities can be constructed around many forms and circumstances, for example, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, religion and many more. Woodward (1997) adds to this by suggesting that " Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others ... and the way in which we are different. Often identity is most clearly defined by difference" (Woodward, 1997, pp. 1-2). When analysing the definition, it's clear that Hogg and Abrams as well as Woodward are only talking about people. Other authors (Elliott, 2007; Mead and Morris, 1934) suggest that objects and symbols can also be used to express and forge a sense of self. This further demonstrates the complexity of defining 'identity'.

Identity in the context of sport can unify and/or divide. It can show common ground or expose differences. Sport can be used as a tool to show how people see themselves and how others see them. It is a potential platform for the construction and display of identity (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002). One example for the display of an identity through sport is national identity. If the concept of nations being an imagined community (Anderson, 2006) is accepted, then Bairner states that "Sporting competition arguably provides the primary expression of imagined communities with the nation appearing more 'real' in the domain of sport" (Bairner, 2005, p. 105). It is around the subject of national identity that I will form my topic of research for the essay. I want to explore the ways in which Rugby Union helps to shape and reflect national identity in Northern Ireland, a county divided for many decades by two main ideologies. The first is the, mainly protestant, unionist ideology. People who follow this ideology believe that Northern Ireland, part of Great Britain, should continue some form of political union with Great Britain and thus, view themselves as 'British'. The second, mainly catholic, nationalist ideology is opposed to such a union and favours a unified Ireland, and thus, view themselves as 'Irish'(Cronin, 1999, p. 143-146). Then there are people who consider themselves as 'Northern Irish'. They are either politically 'neutral' or take on a mixture of beliefs from both sides of the community so I will have to consider this during the essay. I want to explore this looking solely at Rugby Union as it is unique and significant that the Irish national team compete as a united nation against Scotland, Wales and England and, as such, have a large nationalist following in Northern Ireland. In contrast, the Ulster Rugby Union side that also

incorporates counties from both sides of the border has a large unionist following in Northern Ireland.

The academic rationale for my choice of topic is that it is only in the last decade that a more heterogeneous approach to identity construction in this subject area generally has been acknowledged and followed (Hassan, 2002). There isn't a lot of research on how Rugby Union shapes and reflects identity in Northern Ireland but there are sections of research by other academics and authors which will be useful. The concepts of identity will allow me to explore this sectarian divide and understand how both sides of the community can use Rugby Union to display which side of the ideological line they stand on and/or if it can also be used as a tool to unite the conflicting sides of the community. The topic, with its deep historical and political complexity, will also allow me to further explain 'identity' as a socio-logical concept that is ever changing, fluid and complicated.

To do this I will use the Identity and Difference theory by Woodward (1997). The reason for this is that my topic will mainly focus on two main nationalities and ideologies. People with the same nationality and ideology share a sense of geographic space, beliefs, and history with other members of that community, whilst excluding those who do not belong. Difference is central to the shaping of many collective identities and is often used as an active form of social exclusion, particularly when political problems between groups occurs (Woodward, 1997). One could argue that for some people in Northern Ireland being Protestant, unionist or British can be defined as much by not being Catholic, nationalist, or Irish.

Other forms of identity could also be explored in the final piece to further explain the topic. Looking at another form of identity could allow a better understanding or explanation of a range of things related to the topic, for example, social class to expand on the historical context. In terms of social interaction, the middle classes were more integrated than the working classes and the rise of the Irish middle class, in part a response to political developments in Northern Ireland, inevitably led to Catholics being socialised into rugby (Hassan, 2002). Other forms of identity include race, religion, sexuality, profession, age, gender and many more. With every form of identity that is explored, better understanding and a more in-depth knowledge can be attained. I will also have to read up on some relevant secondary research, particularly the books and studies of Cronin (1999), Woodward (1997) and Bairner (2005) in preparation for the final piece.

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