# Ensuring Validity; Accessing the Constructions of National Identity and Citizenship

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to address the problems and methodological considerations of researching national identity and citizenship. The constructions of identity can be multi-layered, varied, complex and difficult to access. What needs attention is the way in which individuals relate to the nation and how the nation is constructed around the values of its citizens.

The myriad of differing constructions and the vague fluid nature of national identity that are available to people, and lack of a solid employable single definition of what makes a nation and the ways that people connect to it means that individual constructions of identity are based on different definitions. This also means that national identity is constructed using items that are personal to the individual and possibly are so ingrained over a lifetime that verbally defining such an identity is difficult.

It is often assumed that data collection is a series of set phases, this paper details how this is not and should not always be the case, and will concentrate on the methodological issues encountered when analysing how national identity is constructed. How do you uncover how an individual constructs and orders their own British and regional national identities, and most importantly how can the researcher access these constructions? How do we collect data in order to accurately understand an individuals relationship to the nation?

The issue is of how to get at an individuals national identity without encouraging clichéd stereotypes, such as 'Englishness is fish and chips and cups of tea', 'Cornishness is Pasties and tin mines', 'Scottishness is haggis and Braveheart'. These items may be the actual constructions and if they are that is fine, they are methodologically valid, but if they are not and they are simply items that replace the real constructions for ease, convenience or suchlike then it is the duty of the researcher not to continue to sociologically analyse this data and make judgements on the structures of society. Every attempt must be made to capture as accurate a picture as possible so that any subsequent sociological analysis maintains validity. The best way to achieve this methodologically is to employ social psychology.

## Theoretical underpinning

Billig (1995) suggested that nationalism was something that far from solely existing in times of extreme hardship or ceremony is actually expressed and negotiated on a day to day basis. This 'banal nationalism' dictates how citizens position themselves and are in turn covertly positioned by the state and the nation. Constructions of national identity are mostly based on banal aspects. This is why they are hard to reach, varied, personal and rarely vocalised. The 'flag waving' incidents and short periods of nationalist sentiment that Billig talks about are simply the outpouring of such banal constructions. It is the personal, individual and everyday constructions that inform behaviour at these flash-points.

It has even been argued that by their very nature, certainly national identity works best when the constructions of belonging are vague and incommunicable. By its very design national identity encourages emotional and symbolic responses in the form for example of patriotism, (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). It is therefore to be expected that assessing constructions of such items will involve a certain amount of difficulty.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that 'we must begin by a clarification of that reality as it is available to the common sense of ordinary members of society'. How that common sense reality may be influenced by the theoretical constructions of intellectuals is a further question and one that may be explored during the analysis; after the data is gathered.

## Research Design

There are several procedural difficulties with constructing a research design. A sound research strategy is therefore necessary to account for all those things that can go wrong while maintaining structural validity (Patton 2002.) Therefore a clear strategy is required to maintain validity, to make sure that that which is being sought an understanding is that which is truly being measured.

The subject of national identity is what Gallie (1959) would call an 'essentially contested concept'. This is due to the myriad of differing constructions and the vague fluid nature of national identity that are available to people. This lack of solid employable single definition of what makes a nation means therefore that individual constructions of identity are based on different definitions. This also means that national identity is constructed using items that are personal to the individual and possibly are so ingrained over a lifetime that verbally defining such an identity is difficult. These items have to be decided by the participant but the researcher must facilitate. The social world has to be pictured; 'as it actually exists to those under investigation, rather than as the researcher imagines it to be' (Filstead 1970). This follows the doctrine of 'verstehen' (Patton 2002) and is of pivotal importance in this research, however it also causes many problems which will also be discussed.

The research strategy therefore has to be based on naturalistic design (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Naturalistic inquiry is a discovery oriented approach that minimizes investigator manipulation, implying that the social world should be as undisturbed as possible (Guba 1978, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). No prior constraints are placed on what the outcomes of the research will be. However rather than constraining the research, planning a structure is necessary to ensure that participants discuss the issue using their own terms (Moustakas 1995,) so that what is discovered as a result is valid and created by the participant rather than the manipulation of the researcher. For this reason, that of maintaining validity every aspect of the research design must be taken in to account. The researcher must be reflexive, in the attention paid to the cultural, political, social, linguistic and ideological origins of participants perspectives and those of their own (Patton 2002). The method and any tools employed therein must take all this in to account and plan for emergent design flexibility rather than waiting for it to happen. The idea of planning a structure to ensure flexibility and limit the researchers input on the data may at first seem counter-intuitive however a flexible but thorough structure is essential to maintaining validity. Flexibility does not denote the lack of a structure, simply one that has been designed to adapt to work in any circumstances.


**Topical versus cultural approaches**

Because the topic of national identity and its construction is as varied and unique as the individuals being interviewed any related study is necessarily, largely exploratory to provide a platform to give participants; 'a direct and explicit opportunity to convey their own meanings and interpretations through explanations they provide, whether spontaneously or in answer to the researchers probing' (Lewis 2006). Or, as Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe it, as a series of 'cultural interviews'. It is important to come to understand the underlying values, concepts, culture and norms of the target population (Arthur and Nazroo 2006). What is required is for the participant to take the lead in the interview and to shape their own narrative, what Moustakas (1995) calls 'being in' the interview. As a result each interview is different, mentioning a wide, seemingly unlinked set of stories. However, having said this it is essential that the researcher keep a clear idea of the research aims and take a fluid and dynamic role in focussing the key points raised by the participant and following up on items of interest wherever they may arise, even though it is desired that they may have as little vocal input as possible. The emphasis for the researcher must be on focussing on the issues as they arise and not dictating them, at any stage, either before or after.


As discussed previously the problem with talking about national identity or citizenship using this 'cultural interview' style may be that people are not used to doing so, perhaps because they are aspects of life that they perceive does not affect the way they conduct themselves on a daily basis. It may simply be that they are used to verbalising or justifying what are seen to be deeply held beliefs (Miller 2005). It has even been argued that by their very nature, certainly national identity works best when the constructions of belonging are vague and incommunicable. By its very design national identity encourages emotional and symbolic responses in the form for example of patriotism (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992)

It is therefore important that although this is mainly an exploratory study that some structure is provided; prompts and questions and topic areas are prepared prior to the interview in order to avoid long moments of silence and provide starting or continuation points for discussion. These elements of a more structured study or 'topical interview' are introduced to manoeuvre around the difficulty in verbalising issues of personal and individual national identity. This is an example of the need for a solid plan to ensure naturalistic validity.

Concentrating primarily on a more structured style would narrow the focus on a particular event or process and is also concerned with what happened and why' (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Although this research is concerned with these elements it is less concerned with focusing on any particular event, aside obviously from the three broad topics derived directly from the research question. Whichever events or topics the interviewee chose to illustrate their national identity or opinions on it was completely up to that individual, to the extent that topics raised in the early interviews become valid categories in their own right and were open for inclusion in to the topic guide. Due to the anticipated difficulties in collecting valid constructions, as described earlier it became necessary to prepare a more detailed and researched topic guide. This guide would inevitably be used more extensively in some interviews than others but it was necessary all the same.

The problem with having any sort of planned input in to an interview in this way is that of interviewer bias. Much like when selecting participants the researcher has to be careful not to decide what is important before the interview begins and consequently sway the interview in their desired direction. For example for the researcher to pose a question on Britishness which implies in the phrasing that Britain is a nation then it is not too fantastical to assume that it is possible that the interviewee will accept this as an 'accurate' academic definition and adjust their answer accordingly. The point of the research is to explore what is important to the construction of national identity and form a theory from that; to identify constructions and then assign importance. The danger is that in forming a topic guide and subsequently deciding what is important before the interviews begin that the researcher is forming a construction of national identity that they then seek to prove or disprove. This bias is must be combated by the flexibility of questioning, the topic guides do not provide sections that need to be covered; rather they are designed to provide the opportunity to encourage the participants to talk about aspects of national identity in whichever way they choose, whichever way reflects their passions and perspectives.

Arthur and Nazroo (2006) claim that data collection is likely to be more structured in evaluative or investigative studies citing the example of a study that needs to provide descriptive evidence of peoples experiences of a service programme where a fair amount of detailed information is likely to be needed to describe the features of the service programme and the specific issues arising from this. A study investigating national identity needs to be investigative in much the same way and peoples experiences likewise need to be accounted for however; the features of national identity are not as easily identifiable as those of the service programme in the example. Indeed a study of this nature differs from others because it is those features of national identity which need to be identified before or indeed by talking about an individual's experiences of national identity. There will be specific issues surrounding the features and the experiences of the features but these will emerge from the interview and cannot so easily be separated in to a distinct category; they can be guessed at through research, reading newspapers, looking at local party manifestoes but the issues, the experiences and the features of national identity are intertwined in a way that is unlike the above example. As a result of this the selection of either a solely exploratory or topical interview structure would not provide the best option; a careful blending of the two is much more useful. Firstly what is required is an emic approach (Pike 1954), where the language and categories used by the people involved in the study are sought, however as explained there are problems with achieving this and so an etic approach is constructed where the researcher analyses important cultural distinctions. Patton (2002) suggests that what is often needed is a mixture of the two, the researcher must seek understanding as an insider while describing it to outsiders. This a relevant distinction and the combination of the two approaches particularly pertinent here where accessing a cultures own terms and distinctions is so problematic, the etic approach must be designed with the purpose of understanding, and the emic approach in mind. A topic guide thus created from the etic approach must have as its central purpose, the ability to draw out understanding in terms constructed by the participant.


**Rivers and branches**

This notion of blending methods together is a recurrent theme when attempting to maintain the validity of research in such an area. Finding the balance between structure and flexibility is consistently important and the structure of any topic guide needs further consideration. Rubin and Rubin (1995) put forward the notion of rivers and branches models for structuring discussion; rivers denoting the exploration of themes as far as they naturally go and branches symbolising the pre-specified selection of a more structured topic guide. Again this is a nice illustrative separation for the sake of clarity, however the present study must again utilise a combination of these two models in order to ensure the data is being collected in context (Keats 2000). The branches were pre specified for reasons already stated but how far the participant took that 'branch' was completely up to them, often the topic turned in to another topic, one providing inspiration for the other. Naming the new model that emerges from the amalgamation of these two may seem like a ridiculous exercise in semantics but however it does provide a certain mental clarity to think of it not in terms of rivers or a singular tree and its branches, but in terms of several trees stood side by side; 'branches' or discussion threads outstretched and overlapping while the trees themselves represent the wider categories, or topics. In this way it becomes clear how topics are necessarily separate for the sake of comparison and analysis, but discussing one topic is unrestricted in scope and can lead in to the discussion of any related topic the participant may deem important. This solid separation of topics, or trees also guarantees the limiting of repetition keeping the discussion flowing and interesting while contributing to the cultivation of a sense of progression through the interview.

**Miner and Traveller models**

The consideration put in to the uses of language and terminology with regards to allowing the participant themselves to assign importance to items is indicative of the overall ethos of the interview. The combination of methods to ensure validity needs to be knitted together with a clear idea of just what the researcher is searching for. Again this was dictated by the subject itself. Kvale (1996) suggested two models when considering the position of the interviewer in the interview situation. The first model is the 'miner metaphor' where: 'The knowledge is waiting in the subjects interior to be uncovered uncontaminated by the miner'.

This appears to be an ideal approach for any project of this kind. The issue of national identity is always salient but rarely discussed on a day to day basis, therefore what is of interest is of how such vast amounts of information are personally constructed and sewn together to form a very individual national identity. The reality may be that such issues are not generally discussed and there are many competing constructions of identity, no one more correct than the next. Therefore the perceived validity of these constructions is not what is of concern. The simple fact is that these constructions continue to exist and national identity continues to be a force within society, much to the bemusement of many academics. This being the case it is important to explore these constructions without contaminating them. As Kvale (1996) states: 'The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subjects pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions' (pg 3)

When voting for or against policies such as devolution individuals will not have access to a researching academic to logically talk through 'correct' versions of identity, they will make a decision based on how they themselves bring together and understand the many varied threads of identity relating to the place they live. This being the case it is necessary to understand how this is done and why.

The second model suggested is that of the 'traveller' who 'asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of conversation as 'wondering together with' (pg 4)

Although the interviews on this project are conversational in style this is simply a tool to relax the participant and make them comfortable in the interview environment, it is not as depicted here. The interviewer using this model sees knowledge as constructed within the interview as well as before and after (Legard Keegan and Ward 2006). The reality is not so simple as this, it is only too obvious that knowledge is constructed in this way and this is the danger. Steps need to be taken to avoid this happening wherever possible, from ordering the questions, to what is to be asked, to the phrasing of said questions. It is not the role of the researcher in this case to negotiate a 'correct version' of identity within the interview, this would simply be a test of the researchers charisma and powers of persuasion rather than a collection of identities that have existed regardless of the researcher. Having said this there are some conversational elements involved. The best example of this was when a participant constructed

Cornishness culturally in terms of; "An affinity with the local area, and it does reflect I think a different kind of cultural approach to life which is not as intense as when you cross the border in to England"

These were aspects of identity that could be adopted and exist within anyone if they so desired. Having attained this as an explanation of identity it then became desirable to question this construction further and in a conversational manner to discover whether this meant that anyone could be Cornish if they so desired? Whether the construction of being Cornish was simply a measure of a desire to be so? To which the participant answered a definite 'no' and justified this answer by referring to a lack of a shared history, ancestry and a sense of struggle. This completely contradicted the earlier construction and would not have remained uncovered without the conversational flexible style of questioning. The second explanation was always there, it was not constructed by conversational questioning only revealed. This is much more like the perspective of Milner and Glassner (1997) who state that while the interview itself is a symbolic interaction, knowledge of the world beyond the interaction can still be obtained. It is accepted that knowledge is created during the interaction, it is just not desirable, and even though this may be the case knowledge of items discussed during the interview can be obtained without the interview itself reconstructing them; if the interview is done correctly and accounts for the limitations of certain methods and compensates accordingly.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, when designing a method to access the constructions of national identity and citizenship, it is important to understand how the individual constructs the nation and the state and their relationship to them. The process leading to attaining these valid constructions is complex and cannot be achieved by following one method or model alone. At each stage there needs to be careful consideration of just what is necessary to achieve the desired result, and this often is reliant on a combination of models and methods. As demonstrated there are aspects of some methods that are completely sound and would suffice for interviews on any other topic. However the nature of researching constructions of national identity and citizenship; verbalising and formulating constructions of items that are by their very design, concepts that were never meant for such scrutiny, working best on some emotional unspoken level, these methods are majoratively insufficient alone. This cross-pollination of methods does not affect the scientific validity of the project if a detailed account of how and why it was done and what the results were is provided; it is actually what ensures validity. The issue of planning a structure to ensure flexibility may appear counter intuitive but flexibility does not refer to an absence of structure just one that be altered at any point to fit the situation. It is important to account for this in a methodology to ensure that this flexibility is not mismanaged and what the researcher is seeking measurement of is actually what is being measured.

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