Most of us as educators associate education with schools, schooling, teachers, teaching & learning, curriculum. However, there are many other contexts in which formal and informal learning/teaching occurs. This paper looks at reconciliation programs in ethnic conflict situations, specifically community and government-supported educational programs that attempt to reconcile or mediate between ethnic/racial groups in post-violent contexts. Here, "post-violent" means contexts where groups have been engaged in armed struggle and/or military violence. I will look at the Northern Irish context, but such programs also exist in other countries such as Cyprus and the Basque areas.

These programs attempt to engage groups with their existing knowledge bases, and aim to demystify taken-for-granted knowledges (and stereotypes of the other) in order to alter people’s understanding, perceptions and attitudes. In that sense, it is fundamentally pedagogical, political and cultural work. It is schooling, political in the sense that it aims at transformation and, in some ways, emancipation (from rigid and "closed" knowledges and constructs of self). And, like "progressive" schooling paradigms, it is about collaborative learning (i.e., groups), reflective learning & self-reflection. What is different is that we are dealing with adults, often profoundly traumatized, alienated and embittered, who participate voluntarily (unlike compulsory schooling) in these anti-sectarian or anti-racial programmes.

Adult reconciliation programs find their place in post-violent interethnic conflict situations. This paper examines the strategy put forward in an anti-sectarian project of the Belfast Workers’ Educational Association branch. Their course material reveals an essentialist treatment of identity. I will argue that such treatment is logical and reasonable within a climate of essentialist tribal (interethnic) conflict.

Essentialism is a term used by many contemporary social theorists in a negative way and some even describe their central position as anti-essentialist. Since I will argue a case for
essentialism in this paper it is important to look at the term itself and the reasons for its rejection in postmodern theoretical thinking.

Essentialism is usually described as follows:

"Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity" (Fuss, 1989, XI)

If essentialism is deployed to analyse the identity of a person, the analysis will assume that there are unchangeable features of this person, his or her position in the world in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. The assumption further contains a certain essence at the core of each of those categories. This means that once categorised working class an analysed identity will then carry not only this fixed identifier, but the identifier is loaded with equally fixed descriptors. An exemplary identity could then be analysed as "Irish-Catholic, lower-class female", whereby each identifier is understood to have a set of expected behavioural, social and cognitive patterns as its essential descriptors.

As a result identity becomes a mixture of essential features at the core of every person. This is a particularly problematic hypothesis as Liz Bondi indicates: "Reliance upon apparently pre-given categories of class, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and so on (invokes) a conception of identity as something to be acknowledged or uncovered rather than constructed, as something fixed rather than changing." (Bondi, 1993, 93).

Preconceived categories such as class as part of a larger discourse in social theory are usually not being put into question by essentialist thinking as in modernist social theory. If their validity remains unchallenged, using them is itself an essentialising act. Such a theoretical position sees the different identifiers within these categories, such as lower or upper class, perform as predeterminators of the "objects that are formed through our attempts to make sense of ourselves and each other" (Keith and Pile, 1993, 29), our identities.

In other words, the assumption would be that at the core of every Northern Irish republican Catholic working-class man are a set of beliefs and predispositions that will make his actions predictable. Predictable within a framework that allows for some flexibility and agency but that is essentially fixed and unbreakable.

What are the problems with this point of view? In a theoretical construction that is reminiscent of Bourdieu's theory of habitus all identifiers such as class, gender etc are charged with an unchangeable core that doesn’t recognise multiple shifting facets of identity in a postmodern world. It is important, however, to keep in mind that Bourdieu does not deny agency to subjects, but that he sees them acting within social fields according to strategies made out of objective necessities (Bourdieu, 1994 [1987]: 11).

An essentialist position contradicts central postmodern tenets such as "Derrida's view of the individual subject as someone who has no solid identity, but who is a bundle of heterogeneous and not necessarily coherent impulses and desires"(Harvey, 1993, 58).

Feminist identity politics is particularly concerned with the question of identity definition, and researchers such as Liz Bondi have come to the conclusion that identity has to be seen as a process in which the person continually assigns new positions along categories such as class, nationality etc for oneself (Bondi 1993). She agrees with others that identities are formed in a process of recurrent construction, followed by immediate questioning and reconstruction.
However, she makes one other important point with which I begin my own positioning and argument. Bondi acknowledges “the need to resist claims that identity is infinitely fluid and malleable” (Bondi, 1993:85). The postmodern assumption that identity cannot be grasped with a set of fixed categories and essential features makes sense in a postmodern world. The choices many people, say in Australia, now have permits them to travel between several identity locations, to try out life drafts, then to decide differently, then to come back again and so on. People try out versions of their life, they might for example start off as Anglicans, lose their faith, and then later on find God in some fundamentalist group or attach themselves to a different spiritual belief. People in Australia do this because they can: it is safe for them.

However, there are other places in the world enmeshed in ethnic conflict as the major political and social determinator. Ethnic conflict situations have certain features in common: there are two or more groups of people fighting for a specific territory, these groups are differentiated by ethnic origin or religion or language or a combination of all three. Even people who don’t actively take part in the conflict assign themselves or are assigned to one side of the divide, nationalistic goal are at the forefront.

**Ethnic Conflict Situations**

- **Fight for territory**
- **Group Differentiation**

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**Nationalistic goals**

These common features of an ethnic conflict situation indicate a microcosm of modernity, of territorial wars and the idea of a nation of "one" people. It nonetheless resides within a postmodern world, and its residue represents the variety that makes up the complex and less fixed assumptions of postmodernity. For the individuals caught in an ethnic conflict situation, however, the driving aspects of the modern goals are not only shaping, but determining their choices. For them there are safe choices and unsafe choices. Most individuals opt for safe choices.
But what are those safe choices in a situation of interethnic violence? There are several forces at work that tend to guide peoples’ decision-making:

1. Which group represents most of my personal identifiers?
2. What do other groups expect me to do?
3. How dangerous is it to cross the expectations of my own group and the other groups?
4. Do I have the option of neutrality?
5. How do I position myself and my opponents as actors in the conflict?

According to recent research (Gil-White, 1999) the primordial position of assigning ethnic identity primarily in relation to blood ties is dominant among many ethnic actors. It can be assumed that a situation of interethnic violence especially fosters a climate of primordialist instead of circumstantialist ethnic actors.

The answers to the above questions and therefore the choices individuals make are commonly guided by an essentialist view of tribal belonging with blood ties and religiopolitical loyalties as central identifiers. In any ethnic conflict situation there are degrees of involvement, but it is impossible to remain completely neutral. For some sub-groups at certain times it is even expected to show a high degree of side-taking, or otherwise endanger one’s own group belonging. The essentialist peer pressure of "this is who we are, this is what we think and do" finds its equivalent on the other side: "This is who they are, this is what they think and do".

Essentialist identity politics are by no means confined to small minority populations, The PIOOM Databank of the Leiden University lists 19 countries with high-intensity ethnic conflicts, 42 countries with low-intensity ethnic conflicts and 74 countries with violent political ethnic conflicts for the year 1996 (World Conflict Map, PIOOM Databank, 1997). In this century Northern Ireland has been an ethnic conflict area for more than 30 years. There have been many attempts to reconcile hostile groups in various peace initiatives. Those reconciliation groups for a long time tried to bring together members of both the Catholic republican community and of the Protestant unionist community.

The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 paved the way for the Belfast branch of the Workers' Educational Association to implement an extensive anti-sectarian project. The "Interface Project" developed three educational packs which cover political education, Irish history and the sense of Northern Irish identity.

After many years of cross-cultural educational programmes with mixed groups of participants as the standard, many organisations, including the WEA, have now started to focus on single-identity education for only Catholic or Protestant participants in different groups. These programmes usually take place in either Catholic or Protestant community centres and aim at deconstructing myths and creating empathy for the others.

"Us And Them"

The core programme is titled "Us and Them" and addresses Northern Irish ethnic group differences in religion, politics and culture/tradition. A facilitator organises a group between 8
and 15 participants. These sessions take place in community centres and often involve ex-paramilitary prisoners, but also in prisons themselves were ex-prisoners sometimes work as group facilitators to bridge the gap between fundamentalist paramilitary activists and the moderate anti-sectarian aims of the WEA’s program.

There are ten sessions of two hours each covering the following areas: Introduction, including a brainstorm on identifiers, Belonging + Personal Identities, Symbols, As Others See Us, Cultural Traditions, Roots and a Sense of the Past, Religious Labels, Borders and Nationalities, Political Identities, Conclusive evaluation of any changed views. A closer analysis of the course material reveals that an essentialist positioning takes place right from the start.

The first session serves to accustom the participants with the course objectives and with each other. Although the facilitator’s notes focus on the complexities of identity, the main aim is to develop a grid of common identifiers that participants share. Games of introduction serve “to demonstrate the variety and commonalities amongst the group members” (WEA, 1998:7) and eventually “everyone now knows a little more about the identity of their fellow group members and has shared a little more about themselves” (WEA, 1998:7). The phrasing reveals the underlying concept of a particular identity for each group member, made up of a variety of identifiers such as hobbies, physical features, possessions, pet hates (WEA, 1998:6). The introductory notes avoid controversial identifiers, such as religion or politics. However, they determine that every group member has a certain fixed identity. A further essentialist component is a game in which participants find a partner with whom they share a hobby or physical feature. This encourages them to think in groups and lobbies (e.g. we are the ones with black hair, only we can speak for this experience).

Initially the participants experience a variety of harmless group identifiers and intragroup opinions on, for example, pet hates. Their reality of seeing themselves positioned in the world is acknowledged.

In a next move the facilitator collects generic terms for identifiers, eg. hobbies or interests, but the first tense moment in any ethnic conflict situation is about to occur: identifiers will have to include sensitive areas. There are many identifiers that most of us would share without hesitations but which become highly sensitive in ethnic conflict situation:

As an example in Northern Ireland people will be sensitive about the following:

- **Religion®** seen as related to political conviction
- **Place of residence®** many sectarian suburbs
- **Job®** especially members of the police or security forces
- **Family relations®** will give away your religion
- **Names®** there are specific Catholic and Protestant Christian and family names
- **Membership in political parties®** potentially reason enough to be a target

And the list goes on. Some people will even use a wrong name in certain situations in order to protect themselves from identification. Gerry Adams reports in his autobiography *Before*
The Dawn (1997) that he called himself John Adams instead of Gerry every time the police would stop him in the Sixties. He felt that "Gerry", being a Catholic first name, would have exposed him to unfavourable police treatment.

"Us and Them" politics are founded on boundaries, divisions, fixed naming and fixed places. The sensitivity of many identifiers as essential classifiers of "Us or Them" sustains the argument that individuals in Northern Ireland and any other ethnic conflict situation live in a modernist, essentialist world. The WEA's anti-sectarian course material acknowledges this fact and picks the participants up where most of their fears lie. In the group the following questions are raised subsequently:

- What sorts of identifiers raise most anxiety?
- What are the risks involved in sharing these?
- Are there any benefits in sharing these?

Sharing identifiers that are dangerously loaded politically seems to be the first step towards finding a third way. This becomes more apparent in the second session which focuses on sharing life experiences as Catholics and Protestants. Although the essentialist interest in group belonging is acknowledged in the first part of the session, the point of convergence then moves to the conflicts individuals experience with different identifiers. This paves the way to a less essentialist view of one's own belonging, rectified with a game of exchanging memories about both early essentialist feelings and feelings of disturbance about them. Although most participants would have entered the program with a clear (essentialist) idea of who they are, the second session already allows them to explore beyond those essentialist categories and to prepare their minds for new ways of viewing the Northern Irish conflict and their own local place within it.

In the third session the participants are then asked to expand on the idea of finding new ways. The importance of symbols for essentialist group identification especially in conflict situations is discussed, but the objective for that session is to leave such identification traps behind and instead create a new uniting flag for all of Northern Ireland. This enables the participants to concentrate on positive aspects of life in Northern Ireland and on future inclusive solutions to the conflict. The essentialising act of creating yet another group flag can be justified in an ethnic conflict situation for its transformative quality. The risk lies in the creation of another larger ethnic group identity ("we, the Northern Irish") without addressing the inherent dangers of any ethnic group identification. Essentialism here reaches its restrictions. A strategy that avoids probing deeper into the issues of ethnicity, territory and identity might leave the participants with a sense of having overcome former prejudices, but without a real change of vision for the future. They may still think in terms of "Us and Them".

A partial strategy to break through this mould is then employed in the fourth session which introduces the terms "denotation" and "connotation" (of an image) to the participants. Participants become aware of the different Northern Irish narratives that colour one's interpretation of media images. The media, especially British tabloids, has often been accused to report on the "Troubles" in an unfair way and thereby to further intensify the conflict. Many republican Catholics are resentful of the mainstream media, but the republican movement itself also publishes several extremely dogmatic newspapers which aggravate the Protestant unionists. The aim of this session then is to explain how media images are constructed within larger narratives and stereotypes and to construct such images with the participants themselves. This confronts them with their own stereotypes of others, of oneself, of others'stereotypes of oneself, of others' stereotypes of themselves, of other's stereotypes of how others stereotype them. This whole array of stereotypes, instead of underpinning the essentialism it stems from, creates a climate of uncertainty. No essentialising group identification as in the previous session is aimed for, but an
acknowledgment of the different positions actors in an ethnic conflict assert. Here the move is towards a more constructivist concept of identity, socially erected and therefore open to transformation.

Both the fifth and the sixth session continue this theme. Although the categories of cultural traditions and roots can invite essentialist thinking, the course’s strategy focuses on a critical reflection on the participants self-positioning. Knowledge and understanding of Northern Irish history is seen as a particularly problematic point in the conflict, especially because in a sectarian school system either the Catholic or Protestant version is dominant. The participants are therefore urged to consider both a variety of cultural traditions and conflicting versions of history and to position themselves not at one particular identity place, but as travelers in ritual and time.

These first six sessions also serve as a grounding for the following three sessions which tackle the core of the interethnic/interreligious conflict in Northern Ireland. In the following three sessions the participants are asked to look at their own and others’ positioning in terms of religion, nationality and political affiliation. The suggested introduction for the tutors displays that the problem lies especially in its avoidance:

"Talking about what it means to us to be Protestant or Catholic and sharing our opinions/perceptions of our own and the others’ side is something which we spend considerable time and energy avoiding. It may therefore feel like we are now moving into risky area- and the truth is that we are, but we have built up relationships over the weeks and we have worked through a contract which should help us to address what after all is a crucial area. But I want to acknowledge your possible apprehensions and my own."

Having gone through the first six sessions, it is now more difficult for the participants to assume an unreflected essentialist position. Not only have they considered a variety of life experiences in Northern Ireland, they have also been asked to put themselves in somebody else’s shoes and view the conflict from a new angle. The beginning inference of essentialist tribal identifiers is now being readdressed with a different cargo on the participants’ side: knowledge of the other story, experience of a different world view, recognition of a variety of Northern Irish narratives and their symbols.

However, these intended outcomes are still no guarantee of transformed thinking.

In a significant step to overcome the essentialist categorisation, the participants are asked to clarify their religious feelings. Instead of remaining Catholics or Protestants, in a human sculpt they now position themselves physically in relation to their actual belief. How close do they really feel to the Catholic church? Which Protestant church do they belong to and how important is it in their daily lifes? The same reflective positioning also takes place when nationality – British, Irish, Northern Irish – becomes the focal point. The session about political affiliation is finally more concerned about the political reality and possibilities for future political changes. It seems to me that the reasoning behind this is to raise the participants’ consciousness about the democratic political process. It therefore occupies an important, albeit too short, conclusion in the course. The participants have started in an essentialist ethnic conflict climate, have expanded their knowledge of and views on the conflict situation, have hopefully overcome the essentialist tribalisation and are now being asked to consider a new, political way of dealing with the variety of opinions, a third way.

Conclusion

In an ethnic conflict situation, identity has more to do with identification than with choice, and we can see the limitations individuals have to face in their choices. Although essentialism as
such is a concept that might be out of place to describe the identity choices of the postmodern subject, it serves a justified role in bringing essentially thinking people together. It is a touchstone, a common ground around which to rally and from which to begin the journey. There are core identifiers in any ethnic conflict situation that must be addressed in order to overcome violent essentialist tribalisation. Dominant and dividing versions of history and conflicting symbolic cultural practices need to be acknowledged, deconstructed and demystified and, if possible, consolidated into a working collaboration. Recognising the essentialist world ethnic actors inhabit and then expanding their world view to incorporate plural ways of interpreting the conflict might be a suitable preparatory path to more democratic processes. The consolidation of different world views can be identified as a priority goal in establishing non-violent multi-ethnic and poly-cultural societies.

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