Public and private: 
National identities in a Scottish Borders community 

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CIBR Working Papers in Border Studies 
CIBR/WP03-1
**Abstract**

This paper is an exploration of national identities among sportspeople in a community in the Scottish Borders. This group experiences a split in their identities. Publicly, they are ascribed an ambiguous national identity by the surrounding national communities. Privately, and among fellow community members, they unambiguously assert national identity. This paper examines the way this split is managed, arguing that the performance of public ambiguity is expected, but is supported by the private performance of nationality. National identity is analysed specifically as a performance, and sport is the context in which this performance takes place.

**Keywords:** Identity, national identity, social context, performance, sport.
Introduction

This paper is an exploration of national identities in a Scottish Border community and how some community members manage them. This group, members of ‘Bordertown’s’ rugby club, are representatives of the community, and are therefore ascribed the ambiguous national identity of the town. Privately, however, the individuals in question are all able to identify clearly with one national community or the other. An apparent tension arises through the negation of the private identity in the public realm. This is therefore an examination of how these people reconcile the tension between their public and private identities. I argue that this is done through the acceptance and performance of the ambiguous identity ascribed to them as a group. Private, within-community negotiations, and assertions of the privately held national identities reinforce this.

This analysis is derived from an understanding of identity as social, dependent upon the interactions taking place between social actors, and the context in which such interactions occur. It is shifting, multiple and contingent. In this case, national identity is analysed in a similar way to other types of identity, which are best analysed in flux (Frankenberg 1957; Barth 1970; Mercer 1990; Anderson 1996; O’Dowd and Wilson 1996; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Sweetman 1999; Tate 1999; Kiely, McCrone et al. 2000). In such contexts, we are able to see more clearly the processes of identity formation and negotiation (Kiely, McCrone et al. 2000: 1.1). Bordertown provides one such context.

The problem faced by the community in Bordertown is caused by the particular nature of national identities. Specifically, a tension exists in the close relationship between national identity and territory, and the integration of this geographic reality with social structures. Although people in Bordertown tend to be quite clear about where their national loyalties lie, as a
community, both the Scottish and English national communities reject them. Because of this communal rejection, as members of the local community, they too suffer rejection from those they perceive to be their co-nationals. This paper explores some of the tensions inherent in this situation.

Membership of a national community may be crudely established through the location of territorial borders – community members live within the sovereign territory, and the borders are used to exclude non-members (Smith 1991: 14; Gellner 1994: 4; Billig 1997: 61). For many in the national community, the sense of ‘Otherness’, and hence of ‘Us-ness’ is given by the borders, in turn reinforcing the sense of belonging among the majority of community members. Such borders are therefore physical manifestations of the social boundaries existing around the community (Billig 1997: 74). ‘We’ live here; ‘they’ live there.

This geographical certainty does not easily translate into social reality. Border communities, although officially community members, are also socially integrated with the ‘other’. Studies of communities on the borders of national communities and identities (Frankenberg 1957; Larsen 1982; Anderson 1996; O’Dowd and Corrigan 1996; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Kiely, McCrone et al. 2000) illustrate how ambiguity in identity and community membership is handled by both the people on the border, and by their co-nationals. Border communities have a dual role to play in the national imagination (Shields 1992: 5), and the ability of their inhabitants to integrate themselves with their national communities depends on which role these communities cast them in. Are they heroic, the pioneers, living on the frontier, and so representing the furthest outreach of ‘civilisation’? As such, they are markers of the limits of identity, and so carry in their traditions and way of life myths and traditions about the “unity of the people, and sometimes myths about the ‘natural’ unity of a territory” (Anderson, 1996: 2). Or are they something else? Wilson and Donnan argue that border people “are comfortable with the notion that they
are tied culturally to many other people in neighbouring states.” (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 4). The communities therefore may possess and display some of the characteristics of the surrounding national communities, but not be fully accepted by either (Frankenberg 1957; Larsen 1982; Wilson and Donnan 1998; Kiely, McCrone et al. 2000). The border for such communities does not exist as a demarcation, but rather as a part of their lives requiring constant and skilful negotiation.

Bordertown occupies an ambiguous place in the national imaginations of both England and Scotland. Historically, the area surrounding Bordertown was the subject of disputing claims by Scotland and England over political and national sovereignty (Neville 1998 : 2). Although ‘Border-region’ is now subsumed into Scotland or England rather than existing as a separate legal entity, socially, the issue of possession and control has remained unresolved. National identity is, therefore, somewhat problematic because of the specific social, historical and political context in which Bordertown exists. Suspended between two national communities, belonging fully to neither, Bordertown’s inhabitants appear to possess an ambiguous, and therefore problematic, national identity. This is true, however, only in the perceptions of others. People in Bordertown have a clear sense of their individual identities, but acknowledge that as a group, they present problems to the national communities of England and Scotland.

Identity and social context

The understanding of identity used in this paper is based on the recognition that it is socially constructed, and that it cannot be defined in simplistic terms. Rather it must be understood as a complex set of behaviours, actions and labels that determine and are determined by our interactions with others. Specifically, identity must be seen as being a simplified way of talking about social relationships and how we see ourselves, rather than as something that is
somehow essential or fixed (Billig 1997: 60). A dialogue, between individual and society, is developed, taking something from each, and allowing each party to reach an understanding of who or what an individual or group should be seen as. Identity is as much about perception and representation as about the expression of individuality and the self.

Identity, therefore, is multiple, fluid and responsive to changing social conditions and contexts (Rutherford 1990: 24; Hall 1997: 4; Roseneil and Seymour 1999: 1). Identities are ‘done’ by people, rather than defining them:

Identity is not ‘just there’, it must always be established. This adds two meanings to our catalogue: to classify things or persons, and to associate oneself with something or someone else … Each locates identity within the ebb and flow of practice and process; they are both things that people do.

(Jenkins 1999: 4, emphasis in original)

When one asserts an identity, one is asserting what relationship one has with a specific group, person or ideology. And that group has the power to deny or support the asserted identity. The identity options open to us are always circumscribed by the social circumstances in which we live (Roseneil and Seymour 1999: 2). We are always identified at least as much as we identify. This is the nub of the tension explored in this paper. The surrounding national communities identify the community of Bordertown as ambiguous in terms of national identity. Consequently, community members and representatives are also ascribed an ambiguous identity. Yet, as individuals they do identify themselves clearly.

The effects of this social determination of identity on the way people behave and see themselves were the subject of Goffman’s work on The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1990). First published in 1959, it suggests that identity may be best understood as a series of roles which individuals take on
in response to the circumstances they find themselves in. He cites Park to make his point:

> It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role … It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.

(Park in (Goffman 1990: 30))

The analogy of role-playing, acting, and performance is apt as it encompasses both the ability of individuals to be flexible in their choice of roles, and the appropriate tailoring of performance to audience, and the importance of social context, or audience. The audience must observe the actor or actors to establish who they are, but the actors must also take into account their audience’s expectations regarding their behaviour.

This performative aspect of identity is used in the analysis of various types of identity. For example, the term ‘gender role’ is used to describe the appropriate behaviour of men and women (Connell 1995: 21) and gender identity itself is established to have basis more in performance in response to social expectations, than in biological characteristics (Oakley 1985: 165). It has also been argued that all identity is developed primarily from social perceptions of our bodies, their appearance and use, and the ways in which they interact with the physical world around us (Young 1990: 148). Another example of this is found in the rituals surrounding the expression of nationhood, the glorification of war and parades, international sporting events, the daily raising of the flag (Billig 1997: 39). All of these actions characterise national identity as a performance that takes place on a society-wide and regular footing. Identity can be seen as a performance as it is written into all
of our daily behaviours, in the way we interact with each other and the ways groups interact.

I examine the public and private performances of national identity of this group. Following is a description of the research, and a description of the social context in which the performances take place. The ways in which the public identity is performed is then examined, before the private performances are analysed.

**Description of research**

In order to examine the public and private performances of national identity, a context was needed where such performances took place. Bordertown, and specifically sport in Bordertown, provided an ideal context. Data was collected using participant-observation and interviews in Bordertown. I joined the Bordertown Rugby Club as a player on the women’s team, the Jesters, and played with them for over two seasons. This enabled me to observe interactions between players within the team, the club and between clubs. Interviews were also carried out with fourteen members of the rugby club. Seven of these were women involved with the Jesters, taking the form of individual semi-structured interviews, and seven with men involved. Two were carried out with groups of three or four players, and five were individual interviews, similar to those of the women. This was fewer than originally planned, particularly with the Jesters. However, in some instances, my teammates were happy to talk to me, but unhappy to be ‘interviewed’, while others could be considered ‘floating’ members of the team, turning up only sporadically. In addition, although most of the women lived locally, some were not from ‘Border region’ at all, and so did not possess the ambiguous identity forming the focus of the research.

The men interviewed were people I knew, or who were recommended by people known to me. They were more difficult to recruit, in part because of
the lack of social interaction between the male and female teams in the club. Seven interviews with male footballers, carried out for a previous research project were revisited. Because of this, there is a gender imbalance in two types of data gathered. Men tend to dominate the interview data, while observation was carried out primarily on the women. Both types of data tend to confirm the other, implying that gender differences do not make a big impact in terms of national identity in this context.

By using a combination of both observation and interviews, I was able to examine both the private (and unambiguous) identities of team members, and the public (problematic) identities. The team performance was seen to be occasionally at odds with individual identities, and the ambiguous nature of the Bordertown identity was made clear.

Using a sports team as a way of examining these performances had several advantages. I argued above that identity can be understood as a performance. In order for this analogy to hold, it is necessary to see identity as a social interaction involving an audience and actors. These roles are reversed or played simultaneously throughout the interplay between individuals. The interaction can take place on an intimate level, individual to individual or within small groups, or on a larger scale, when big groups of people such as societies or national communities, communicate with one another. In order to examine this interaction, it is necessary to find a context in which it takes place and which can be easily observed. A sporting context provides this, and has several advantages.

Firstly, it utilises the established role of sports teams as community representatives (Frankenberg 1957: 102; Mosely 1997; Hill 1999), and therefore immediately established a context for community interaction. The sports field is one of the places that differences are recognised, and boundaries are drawn. Crucial to sport is participation and interaction in a specifically
competitive context (Sugden and Bairner 1993 : 7) — without the element of competition, sport as an activity is meaningless. It is, therefore, firmly related to issues of identity — the world, according to sport, is divided neatly into ‘us’ and ‘them’. The boundary lines are drawn firmly around identity and there can be no grey areas. Bordertown as a community is marked off as separate from other communities whilst simultaneously communicating with them. The relationship between these communities can therefore be studied.

Secondly, sport is a public and shared experience. It relies on the presence of an audience and interaction for it to have any meaning. The audience may be those actually watching the event, but could equally be those who are participating. Without this relationship, sport becomes simply a pastime, rather than a symbol or representation of anything (Wertz 1985 : 13). At the most basic level, sport gives people a public forum to express themselves and their communities. Sport is a performance by its very nature, and the audience to the performance (be it spectators or fellow participants) assist in creating its meaning. The Jesters, therefore, perform an identity the interpretation of which is a collaboration between themselves and their opponents. A public performance takes place on the sports field, when the Jesters, and other teams from Bordertown, are interacting with ‘outsiders’. A private performance takes place between team members, and between community members in establishing national identity.

Thirdly, rugby has a tradition of public performances and displays of team solidarity, masculine identity and national identity (Philips 1986; Wheatley 1990; Long, Carrington et al. 1997; Johnes 2000). It seemed reasonable to suppose that, given the nature of Bordertown’s public identity, that performances of national identity might be part of a rugby club’s repertoire.

Fourthly, wanting to carry out ethnographic fieldwork, I needed to find a context where identities were observable, but where I could also be accepted.
As a woman, I was able to join the women’s team and participate as a full member. However, not being British, I was excluded from some of the team performances, giving me ample opportunity to observe and analyse them.

**Public identity — performing the ambiguity**

As stated above, the national identity of Bordertown is problematic, because it is perceived to be ambiguous. People living in Bordertown acknowledge that these national communities do not accept them as either Scottish or English. The community in Bordertown feels a sense of difference, and distance, from the English and Scottish national communities:

I don’t know … when we go to Bigton, they say we speak Scottish, we’re Scottish, and when we go to Scotston, they say we’re English … It works both ways … We’re actually on the borderline.

(David)

We’re just somewhere in-between somehow. … We talk different to anyone else. … You know? Half and half.

(Richard)

Living at the point where ‘We’ become ‘Them’, their identity is based on a lack of belonging and a deep sense of difference. Comments such as these imply a great sense of being outside, on the margins, of not belonging among people living in Bordertown. Local identity in Bordertown has come to be perceived as a form of national identity in itself.

They wouldn’t class themselves as Tooners [slang name for people from the region surrounding Bigton], put it that way. If they had to name the nearest city, they’d put themselves as from Bigton I guess. But when they go abroad, they’re Bordertowners.

(Evan)
Bordertown’s got its own language and its own, its own everything. People say, people come from Bigton and say it’s like living in a foreign country.

(William)

Bordertown, then, is regarded with some uneasiness. Entirely alien to both England and Scotland, the identity of Bordertown is something upsets the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ dynamic of the border.

Despite this disruption to ‘normal’ community interactions, Bordertown is able to interact with other communities through their sports teams. The context of Bordertown’s ambiguity results in sporting fixtures taking on a particularly national flavour:

I think a lot of them like to think of us as being English, so it’s like a little Scotland versus England thing. But yeah, I think a few regards us as being English.

(Liam)

Each team can come to represent a national group, resulting in specifically national banter directed at Bordertown players:

It were a few year ago when Alex were playing … we were playing up in Scotston … and the lads up at Scotston … you know what they’re like … Alex stopped with the ball and he says, ‘I’m more Scottish than you! I was born in Edinburgh!’ And away he went with the ball again!

Sport therefore provides a context in which community interaction takes place, and the public ascription of identity occurs.

One response to this public ascription is the acceptance of the ambiguity inherent in it, and a corresponding performance of it. For example, the
ambiguity in national identity is ritualised within the Jesters through the ritualised singing of particular songs. The team traditionally sing ‘Flower of Scotland’ and ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariot’, two songs adopted by Scottish and English rugby crowds, on the bus on the way home from matches:

Basically when you’re on the bus, and you’re singing ‘Flower of Scotland’, and you’ll no sing ‘Sweet Chariot’, there’s a few people get a bit upset … Look at Trish’s face when you sing ‘Flower of Scotland’ and never sing ‘Sweet Chariot’. … Oh she used to get right mad. Loosened up a bit now like, but still cannae take it. When I’m drunk I’ll sing ‘Sweet Chariot’ anyway. … It’s something to sing on anyways afterwards. … I think it’s just a case of keeping everybody together and everybody high and happy and that. Amused on the way back. It works actually, gets everybody started on a singsong, keeps everybody together. … If you’re coming home on the bus and everybody’s quiet, got sore legs and sore back, say right, Player of the Day and Numpty of the Day, just gets everybody going doesn’t it?

(Emily)

Singing in itself is not unusual in rugby sub-culture. However the songs, which traditionally start the singing, are national in character, and two different national identities are celebrated. The team usually starts by singing “Flower of Scotland”, the unofficial Scottish anthem for rugby crowds. However, this must be followed by the entire team singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”, which is the English equivalent. If this is not done “there’s a few people get a bit upset.” This ingrains the duality of the team’s identity into the public arena.

The importance of national identity to the team is also illustrated in their use of national songs in the initiation rituals. Team members are usually asked to
sing either the Scottish or English song, sans trousers. However, everyone
joins in, and then everyone sings the alternative song. This sometimes gets
out of hand, with a chorus of ‘You can stick your fucking chariots/thistles up
your arse!’ to the tune of ‘She’ll be coming round the mountain’ being sung in
retaliation.

This focus on national identities in the team can cause difficulties. While on
tour in Northern Ireland, it was decided that it would be impolitic to sing
“Swing Low” in case of offending anyone. As a result of this, the team also
decided to ban “Flower of Scotland”, over the grumbling of several players.
The team then found itself in a quandary at the rugby club hosting the
tournament, however, when they were invited to sing a song ‘from their
home’. Not allowed to sing either one of the songs that they knew best, they
demurred.

Other details of the performance in this context were also discussed. Entering
an area where national identity had corresponding political implications, and
experienced in instances where problematic identities cause social difficulties,
the Jesters were concerned to perform a ‘neutral’ identity. Players were
explicitly warned not to take English rugby jerseys or football strips away with
them. This was extended to Scottish jerseys as well, in the interests of
‘fairness’. The various members of the police force were reminded not to take
their warrant cards, identifying them as working in England in an unpopular
profession, with them and it was advised not to mention their occupations.
Players were also gently encouraged, though never explicitly told, to cultivate
the identity of a Scottish club by not mentioning the ambiguity of
Bordertown’s identity. If asked, the team played in Scotland, and came from
the Borders, and it was left at that. Even the team bus was decorated with a
Scottish flag.
National identity in Bordertown is recognised as being a potential source of social isolation, as individuals find themselves unaccepted by either the English or Scottish communities because of their local community membership. To overcome this, they perform an explicitly ambiguous identity. By performing the identity that others have ascribed to them, they are able to gain social acceptance, if not national acceptance. However, the success of this strategy depends on a coherent private performance of identity.

**Private performances**

The private performance of identity referred takes place between community members of Bordertown, away from the presence of the ‘other’, or members of different communities. Its purpose is to reinforce an individual’s and group’s sense of identity such that they are able to perform the public identity required of them easily. The key to handling, performing and legitimating this performance lies in the skilful use and interpretation of ‘identity markers’. These are the signs and symbols people look for in an individual to establish identity, and commonly include “birth, upbringing, ancestral ties and place of residence” (Kiely, McCrone et al. 2000). In Bordertown, these are used creatively in order to allow locals in Bordertown to assert membership of the national community they feel closest to. In the group discussed in this paper, one of the most important of these markers is sport.

Place of birth, and the location of Bordertown, are accepted as making claims to nationality relatively unproblematic. This is not to say that there are not occasional difficulties:

> When you’re English … there’s no real choice … You can’t just say, right mam, get over the border and pop us out there … you’re born wherever you are, so wherever you’re born … But not in my case, because I was born in Malta.

(Dave)
Taken from a conversation with three men, all of whom were English, in Bordertown, it shows the importance of social context in determining which identity markers are to be used. The other two men were born in England, and all agreed that they could define themselves as English because of this. Curiously, Dave seems to have thought this applied to him as well, until a sudden recollection causes him to shift his ground. Because of an accident of birth, he must find alternative ways to support his claims to English national identity. Instead, he relies on his ancestry, the fact that his parents are English, to claim his identity.

Kieran contradicts this. His family is a mixture of English and Scottish but he himself was born in England. He begins his claim to English national identity by claiming birth as being primary, and then begins to explain:

My grandmother’s Scottish but that, like, but … let’s get this right. My father’s Scottish right, with a Scottish family. My mother, who’s English, has a Scottish family … As you gradually work down the family tree, you (Laughs) wind up with me! And hopefully … my kids will be English. … Obviously, I have Scottish and English blood in me but, no, I’ve just always considered myself English. I’ve never asked my mum, am I English, I’ve just assumed that I am.

(Kieran)

Kieran, were he working with Dave’s criteria, would be defined as being Scottish because the majority of his family are Scottish. He himself sees himself as being English, because of his place of birth and because of his mother. It is unclear how his mother claims her national identity because it would appear that she rejects ancestry as being important. Kieran seems to both reject and assert ancestry markers. Rejecting ancestry, he enables himself to choose his national identity. However, his future children’s’ choice
is eliminated in his assertion of it – he claims the importance of his blood and identity for them. Because of his fatherhood, his children will also be English.

Such contrasting uses of identity markers are accepted among people in Bordertown because all are concerned with developing a cohesive private identity to counteract the public one. However, the confusions arising from such a blend of identity markers must be overcome. One way around the difficulty, for those interested in sport at least, is to use support of a particular sports team to support identity claims.

Sporting results also influences Kieran’s choice of national identity and his explanation of this choice. When asked if there was anything that would encourage a Scottish identification, he said no:

> Maybe if they was winning the rugby. (Laughs) No, I don’t think so! … I could play for Scotland … I wouldn’t want to though. They’re terrible! I wouldn’t want to play! Laughs.

Eligible to play for both England and Scotland, his analysis of Scottish rugby, and assessment of their success rate influences his desire for an English association. Given the two options, the more successful team is the more appealing. This type of strategy is really only successful for individuals who, like Kieran, have the option of choosing a national identity. Otherwise, people are more likely to ignore the sport, than take it up (Johnes 2000: 95).

Gary expresses another series of justifications of identification. He was born in England, but asserts Scottish national identity because of his parents and because of where he went to school. But sport is a vital part of his identity claims:

> Obviously, I was born in England and lived in England, apart from when I was at school, so I’m definitely Scottish. … I always look at it from a sport angle. If Scotland played England, it would definitely
be Scotland all the time. If England played another country, I wouldn’t say I’d support England but … I don’t hate them and I don’t wish the other country to win.

Gary does not see his national identity as being open for negotiation in the way that Kieran and Michael do. The ‘obvious’ nature of his identity is expressed through sport, which undercuts both his place of birth and place of residence. Although Kieran and Michael are not ambiguous about their national identity, one senses some flexibility in the way that they present themselves. This type of flexibility is not present in Gary. It represents a difference in the ways in which English and Scottish identifying people see themselves.

This difference is also reflected in the willingness of English supporters to also support Scotland. Ciara is English, but is prepared to support Scotland in external competitions:

I mean, I know what I am, and I’m English. I play for a Scottish team. So we … I support both really, if you want to know. Kind of support Ireland and Wales as well. … No, I mean if it came to push and shove, if it were Scotland and England in a football match or whatever, or World Cup, I’m going to obviously support England. … But if it was Scotland and somebody else, I’d support Scotland.

Due to the relative successes of the two nations, it is easier for the English fans to support Scotland. The Scots are not perceived as posing a threat to English sporting superiority. For Scots, such as Gary, this flexibility is not possible

Within the rugby club itself, national identity does not usually cause any problems. National identity is raised in banter or jokes, but is rarely mentioned in an antagonistic way:
You just get on with it. You know, if England’s playing Scottish and you’re watching at the club, you’ve always got half English and half Scottish and it’s just … general … Banter … None of it’s serious.

(Kieran)

When we used to watch the England-Scotland games all the time in the club, there was always Scotland in one room and England in the other … crowded round the little tellies before we had the big screens. Um, and we used to shout through, ah, silly things, this is men and women. But there’s no arguments. Not unless anybody’s very drunk and being very stupid. But no, you have a bit of a mickey-take and that, but no.

(Bethany)

The Jesters’ private performance of identity mediates relations between teammates. National identity informs team relations, behaviours and conversations both within the team, and with outsiders. It is so pervasive a topic that one ceases to notice national comments until removed from the context.

Banter between team members is often explicitly national. Newer or quieter team members are commonly teased about English or Scottish strips, with relevant comments from all sides in support, “It shows she’s got taste!” derision, “She is young. She will learn.” and confusion, “Today you’re wearing a Scottish top. Last week it was England. Which one are you?” National identity is referred to constantly, but usually only to people who are well known, or who the team is looking to include. It is a way of gaining and signalling acceptance into the team.

The strategy of playing up the ambiguity of national identity is a successful strategy in terms of maintaining national identity in the consciousness of
outsiders and team members. It does, however, run the risk of marginalising some of the members of the group. In this case, the emphasis on national identity occasionally caused the English players to feel excluded.

When twenty of the players were asked about their national identity in a survey, ten identified themselves as Scottish, seven as English and three as both English and Scottish. Thus, although Scots are in the majority on the team, they are by no means overwhelming. However, it would appear that for the English players national identity is less of an issue than for Scottish players, and that they found the importance attached and the attention paid to it frustrating. On two surveys about national identity in Bordertown, written by English-identifying players, there were comments reflecting frustration and some sense of alienation:

> It’s nice to feel you belong to a group but when others in the group let you down you want to distance yourself e.g.: fighting and bad behaviour. It upsets me when people harm others just because they are in a different group.

> I hate when people make a fuss about England/Scotland saying “They’re better than …” It’s ridiculous. It doesn’t matter what country you’re from.

Both comments could be said to reflect a more general dissatisfaction with the way that the Jesters tend to operate as a group, and a feeling that emphasis on national identity and its ambiguous performance can be limiting and suffocating.

Although most players see the singing and the nationality as a way of bringing people together, Trish, the player mentioned by Emily, sees the tradition as being divisive:
It’s the Scots. And I am not knocking it because they’re Scottish! But it’s mainly the Scottish ones. … Really staunch about being … from Scotland … I guess I mean [player], she gets herself into so much trouble just because she’s so, Scotland this, Scotland that … I do find that, in our team, that there’s quite a few that, I mean Bethany calls herself Scottish but she’s English, well, fair enough. Support Scotland and that but why when you’re English call yourself Scottish when you’re not? … [I]t’s not the fact that it’s England-Scotland, it’s the fact that, honest to God I don’t see why we’re not the same. Why we have to be different. Maybe that links back to racism and that, because I’m not prejudiced at all. But I can’t think of anything, I’m really not a prejudiced person, but I think that everyone in my club is just … why should it make a difference just because they’re English or they’re Scottish? … I think about it every time, saying they’re gay or lesbian or whatever, so what? To me personally it makes no difference. … I just cannot see, in honesty, why it makes such a difference … English, Scottish, it just totally doesn’t matter.

(Trish)

A split appears here between the English and the Scottish players, felt more keenly by the English. The public face of the team is Scottish, but mainly because the Scottish players seem to insist on it. And often it seems that the Scots have something to prove, that they are the ones who approach the English players to comment on English-Scottish sports results. Trish’s sense that ‘we aren’t different, why does it make a difference’ is born out of exasperation as much as anything else. In truth, these women seem to have more in common than they do different, so why is the difference within the team emphasised?

The English players, then, are concerned about their national identity for different reasons. Having the team identified as English is not really an issue -
it is generally accepted in the club that it should be considered a Scottish club because it plays mostly in the Scottish League. The problem appears to be the constant mention of it - why, if they have ceded the public face of the team, should they be reminded of it constantly? The other side of this, though, is the feeling that if the whole issue is so important to the Scottish players, it is better to simply let them get on with it. Ciara is one such player who joins in the singing, but reluctantly or “under duress do I”. Ciara’s earlier identification of the Jesters as a Scottish team combines with her own relaxed attitude towards her identity. Being unproblematically English gives her the confidence to absorb many of the outer trappings of Scottishness of the team. Although the town and club might promote an ambiguous identity, the Jesters really do only accept a Scottish face. The English players are able to absorb this relatively easily, however, because their identity does not seem to be as problematic to them.

However, the constant reminder of it makes for a potential division in the team. The strange thing about this is the fact that the Scottish players seem to be aware of this, but do not see it as being important:

I think that ... we the Scottish supporters get away with a lot with the girls because we’re always singing ‘Flower of Scotland’, and then we never sing anything for the English, and then when they do sing it, we sing something very horrible afterwards. (Laughter.) But it’s, but that you know, I think that they take that in good stead.

(Bethany)

It is evident that it is taken, but not necessarily in good stead. In general, the English players accept it as being part of the price they pay for being a part of the team. However, it is significant that these practices of inclusion also have a dimension of exclusion as well. The exclusion is downplayed, and marginalised players go along with the behaviours of the rest of the team.
Conclusion

This paper has shown that developing a sense of national identity in border communities such as Bordertown is highly dependent on how other people perceive the community and the extent to which people are able to accept identity claims. In the instance of Bordertown, the community was ascribed an ambiguous identity by those outside it. Both the Scottish and English national communities were reluctant to accept Bordertown community members as co-nationals unproblematically. Such a public identity ran counter to the clear identifications of individuals from Bordertown. As a community, they were marginalised. However, as individuals within the private context of Bordertown, they were not, and instead were able to identify themselves clearly one way or another.

This was shown through the performance of identity in different contexts. In the public context, in which Bordertown was interacting with other communities, in this instance through the medium of sport, Bordertown representatives accepted and performed the ambiguous or marginalised identity ascribed to them. This performance was expected and understood by other communities, setting up an interaction allowing Bordertown to be accepted as an ‘other’ by other communities. People from Bordertown had an identity appropriate to the social context they were in. This was due, in part, to the particular nature of national identity. The establishment and expression of national identity rely upon the development of a unifying system of meaning covering disparate local communities. Individual differences and a range of interpretations of what it means to be a member of the national or ‘place-based’ community are therefore accepted. Bordertown provides a good example of this, as the specifically local identity and experiences of its inhabitants mediate their national identity (Cohen 1993: 44). Sport, in this case, was used to integrate a national community, allowing potentially marginalised people to become accepted as part of the larger community.
This was reinforced by the private performance of national identity within Bordertown and the club. Identity markers are used creatively to assert national identity. People are able to use markers such as birth, ancestry or residence to assert membership of a national community as it suits them. The ability of an individual to establish which team they support is generally accepted as being indicative of which national identity they possess. This is accepted and supported by their fellow community members. However, this private performance also results in some problems. First, by engaging in a private performance, they are also engaging in the development of Bordertown’s public identity. Particularly in the case of sports teams, which are constantly representing the community, an ambiguous national identity must be performed in public, which may not sit easily with the private identity of the individual. And some individuals may be marginalised as a result.

The interplay between Scottish, English and British identities was not here discussed. It is obvious, however, in this group at least, that Scottish identity has more resonance than does English. But this might be in part because of the relative strengths of the English and Scottish rugby teams – success tends to breed magnanimity, and it becomes easier for English players to support Scottish teams than vice versa. However, it is also worth noting that in the context of the Jesters, it is the English players who tend to be marginalised. The interaction Scots and English on the team is not, therefore, unproblematic, and performances of English identity are not as well tolerated as those of Scottish identity. This again reinforces the importance of social context in the performance of identity, and raises question as to how else the Jesters may have performed their public and private identities to avoid excluding their own.

It is possible for ‘Bordertowners’ to handle the ambiguity of their ascribed identity by embracing and performing it. The ambiguity, far from being suppressed or hidden, is expressed through the constant mention of the mixed
national character of the town, through the banter between players and throughout Bordertown, which has an explicitly national character. This strategy avoids being confrontational because it is a performance of a local identity expected by outsiders to be ambiguous. The townsfolk do not have to choose one identity or another, but instead are encouraged to be a mixture, to not belong. The fact that this is a performance is supported by the fact that everyone in Bordertown can identify which national identity they belong to. Performing ambiguity, however, is their way of behaving as they are expected.

The success of such a strategy implies that other groups may be able to use it to their advantage. Alternative manifestations and performances of national identities by, for example, immigrant, refugee or minority groups can be absorbed by the majority community if such performances are expected from the groups. This is not to claim that such performances are entirely unproblematic – the marginalised group is likely to remain marginalised, but in a position of greater status. And the success of such a strategy is dependent on the willingness of the community to accept diversity among its members.

This paper has shown that ambiguities in such identities may be successfully managed providing that the social context and actors involved understand each other and are able to interact successfully. Focusing on the lived experiences of people with ambiguous national identities enables us to gauge the extent of their belonging to the national community, and the ways in which they are able to assert membership. The Bordertown experience suggests that the boundaries of national identities are flexible, and as such are subject to negotiation. Because of this, people are able to perform a version of national identity, which, although not conforming exactly to the ‘official’ rhetoric, is nonetheless accepted as a valid assertion of community membership.
References


