

A New Generation of Symbols: Building a Shared Identity

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Why is this Issue Important?

Imagine walking into a space and hearing ‘God Save the King’. Now, you walk into another and hear ‘Amhrán na bhFiann/The Soldiers’ Song.’ Immediately, you may have intuitions about the identities of the people in those spaces, what they believe, and who else is welcome there.

National anthems are just one example of the many political symbols surrounding us, including flags, emblems, memorials, and public figures; all of which communicate complex messages.

On the island of Ireland, political symbols sometimes communicate messages of division. They achieve this by creating a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’. For example, flags are commonly used in Northern Ireland (NI) to mark out territory between Catholic and Protestant communities. Where, and how often, flags should be flown has been a source of major tension within NI, for example, during the 2012 riots, resulting in 107 arrests and 174 police injured across 6 nights (Melaugh, 2013).

However, symbols can also communicate messages of unity and reconciliation. They can achieve this by representing a larger category, under which ‘us/them’ is transformed into ‘we’ (Gaertner *et al.*, 2008). For example, a whole host of groups within the Republic of Ireland (ROI) can identify as European through the country’s membership in the European Union (EU); to cultivate this sense of shared identity, the EU intentionally creates shared symbols (e.g., their flag and the euro as common currency) (Miller, 2008).

As initially outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, the use of symbols is a key issue within the ongoing peace process, and indeed, to realizing the ‘Shared Island Vision’ of cooperation, connection and mutual understanding across the entire island.

Youth offer a powerful tool to help realise this vision. On one hand, young people’s exposure to ‘us/them’ political symbols can prolong intergroup divisions across generations.

But on the other hand, children also understand and show attachment to more inclusive ‘us’ symbols. For example, children aged 7-12 on the island of Ireland report liking being European (Lennon Malbasha, Dautel and Taylor, 2022). In divided societies, children that reporting liking being European reported more positive attitudes and behaviours towards children from the ‘other’ community (Taylor *et al.*, 2023). Thus, children’s exposure to political symbols, depending on their type, can either contribute to peacebuilding or prolong group divisions across generations.

Key Insights

Political symbols are pervasive in our environments. Symbols such as flags, anthems, currency, and public figures occur frequently and communicate complex cultural information; for example, what the individuals associated with those symbols believe.

From an early age, children recognize and hold knowledge about political symbols. Children's exposure to potentially divisive political symbols contributes to the perpetuation of intergroup divisions and conflict across generations, as children internalize categories of 'us' and 'them'.

Symbols that represent a larger, more inclusive identity, can be leveraged in peacebuilding. More inclusive symbols are a tool that can transform categories of 'us/them' into 'we'. A wealth of research demonstrates that humans are intrinsically motivated to behave more prosocially towards individuals that they perceive as being similar or part of their social groups (i.e., perform inclusive behaviours like helping and sharing resources).

Symbols are an important issue in contemporary peacebuilding on the island of Ireland. The respectful use of symbols is necessary for improved North-South and Protestant-Catholic relations. Symbols will be a pressing issue within any future question of Irish reunification/border polls, that requires proactive consideration.

Policy Recommendations

Communities, professional organizations, schools, etc., should be aware of the symbols in their environments. Symbols that highlight 'us' and 'them' boundaries (e.g., Irish/British) should be minimized when those boundaries are linked to division and conflict.

Alternatively, **symbols that represent larger identities that encompass multiple subgroups (e.g., European) should be encouraged.** These larger, inclusive identities may already exist and be naturally occurring. Or, they can be created for the purposes of improving group cohesion. For example, in classroom settings, group cohesion (e.g., between children of different ethnicities) can be facilitated by creating a name for the class group (e.g., the purple group), using it frequently, and highlighting individuals' shared membership in that group through symbols (e.g., purple wristbands, a class emblem) (Guerra *et al.*, 2013). Thus, harnessing symbols and identity labels is a cost effective mechanism to improve intergroup relations.

Young people should be consulted regarding their views on existing political symbols, and the potential to design new and inclusive symbols that represent all on the island of Ireland, thus enacting the joint vision of the Shared Island Initiative and The Good Friday Agreement. Structures (e.g., Youth Forums) already exist or are currently undergoing expansion to facilitate this consultation. Extensive international research has established that involving youth in the identification of sociopolitical challenges, and potential solutions, has the power to support their learning, civic engagement, and leadership qualities (Kornbluh *et al.*, 2015), contributing to more equitable and tolerant societies across generations.

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