Where are you from? The importance of the located self[1]

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"Not only do most Psychologists refuse to take national identity seriously as a legitimate problem for research, those who do write on the problem seem bent on explaining it away in the course of preparing their moral case for universalistic utopianism " (Scheibe, 1998)

This quote identifies the central concern of this chapter. What happens if I did take the problem of (my) national identity seriously? Just what is the importance of national identity and what are the effects of living within a different national identity over a long period of time. Linked to this is the experience of working and thinking within a particular psychological framework (Personal Construct Psychology; Kelly 1991) over 20 years. While I am not aware that there is anything directly written within Kelly's work about this topic as ever I found that there are clues within PCP as to how we might go about understanding national identity:

"Each man contemplates in his own personal way the stream of events upon which he finds himself so swiftly borne" (Kelly, 1991).

This chapter is my own contemplation about the stream of events which has led to me being invited to contribute to Jörn's festschrift. In writing it there are three main questions to which I shall return more than once.

Who you are is a function of:

1. *Where* you are (?)
2. where you *have been* (?)
3. where you *hope to arrive* (?) (Benson, 2001).

To do this I use three main sources; the work of George Kelly, of Ciaran Benson and of Karl Scheibe. Kelly's Personal Construct psychology has influenced my entire career as a clinical psychologist. Benson and Scheibe are much more recent discoveries who have both been of great help in clarifying what was bothering me and in assisting me to reconstrue this bother. Benson's work gave me a central clue as to how I would go about the task of recon-

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struing - in particular his use of the concept of THE OTHER in relation to national Identity. Scheibe's work filled in a major gap in my knowledge of what has been written about the idea of self and where selfhood is derived from.

Cultural Psychology

In his book '*The Cultural Psychology of Self*' (Benson 2001), Benson states that Cultural Psychology acknowledges explicitly:

-   How one is located in one's community,
-   how that community is located in its wider society,
-   how that society stands in relation to other societies,
-   how these relationships are placed developmentally and currently in history.

All have a profound relevance for the kinds of mind and self that may be formed.

"Cultural psychology: examines how people make meaningful the world they find, make meaningful worlds and in the course of doing all these things construct themselves as types of person and self who inhabit these worlds" (Benson, 2001).

Benson quotes Bruner: *"The dominant questions for a cultural psychology of self have to do with the making and negotiation of meaning, with the construction of self and a sense of agency, with the acquisition of symbolic skills and with the cultural situatedness of all mental activity"*.

I want here to make an attempt using PCP to develop this idea of a cultural psychology of Myself, using the broad invitation provided by Jörn. This is particularly appropriate, as a festschrift should in some sense be a cultural psychology of its subject - Jörn himself. This is, of course, an area, which he has worked on himself most notably in his paper for the Townsville PCP conference "Congress language, Personal Constructs and Constructive Internationalism" (1996). In this paper Jörn says, "I apologise that I am going to touch upon a number of topics that transcend my professional competence. In some instances, therefore, what I have to say is more based on personal convictions or experience that on the solid ground of scientific knowledge."

This is a disclaimer of which I would like to take full advantage!

Jörn focuses on the importance of different languages and the problems of translation and the difficulties of mutual understanding. I want to widen this discussion from language to place: *Who* I am and the language I speak is de-

termined largely by *where I am located*. My very sense of self is moulded by the culture in which I develop. We can often have a real sense of where a person comes from by the sort of person they appear to be; "from his behaviour I do not think that he comes from here". As Benson puts it, "Self is a locative system".

Self, acts of self-location and locations are inextricably linked and mutually constructive leads to the importance of the cultural psychology of self. The key issue for Benson is the significance for himself of the ways and means by which he locates himself and is enabled to do so biologically and culturally which, taken together, constitute a fundamental part of his psychology. For Benson *the concept of self lies at the heart of this psychology of location* (my emphasis).

I have already described how I ended up living in England, in a paper which was the direct result of an invitation from Jörn (Cummins, 2000). This paper has also been prompted by a similar direct invitation from Jörn. As already mentioned I was particularly interested in Jörn's paper on conference language (Scheer, 1996). He makes just one allusion to the differences between English speakers: "Other people, in this case British, complained that they did not understand some of the Australians, many of the Americans and so on"- but does not take this up, except to see it as a parallel to the difficulties experienced by speakers of other languages. As I thought about it I realised that what Jörn is hinting at here, that British people may not be able to understand Australians and Americans, can be attributed to two main causes, accent and different vocabularies. Both of these are usually part of what Scheibe (1998) calls our birthright: "That which one is, prior to the enactment of any achieved roles, is a result of the birthright". We are born within an ascribed sex, kinship, race and sometimes religion. The accent and vocabulary we develop is usually intimately bound up with our birthright.

We can of course try to alter both - a recent programme on British television attempted to teach a working class woman from the north of England to be able to pretend to be an upper class "Lady XXX". A major part of the month make over was to try to teach her to radically alter her accent; it is not just language that defines a person - within the same language system it is accent that determines much of how an individual is construed. At the end of the month the programme makers had to accept failure and alter their script, as they had not been able to sufficiently alter her accent. Clothes, mannerisms and life stories were much easier to alter than accent. I realised that accent is crucially about location and kinship. In most parts of the British Isles a strong regional accent has been seen as a statement of working class origins. Education often saw as one of its tasks to smooth out the regional accent. But this

accent is the most powerful statement about where a person began their life. It usually also has a profound effect on how the person is construed by the OTHER.

"A person may for example, be firmly convinced that people with a certain kind of speech accent are ignorant and basely motivated" (Kelly, 1991). This is certainly one of the strong English stereotypes about anyone with a distinct Irish accent. Once they begin to speak such a person has begun to make a statement about where they come from: it is not just language that defines a person - within the same language system it is accent that determines much of how an individual is construed. As my central questions state: *Who* you are is a function of *where* you are, of where you *have been*, and of where you *hope to arrive*.

We cannot even begin to answer these without making some statement about the birthright we began with. One of the questions I have struggled with is to what extent it is possible to leave behind my birthright. I lived in Ireland for a total of 22 years; I have lived in England and Scotland for a total of 28 years. I do not think however that I will ever stop seeing myself as Irish. But what kind of Irish? (In Coventry the second generation Irish are known as "Plastic Paddies", i.e. an inferior version of the real thing). In PCP terms I suspect that I have constructed a set of fragmented selves, where a fragmented self is defined as a set of incompatible subsystems. I have the self that is "pure Irish", the self that is anglicised and the self that attempts to integrate the previous two. The question is of course what is the cost of this fragmentation.

A recent discovery of Tom Ravenette's model of boundaries (Fisher and Cornelius, 2001) helped to clarify this question. Ravenette's model utilises two constructs: *legitimate* vs *illegitimate*; and *Safety* vs *Danger*.

If we put these in a matrix we get

<div align="center">

legitimate

Safety   Danger

illegitimate

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In adopting an identity I can choose to try and "become English". This would be *illegitimate* but *safe* (as long as I am not discovered!). To proudly assert my Irish identity is *legitimate* but *dangerous* (the risk of rejection). I could decide to live solely within an Irish community (which would be seen by the host community as *illegitimate* but *safe*) and finally I can refuse to be any-

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thing but totally Irish in the wider community (*illegitimate* and *dangerous*). Ravenette's model helped me to see that there is no one adequate answer to the dilemma.

"The Educated Person quite often succeeds in gaining liberation from the primitive emotional bonds into which he was accidentally born - but what is the psychological sequelae to this liberation?" (Scheibe, 1998)

Jörn's invitation has given me the opportunity to develop something which has been part of my life since I first came to England in 1973 - i.e. the sense that I lived among THE OTHER.

Where am I from

"*A fundamental problem confronting every one of us, and indeed every sentient creature, is how to position ourselves in the worlds we inhabit and how to find our way around them... Location is a basic ontological category for Psychology*" (Benson, 2001).

In Bensons book 'The Cultural Psychology of Self' I found some of what I had been looking for. Location is a basic ontological category for psychology - this may be true, it certainly was no part of any psychology I have ever studied. And yet it makes so much intrinsic sense to me. I still struggle with the typical conference question "Where are you from?". This can have several answers:

1. I am from "PCP Education and Training" (a training organisation)
2. I am from Coventry Psychology service (my work place)
3. I am from Near Rugby (where I live)
4. I am from Dublin (where I came from)

Each of us lives in a complex set of interrelationships - being judged by a multiplicity of social judges. I can be judged as

- How Irish am I,
- How good a psychologist am I,
- How good a parent am I,
- How good a conference participant.

Much of the time the questioner actually is interested in the answer to 4 - it is my accent which has puzzled them. Living in a different English speaking society it is accent which acts as the differentiator of location. To alter ones accent can have a significant effect of how a person is seen. I discussed this recently with a Scottish friend: To my ears she has a distinct Scottish accent, yet in a recent telephone conversation to Scotland she was told "don't you

sound English". I have had similar experiences while in Ireland - being told in Ireland that I sound English and in England being heard as Irish can lead to a sense of living in the in-between.

"The starting point of every journey is here ... The point of reference for each and every moment of the journey is here *and its conclusion is when the* there *of destination becomes the* here *of arrival"* (Benson, op. cit.)

This can be linked to the journey of emigration - when I stop thinking of Ireland as the reference point and realise that England has become *here*, e.g. when talking to my children while in Ireland, England is home for them and by implication me, so I find myself hesitating over the use of the language "when we get home". In the act of doing so I am acknowledging that movement *from there to here*.

As Kelly points out, the degree to which we can relate to the other depends on how well we understand that other persons view of the world. Being misconstrued in both countries makes social understanding a difficult venture!

The more interested I got in this the more I became aware of the large literature on self-studies. I am no expert in this field. The book, which I became aware of through a personal communication from Dušan Stojnov, was *"Self Studies; the psychology of Self and Identity"* (Scheibe, 1998).

Where did my self come from

Scheibe makes the interesting distinction between:

Degradation of social role - Advancement.

By degradation of social role he means roles that are seen as inferior e.g. convicts, psychiatric patients. Advancement refers to roles which give high status e.g. medals, job promotion. Using this concept we can see that it is possible to be Irish in England - *degraded social role* - and at the same time be *advanced* by being a consultant clinical psychologist. This framework has allowed me to make sense of a clinical reality - that of patients making disparaging remarks about the Irish (knowing that I was Irish) while still according me the respect of a professional whom they saw as providing the therapy they needed. As Scheibe points out, a person's social identity at any time is a function of his or her validated social positions. This means that we are constantly faced with the necessity of locating ourselves in relation to others. This location is psychological in the sense that Scheibe is referring to but directly physical in the sense that Benson is referring to.

As Benson goes on to point out: "The fact of being located is central to the concept of selfhood".

But where am I located - what does it mean to be located? For some people there is a definite denial of any such linkage. The Spanish artist Jean Munozis is quoted in the *Observer* (a British Sunday newspaper) as saying when asked if he felt like a Spanish artist: "I never feel that you are bound by your territory...I don't work with anyone in Spain...When I am here (in Madrid) I am in my studio. *I am an exile at home* (my emphasis)". This, remember, is a Spaniard talking about living in Spain. I start from a different perspective but one that still leaves me as an exile at home (*Being Irish living in England*).

"Nothing can be without being in place" (Aristotle)

My early interest in PCP came from Kelly's definition of guilt. Having been brought up in a standard Irish Catholicism I was an expert in being guilty. The church of my childhood was very keen on getting people to understand their guilt, which begins at birth with the doctrine of original sin. The newborn is lucky to be given the gifts of the church to expiate this guilt and strive for a better life. Kelly's emphasis on the importance of one's core role gave me the way of understanding my guilt and of being able to reconstrue it without the church provided methods. In the early 1980's I spent an afternoon with an English Benedictine monk. We discussed my thoughts about Christianity and Catholicism in particular. Towards the middle of the afternoon he said to me: "Peter, you are a typical Irish catholic of the 50's; we are not like that any more". I was very struck by this comment - I was typical of a time and a place. What did it mean to be Irish and a catholic - particularly as I have now lived in England for longer than I ever lived in Ireland.

The history of being Irish in Britain has been changing rapidly in the time I have lived in Scotland and then England. Just before my time it was not unknown to see signs "*Room for rent - no Irish or coloureds*". I was fascinated to see Scheibe (1998) use a similar example: "Not only does the nature of the birthright grant determine the respect in which a person is initially held (and in turn the self respect that it generates) but it also determines the possibilities for the individual to gain access to attained positions within the society because of linkages that are explicitly or implicitly codified within a society to regulate the promotion process". Thus the rule "*No Irish need apply*" constitutes a barrier to promotion resulting from the particular character of a granted component of identity.

The typical stereotype of the Irish was of stupid people who worked in manual jobs. This image has had a long history, going back to Irish labourers who

dug the canal system and probably before that (I am no historian). In more recent times the stereotype of the Irish as all literary gifted people has developed, fuelled by an increase in the profile of Irish writers and Poets. But I think my favourite stereotype was one I read in an Sunday paper: "Being Irish, he is of course good with horses!!"

Benson suggests that "the other is that in dialogue with which I define my own identity. I think of myself as being that which the other is not and each *we* does the same ... *England has been Ireland's great other*" (my emphasis). This phrase was a real revelation for me. I referred earlier to a feeling of the sense that "I lived among the OTHER". I also have been fascinated by a psychology, which is a psychology of the other (PCP). At the heart of PCP is the insight that we cannot understand anything without having some sense of its contrast pole. "A construct is a way in which some things are construed as being alike and yet different from others" (Kelly, 1991).

Inevitably I have been living out this by living in England. Who I am is a function of where I am i.e. where I am can define my sense of which OTHER I am using to define myself. Travelling in the US I often met people who were delighted to hear that I am Irish. I too am Irish, they announced. As it turned out they usually had Irish ancestry 5 or more generations back - rarely if ever had they been to Ireland. I was very aware that I did not see them as Irish - I construed them as American. This was in contrast to experiencing myself as European for the first time and realising that I had more in common with a German speaker than I had with an English speaking American (in PCP terms, European identity was superordinate to common language).

Again a framework provided by Scheibe provides the interesting construct:

<p style="text-align:center;">*ascribed* (granted or given)   vs   *attained* (elected)</p>

While Irish Americans would see their identity as *ascribed* I was seeing it as *attained*, i.e. they had chosen to develop this identity on the basis of very distant ancestral roots. I suppose I saw them as having some choice they could see themselves as *American* or *Irish American* whereas I had no choice - I was born Irish. There is of course some room for argument here - most famously the Duke of Wellington who was born in Dublin: When he was called Irish he replied "because a man is born in a stable does that make him a horse". It follows from this comment that it is possible to move from *granted* national identity to *attained*. I wonder how true this is - I myself do not think it would be easy to become another nationality; while I could acquire another passport I could never stop thinking of myself as Irish. However I do think that after living in a different culture for a long time you inevitably acquire many of the traits of the dominant culture. I have some sense of how English

have I become - not used to spending time talking to shopkeepers; expect people to be punctual; suspicious when someone starts talking at a bus stop; unwillingness to humour people; expect people to do what they have said they will (as contrasted with a common Irish unwillingness to offend people so avoid giving offence by evasion rather than confrontation of problem area).

"*The culturally distinctive features of a people are the ways in which their interpretations of the world channel how they act in it. This sense of themselves as a distinct people is part of the foundation for what is called national identity*" (Benson, 2001).

It is clear that others have found it possible to do what I have found difficult to contemplate, i.e. to change nationality. While writing this chapter an Obituary appeared in the Times newspaper of an ex member of the IRA. The opening sentence of this obituary observes

"*More than one Englishman has become so enchanted with the Emerald Isle (Ireland) that he has invented a whole new persona for himself ... none went quite as far ... as an East London boy called John Stephenson who turned himself into Sean MacStiofain ... brought up in London he was told by his mother just before she died (when he was seven): "I'm Irish, therefore you are Irish ... don't forget it*"

"I never did" MacStiofain later said. He spent the rest of his life involved in the Irish republican movement learning to speak Irish and moving to Ireland. (the majority of people in Ireland cannot speak the Irish language) ... In his own view he clearly became Irish, derived from the *birthright* passed on to him by his mother. The obituary ends however by pointing out that

"*as it turned out his implacable sense of Irishness was - tragically or comically - a deluded one ... a journalist discovered that John Stephenson was one eight Irish at best ... although she claimed to be from Belfast his mother was born in London with just one Irish grandmother*".

It is very clear here that the writer sees MacStiofain as having been deluded because of the lack of an inherited birthright ... no constructivist there! He could not be Irish despite a lifetime lived as such because his mother had not got a full Irish ancestry. But his mother for whatever reason clearly construed herself as Irish and passed this on to her son.

It is clear from MacStiofain's own description that his was a very emotionally driven decision, linked to his mother's dying wish. He would appear to have successfully changed his own national identity by adopting what he was told was his birthright.

As I described earlier the core of this chapter is the idea that *who* you are is a function of

- *where* you are,
- of where you *have been*
- and of where you *hope to arrive.*

I conclude that I am someone who is a long term English resident who comes from Ireland. I now see that I need to arrive at an understanding of how two sets of OTHER can be integrated into a meaningful structure that can help me to say where do I come from and to end up with a clearer sense of where I hope to arrive.

Where do I hope to arrive

In this chapter I have begun to understand why Jörn's work has intrigued me - the sense of a language self he has identified is extended to a sense of place and accent linked to that place. It fits well within a *festschrift* as Jörn has (perhaps unwittingly) been a major stimulus in my development of this theme. This is in turn extended using Scheibe's key ideas of *ascribed* vs. *attained* and *degraded social role* vs. *advancement*. The idea of a personal cultural idea of self helps to coalesce ideas, which I have lacked the structure to explore. Benson's central idea of the OTHER (and national Identity) links into PCP and begins to clarify why it makes such intrinsic sense to me. As previously stated PCP is a psychology of THE OTHER. Inevitably PCP itself has to be seen as a psychology of Kelly's own cultural self. "*Kelly's pioneering background - he and his parents were literally among the last 'homesteaders' on the American frontier - undoubtedly predisposed him to conceptualise human behavior in terms of an exploration or quest*" (Neimeyer, 1985).

This chapter has been an attempt to clarify part of my own exploration. In doing so I have been very aware that the question of national and personal identity is one that can become highly politically charged (particularly in the context of English/Irish identities!). But this risk is probably a useful emotional indicator of using PCP to properly advance understanding. When Kelly was asked what area he would most like to see PCP being developed he replied "Politics" (Fransella 2001). In a very small-scale personal way I hope that this chapter has been a personal political extension of the value of PCP. For this is where I hope to arrive - at an understanding of the meaning of living within a different national identity and my struggle to arrive at an integrated sense of where I have been; of where I am and of where I hope to arrive.

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