CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Learning from minority: Exploring Irish Protestant experience
Authors	Walsh, Tony
Publication date	2015
Original Citation	WALSH, T. 2015. Learning from minority: Exploring Irish Protestant experience. Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions, 2(1), 73-93.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://jisasr.org/
Rights	©2015, The Author(s).
Download date	2026-11-15 02:30:19
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1882



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

© ISASR 2015

Tony WALSH

Learning from Minority: Exploring Irish Protestant Experience

ABSTRACT: This paper, based on a narrative research inquiry, presents and explores a number of stories relating to the experience and identity of members of the small Irish Protestant minority. Drawing on these stories it uses Foucault's conceptualisation of power and discourse to consider community, social withdrawal, and two different but linked expressions of silence as acts of resistance. These were simultaneously utilised to preserve a culture and ethos diametrically opposed to the religious and political hegemony of the Irish Catholic state and to combat the threat of extinction. The article concludes that an exploration of Ireland's traditional religious minority not only raises awareness concerning a specific group's experience but extends an understanding of the issues with which minorities (in more general terms) may have to cope in order to survive.

KEYWORDS: Irish Protestant experience, narrative, power, resistance, community, silence.

Tony WALSH works at the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University, Co Kildare where he is joint co-ordinator of the Doctorate in Adult and Higher Education and co-ordinator of the MA (LMDS), a partnership programme with the Irish Defence Forces. Originally a systemic-constructivist psychotherapist he is Director of the Centre for Studies in Irish Protestantism at the University and has edited, jointly edited and contributed to a number of books on radical adult education, post-positivist research, suicide, defence issues, and multiculturalism. As well as working in Ireland he has engaged in research interests in the United Kingdom and in Palestine.

Introduction

In a recently published essay the Irish writer John McGahern (2009) describes the funeral of his friend, Willie Booth. As its sole remaining member, Willie's death constitutes the extinction of the Protestant community in a particular area of rural Ireland. McGahern notes the uniformly positive remarks of Catholic neighbours following the funeral; they comment on the satisfactory nature of cross religious relationships, and on the unproblematic position of the tiny Protestant minority in what was until very recently a rigorously and overwhelmingly Catholic state. He concludes that only the now silent Willie Booth, or other members of the minority, *really* know how things are. "And," McGahern comments, "they would naturally be too courteous and careful to say." He concludes: "I feel like asking people like Willie Booth if it was really so simple to live here" (2009, 165).

An underlying theme of John McGahern's story is the death of a particular minority in a remote neighbourhood of rural Ireland. Its own extinction is a compelling issue for any group to confront. Growing up, I was acutely conscious of the potency of this theme; Ireland's countryside and its town and cityscapes are littered with ruined buildings which point to the demise of once vibrant Protestant communities. From the foundation of the State in 1922 numbers declined from some 11% of the population to 3%, less than 150,000 persons, in the 1990s.[1] From the Republic's gaining of political independence in the early decades of the 20th Century, until quite recently, Protestantism represented the sole alternative of any numerical significance, to the Nationalist Catholic hegemony of the Irish state. These realities in themselves constituted, and even now, continue to represent formative influences on the experience of being Irish and Protestant.

Growing up as a child in the 1960s I was acutely aware of the threat of extinction for the Irish Protestant community; it was a very real preoccupation for one part of my religiously "mixed" family of origin. And I daily *felt* the rigid divisions as my family resonated to the splits between the two main constituent communities of Irish life. There was the unassailable dominance of Catholic nationalism, explicit in all the structures and narratives of society, and there was the small religious minority against which, in a strange way, this dominant group at least in part defined itself. Protestants, with their historic connection to processes

[1] It may be important to point out to readers unfamiliar with Ireland that this is unlike the situation in the separate political entity of Northern Ireland, which remains part of the United Kingdom and where Protestantism continues to represent more than 50% of the population; for this and for other historic and cultural reasons the experience of the extreme minority Protestant community in the Republic is completely different to that of the majority Protestant community in Northern Ireland.

© ISASR 2015

of English colonisation and their alternative understandings of religion were seen as tainted, foreign and heretical. My family had uneasily bridged the gulf between both traditions for generations.

McGahern's neighbours' assumption that life is so positive and unproblematic for the Protestant minority in Ireland is arresting - and attractive; it is one which has become part of the received wisdoms of Irish life. Growing up in the 1960s, in a context where both parents' families of origin had been religiously mixed for generations, left me with a very different impression. From a viewing point positioned *between* majority and minority tribes things seemed very complex. Such hybrid spaces, where one draws on the often competing knowledges and experiences of more than one culture, are, as Olesen (2005) suggests, rarely comfortable. They do however offer a rich and varied view of a particular phenomenon and it was the perceived dissonance between received wisdom and my own experience which ultimately resulted, many years later, in a narrative research inquiry focused on exploring aspects of Irish Protestant identity.

Purpose of the Article

In this article I reflect on a small sample of the stories which emerged during the course of that research. The stories reflect on three main themes: power, resistance and silencing. The fear (or actuality) of extinction constitutes a background meta-theme weaving through these other concerns. Some of the stories are those of participants in the research, however a number of autoethnographic elements are also included. The article opens with a brief introduction to narrative research including a section on autoethnography. I then present the stories with a commentary on the themes involved and ultimately close with a number of conclusions. The aim of the article is two-fold; firstly to raise the awareness of readers to the experience of (some) members of one particular grouping – the Irish Protestant minority. It is hoped that the presentation of the selected stories will further this aim. A second purpose of the article is to extrapolate from an exploration of these experiences to generate some conceptual reflections which will help us to understand how minorities, in general, function. The conclusions are particularly geared to furthering this aim.

Narrative Inquiry

The discipline of narrative research recognizes stories as unique conduits - lived and told filters, through which humans engage in the projects of building lives, relationships, meaning and collectivities. Stories are seen as

a rich entrée which help us to think about how people utilize (or resist) power, how they create, adapt to, or refuse change, and how they structure their reality, and experience their world, in relation to certain sets of assumptions. The presenting (or in some instances the creation) of stories as a way of communicating social reality in ways that move both heart and head is a core requirement of most forms of narrative inquiry.

Narrative theorists argue that story-making and story telling are the *primary* modes through which human beings make sense of their world and their experience (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2008; Speedy 2008; Frank 2004; White 1990). They contend that the stories we tell are not just passive vehicles of communication but active agents, operating at various levels of consciousness to form our assumptions and to shape our actions. In doing so stories highlight certain aspects of life or meaning, hide others and direct our thinking along certain avenues. And of course an absence of stories about certain events or people also conveys definitive messages about what we believe, think or wish to communicate.

Tentativity

Narrative research is a very broad discipline in that it uses stories in lots of different ways with a view to *wondering* or *hypothesizing* about human behaviour and assumptions. In keeping with its postpositivist origins, it honours tentativity in approaching the highly complex and interwoven world of social phenomena. It tries not to be prescriptive and contests the notion that "research findings" are objective or ultimate truths about a topic or group because it recognises that research representations are themselves stories (rather than totalizing truths or ultimate realities) which researchers tell about certain events or phenomena. Narrative research often focuses on *difference,* not with the prime intention of "discovering" possible universals about human behaviour or assumptions (although trends relating to a wider applicability *can* emerge) but rather aspiring to open up particularities of experience to a wider viewing. In doing so it tends to focus on the personal or the local, the unusual or marginal, of lived experience.

As a research methodology narrative inquiry emphasizes the significance of personal, as well as cultural, community or organisational stories. "Narratives invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to the perspective of the narrator" (Reissman 2008, 9). In contrast to traditional positivist research genres it also attends to the importance of feelings and emotion. Michel Foucault (1995) emphasizes the importance of seeing both lived experience and personal emotion as rich material for social exploration. He argues that the key to a useful and enlightening social inquiry is frequently created by drawing on the participant's or (often

more importantly) the author's personal experience of a particular topic as personally or socially problematic. Foucault uses his own personal experiences of mental disturbance, of imprisonment and of sexuality as starting points to explore these areas on a much wider societal canvas. In doing so he engages in a particular inquiry into such areas with a view to developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of a topic.

Exploring Stories

The exploration of stories, particularly those of minority groupings, can open to view different ways of seeing or understanding. Such engagement can reveal possibilities for reflection, agency, change and transformation for individuals, for groups and at times for society. As Richardson argues individual or collective stories

> […] that are based in the lived experiences of people, and deviate from the cultural story, provide new narratives; hearing them helps individuals to replot their lives because they provide an alternative to absent or powerless texts…we can write here a postmodern culture that is a product of situated persons, creating transformative and liberatory narratives (1997,58).

Stories "retain more of the 'noise' of real life" (Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson 2001, 4) – and an important feature of narrative research is that it reveals, through the exploration of the personal, much that other forms of research tend to conceal. This provides a means of enhancing our understanding of lived experience and particularly of ordinary or marginalized lives and consequently creates possibilities for transformation and change. Through a study of stories

> […] we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change. By focusing on narrative we are able to investigate… how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted. All these areas of enquiry can help us describe, understand and even explain important aspects of the world (Andrews *et al* 2008, 1/2).

Autoethnography constitutes a particular form of narrative inquiry in which the researcher presents stories of *their own* experience, generally as part of a subgroup or subculture. In autoethnography researchers become mediums, part simultaneously of two worlds. As emissaries from a lesser-

known world of which they are a part, they bring senses, information and accounts to a majority world of which they are also a part. In criss-crossing boundaries autoethnographers use their own experience to describe and to convey a sense of the lesser known context. While they "write about themselves, their goal is to touch a world beyond the self of the writer" (Jenks 2002, 174). In a desire to communicate effectively with this wider world autoethnographers weave evocative accounts designed to convey "the astonishing particularities of individual lives and larger notions of culture and knowledge, subject and object, and knower and known" (Jewett 2008, 50).

As a method of social inquiry autoethnography very deliberately sets out to notice, reflect on and draw from feelings, bodily experiences, reactions and behaviours of both self and others in its attempts to convey a minority world to a wider or majority experience. In doing so it subverts more traditional research methodologies which ignore or silence the personal. It seeks to attend to and "make relevant those aspects of being that are suppressed by analytic strategies that draw a veil of silence around emotions and bodies" (Davies and Gannon 2006a, 3). Autoethnography also constitutes an effective attempt to contest the silencing which often operates in the majority world to silence minorities or those who are socially marginalized. In doing so it contests the "conditions of inarticulation" (Barton 2011, 440) which often characterise minority or marginal experience.

It is important to recognize that autoethnography is both rigorous and demanding as a research pursuit. It calls for levels of awareness and critical insight on the part of the researcher which are highly challenging. It is both a difficult and often an emotionally costly pursuit, since it involves the researcher in a rigorous, reflexive and deeply challenging engagement with his or her own life experience. Ellis argues that "authors focus on a group or culture and use their own experiences in the culture to reflexively bend back on themselves" and hence to "look more deeply at interactions between self and other" (2004, 37). Davies warns against sloppiness and self indulgence in this practice; to be effective it must be rigorous, questioning and forensic (2006). Autoethnography privileges the subjective experience and the subjectivity of researchers and aims to convey the *feel* or *texture* of what it was like to be in the midst of the experiences which they describe.

Minorities are particularly susceptible to the influence and exercise of majority power. In the years following political independence Irish society was suffused with the hegemony of Catholic nationalism. This continued (albeit in somewhat diluted form) until the nineteen seventies and eighties. It was expressed in State legislation and bureaucracy and perhaps more significantly it was manifest in the minutiae of day to day relationships. Michel Foucault (1994) argues that power is everywhere. We

© ISASR 2015

are surrounded, formed and indwelled by it. He contends that the power of certain interests and positions in society is manifested both in the assumptions and in the rituals of that society. Such assumptions and rituals go largely accepted and uncritiqued – their processes largely invisible to the majorities whose needs they serve. One of their effects is to reinforce socially dominant realities while simultaneously marginalising and silencing alternative ways of seeing and doing. Autoethnograpy as a research methodology consciously seeks to reverse such conditions of inarticulacy.

Discourse

The concept of *discourse* is theorised as the mechanism through which power is made operative – and visible. Discourses are "socially organised frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done" (Burman 1994, 2). More specifically Ryan argues that "Discourses are regimes of knowledge constructed over time. They include the commonplace assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, beliefs systems and myths that groups of people share […] [they] articulate and convey formal and informal knowledge and ideologies" (2005, 23).

Discourses have a number of basic functions. Firstly, through discourse majorities order, see and make sense of the world and their experiences of it and define the nature and parameters of what is to be accepted as "true". The discourses of the time defined true Irishness as Catholic, Gaelic and nationalist. Anyone outside of this description was by definition both other and non-Irish. After centuries of disruption, infighting and persecution this clarity gave the newly emergent state that sense of power, authority and coherence it needed to enforce the identity of the new nation. The Catholic Church alone was defined as holding a totality of religious truth and validity; those outside it were an aberration, heretics, and perhaps most significantly, a threat to national unity. Secondly, dominant discourses delimit what can be accepted as valid knowledge, what can be defined as normal behaviour and what are natural expressions of subjectivity for a particular time, place and societal context. It was the particular combination of political and ecclesiastical power that lent such potency to the particular set of discourses which gained prominence in the years following political independence. Thirdly, through being taken up in the discourses which are regnant in a particular society or culture, members of a dominant grouping enter into a shared grid of common understanding with others which reinforces shared systems of meaning, facilitates communication and simultaneously excludes and marginalises those whose meanings, behaviours and

assumptive worlds do not accord with these. Lastly, discourses maintain the power of a particular society's elites through privileging certain knowledges, assumptions, behaviours and ways of being which come to be seen as normative, rational acceptable, unexceptional and hence beyond question (Ungar 2004, Ryan, 2001).

Enacting Power

Teasing out the discourses which are dominant in a society was for Foucault (1994) a way of shedding light on how that particular society functions. The concept of discourse creates a lens through which the distribution and operation of power could be brought into visibility. In conceptualising discourse he was very clear that such meaning repertoires exist *outside* the sense-making processes of individuals or groupings; instead they are pre-existing, external (and largely unconscious) channels which organise the thinking and assumptive worlds of a society and its members. Individuals and groups in a particular society are unconsciously recruited into these ways of seeing and being. The following story "Corpus Christi" describes one occasion of the public, ceremonial acting out of such power - and its effects on a particular individual's identity. "The institutionalisation of power favours the dominant group" (Trahar 2011). The story was shared with me by Bob, an old friend and recently retired nonconformist minister who had expressed interest in participating in the research. He tells the story in response to a request to describe a defining moment in his experience of Irish Protestant identity. In it he highlights an event in which the dominant discourses of a particular version of Irishness were publicly ritualised resulting for him in a profound sense of marginalisation. He hypothesises that for many members of the religious minority such events, (they were very common occurrences until only ten or fifteen years ago), still have a powerful effect in the definition of identity.

Corpus Christi

> "There's lots of moments that light up aspects of identity. Ireland has changed radically in the last couple of decades and it's sometimes hard now, in a much more secular and multicultural era, to form an appreciation of how powerful the Catholic Church was in defining life in the Irish State. While a lot has shifted, I'd say perceptions of that power are still important in the thinking of many Protestants to this day. And that's probably true for a lot of other minority groups as well.

© ISASR 2015

I was stationed as minister in a rural town in the late sixties and early nineteen seventies. It was a dreadful time in rural Ireland for everyone; there was huge poverty and the emigration rates were cataclysmic. The Protestant population was particularly badly affected by emigration; communities were often completely numerically unsustainable, and growing more so by the day. While there were often good relations at a personal level between members of the different religious groupings, many Protestants felt that there was little they could relate to in the State and that they were often barely tolerated. Memories of burnings and boycotts were very close. And there was the additional difficulty of finding a Protestant mate. *Ne Temere*[2] loomed large for us all. A pall of depression enveloped everything. It was actually almost endemic in many minority communities; the future appeared immeasurably bleak. We felt completely powerless. Extinction seemed inevitable.

I was walking down the main street of the town, one afternoon on my way home from visiting a member of my congregation. We'd stayed chatting, forgetting it was Corpus Christi. Big Catholic Church holidays could be queer old days for Protestants. As I headed home the main street was thronged with people. Intertwined Papal and Irish national flags adorned every lamppost and matching coloured bunting criss-crossed the street. The whole centre of the town had been totally taken over and there were Gardai[3] everywhere; the Army were out in force to form guards of honour at various points for the procession. "Ave Marie" and "Panis Angelicus" were resounding from loudspeakers attached to every telegraph pole, interspersed with decades of the Rosary to which the crowd responded on their beads.

I was getting all these looks as I tried to thread my way quickly home before the actual procession arrived. In a small community everyone knew I was 'one of the others' and a preacher to boot. Suddenly the procession was upon us. There was the bishop holding the monstrance containing the sacred host aloft, with a white and gold canopy held over him. He was surrounded by hordes of priests in vestments. There were

[2] First promulgated in 1908 the *Ne Temere* Papal Decree demanded that both partners in religiously 'mixed' marriages (ie. those involving a Roman Catholic and a member of another-or no-religion) had to give a written undertaking that any children of the marriage be brought up Catholic. In short these agreements ultimately became legally binding in Ireland and the Decree was enforced (by the majority religion, by local majority communities and ultimately by law) with a ferocity unheard of even in other countries with large Catholic majorities. The Decree and its policing was a significant factor in the numerical decimation of Irish Protestantism and continues to be viewed with deep resentment to this day.

[3] 'An Garda Síochána', Guardians of the Peace, the Irish police force.

> hundreds of acolytes, first communicants, school choirs, church choirs, members of the Legion of Mary, the Vincent de Paul and so on in the entourage. As the procession approached, every person in the thronged street fell to their knees in worship of the Eucharistic host. I was fascinated by the display… and suddenly realised that I was the only one left standing. I didn't want to be discourteous and yet I couldn't follow the crowd's example; it would have been a betrayal of everything we stood for as evangelical believers. For a moment I was paralysed…. I couldn't even think. Standing there I have never felt so alone, so alien in my entire life. After a couple of moments the paralysis left and I darted into an alcove and stood looking into the window of a draper's shop 'till the procession passed. I couldn't think of anything else to do.
>
> The outstanding memory I have of the experience is of complete isolation and non-belonging. I was an alien in my own country, a stranger in my own home. Who was I to be here at all?"

We sat in silence, lost in our own thoughts. I was picturing those processions, their triumphalism, the intertwining of papal and Irish flags. I remembered the pressure, subtle, or not subtle at all, exercised on the Protestant households on the route of such processions. Catholic neighbours in many areas of North Dublin, where I grew up, would drape papal bunting across the facades of houses, irrespective of householders' religious identity. Or they would erect 'May altars' complete with flowers, candles and huge statues of the Virgin Mary in Protestant gateways, to obliterate, it seemed, our very existence. In either instance permission was rarely solicited. Even if it had been, in reality it could hardly have been refused.

Unmasking Power

The incident which Bob describes points to the acting out of a set of discourses which organised Irish life until very recently. Their potency was remarkable - consequently it is little wonder that the memory of such influences is still strongly felt even in a rapidly changing Ireland. An ostensibly religious occasion is used to publicly demonstrate a distinctive combination of political and ecclesiastical hegemony. The servants of the state, police and army, are drafted in willingly and unquestioningly to form guards of honour for a particular religious observance.

Discourses structure a society's thinking, privileging certain groupings and their realities and marginalising others. In a very real way the discourses which are regnant at a particular time and in a particular society dictate how members of that society will be *able* to assess, think

© ISASR 2015

about or react to situations or issues – including to the minorities which exist at their edges.

In his work on discourse Foucault (1994) is at pains to distinguish between different forms of discourse. He speaks of juridical discourses, those which have their origin in the judicial systems of a society. While originally related to defining legal and penal practice, the concept was broadened over time to be associated "with a certain number of social controls" (Foucault 1994, 5), referring to the exercise of power through the structures and policies of the state - the officially sanctioned expressions of state control. In the same work Foucault (1994) also speaks of veridical discourses; here he refers to those discourses which gain their authority from a structured assumption of "truth", claiming to have the power to divide truth from error or reality from falsehood. They are embedded in, gain their authority from, and are expressed through various privileged discursive practices such as education, science, psychology, medicine, ideology or indeed theology. Such veridical discourses claim authority to recognise and divide the normal from the deviant (Ryan 2001).

In the panoply of the *Corpus Christi* procession we see an expression of both veridical and juridical discourses in the intermingling of papal and national flags, in the presence of police and army as guards of honour, in the taking over of the whole centre of the town and in the complete ritualistic and spatial dominance of one theological and ecclesiastical structure. And of course *Corpus Christi* processions took place in *every* community in the country. They were influential in reinforcing certain vernacular discourses. Bob runs the gamut of those disapproving stares; and of course we knew in North Dublin that it would have been pointless to object to those "May altars" (an absolute anathema to Protestant spirituality and practice) being set up in the gateways of Protestant homes.

Discourse and Subjectification

But something else is also highlighted in Bob's reactions. On that *Corpus Christi* evening he actually *felt* the effect of that power in his own person; the power of official displacement. Foucault exemplifies this point: "the goal of my work…has not been to analyse the phenomenon of power, nor to elaborate the foundation of such analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1982, 208).

Bob resonated (as in a different way did the crowd, the priests and the acolytes), to such processes of subjectification. Alone and alien, his religion, his experience of Irish identity, his very way of being did not fit with the dominant discursive mould. His identity and his particular expression of subjectivity was other, unacceptable. He knew this

cognitively from his observations of the crowd's reaction as well as from his wider life experience. But he also *felt* the marginality of his subjectivity quite profoundly. So much so that he didn't know what to do. Dominant discourses are active in *creating* reality; they are also profoundly implicated in the construction of subjectivities (Davies and Gannon 2006a) and are active in creating feelings (Ryan 2001). Those who are outsiders know and feel themselves to be so. In reaction to centuries of colonial oppression, a unitary religio-political hegemony was everywhere, defined by the strategic alliance of Catholic hierarchy and Nationalist politicians; to belong, it was imperative to conform to the narrow Irishness defined by Gaelic Catholic Nationalism. Those who did not subscribe to its tenets, who lived outside the compass of its striations *knew* themselves to be outsiders. And as such they had to find ways of surviving.

At Kilmacdonagh Church

One way in which the Protestant minority expressed agency and resistance in such inhospitable territory was to develop a network of strongly bounded interlinked communities. Many of these continue to survive but many others, eroded by the interlinked depredations of *Ne Temere* and emigration do not. Both themes are represented in the next story, "At Kilmacdonagh Church". This story was shared by Janice, the adult child of a religiously mixed marriage and illustrates recurring pre-occupations expressed in many stories gathered in the fieldwork. It points both to resistance, to the difficulty of resistance and to that reality of the foundation of the State. Even today, and in apparently robust, numerically secure communities the theme of extinction is still strong, pointing to the potency of past realities in the construction of the present.

> "The air is biting and chill and skiffs of grey rain beat against the car. I'm the first here and park halfway up the ditch, to give room for the hearse to pass; I suppose they must have gone the long way 'round stopping outside the house, as is the custom. It never struck me that they would, it being empty and derelict for so long now. Looking ahead, through the windscreen, I can see the gates hanging rusted, crookedly, from the stone piers, at the end of the lane. The church stands stark and derelict in the driving rain. The grave stones are gathered, like chickens around a mother hen, in the shadow of its ruined tower; Pilsworths, Greys, Shaws, McDonaghs, Wilsons, Gilltraps, Robertsons and so on. All that's left of a once populous community are the grave stones in this remote place. There's not a member of any of those families left above ground in this area now.

© ISASR 2015

There's a stark pile of newly dug earth under the tower. She's being buried close to the doorway, now neatly blocked with concrete slabs. She went through that doorway every week with those other few, determined to keep the flag flying in this forgotten corner. Looking up, I see the saplings are pushing their heads above the roofless walls of the church. It must be closed awhile for them to have got such a hold. I think I heard they'd given up after she had the stroke, ten or fifteen years ago. Overhead the February sky is leaden; a scatter of rooks circle the bare trees, cawing in desolate, lonely voices, keening it seems for Lily. For her death. Perhaps for her life. I have a strange sense that we're mourning today for a community that's gone. I shiver as I peer through the misted windscreen; the scene breathes absolute desolation.

Last time I was here at Kilmacdonagh Church was years ago with my Mum, a child of perhaps ten or eleven. We used to do the Harvest services every year; I think it brought her back to her family's farming roots, as well as to her own community. The minister here was a distant cousin and Lily was his sister; she played the organ here. After his death she was one of the few left to keep the place open. Dad never came with us; going to an actual Protestant service would have been a step too far for him. The little church always smelt gorgeous with its riot of flowers, and all the vegetables, fruit and sheaves of corn – and just a hint of damp and paraffin heaters. It was always full for the occasion, people drawn from miles around; I knew a lot of them to see. The noise of chat and greeting as people arrived competed with Lily's efforts at the harmonium. I remember being fascinated at how the flowers on her hat would bob and tremble as her feet pumped, and her fingers coaxed music from its reluctant keys. Every autumn people drove miles each weekend, attending harvest services in those small country churches. There'd be a slightly different group of people each week, singing the same harvest hymns, and then repairing across a lane or field to a dingy hall or half-derelict schoolhouse for tea and sandwiches. The places always smelled of mice and damp. Me and my brother always liked Kilmacdonagh best – everyone was very friendly and the traybakes were great there. Mum always said that going to the Harvest there was somehow very real; you just had to look out through the clear glass in the church windows and see the golden fields, and the apple orchards and the sheep scattering the hills beyond. It was just like in that psalm we always sang at harvests, the 65th I think it is. You could actually see what you were giving thanks for. Looking back, I suppose those 'harvest manoeuvres', with people travelling miles to support each other's churches, created a sense of hope – maybe gave a brief illusion of permanence – when everyone knew deep down that the end was in sight.

> But back to the funeral with the crowd standing around the open grave, sheets of rain obliterating the surrounding countryside, the fields, the hills. The rooks are cawing loudly. It's getting dusk already; the rector is squinting at his book, twisting it this way and that to get the best of the failing light. Wouldn't you think he'd know the burial service by heart at this stage? Now with the marriage service there might be some excuse, there wouldn't be much custom for that; some of these country parishes mightn't have seen a wedding in thirty or more years. Everyone looks miserable, hunched under their dripping umbrellas. The air of complete desolation is palpable. We're mourning for Lily, but mourning too for the passing of a community of which she was one of the last. Of course she never married; there were none of our own left to marry 'round here. She died alone. If things had been different she could have been surrounded by her own family; children, perhaps even grandchildren.
>
> I wonder what happened to the rest, those who used to come here, years back, the ones who got away? Did things turn out any better for them? Was it worth it for those who stayed on? I don't know."

Muted Discourses

While at any given time a particular society is structured through the dominant discourses which organise its thinking and being, there also exist, at the edges of a society, and held by marginalised groupings, a range of muted discourses representing alternative sets of assumptions (Chambon 1999). For instance feminist and gay ways of seeing, knowing and acting still represent such alternative or muted ways of being in many countries, as they did and to some extent still do in Ireland (Ryan 2002). Protestantism also embodied such marginal or muted discourses in a State characterised by the particularly rigorous and unitary range of discourses of Irish Catholic nationalism. It represented a minority embodying alternative ways of making sense of the world; one that refused to give way or leave and as such constituted a clear form of resistance to the dominant discourses. For such groupings a core challenge is to find strategies which work to preserve those muted discourses intact. And to maintain the alternative ways of being which they imply.

Resistance

The story of Lily's funeral, set in the shadow of the derelict Kilmacdonagh Church, and the vignette which it enfolds of the Harvest Thanksgiving years earlier, when the church was the centre of a small but lively

© ISASR 2015

community, represents two central themes in Irish Protestantism. Resistance through alternative community expressed in a multitude of cohesive and interlinked social structures; and the pain of extinction when such communities die. Those "harvest manoeuvres" (repeated at Christmas with the round of carol services) with their expression of informal networking and identity maintenance are still a feature particularly of rural life. But Lily is the last of her family in the area; the rest have died or are long left. The names on the gravestones (Protestant names, and names in Ireland are still a good indicator of religious affiliation) are all that bear testimony to the existence of a once thriving Protestant community in this remote place. There is an air of desolation as those at the funeral are conscious not just of Lily's passing but of the passing of yet another community.

Community as Resistance

Strong community, one of the prime ways in which Irish Protestantism has mobilised agency in defending itself, is expressed through an extensive network of intersecting interest and social groups which reinforce a way of being which is at once distinctive and in opposition to the majority Roman Catholic ethos. Until recently, for a variety of historic reasons, almost all schools in Ireland were denominational. Besides the often large Catholic schools, much smaller schools, staffed by teachers trained in a minority training college, existed in every Protestant parish, or group of parishes. Accompanying these each parish of any size also maintained a variety of organisations catering for its spiritual and social needs: bowls and badminton clubs, Bible study groups, musical societies, dramatic societies, women's groups, youth clubs and uniformed organisations such as scouts, girl guides and Boys and Girls Brigades. Meeting in decrepit halls and school-houses these served the dual functions of nurturing a separate and distinctive minority ethos and of guarding against fraternization with the majority and the attendant terror of "mixed" marriages and resultant assimilation. These organisations frequently fought an ongoing battle for numerical and financial sustainability; the accompanying frenzy of fund-raising activities further reinforced the corporate identity. At a national level Protestantism also maintained a range of medical, educational and charitable institutions informed by cultures, values and practices, different to those of the organisations operated under the hegemonic ethos of the Catholic State. It was well-known that until the nineteen eighties (and sometimes the early nineties) advice on artificial contraception could only be obtained in Protestant hospitals. Such organisations represented a clear and conscious resistance to the power of dominant discourses.

Resistance as a Function of Power

Foucault's conceptualisation disputes traditional definitions which see power as an unidirectional force which maintains or imposes simple domination. In his later work (1988) and most particularly in his interviews (1994) he insists that resistance is intimately bound up with power and entails a complex mutual interplay between the two: "…as soon as there is a power relation there is the possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy" (Foucault 1988, 123). Hence he assigns resistance a constitutive site within the designation of power and in doing so recognises the existence of a certain freedom to act within these relations. He is making this distinct argument in order to point to the possibility of change and to encourage the exercise of that particular potential. In establishing this argument Foucault (1988) is contending for the exercise of that very resistance; power is not totalising and hegemonic; within it there are possibilities for resistance, points of attack. This potential can take many forms; it can be escape, violence, strategy, refusal or ruse. In this sense "Power implies a mobile, variable interplay of the dominant discourse and resistances to it" (Foote and Frank, 1999, 172).

Power, Resistance and Tension

Resistance is exercised in response to the very real consequences of discourse expressed at the very practical level of lived experience; "…they are structures of knowledge that influence systems of practices" (Chambon 1999, 57) and those practices impinge in significant ways, particularly on minorities, on those whom they marginalise. As Ryan argues such discourses have real effects for real people in real lives. Discourses "*shape* [emphasis in original] social relations and have actual effects on practice and identity. Discourses are real, with real effects. They are not just a reflection of reality; they have an objective reality" (2011, 3).

The relentless enforcement of the *Ne Temere* Decree, the wall-to-wall nature of the Catholic nationalist assumptive world, enshrined in legislation and potent in community life, have had very real effects on the Protestant minority. The forces which operate in the service of the power groupings of a society have very real consequences (Davies and Harré 1990). These include intermarriage, emigration and a resultant hemorrhage of Protestantism from vast tracts of the Irish countryside. The scene at the derelict Kilmacdonagh Church, the atmosphere of depression, and the sense of attending the obsequies of an entire community give potent testimony to this. But for Foucault, such resistance is not simple or straightforward; he describes it as struggle, sometimes more, sometimes

© ISASR 2015

less effective: "It is the reality of possible struggles that I wish to bring to light" (Foucault 1989). Forms of resistance may be effective or only partially effective; they may work or they may not. Tight and extensive community structure as resistance is held in constant tension with the failure, dissolution and death of Irish Protestant communities.

Silence and Withdrawal as Resistance

But Irish Protestantism has also used silence and withdrawal as forms of resistance. It learned not to protest lest speaking out should make things worse; but equally there are areas of Irish life from which it has largely withdrawn. Saying "no" is not always an effective strategy; where a group is rendered voiceless it is often not even possible. Doing "no", through silence or withdrawal, however, can constitute a strategic response. Foucault identifies liberation with resistance rather than revolution, the acting out of refusal at multiple points of power relations (Faith 1994, 53). While effective at one level, silence and withdrawal, like building cohesive community, have not always been totally effective or without cost. The scenes at Kilmacdonagh Church, and all that they imply, have been re-enacted throughout the country. And yet few have ever spoken out against the influence of dominant discourses to which they bear testimony. The traditional reluctance of Protestants (with a few significant exceptions), to enter political life, and the investment of energies instead in building tight communities may have had benefits. These strategies however, also enabled the *status quo,* the cause of the religious minority's marginalisation to remain largely unchallenged. Silence can also turn inwards becoming a way of being which disallows reflection and critique. The last story is a weaving together of two vignettes which, almost inadvertently, raise the issue of minority silence. It is autoethnographic and highlights a somewhat unexpected direction which silencing can take.

Silence

> "You *cannot* use that…!" My wife's fury was palpable. Startled I looked up. "That" was a piece I had been reading to her, to check for detail. It was a composite story describing the life - and the death at his own hand- of George, the last member of a Protestant community in an isolated area of the Irish Republic. The last of 16 generations of his family to scratch a living on their small farm, his story spoke of alcohol abuse, isolation, marginalisation and profound processes of othering. To his neighours he was a

planter[4]; the incursor, with, in their words "No fucken' right here." "They're waitin' 'til I die to get the land back," had been his view of their attitude towards him.

"That story will rise trouble…we *never* talk about such things!" Generations of Heather's Methodist antecedents, a minority within a minority, spoke through her horror. Her view resonated with Victor Griffin's family. The uncharacteristically outspoken Protestant leader and Dean of St Patricks Cathederal, Dublin, provoked horror in his family, when he publicly commented on such vexed topics as contraception, divorce, discrimination. "You'll have us burned out" wailed his mother. And now: "We *never* talk about such things."

The spring sunshine shone down as we searched for a family grave in the remote churchyard. Surprisingly there were several other people there too, intent on similar searches, or on memorialising, on this May Bank Holiday Monday. We had chatted together in a desultory fashion as we pursued our searches. Sufficient information had been exchanged to identify ourselves as all part of the same tribe – in a few instances distantly related.

Suddenly, parting the grass, I came across a small gravestone. The names of two young men, with the same date of death in the 1920s were inscribed on it; the Pearson brothers. The information on the stone was minimal; just names, dates of birth and death. And the caption "Never forgotten". Nothing to indicate that they had been murdered by their neighbours, members of the IRA. Both shot in the groin they were left to bleed to death. Father and older brothers away at a Gospel meeting, their mother and sisters had been forced to watch but were prevented at gunpoint, from going to the boys' aid or comfort. Later the same day the family's dwelling house had been torched.

I looked up as two of the other visitors approached; both middle aged women, sisters I suspected by their similar features and colouring. We'd spoken earlier.
"Ah" said one, "The Pearson lads." There was a long pause.
Then: "Sure they were related to us. Their mammy was a cousin of Grandma's." Another pause. "Of course we never talk about it." Nodding, I felt speechless before all that was left unsaid.

My wife's words came back powerfully: "We never talk - even among ourselves - about those things." Somehow external silence, a concern to keep heads down, not to rock the boat seems to have been extended, internalized. "We never talk about those things."

[4] 'Planters' was (and in some cases remains) a highly pejorative term applied to Protestants, particularly in rural Ireland. It relates to the historic colonising practice (particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries) of displacing native Irish owners and gifting (hence 'planting') their land with English settlers loyal to the Crown.

© ISASR 2015

Silence as Defence

In previous generations voicelessness was a response to the hegemonic discourses of the emergent Irish State. It was a defence mechanism employed in order to safeguard a minority, who already felt themselves to be in a vulnerable and exposed situation. It was seen as the price of being allowed to remain in Ireland and to live in peace. Silence allowed them to pass beneath the dominant national radar; it cloaked their differences but also allowed those differences to exist and was felt to be a timely and effective strategy for survival.

But over time this silence also seems to have taken on another purpose. Protestants rarely spoke about the difficulties of the situation in which they found themselves, even within the security of their own community. I knew that from the members of my own family of origin who had been members of the traditional Irish religious minority. It is often much easier and more comfortable to live with denial than with a continuous engagement with unpleasant reality. And in this light it is interesting to note that virtually all the revisionist historians who have begun to comment on the negative experiences of the Protestant minority in Ireland, are either from a Catholic cultural background, are Irish Protestants now domiciled outside the country, or are not Irish at all.

Paulo Freire emphasises the significance of the telling and sharing of community stories as a tool for self-understanding, transformation and change. Etherington argues that "When we use our own stories, or those of others for research we give testimony to what we have witnessed and that testimony creates a 'voice' where there was previously silence and occlusion" (2004, 9). A reluctance, or ultimately an inability to tell its own stories renders a community unable to reflect in any real sense on its history, its own identity - and more particularly on its own experiences of resilience and agency. In turn this restricts its ability to understand its place within, and possible value to, a wider society. Learning to deal with marginal positioning creates particular resiliencies and strengths which become part of such a group's social capital. A conscious awareness of these contribute to a minority's sense of self worth and ultimately to its ability to strategically position itself positively within the wider society. An alertness to the lessons learned through dealing with peripherality can also constitute a repository of valuable information for other minority groupings in dealing with marginal positionings.

Conclusion

The various modes in which majorities exercise power is always an issue for minorities; power impinges in very real ways not just on lived

experience but also on feelings and identity. Resistance to such exercises of power takes various forms. Irish Protestantism has survived, despite its chilly reception in the independent Irish State. An exploration of some facets of its experiences alerts us to a number of dynamics of relevance to the study of minorities in general:

- Gaining an understanding of exactly *how* the power discourses of a particular society (or majority) impinge on the life and ways of being of a particular minority is an important factor in developing an understanding of the identity of any minority group.
- Various forms of resistance are a concomitant reaction to any exercise of power. Understanding the modes through which a minority grouping effects resistance to the majority discourses becomes significant in gaining an awareness of how a particular grouping identifies itself.
- A strong sense of community has been crucial in allowing the Irish Protestant community to survive; this has also arguably allowed it to ameliorate, or deny, an awareness of the very real possibilities of extinction. This alerts us to what may be the significance of denial as a defence mechanism in allowing minorities to survive in less than favourable contexts.
- A reluctance to challenge the majority status quo appears to have served well in contributing to Irish Protestantism's survival. It was however accompanied by an internal process of silencing which tended to stifle internal debate, discussion and critical reflection relating to the community's identity and to its positioning within Irish society. This invites attention to how certain forms of resistance may have unwelcome, unexpected or unwonted sequelae. A study of such areas may be an important focus of consideration, shedding light on particular charecteristics of the life experience of a minority.

In concluding it is important to note how a research inquiry which presents and explores narratives of life experience, of both research participants *and* of the researcher, can create an entrée to a particularity of experience and to aspects of minority domains which would otherwise be difficult to access. Such exercises can offer rich and nuanced perspectives on a specific world as well as expanding the conceptual frames of reference which we bring to bear in exploring minority experience in general.

© ISASR 2015

References

Burman, E. (1994). *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology.* London; Routledge.

Chambon, A. S. (1999). Foucault's Approach: Making the Familiar Visible. In: Chambon, A. Irving, A. & Epstein, L. (eds.). *Reading Foucault for Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press, p 57.

Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2006). *Doing Collective Biography*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Davies, B. & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. 19 (4), pp. 43-63.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I.* Alta Mira: Alta Mira Press.

Faith, K. (1994). Resistance Lessons from Foucault and Feminism. In: Radtke, H. L. & Stam, H. J. (eds). *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice.* London: Sage, p. 53.

Foucault, M. (1982). Omnes et Sigulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'. In: McMurrin, S. (ed). *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p 208.

Foucault M. (1988). *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-84.* New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1989). *Foucault Live (Interviews 1966-84.* New York: Semiotext.

Foucault, M. (1994). *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 - 1984*. London: Penguin.

Jenks, E. (2002). Searching for Autoethnographic Credibility. In: Bochner, A. & Ellis, C. (eds). *Ethnographically Speaking.* Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

Jewett, L.M. (2008). *A Delicate Dance: Autoethnography, Curriculum and the Semblance of Intimacy.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, p 43.

McGahern, J. (2009). *Love of the World: Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.

Faith, K. (1994). Resistance Lessons from Foucault and Feminism. In: Radtke, H.L. & Stam, H. J. (eds). *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice.* London: Sage, p.53.

Olesen, V. (2005). Early Millennial Feminist Qualitative Research: Challenges and Contours. In: Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 249.

Reissman, C. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences.* London: Sage

Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of Play.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ryan, A. (2011). Contemporary Discourses of Working, Earning and Spending. *Unpublished article.*

Ryan, A. (2005). Introduction. In: Antonesa, M. *et al* (eds). *Researching and Writing Your Thesis*. Maynooth: MACE, p. 3.

Ryan, A. B. (2001). *Feminist Ways of Knowing*. Leicester: NIACE.

Ryan, A. B. (2005). Methodology: Collecting Data. In: Antonesa, M. *et al* (eds). *Researching and Writing Your Thesis*. Maynooth: Mace, p 23.

Trahar, S. (2011). *Developing Cultural Capability in International Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

Ungar, M. (2004*). Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p 225.