

# **'Plastic and Proud'?: Discourses of Authenticity among the second-generation Irish in England.**

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This paper argues that understandings of authenticity are crucial in the construction of a diasporic identity and explores how members of the Irish diaspora in England construct discourses of what it means to be 'authentically' Irish. In particular, it examines how these discourses are arranged around the 'Plastic Paddy' trope, a label originally coined by young Irish migrants in London in the 1980s to describe the second-generation London-Irish they encountered. The attribution of 'plastic-ness' in interview data as well as rhetorical defences against being labelled 'plastic' reflect ongoing issues of contestation over meaning and ownership of diasporic Irishness. From a social psychological perspective, this provides an example of the subtle ways in which language and labels may be used for exclusionary purposes, as well as the agency displayed by those who are positioned as 'inauthentic' by these discourses in constructing their own identities in dialogue with them.

## **DIASPORA & AUTHENTICITY**

The extent to which diasporic identity operates at the level of the subject i.e. the agency employed by individuals in constructing their own conceptions of what it means to be a member of a diaspora, is somewhat complicated by the diverse understandings of the term 'diaspora' (Brubaker, 2005). In particular, the increasing popularity of the term 'diaspora' to describe migration in public discourses has led to a rather different popular conception of diaspora than that commonly used within the social sciences.

Social scientific discourses around diaspora have tended to concentrate on the potential of the term for deconstructing the notion of a unitary national identity residing solely within the nation-state. Rather, conceptualising national identity as diasporic allows the possibility for the emergence of a wide variety of hybridised, deterritorialised identities that do not necessarily refer to the point of origin. The concept of 'diaspora space' allows for the intersection, re-inscription and emergence of new contemporary forms of 'transcultural identities' (Brah, 1996).

However, popular understandings of diaspora often tend to treat the term as simply a useful and fashionable description of migrants and their descendants, with national identity continuing to reside within the nation-state. Therefore, while new transient deterritorialised diasporic identities may exist, they do so in dialogue with essentialist discourses of national/ethnic identity, which may be asserted for a variety of reasons, including political ones (Bernstein, 2005). It is the contention of this paper that such dialogues generally take place along the axis of authenticity. Debates as to what ought to constitute an 'authentic'

diasporic identity may occur across various subgroups within the diaspora and also with how national identity is constituted in the contemporary national point of origin. As an example of such debates and how discourses of authenticity may be organised around a particular linguistic trope, this paper will examine the case of the Irish diaspora in England.

The case of the Irish in England is a particularly cogent example, given the historical colonial relationship between the two countries, their geographical proximity, and the long history of migration from Ireland to England. Irishness in England, therefore, is influenced by the historically oppositional nature of Irishness and Englishness (Douglas, 2002; Hickman, 1998; Lentin, 1998), as well as the various conceptualisations of Irishness brought across the Irish Sea by successive waves of migrants.

### **The Irish in England**

While there are many areas of contestation between various 'Irishnesses' in England around such factors as age, class/education, religious observance, political attitudes etc., perhaps the group for whom the notion of an 'authentic' Irishness is most pertinent are the second-generation Irish.

Given that Irish migration to England has been more or less a constant over the past hundreds of years, Irishness in England is a multi-generational phenomenon. However, certain demographic features of second-generation Irishness have become dominant. The two major waves of post-war migration from Ireland to England occurred in the 1950s and the 1980s, coinciding with major recession periods in the Irish economy. Geographically, while London has always been a significant destination of choice for Irish migrants, large numbers of the 1950s generation of migrants found employment and settled in the West Midlands and in towns associated with manufacturing and construction. This was not true of later migration, which was largely, although by no means exclusively directed towards London and the South-East (MacLaughlin, 1997; Walter, 2008a). Irishness outside these areas is now largely becoming a second-generation phenomenon, given the age profile and dwindling numbers of the original 1950s migrants.

Due to these demographics, therefore, the culturally and numerically dominant second generation Irish cohort in England are the children of those Irish people who migrated to England in the 1950s, many of whom now have children of their own – an emerging third generation. There is some evidence of a 'second wave' of second-generation Irish emerging i.e. the children of the 1980s wave of Irish migrants. However, as pointed out by Walter (2008a), the high level of return migration among the 1980s cohort of migrants has resulted in this 'second wave' being numerically smaller than might have been expected – how much of a cultural impact they will have remains to be seen.

It is difficult to put an exact number on the amount of second-generation Irish in England, largely due to the disparity between the estimated claim that 13 million people in Britain have some form of Irish ancestry and the much lower than anticipated figure of 157,009 second and third-generation Irish people choosing

the 'white Irish' ethnic option in the 2001 Census. It has been argued that this was due to the inadequacy of the question: for example, many of those who might have been expected to tick the 'white Irish' box may have confused the concepts of ethnicity, nationality and citizenship. The census categories have also been criticised for not taking into account those who might have wished to express Irishness as a component of a mixed identity (Howard, 2006; Limbrick, 2007). It might be argued that the census results are symptomatic of the difficulties experienced by many second-generation Irish in defining their own identity, especially in the reductionist, essentialist terms employed by census forms (A problem shared by second-generation immigrants worldwide, cf. Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway (2008)).

Many second-generation Irish people may feel constrained in 'officially' identifying themselves as Irish due to the variety of cultural understandings of what 'Irishness' constitutes. In particular, claiming Irishness in an English accent is fraught with difficulty and possible rejection, as the two identities tend to be seen as incompatible. Indicative of this perceived incompatibility is the fact that no widespread 'English-Irish' *national* equivalent of the 'Irish-American' identity label exists (Walter, 2001). Hickman, Morgan, Walter & Bradley (2005), in assessing their own Irish 2 Project on the second-generation Irish, have described those in England as being positioned at the intersection of the two hegemonic domains of England and Ireland, both of which problematise the authenticity of their claims on Irishness.

My research therefore is an attempt to trace the various uses of authenticity in discourses of Irishness in England; who is positioned as authentically Irish, what practices are constructed as representing authentic Irishness, and what is the benefit to speakers from drawing on discourses of identity? Rather than providing an overview of all the means by which Irish identities have been authenticated and inauthenticated in the data, I wish instead to illustrate the ways in which this can be accomplished discursively by focusing on one resource that is often used to do this kind of work with regard to the second-generation Irish i.e. the 'Plastic Paddy' trope. Used as a means to position the second-generation as inauthentic, this pejorative term finds parallels among other diasporic communities such as the use of the term 'coconuts' to describe second-generation British-Asians (Jaspal, 2009; Vadher & Barrett, 2006).

'Plastic Paddy' came into common use as a term of abuse in the 1980s, when it was frequently employed by recently-arrived middle-class Irish migrants for whom, according to Hickman (2002) it became 'a means of distancing themselves from established Irish communities'. According to Hickman et al. (2005) the use of this term is part of the process by which the second-generation Irish are positioned as inauthentic within the two aforementioned 'hegemonic domains' of Englishness and Irishness.

*"Ironically, both English hostility when faced with the spectre of Irish identities, and Irish denials of the authenticity of those same identities, utilize the pejorative term 'plastic Paddy' to stereotype and undermine processes 'of becoming' of Irish identities of second-generation Irish people. The message from each is that the*

*second-generation Irish are 'really English' and many of the second-generation resist this." (Hickman et al., 2005, p. 174)*

It would be over simplistic, however, to describe the term 'Plastic Paddy' as simply denoting differences of accent and birthplace. Rather, as explored by Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2003) the common use of the term in "the discursive repertoire of the young elite workers who migrated from Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s" led to the term being imbued with class and power discourses of an authentic Irishness.

*"Its accomplishment of itself as nationally authentic within the cultural storylines available to it depends upon its active disidentification with the second generation, which it positions as culturally recidivist, retelling 'the same old story' of nationalist Ireland to which the second generation, as non-national is seen as making illegitimate claims ... the elite workers are central to constructing and circulating around the Irish diaspora in Britain an internal cultural script positioning the second generation as 'not properly Irish'" (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2003, p. 391).*

While these descriptions portray how the second-generation were positioned by the 1980s wave of largely middle-class migrants, the focus of this paper is on how second-generation Irish people themselves reacted or engaged with these discourses. Individuals are not simply 'judgmental dupes' but demonstrate agency in positioning themselves within or without discourses, but this agency in turn is constrained by the linguistic power invested in the discourse (Davies & Harré, 2001; Emerson & Frosh, 2004). From a psychological point of view, therefore, the point of interest lies in whether second-generation Irish people recognise themselves as occupying a subject-position in the hegemonic discourses of authenticity arranged around the 'Plastic Paddy' trope and if so, whether they subject themselves to the rules of the discourse or seek to resist it (Hall, 2001). This paper therefore, is an attempt to trace the various ways in which second-generation Irish people in contemporary England either draw upon the term 'Plastic Paddy' in order to position themselves as a certain type of Irish person, or rhetorically construct their own 'authentic' identities in dialogue or in opposition to the term.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The extracts presented in this paper are taken from interviews carried out during 2008, with second generation Irish people in London and Birmingham, as part of research towards a PhD. These encounters were part of a larger process where 30 individual interviews and 4 group discussions were conducted with a variety of people of both Irish birth and descent in England. 11 participants were classed as 'second generation' (although some might be more properly be regarded as belonging to a 1.5 generation, having spent some time as children in Ireland). Participants were recruited via snowballing methods, ranged in ages from early twenties to mid seventies and 16 were male, while 14 were female. The main prerequisite for participation in the research was self-identification, at least to some extent, as Irish.

Participants were encouraged to speak about their own personal life experiences of Irishness, in keeping with a narrative-discursive approach to interview data, in which speakers are taken to employ “established and recognised resources to construct an identity which also refers to the unique circumstances of a particular life” (Taylor, 2005, p. 48). In addition to this, the ways in which Irishness as a *concept* is constructed through rhetoric have also been highlighted in the analysis of the data. As a means of informing the analysis, constructions of Irishness in the Irish ‘ethnic press’ in England have been noted as well as the ways Irishness has been performed at a number of public events of Irish interest, such as St. Patrick’s Day parades. This all comprised an effort to trace moments of continuity and contestation along what Wetherell (1998) has termed the broader ‘horizon of discourse’ relating to Irishness in England. For this particular paper, the ways in which notions of authenticity were rhetorically constructed around the use of the term ‘Plastic Paddy’ were examined in depth.

## **FINDINGS**

The extent to which the term ‘Plastic Paddy’ has become a form of shorthand for debates around the ‘authenticity’ of the second generation was reflected in the interviews, with almost every participant, whether migrant or second-generation recognising the potency of the label. Therefore, second-generation Irish people have to negotiate their identities in a discursive terrain dominated by the possibility of being labelled a ‘Plastic Paddy’, or in which second-generation people are collectively termed ‘Plastic Paddies’, whether they have ever had the term personally applied to them or not. It would appear that, for the second-generation, in order to rhetorically make a case for the authenticity of one’s Irish identity, one first has to orient oneself in relation to the de-authenticating potential of being labelled ‘Plastic’.

The micro-analysis of the interview data specifically concerned with second-generation uses of the term ‘Plastic Paddy’ uncovered five distinct discursive strategies that were employed in engaging with the term. These included 1.) Adoption 2.) Rejection 3.) Deflection 4.) Accommodation and 5.) Reclamation/subversion. An illustration of the use of each of these strategies with relevant data extracts is presented below:

### **Adoption:**

It should be noted that while the ‘Plastic Paddy’ term may have its origins in descriptions of second-generation Irish people by recent migrants, it is not necessarily currently used exclusively in that context. The research uncovered a number of second-generation people who freely use the term in order to describe other second-generation people who they feel ‘overdo’ their Irishness, thus ‘adopting’ the term in its dominant usage. In the following extract, James, a man in his 40s, who identified his Irishness as deriving from his family background, but primarily positioned himself as a Londoner culturally, described what it was to be a ‘Plastic Paddy’ in these terms:

**Extract 1:**

**Marc:** I'm asking people about the:, you've heard the term Plastic Paddy?

**James:** Oh, yes

**Marc:** Yeah, who would you say that applies to?

**James:** I would say that applies to second or third generation English people born here [**Marc:** yeah] who cling on and identify themselves through their Irish heritage or connection, and go completely over the top about it [**Marc:** yeah], so much so that they're promoting themselves far beyond any reality that I ever see in Ireland [**Marc:** yeah], that's what I would call a Plastic Paddy

**Marc:** In what ways would you mean over the top?

**James:** Well, a little bit too much green [**Marc:** yeah] and a little bit too much into certain Irish music or cultural things or use of Irish words or an over-elaborate celebration around St. Patrick's Day [**Marc:** yeah] which I just don't see any of those things evident in Ireland [**Marc:** yeah] y'know, and, and a huge connection with going to Irish pubs, which I've never seen an Irish pub outside Ireland that looks like a pub [**Marc:** yeah] from Ireland, there's almost a concept been created around what an Irish pub is, and so they're into all that, sometimes they may be very aware of what, what real Ireland is like, either, y'know, in the Seventies or indeed now, or they may have no idea because they don't actually ever go there [**Marc:** yeah] that often it almost becomes an identity for people and I think it's quite sad, really, people who are typically like that and they'll support their Irish team [**Marc:** yeah] and all this kind of stuff.

**Marc:** Support their Irish team as in the soccer team, like [**James:** yeah] yeah [**James:** yeah] have you ever used the term?

**James:** Have I? [**Marc:** yeah, yeah] Yeaahh:: of course I have (*laughter*)

**Marc:** In what kind of ah, context?

**James:** Well, the context I just said, I even called me own brother one once so I find them quite irritating

James suggests that the 'Plastic Paddy' label applies to those who create an 'over-the-top' Irishness that is unrelated to Irishness as it is experienced in Ireland, particularly as it relates to the 'creation' of Irish pubs. (An analysis of the role of Irish pubs in British culture can be found in McGovern (2002)) In this case, the 'reality' of Irishness is territorially situated in Ireland, and deviation from this is seen as 'over-elaborate' or inauthentic Irishness. James, therefore, adopts the term as representing a valid marker of inauthenticity and suggests that the only valid means by which second-generation people can avoid being positioned as such is to avoid over-emphasising their own Irish connections, describing making use of the term himself in such a context.

**Rejection:**

By way of contrast, in the following extract, Kate, a second-generation London-Irish woman in her 40s rejects the 'Plastic Paddy' label as it might be applied to her by undermining the notion that there is one 'true', 'authentic' Irishness:

**Extract 2:**

**Kate:** I don't like that term plastic paddy [**Marc:** no] because it's not like you're a fake, cause that's the-to me that the image is it's a fake [**Marc:** yeah] paddy, I don't consider myself a fake Irish person, I'm just different [**Marc:**

hmm] you know, there's a spectrum of Irish and I'm on it somewhere [Marc:  
yeah] you know

Kate, therefore, constructs Irishness as a spectrum, on which she can be located, rather than a static entity, or something that is territorially bound in Ireland. This discourse of 'not fake, just different' is a common one among second-generation Irish people in England, particularly as a means of emphasising the specificity of having an Irish cultural upbringing in a (generally urban) English context.

### **Deflection:**

While Kate simply rejects the notion of being a 'Plastic Paddy' outright, other respondents treated the term as though it had some descriptive value, but ought not to apply to them. Such people would employ discursive 'deflection', in attempting to describe who ought to be properly labelled as a Plastic Paddy, rather than it being a blanket term. For example, second-generation Irish people who are involved with Irish activities on a regular basis tend to apply the term to those who only mark their Irishness on high-profile occasions such as St. Patrick's Day. By way of illustration, the following extract comes from an interview with Sarah, a second-generation woman in her twenties who worked for a Birmingham-Irish community organisation.

### **Extract 3:**

**Marc:** Yeah, you do get this term 'plastic paddy' for [Sarah: yeah] the; have you come across that much or?

**Sarah:** 'Er, I have. 'Er, I've come across it, I wouldn't term myself a plastic paddy [Marc: yeah]. I don't know if I, I would necessarily, 'cos I sort of think of it to be like f-, fake [Marc: yeah] Irish names. I suppose I'm gonna kind of give a definition of myself (*laughs*); I don't really intend to but like if people who maybe just celebrate being Irish on St Patrick's Day or [Marc: yeah] don't have any other interests in it apart from, from that, I would, I would think would be [Marc: yeah] plastic

Sarah, then, in an attempt not to describe herself when giving her definition of a Plastic Paddy, constructs the term as describing someone with only a 'part-time' connection with Irishness, celebrating it only around St. Patrick's Day. Thus 'authentic' Irishness in this case is constructed around involvement and participation in Irish activities rather than around birthplace. In other words, 'living' Irishness is seen as essential in order to claim Irishness. What this also illustrates is the extent to which second-generation Irish identities are rhetorically constructed in dialogue with the term 'Plastic Paddy'.

### **Accommodation:**

Another example of the ways in which second-generation identities are constructed through rhetorical engagement with the 'Plastic Paddy' label is provided in the following extract, which is taken from a discussion group carried out in the same location in Birmingham:

#### **Extract 4:**

**Sarah:** 'Erm, I just think there is that fear of the, the 'Plastic Paddy' by being called a 'Plastic Paddy'; it, well, it doesn't really bother me but 'erm, I know that it, some people really hate it because its hard to, like; they can have a complete Irish upbringing and be considered maybe Irish by people over here, but if they're in Ireland it's just that they're like; I suppose they could call themselves 'er, they'd call themselves maybe 'Birmingham-Irish', but they wouldn't call themselves 'Irish-Irish' [Marc: mm].

**Eileen:** I think that's quite a [

**Becky:** It's a fear of being criticised more [Eileen: yeah, well I think so] yeah.

The women in the group, therefore, describe a process by which second-generation Irish people in Birmingham come to describe themselves as 'Birmingham-Irish' as a means of avoiding being labelled a 'Plastic Paddy'. Adopting a hybridised label is a means of creating conceptual space for a different type of Irishness to be imagined, one that emphasises the localised specificity of their Irish identities. This is a common strategy among second-generation people, with equivalent London-Irish, Liverpool-Irish and Manchester-Irish labels all existing. Localised hybrids are generally preferred to a hyphenated 'English-Irish' label, given the aforementioned perceived incompatibility of the two identities (Hickman et al., 2005; Leonard, 2005; Walter, 2001). It is perhaps notable, however, that such localised hybrids appear only to be available to inhabitants of large, multicultural cities with established Irish communities such as London and Birmingham. Inhabitants of smaller towns, such as Banbury in the Irish 2 Project (Walter, 2008b) or Milton Keynes in my own research, do not appear to have such localised hybrids as resources to draw upon when describing their own identity, and as such, attempt, not entirely successfully, to articulate an identity that incorporates both Irishness and Englishness.

However, the adoption of these labels only reflects a limited amount of agency in claiming Irishness – the extract makes it clear that the constraints placed on second-generation identity by the existence of the 'Plastic Paddy' trope mean that people feel unable to claim an unqualified Irishness, thus reflecting the discursive power of the label. The possibility of being labelled a 'Plastic Paddy', therefore, is constructed in this extract as something that cannot simply be ignored or rejected, but rather accommodated, by pre-emptively adopting a qualified Irish identity.

#### **Reclamation/subversion:**

While the above examples have been taken from interviews where the speakers have, through one means or another, avoided applying the label 'Plastic Paddy' to themselves, as is often done with pejorative labels, there are those who seek to reclaim the term. For example, in Mac an Ghail and Haywood's (2003) research among young second-generation men in London, the term is recast to represent an outward-looking diasporic Irish culture that can be comfortably situated among other ethnic identities. Along similar lines, the second-generation



London-Irish band, Neck, display the slogan “Plastic and Proud” on their merchandise:

We - the second-generation Irish in Britain- get called Plastic Paddies (I believe in the U.S. our equivalent are called 'narrow-backs') as a derogatory term by the first-generation Irish-because we're not "the full ticket". I personally don't give a toss, it's just a daft name, but there are contemporaries of mine who find it ignorant and offensive. -So the idea is to turn it on its head & reclaim it: if you call yourselves it, it takes the sting out of the intended 'dig', if y'knowwotahmeen.... and, of course, I am proud to be second-generation Irish - so if that means proud to be a “Plastic Paddy”, then that I am. <sup>1</sup>

This ‘playful’ reclamation of the term by ‘turning it on its head’ illustrates a less constrained form of agency on the part of second-generation individuals. While acknowledging the potency of the label, appropriating it allows the original pejorative associations of the term to be subverted. ‘Plastic’-ness now becomes constructed as a badge of pride, and something that can be proclaimed publicly: strikingly so, in the case of Neck’s punk-influenced ‘Plastic and Proud’ t-shirts. Rather than the term excluding second-generation people from the category ‘authentic Irish’, it is employed in order to articulate a certain type of ‘loud and proud’ second-generation Irishness that is oriented more towards diasporic experience in the multicultural city than towards contemporary Ireland.

Having said that, it is debateable how widespread this re-articulation of the term ‘Plastic Paddy’ is, given that none of the second-generation participants in this study engaged in this form of reclamation. However, there were indirect references to such approaches during interviews with the migrant generation, such as one of the Milton Keynes participants making a passing remark about his own teenage children referring to themselves as ‘Plastic Paddies’ in a playful manner. It is also perhaps notable that a ‘Plastic Paddy Appreciation Society’<sup>2</sup> exists, among other similarly-named groups on the social networking website Facebook. It is possible therefore that this represents an emerging, positive identification among younger second-generation Irish people in England, in a somewhat ironic, postmodern sense.

## DISCUSSION

This article sought to illustrate the ways in which those who are positioned as ‘inauthentic’ by an exclusionary discourse are not simply passive but can demonstrate agency through engagement with the tropes around which the discourse is organised. In wider analytical terms, this serves as an example of how attending to the use of contested terminology in everyday discourse may lend new insights into the construction of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from an interview with songwriter Leeson O’Keefe on the website Shite ‘n Onions: [http://www.shitenonions.com/interview\\_Neck.htm](http://www.shitenonions.com/interview_Neck.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2389663378>

Somewhat fittingly, the various means by which second-generation people have utilised the 'Plastic Paddy' term within their own discourse and self-descriptions illustrates the 'plasticity' of plastic-ness, being capable of being moulded into a number of different meanings. The ascribed nature of the 'Plastic Paddy' term means that second-generation Irishness operates as a 'troubled' identity, but tracing the ways in which second-generation Irish people in positioning themselves within discourses of 'authenticity' or 'inauthenticity' illustrates the multiplicity of understandings and performances of second-generationness.

Discursive strategies for avoiding being positioned as a 'Plastic Paddy' ranged from not going 'over the top' with one's Irishness, to adopting localised hybrid identities, to simply rejecting the accuracy of the term as a description of second-generation Irishness. While the approaches differ in the extent to which dominant understandings of the term are challenged, they collectively serve to undermine usages of the term to describe, indiscriminately, all those of Irish descent born outside the island of Ireland.

It is debateable however, whether this indicates a shift towards more deterritorialised understandings of diasporic Irish identity, as discussed earlier. Irishness as it is understood in Ireland still retains a central position in these discourses as the standard against which other understandings of Irishness must be rhetorically constructed. Given this centrality, diasporic conceptions of Irishness do not so much deconstruct as co-exist, not always entirely comfortably, alongside the notion of a unitary national Irishness residing within the island of Ireland. Authenticity therefore, however it is understood, acts as an important shibboleth towards claiming national identity.

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