



*Critical Social Thinking: Policy and Practice, Vol. 1, 2009*

Dept. of Applied Social Studies,  
University College Cork,  
Ireland

## **Immigration and social change in contemporary society: An assessment of the process of integration and the ‘recognition’ of ethnic minorities**

**Kate Ross-Lonergan, BSocSc**

### **Abstract**

Contemporary politics has in recent years witnessed an upsurge of interest on the topic of multi-culturalism and the ‘recognition’ of minority groups. As noted by Bacik (2004:182) ‘by comparison with other European states, there was relatively little immigration to Ireland in the twentieth century.’ Ireland is a country whose history was characterised by substantial patterns of emigration. The 1990s however, introduced a ‘new’ Ireland with the expansion of the economy and the years of ‘The Celtic Tiger’. In light of this dramatic change the phenomenon of net immigration to Ireland began. This process of social change took the Irish government by surprise and has led to an abundance of ad-hoc immigration policies and to the lack of a coherent integrative framework for ethnic minorities. The rationale for this research is to contribute to an understanding of the importance of ‘recognition’ of ethnic minorities and how its incorporation into legislation and service provision is crucial in shaping the future for progressive immigration policy in Ireland. An analysis of policy and legislation to date was carried out to set the scene for the current situation in Ireland, finally the role of specific N.G.O.s in Cork City was assessed and how they further the integration process, particularly the ‘recognition’ of difference. The findings suggest that the question of minority

rights be framed within the principles of liberal democracy. This is pivotal in the Irish case in relation to broader immigration policy and the integration process and would realign the debate on immigration policy away from a primary emphasis on regulation and control of borders, to issues of 'recognition' and integration.

**Key terms:** Multiculturalism; ethnic minorities; integration; recognition; citizenship.

### **Background**

Theories on recognition are a central focus of this piece of research. The current debate on multi-culturalism and the 'recognition' of ethnic minorities has spawned an extensive literature. The work of Charles Taylor (Taylor, 1994) and Will Kymlicka (Kymlicka, 2000), from a liberal perspective and the theories of Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2003) and Iris Marion Young (Young, 1990) from a more radical perspective, provides an appropriate theoretical backdrop to the questions being researched and provide a framework for the analysis of social policy and legislation relating to the emergence of ethnic minorities in Ireland.

In particular, the work of Young and Fraser (Young 1990, Fraser, 2003) were useful in guiding the research and have relevance for application to the Irish situation. Young's theory on 'the politics of difference' (Young 1990: 157) argues that when 'political procedures and practices transcend group difference for a system of universalism which treats every individual as equal, inequalities are produced and formal democracies only reflect the interests and perspectives of the majority group'. (Young 1990:157) In this way liberal politics 'excludes and devalues some persons on account of their group attributes' (Young 1990:157). Cultural injustice and that there is a need to attend to group difference in both the private and public sphere are central to her argument. Young recognises that 'attachment to specific traditions, practices, language and other culturally specific forms is a crucial aspect of social existence people do not usually give up their social group identifications, even when they are oppressed' (Young, 1990, p.163). She believes that minority groups will

continue to structure our society and that social justice involves ‘a politics that asserts the positivity of group difference’ (Young, 1990, p.166) and the mutual ‘recognition’ and affirmation of distinctness. Her work is highly influential in relation to the debate on ‘recognition’ as her theory on ‘the politics of difference’ is consistent with the Irish case today the oppression that she identifies can be seen here. For example in the lower paid service sector of the labour market in the form of exploitation, as well as this the system of direct provision ensures the marginalisation of asylum seekers from mainstream society by accommodating and feeding them in segregated centres and denying them access to the labour market. Her work understands how the ‘politics of difference’ (Young 1990) can complement other political practices and therefore promote social justice in contemporary society. For this reason her theory of ‘the politics of difference’ (Young 1990) was an appropriate framework for analysis.

Fraser’s theory of ‘recognition or redistribution’ (Fraser, 2003) was also central to the research process. Fraser argues that contemporary political debates focus on recognition politics and economic struggles in society have been obscured by this. Fraser argues that ‘race is a two dimensional issue and contains the aspect of status and class’ therefore the oppression of ethnic minorities involves ‘mal-distribution and mis-recognition’ (Fraser, 2003, p.22). Ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately high rates of unemployment and poverty and are ‘over-represented in menial work’ as well as this they are constructed as ‘inferior’ to the dominant culture and are not recognised as ‘full members of society’ this can lead to ‘cultural devaluation, marginalisation, harassment and denial of equal citizenship rights’ (civil, political and social) (Fraser, 2003, p.23). Fraser focuses on integrating ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’ to transform contemporary political practices. Her argument centres on the premise that multiculturalism with its emphasis on ‘recognition’ has obscured issues relating to the economy and in particular the distribution of resources which is just as relevant in the pursuit of justice in modern democratic societies. She promotes a comprehensive framework that uses both redistribution and recognition to combat social injustice in society. Her theory of ‘redistribution or recognition’ (Fraser 2003) can be applied to the Irish situation as barriers to employment exist and ethnic

minorities tend to make up the bulk of service sector low paying jobs. Stereotyping of ethnic minorities also persists in the Irish context and views immigrants as welfare scroungers and ‘the alien’ in society if negative connotations like this continue to be associated with ethnic minorities in contemporary society then injustices of ‘mis-recognition’ and ‘mal-distribution’ will prevail. (Fraser, 2003) Consequently Fraser’s work was useful for the research process as she promotes a comprehensive framework that uses both ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’ to combat social injustice in society.

In summary, the debate on the concept of ‘recognition’ has proved controversial and increasingly, group differentiation cannot be ignored or avoided as it forms part of an individual’s identity and promotes a sense of solidarity. The relationship between ‘recognition’ and ‘distribution’ highlighted by Nancy Fraser is integral to the research process as it can be applied to contemporary society where ethnic minorities as mentioned earlier are disproportionately affected by economic inequality. Any political process which aims to transcend group distinctness in a diverse society risks producing significant exclusion and inequality, and has implications for the welfare and integration of groups deemed to be different. The next section discusses models of integration, whether there is a perfect model of integration and Ireland’s response to immigration.

### **Models of integration**

When looking to other countries there is a debate on two different models of integration used today one is assimilation while the other is the multi-cultural model. An assimilation model of integration states that there should be no public expression of ethnicity, religion or culture these are a matter for the private domain. This was very much the French tendency as asserted by Fanning (2007: 219), ‘citizenship the foundation of all freedoms, is essentially a contract between the individual and the state.’ In France, members of ethnic minority communities have the same human rights as every other citizen but their cultural difference may not be expressed in public they must assimilate to the majority culture. All three interviewees identified

this model as being regressive as it is an obstacle to integration and a form of oppression. It expects ethnic minority communities to repress their cultural difference which is of importance to them and so associates negative connotations with difference. On the other hand there is the multi-cultural model, and as of yet Canada and Australia are the only countries in the world to have legislated for multiculturalism. Multi-culturalism is essentially a trade-off, so in recognising culture and diversity as far as possible there are at the same time core values and if a migrant wants to live in the host society they must agree to these core values. As noted by Fanning (2007, p.225), 'both countries recognise that it is not possible to have diversity without also affirming core values.' In the case of Canada, and increasingly in European countries, a potential migrant intending to stay permanently, must learn the official language, and in Canada this means either French or English.

In the European context, immigration has come a bit later (with the exception of France) than the older immigration countries (Canada, Australia, U.S.). The reality of nation state building in Europe has played a factor in responses to immigration. In Europe the nation state was constituted by the citizens of that nation themselves who shared a common history and culture and in most cases, a shared language and religion. So the European tradition of nation-building has both civil and ethnic aspects in relation to their citizenship traditions, which may be inclusionary and/or exclusionary. The 'ethnic' dimension of a nation may focus on culture, with citizenship being on the basis of ethnic origin rather than civic nationality. Cultural and social divisions are generated by nation-building, and the way politics is structured within the state both shapes and is shaped by these divisions. Nation-building involved the idea of a shared culture, but this often demonstrated cleavages arising from ethnic, religious or linguistic differences (Bellamy 2004). Nationality is a dimension of nation states, and ethnic and civil dimensions may emphasis assimilation and/or acculturation to a statist ethic (ibid.:15). The construction of the modern Irish nation embodied a politics of nationalism, a vision of a Gaelic, rural, Catholic and sedentary Ireland (Garner 2004:208) which limited the articulation of

difference. The recent influx of migrants to Ireland has forced Ireland to address the issue of integration and ‘recognition’.

In recent years with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and Madrid, the famous murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands the whole debate about multi-culturalism has emerged and the failure of these European countries to integrate immigrants. In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a rising public debate around whether other cultures and their beliefs were compatible with European liberal democracy. These series of events around Europe have shifted the political thinking on immigration and integration policies; currently Europe is going through a tumultuous period where the idea of multi-culturalism is being called into question.

### **The Irish Situation**

In the Irish context policy to date has been on a piecemeal basis and has let the labour market determine the controls and regulations for immigration, this does not look likely to change anytime soon. Legislation to date has focused on immigration and preventative measures to reduce the number of unwanted categories of immigrants entering Ireland mainly asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants, rather than focusing on what needs to happen when they get here and what services, information and assistance are available to them when they do. The integration and recognition aspect is the one that seems to consistently fall short. This could be due in part to the reliance on out-dated legislation and on hurried amendments to legislation which are unclear and end up creating more issues in relation to ethnic minority rights. Immigrants continue to experience barriers to different degrees in Irish society particularly in terms of recognition, in the workplace and education and in the system of direct provision and family reunification.

It can be seen that ‘no perfect model of integration’ (Fanning 2007:226) has yet been developed for the more diverse society that exists today. Immigration is now an integral part of society and integration is something that needs to be carefully addressed. The debate regarding multi-culturalism, integration and the recognition of

cultural difference is a complex one which this research process could not unravel however, this study aims to shed a new light on the topic of integration with a focus on the people involved in the process.

### **Empirical Findings**

The study examined the prevailing difficulties and barriers to the integration process and the recognition of cultural difference of ethnic minorities in Ireland. The research also looked at the possibility of policy change and the role of N.G.O.s in promoting change and the positive recognition of difference. The key findings were divided into four themed sections. The first section dealt with the policy framework of these agencies and the possible incorporation of recognition into this. The second section looked at methods for promoting ‘recognition’ and integration of ethnic minority groups, the third section highlighted the obstacles to integration identified by the representatives of these agencies. The fourth section dealt with policy formation and the impact it has on the delivery of services and the lives of ethnic minority communities.

### ***Policy Framework***

The respondents were asked to describe the policy framework which they promote, and how the ‘recognition’ of difference was incorporated into their policies and procedures. Although the ‘recognition’ of difference was central to the research not all the respondents could agree that this term was incorporated into their approach. The answers from each respondent varied somewhat but the common theme that consistently appeared in each interview was the importance of integration. In the case of Cois Tine Gerry Forde spoke from a more Christian ethos as Cois Tine is a Church-based organisation. We are a multi-cultural organisation that respects and promotes integration of people from all communities, cultures and faiths”. Their organisation focuses primarily on the more disadvantaged ethnic minorities like asylum seekers and refugees of African origins. The recognition of difference is incorporated in their approach not in these specific terms but by the acceptance of all people no matter “who they are, whatever their religion and where ever they are at in life and trying to

help them” in this way they are conscious of difference. The findings suggested that integration is an important process and that the recognition of difference is an integral part of this process. However, in the Irish case it appears that this term is relatively new and somewhat under-developed as it is not specifically referred to as an aspect of the process of integration.

### ***Methods for promoting integration and the ‘recognition’ of minority groups***

It was important for the research process to be aware of the methods used to promote the integration and ‘recognition’ of minority groups as this gave an understanding of the roles of the different agencies involved in the study and how they operate. Paul Dunbar referred to Nasc’s collaboration with other groups in Cork like Minority Ethnic Led Organisations (M.E.L.O.) through the Cork Networking Community (C.N.C.). As well as this they hold information talks by their speaker’s panel, give advice, provide services and undertake regular campaigns to encourage the ‘recognition’ and integration of ethnic minorities. An example of one of their campaigns is on the issue of family reunification for refugees. Involvement with the C.N.C lets the agency work with the capacity building of ethnic minority groups, because as Paul said “they are limited in the sense that they don’t have funding”. So the C.N.C. holds social and cultural events to help promote the integration of these groups but Paul feels the recognition of these ethnic minorities is “trickier” than promoting integration. So in relation to the promotion of integration each respondent emphasised a different aspect be it the importance of a national policy, the raising of awareness through campaigning or facilitating the capacity building of less-developed groups, or on a practical more local level holding events to encourage integration. Each of these features is essential in creating the optimum conditions for the integration and recognition of ethnic minorities. All of the groups emphasised the power of public opinion in integration and the promotion of ‘recognition’ campaigns and events help to alter public opinion and so change the negative connotations associated with immigrants and create a more “positive image of difference as normal”. All respondents agreed that it is those who are in positions of power be it



managerial or the leaders of our country it is up to them to promote integration and recognition because it needs to “start at the top and “spread through the ranks”.

***Obstacles to integration and forms of oppression experienced by ethnic minority communities***

All respondents identified some form of oppression or as some referred to it “barriers” to integration. The Current system was highlighted by all as being oppressive in particular the system of direct provision and the issue of family reunification. The misrecognition of groups was also highlighted by some as a form of oppression. Piaras MacEinri highlighted the harsher and stricter immigration policy that exists in Ireland today; he argued that the proposed Immigration and Residence Bill is consistent with these stricter regulations and immigration controls. He added that this situation is similar in other countries in Europe and that a “Fortress of Europe” has been created focusing on stopping people at entry into the country. Piaras also emphasised the issue of one year funding and how it is wasteful of resources he argued that Ireland should learn from best practice and funding should be provided for a few years to see significant changes arise. In the Irish context many obstacles to integration and other forms of oppression continue to persist. Without improved access to employment, education and other services it is more difficult for ethnic minorities to integrate. The system of direct provision was highlighted as a major barrier to integration as it maintains ethnic minorities on the peripherals of society and inhibits their interactions with the mainstream. It ends up being a form of “institutionalisation” as it is a lengthy process in which people are housed and fed in a centre. Another important feature of oppression highlighted by all respondents was family reunification and how without the “support structure” of an individual’s family with them their capacity to integrate into society is reduced considerably. The issue of funding and resources was stressed the government’s solution of one year funding to for example build capacity for ethnic minority groups is a well meaning project but when the funding is withdrawn after the year then the progress appears to drip away and result in the project not being finished and we end up right back where we started and no closer to integration or the ‘recognition’ of ethnic minorities.

***Policy formation and its impact on the provision of services for and the lives of ethnic minorities***

In terms of policy formation and the channels open to change policy, two different ways were highlighted by all respondents; lobbying politicians directly and changing public opinion. As for the impact of policy on the provision of services and the lives of ethnic minority groups it was clear that more progressive policies will have a more positive approach on the lives of ethnic minorities. Again all the respondents stressed different aspects of policy formation but were all in agreement on its impact. Without the relevant policies in place being tried, tested, implemented and developed the situation of ethnic minorities will change very little. Although agencies and organisations are doing great work in the provision of services for these groups and holding social and cultural events to promote integration and the ‘recognition’ of cultural difference there are limits to what they can do because of funding, resources and time. If harsher immigration policies are introduced this will make the work of these organisations that much harder. In terms of policy change and formation, the agencies hope that concerns raised on the proposed Immigration and Residence Bill will not go un-noticed and a fair and coherent immigration policy will be developed. The necessity of a national integration strategy is highlighted by all respondents without this the supports for integration and the ‘recognition’ of ethnic minorities are not available.

**Reflections on the research process and its significance**

The time frame for the Research Project was six months from October to March so in that way the research content was limited. The significance of the research in contributing to the understanding of the process of integration with particular reference to the recognition of cultural difference has been invaluable. Although I found out that in general in Ireland recognition is not an integral part of the integration process in relation to the interviewees all of them stressed the importance of recognition of difference maybe not in these specific terms but they recognised difference as a normal and positive thing. In the Irish case the majority of research has focused on the regulation of borders and the introduction of harder immigration



controls so this research process has shed new light on the multi-cultural and integration debate. The theoretical approach adopted was useful in creating a more comprehensive understanding of what is meant by the concept of integration and recognition as well as social citizenship. All in all this was a unique study focusing on the humanistic side to immigration rather than the facts and the figures.

## **Bibliography**

- Bacik, I. (2004) 'Ethnicity and Immigration' in Bacik, I. *Kicking and Screaming, Dragging Ireland into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Dublin: O' Brien Press, pp.182-209.
- Bellamy, R., Castiglione, D. & Santoro, E. (2004) *Lineages of European citizenship*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Department for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (1999) *Integration: a two way process*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Fanning, B. (2007) *Immigration and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fraser, N. and Honneth, A. (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition, A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso
- Fraser, N. and Honneth, A. (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition, A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso
- Garner, S. (2004) *Racism in the Irish Experience*, London: Pluto Press.