National identity in a Scottish hospital: an everyday way of being?

Briefing No. 11, January 2006

Key Points

- This briefing paper reports on a study by an anthropologist of a working hospital as seen from the inside, from the point of view of its employees.
- It explores nationality in the context of everyday life and work: how such a phenomenon figures, if at all, in the ‘natural’ context of people’s routine social relations and workaday worlds.
- National identity appears as one of a range of identities that people adopt for different purposes at different times.
- National identity shows itself as an ambiguous, emotional attachment to particular events and activities.
- National identity appears less important, in the everyday, than kinds of identities regarded as closer to home.
- In the increasingly global contexts of social life, nationality may, paradoxically, be attractive as a kind of middle-range identity: neither too big nor too small, too distant nor too ineffective.

Related Publications

(all by Nigel Rapport)


Policy Implications

With the advent of the Scottish Parliament the words ‘Scottish’ and ‘Scottishness’ are invested with new public and political legitimacy and power. Policy-makers must not deceive themselves into thinking that such a public profile makes these words any easier to know in terms of the everyday lives which individuals and institutions choose to live through them (or not). They may or may not be invested with notions which their users take to be ones of ‘national’ identity.
Introduction

This briefing paper reports on research undertaken in a Scottish hospital on the theme of national identity, specifically Scottishness. It examines the ways in which this identity was expressed as an everyday aspect of individual and institutional identity in a situation of high-profile political change. Nationality is explored as a particular kind of spoken and lived identity: a set of words and behaviour which people routinely deploy by which they express themselves, in which they publicly live. The paper is one of a pair; see also ‘A Scottish Hospital? identity at work’, Briefing No. 10.

Ninewells Hospital is the major medical facility responsible for providing acute medical services for a population of approximately 470,000 in east-central Scotland, a geographical region of some 3,000 square miles. The Hospital also represents one of the largest employers in Dundee, providing almost 10 per cent of local jobs in an area of sizable unemployment. How does the identity and ethos of a modern hospital, a large-scale, technologically sophisticated institution, with a global workforce, catering to ‘human’ need, abut against claims (parochial? primordial?) to national distinctiveness?

Methodology

Research in Ninewells Hospital was conducted largely by participant-observation fieldwork – the author worked as a hospital porter – over a period of ten months, followed by a further two months’ of semi-structured interviewing of medics, managers and Word. Words recorded and behaviour observed were then analysed in terms of what the author knew, from his own experiences in the hospital, about the individuals concerned, their work, status, responsibilities, personal attitudes and formal position in the hospital. A picture of the hospital as an institution is thus built up piecemeal from everyday observations of individuals at work – including the author himself.

Findings

Three main conclusions may be drawn about nationality as a kind of identity:

• Affirmations of identity are plural, temporary and contextual.

Identity based on notions of nationality, such as Scottishness, was only one of a number of kinds of affirmation that people made in Ninewells Hospital. It was not an identity that people always espoused, certainly not one that everyone exposed to the research did espouse: it did not necessarily make it their fundamental or undergirding identity. Rather, being an identity and a status that attached itself to all thinking and acting, nationality was asserted in connection with specific undertakings, such as sport, or a display of certain behavioural traits, such as quickness or drollness: it always accompanied a characteristic or emotional level ‘Scottishness’, then, was variously attached by people to a vociferous supporting of the national team against foreign teams, to ensuring children took seriously their lessons in country dancing, to proudly celebrating a capacity for consuming alcohol at parties and pubs – and to a parochial bias against the English or other ‘outsiders’. However ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge however ascribed (to practices and events), and whether positively or negatively defined, a raised emotional charge. ‘Scottish identity? We’re drunken bastards! And Scottish football is white. I don’t like saying it but it’s true – I wonder how good even the best players up here would be down there in England!’

• Different kinds of affirmation of identity merge into one another on a common sliding scale.

Nationality is one of a number of kinds of identity which are ranged on a scale of size, and of closeness and distance to oneself; one moves up and down the scale, from greater to lesser inclusivities, at different moments, substituting one kind of identity for another as one perceives the need or opportunity or other contingencies. Thus, Scottishness, the national identity, slides into other, more local and exclusive identities such as East of Scotland, Dundee, Lochee; or one’s occupational community or place of work or family; as well as larger-sized, more distant identities again, such as British, European or Western. Moreover, when considered in terms of the time and attention with which people invest it and the pressure with which they can define it, Scottishness would often give way to identities considered more particular.

At Ninewells, people were often serious about their affirmations of nationality, and very emotionally attached, but more often they measured their belonging, certainly attested to it, in terms of identities smaller in geographical scale and closer in ‘genealogical’ or biographical connection or housing estate, local football team or family, professional association. Scottishness was less significant as an everyday marker of identity at work than identities further down the scale, closer to one’s in terms of size identities more easily identifiable as pertaining to oneself as an individual. Thus, different medics could concur that: ‘Scottish identity? We’re drunken bastards! And Scottish football is white. I don’t like saying it but it’s true – I wonder how good even the best players up here would be down there in England!’

Dundee had to shape itself as an area of medical specialism in opposition to Glasgow and Edinburgh. That’s been the pressure on Ninewells Hospital, not something ‘Scottish’ as such. Dundee has always been isolated within the Scottish framework, or again: ‘We still don’t trust the Scots. At Ninewells Hospital; nationality was only one of a number of claims to identity made at the same time, and it came to mean a range of things. Again, this suggests caution in considering connections between the everyday expression of nationality – its commonness as a theme in public deliberation – and its being a political project of legislators. The flag-waving surrounding the new Scottish Parliament only occasionally achieved a presence at Ninewells Hospital; when it did so, it was manifested in force as much as in a patriotic validation.

As an explicit affirmation of identity, the present study draws attention to certain distinctive features of nationality as a way of being:

• Nationality is in tension – competition, contest – with other kinds of identity. It is part of a field or range of legitimate ways of speaking and behaving in the everyday. There is tension – albeit because they are alternatives at any one moment of expression people make a selection between nationality and other ways of being. The tension is heightened because these different ways operate in contradistinction to one another; at least in part: nationality contrasts with non-nationalist identities that emphasise, for instance, medical practice, occupational (instituional) practice, political allegiances, sport, leisure, the market, education, health, collegiality, race and ethnicity, gender, individualism, localism, regionalism, globalism or cosmopolitanism as keys to who one is.

• Nationality appears as an identity with a particular character; it is vague and emotion-laden. Nationality embodies values as much as anything else; it is more of a substance, if not more so. It is a prescription for loyalty, pride, belonging; tradition – alternatively: parochialism, quickness, xenophobia – more than an exact description of particular group members and their behaviours. The usefulness of such vagueness is its inclusivity. The ambiguity lies in the claim to identity: it invites contribution; it invites continuing use of the concept. For many at Ninewells Hospital, nationality in...