Using survey data to explore preschool children’s ethnic awareness and attitudes

Paul Connolly

Journal of Early Childhood Research 2011 9: 175
DOI: 10.1177/1476718X10387898

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ecr.sagepub.com/content/9/2/175
Using survey data to explore preschool children’s ethnic awareness and attitudes

Paul Connolly
Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

Abstract
This article presents the findings of a large-scale survey (n = 1049) of ethnic awareness and attitudes among three to four-year-old children in Northern Ireland. In drawing upon and applying Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, the article demonstrates how, even at this age, the children are already beginning to embody and internalize the cultural habits and dispositions of their respective ethnic groups; namely the Protestant and Catholic communities. This is illustrated in the present article in relation to the children’s attitudes towards particular national flags and awareness of specific sports associated with their respective communities. Informed by the work of Bourdieu, the article concludes by arguing for the need for greater use of quantitative methods in conjunction with in-depth qualitative and ethnographic research to help further our understanding of the influence of ethnicity in young children’s lives.

Keywords
community identity, ethnic awareness, habitus, preschool children

Introduction
Since the early 1920s, psychologists have been concerned with attempting to identify and measure the ways in which children first become aware of racial differences, in particular, and the attitudes they ascribe to these and how these attitudes develop with age. The clear message arising from this body of predominantly quantitative research has been that children tend to begin recognizing racial differences from about the age of two and are capable of ascribing meaning to these differences (including negative attitudes) from around the age of three onwards (for overviews see Aboud, 1988; Milner, 1983).

This body of work has been extremely important in terms of providing clear evidence of how race and ethnicity can impact upon the lives of very young children and thus making possible discussions concerning the need to address such issues in early childhood programmes. More recently, research in this quantitative tradition has provided important insights into the cognitive processes and complexities of racial attitude formation. It has, for example, drawn attention to: the need to distinguish between in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice; how in-group favouritism can
develop in young children without the need for their subjective identification with the in-group; and how racial attitudes are informed by exposure to diversity as well as how those attitudes impact upon friendship choices and the quality and nature of the relationships that develop (Aboud et al., 2003; Bennett et al., 1998; Doyle and Aboud, 1995; Kowalski, 1998, 2003).

Inevitably, however, in the search for broader patterns and trends in the development of racial and ethnic attitudes among young children, there is something lost in terms of understanding the context-specific nature of young children’s racial attitudes and their contingent and contradictory character as they arise out of and then, in turn, inform the complex sets of social interactions between young children. Indeed, the limitations of some of the earlier quantitative research in this area — that was criticized for encouraging a de-contextualized and static understanding of young children’s racial and ethnic attitudes and identities — have been well-rehearsed elsewhere (Billig, 1985; Condor, 1988; Connolly, 1996, 2001; MacNaughton and Davis, 2009; Potter and Wetherall, 1987; Reicher, 1986).

It is in recognition of such limitations that an equally important body of qualitative (and largely sociological) research has begun to emerge more recently that has been concerned with understanding and documenting young children’s experiences and perspectives (see, for example, Connolly, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Troyna and Hatcher, 1992; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). What has been of a particular concern for much of this work has been the importance of developing naturalistic accounts of how race and ethnicity operate in young children’s social worlds and the complex sets of inter-relations and wider social processes and forces that underpin this. This, in turn, has drawn attention to the complex and contradictory nature of race and ethnicity as they are recognized and reproduced in young children’s lives and the agency of the children themselves in terms of the key role they can play in appropriating, re-working and reproducing discourses on race and ethnicity (Connolly, 1998; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001).

One of the ways in which attempts have been made to make sense of the impact of race and ethnicity on children’s perspectives and identities has been through the use of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (Connolly, 1998; Reay, 1995). The habitus represents a set of predispositions and taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting that an individual gradually develops over time and that is reflective of their day-to-day experiences and the routine sets of social relationships that they are embedded within. As such, the habitus can therefore be regarded as the internalization or embodiment in an individual of the environment within which they are located. Put simply, the way people think and behave is ultimately a reflection of their previous experiences and is therefore constrained to the extent that their immediate social worlds are constrained. As Bourdieu (1993: 86) has explained:

> The habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought.

Such a concept is potentially useful in exploring how discourses on race and ethnicity, as manifest in the media and popular culture and more specifically in local social structures and neighbourhoods, come to be progressively internalized by young children as taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting. As such, a focus on habitus therefore requires us to understand young children’s racial and ethnic attitudes and identities within particular social contexts (or what Bourdieu’s refers to as ‘fields’). Given this it can be understood why, methodologically, much of the work that has attempted to use and apply the notion of habitus to young children’s lives, including in relation to issues of race and ethnicity, has tended to be qualitative and often ethnographic in approach.
However, there is something that is lost by restricting our methodological focus to qualitative, ethnographic research. If the habitus does represent the internalization of broader social structures and represents a set of predispositions that are manifest, to some extent, in the regularization of particular ways of thinking and behaving then these wider patterns should be discernible and thus ultimately measurable to at least some degree.

This last point was clearly recognized by Bourdieu himself and underpins one of his classic works – *Distinction* – that made use of a large-scale survey and advanced statistical techniques to gain insights into the effects of social class on people’s cultural habits and dispositions in France (Bourdieu, 1984). However, while recognizing the importance of quantitative research, Bourdieu (1984: 40) is also clear about its limitations:

Statistical enquiry is indispensable in order to establish beyond dispute the social conditions of possibility (which will have to be made more explicit) of the ‘pure’ disposition. However, because it inevitably looks like a scholastic test intended to measure the respondents against a norm tacitly regarded as absolute, it may fail to capture the meanings which this disposition and the whole attitude to the world expressed in it have for the different social classes.

This, then, provides the starting point for this present article. Through the use of a case study of a large-scale survey \( n = 1049 \) of the ethnic attitudes of three- to four-year-old children in Northern Ireland, the article seeks to demonstrate the value of survey methods, and quantitative research more generally, in exploring what Bourdieu above referred to as the ‘conditions of possibility’ or, in this case, when and how ethnicity begins to emerge as part of the habitus of preschool children. Of course, the types of generalized trends that emerge from surveys such as this only ever reflect such conditions of possibility and the ways in which broader, structural conditions are mediated and negotiated in the lives of young children is something that in-depth, qualitative methods are uniquely placed to uncover. Following an outline of the quantitative case study and key findings, the article will conclude with a wider discussion of the potential ways in which quantitative and qualitative methods might be better used to complement one another.

**Methodology**

As mentioned above, the vast majority of research on preschool children’s ethnic attitudes has tended to focus on those attitudes that develop in response to ethnic groups that tend to be distinguished by physical differences, most notably in terms of race. To date, much less attention has been paid to the emergence of ethnic attitudes among young children where differences are not physical but culturally based as is characteristic of many ethnic conflicts and divisions around the world. As such, this present case study of Northern Ireland is particularly apposite given its focus on the emergence of ethnic attitudes among preschool children from the two majority ethnic groups in the region – Protestants and Catholics – that tend to be signified through a range of cultural differences that reflect the differing national/political aspirations of both groups (Britishness and Irishness respectively). While the armed conflict is all but over, the 30 years of violence in the region has left its legacy with high levels of residential and social segregation between the Protestant and Catholic communities (Fay et al., 1999; Morrisey and Smyth, 2002).

The purpose of this quantitative study is therefore to begin to map out the ‘conditions of possibility’, as Bourdieu termed it, of how and in what ways such levels of continuing ethnic segregation begin to emerge in young children’s social worlds and become a part of their developing habitus. The survey was conducted by accessing children via 56 preschool nurseries and playgroups located across Northern Ireland. With the help and support of *Early Years – The*
A total of 1049 children aged three to four years took part in the survey. The key characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1. As can be seen, the final sample was fairly balanced in relation to gender and ethnicity. In terms of age, the mean age of the children was four years and one month.

Data collection was undertaken with each child individually. Signed parental consent was gained for each child before they were approached and the children’s own consent was also sought at two levels. First, each child was given the option of whether to take part in the research or not and, second, it was made clear to them that they could stop and go back to what they were doing in the nursery/playgroup at any point during the interview. In addition, the interviewers were asked specifically to monitor the children’s body language and to stop and ask them if they wanted to carry on if, at any time, they appeared to become restless or in any way distressed.

Data collection was undertaken by a designated early childhood practitioner working in each of the nurseries/playgroups. They were all provided with training and were asked to follow a highly structured research instrument that standardized the way the children were approached, what each practitioner said to the child and the order and manner in which the interviews were conducted. A copy of the final research instrument used is available from the author on request.

The actual interview with each child consisted of a number of tasks that the children were asked to complete. The tasks represented a first attempt to begin to explore the ways in which ethnic segregation in Northern Ireland was impacting upon and thus coming to be expressed through the habitus of the young children. In this sense the tasks aimed to assess the degree to which the children were already beginning to internalize the cultural dispositions of their respective communities through examining their awareness of and/or attitudes towards various commonly appearing cultural symbols and events. Given the restrictions of space, this article will focus on just two: national flags and different sports. These two cultural symbols/events were chosen as they are among the most common ways in which the cultural preferences of the Protestant and Catholic communities differ. As such, if young children are beginning to internalize the cultural dispositions of their respective communities at this age then one would expect to see this manifest as differences in the levels of awareness of and attitudes towards these two symbols/events. To avoid repetition, further details on each of these tasks are provided below when reporting the findings arising from them.

In addition to the data gained from the interviews, some contextual data were gathered and used in the analysis in relation to the neighbourhoods within which the nurseries/playgroups were located. The purpose of including such data in the analysis was to see whether the children’s attitudes and awareness varied in relation to neighbourhood characteristics. Given that certain areas within Northern Ireland remain highly segregated and ongoing sectarian violence continues within some of these areas, it was hypothesized that this may lead to heightened levels of ethnic awareness.
and attitudes among the children living in these areas. The contextual data used were derived from the 2001 Census and represented three variables that are most commonly assumed to relate to the incidence of sectarian conflict and violence in Northern Ireland: levels of deprivation; the degree to which an area is rural or urban; and the degree to which it is ethnically segregated. The first was an overall measure of multiple deprivation that represented a weighted, composite measure consisting on a number of domains of deprivation such as income, health and disability, and proximity to services. The second represented a proxy measure for whether a nursery/playgroup was located in a neighbourhood that was rural or urban and was simply the population density of the local area, measured as the number of persons per hectare. Third, two dummy measures were used to represent the degree to which each particular neighbourhood was either ethnically mixed or segregated. One measure (‘Catholic Majority’) consisted simply of the percentage of the population in that neighbourhood that was Catholic. It was coded such that the actual percentage was recorded if Catholics were in the majority in that area and was coded zero otherwise. A measure for ‘Protestant Majority’ was coded in the same way.

Findings

Preferences for national flags

In relation to flags, the children were presented with five national flags that were placed in front of them in random order: the British Union flag; the Irish tricolour flag; the Spanish flag; the Chinese flag; and the South African flag. The children were asked to look carefully at all five flags and then to point to the one they ‘liked the best’. That flag was removed and then they were asked to consider the remaining four flags and point to the one they liked the best. The process was repeated until all flags had been selected and/or the child said that they could not or did not want to choose any more.

The focus for the analysis was simply whether there was a tendency for Catholic children to display a preference for the Irish flag (that tends to be associated with the Catholic community in Northern Ireland) and, similarly, for Protestant children to display a preference for the British flag (that tends to be associated with the Protestant community in Northern Ireland). As illustrated in Figure 1, there was a general tendency for the Protestant children to rate the British flag higher than the Irish flag and, conversely, for the Catholic children to do the opposite. Within this, it is interesting to note the gender differences that existed across both groups such that the boys in both groups tended to rate their respective flags higher than the girls in their groups.

These findings were confirmed formally by statistically modelling the data (see Table 2). As can be seen from Table 2 (Model 1), in relation to the British flag, Protestant children were just over twice as likely (2.075 times more likely) to pick the British flag as their first choice compared to Catholic children. In addition, and independently of this, boys (whether Catholic and Protestant) were nearly three times more likely (2.918 times more likely) to select the British flag as their first choice than the girls. Further analysis of these data confirmed that these two tendencies were indeed independent of one another. In other words, there was no evidence to suggest that the gap in preferences between Protestants and Catholics was any bigger or smaller among the boys or the girls. Finally, and in relation to Model 2, it can be seen that such preferences were not associated with any of the neighbourhood characteristics included in the analysis and, overall, only just over 8 percent of the total variation in the children’s preferences for the British flag could be explained by the combined effects of gender and ethnicity.

The same basic picture was also evident in relation to the children’s preferences for the Irish flag. As also shown in Table 2 (Model 3), Catholic children were over two times more likely (2.239
Table 2. Variables associated with three- to four-year-old children’s choice of the British Union Flag and the Irish Tricolour Flag as their favourite (multilevel binary logistic regression models)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British Union Flag</th>
<th>Irish Tricolour Flag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (SE)</td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>B (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-level variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy (Girl = reference)</td>
<td>1.071 (0.147)</td>
<td>1.067 (0.148)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.730 (0.144)</td>
<td>0.750 (0.172)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (in months)</td>
<td>0.007 (0.013)</td>
<td>0.006 (0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood-level variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple deprivation</td>
<td>0.060 (0.087)</td>
<td>1.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>0.049 (0.081)</td>
<td>1.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic majority</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.003)</td>
<td>0.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant majority</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.003)</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.088 (0.663)</td>
<td>-1.995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U₀ (Neighbourhood level variance)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPC (Neighbourhood)</td>
<td>&lt;0.1%</td>
<td>&lt;0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Variance explained by model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Random Intercepts Model. Dependent variable: whether the children selected the flag indicated as their first choice (coded ‘1’) or not (coded ‘0’).
See discussion of methodology for an explanation of these neighbourhood-level variables.
Calculated simply from the correlation between observed values and predicted values from the model.
Dummy variable coded ‘1’ for Protestants in Models 1 and 2 and ‘1’ for Catholics in Models 3 and 4.
times more likely) to choose the Irish flag as their first choice than Protestant children. In addition, whatever their religion, boys were around one and a half times more likely (1.489 times more likely) to select the Irish flag as their first choice than girls and, as with the British flag, these two tendencies were found to operate independently of one another. Finally, and as can be seen in Model 4, such preferences were also not associated with any of the neighbourhood characteristics considered and the combined effects of gender and ethnicity were only able to account for a little over 3 percent of the total variation in the children’s preferences.

The fact that no evidence was found of any noticeable neighbourhood effect in relation to these preferences is particularly interesting given the way in which flags have tended to be used in Northern Ireland to mark territory and local neighbourhoods, particularly those that have a history of sectarian tensions and violence and that tend to also be in deprived and highly segregated areas. One would therefore expect there to be some variation in levels of preference for flags between neighbourhoods. However, and as shown here, the general tendency for Protestant and Catholic children to choose their own flags first was likely to occur to a similar degree whatever the local neighbourhood.

Awareness of sports

The other key task reported here involved the children looking at a photograph of either adults playing hockey (a sport that tends to be associated more with the Protestant community) or the Gaelic sport of hurling (that tends to be associated much more with the Catholic community). The particular photograph each child was shown first was selected randomly. For the photograph they were shown, the children were then asked a number of questions, including: ‘Can you tell me what game these men are playing?’ The same procedure was then followed for the remaining photograph.

The proportions of children able to name both sports correctly are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, a clear tendency is evident with Protestant children being much more likely to recognize hockey than Catholic children and, vice versa, Catholic children being much more likely to recognize hurling than Protestant children. Again, and within this, such tendencies appeared to be gendered with boys (whether Catholic or Protestant) being more likely to recognize both sports than girls.

In relation to the children’s ability to recognize and correctly name hockey, their responses were further analysed as previously with multilevel, binary logistic regression models. As can be seen from Table 3 (Model 5), the findings confirm the patterns described above and illustrated in Figure 1. Thus Protestant children were just under two and a half times more likely (2.430 times more likely) to want to play hockey than their Catholic counterparts and boys (of whatever ethnic group) were a little under two times more likely (1.817 times more likely) to want to play hockey than the girls. Moreover, and consistent with the findings in relation to flags, these two effects (of ethnicity and gender) tended to operate independently of one another. Finally, it can be seen (Model 6) that such levels of awareness were not associated with any of the neighbourhood characteristics and, overall, the combined effects of gender and ethnicity only accounted for 10 percent of the total variation in children’s ability to recognize the sport.

In a similar vein, Table 3 also summarizes the findings in relation to the children’s ability to recognize and correctly name hurling. Again, the findings from the statistical models (Models 7 and 8) confirm the picture illustrated in Figure 1. Thus, Catholic children were over 44 times more likely (44.301 times more likely) to be able to identify the sport compared to their Protestant counterparts (a ratio misleadingly high due to the fact that the proportion of Protestant children able to do this was negligible). In addition, boys (whether Catholic or Protestant) were a little under two
As before, these two effects of gender and ethnicity tended to operate independently of one another. This time, however, and given the larger differences that exist, it is not surprising to note that the combined effects of individual and neighbourhood-level variables were able to account for just under 20 percent of the total variation in the children’s responses.

Beyond this it is interesting to note from Model 8 that there is a relatively strong neighbourhood effect on this occasion with 38.1 percent of the variation in the children’s ability to recognize and correctly name hurling being accounted for by the neighbourhoods they come from. As Model 8 further illustrates, some of this variation would seem to be explained by the neighbourhood-level variables added into the model. While none of these is statistically significant, both the effects of multiple deprivation ($p = 0.160$, Chi-square = 1.971, d.f. = 1) and population density ($p = 0.161$, Chi-square = 1.962, d.f. = 1) were approaching statistical significance. As the nature of the coefficients indicate, a very slight tendency may therefore be apparent for children to be

### Table 3. Variables associated with three- to four-year-old children’s ability to correctly identify the sports of hockey and hurling (multilevel binary logistic regression models)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hockey</th>
<th></th>
<th>Hurling</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 5</td>
<td>Model 6</td>
<td>Model 7</td>
<td>Model 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B (SE)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exp(B)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-level variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy (Girl = reference)</td>
<td>0.597</td>
<td>1.817</td>
<td>0.533</td>
<td>1.704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.208)</td>
<td>(0.209)</td>
<td>(0.283)</td>
<td>(0.285)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.888</td>
<td>2.430</td>
<td>3.791</td>
<td>44.301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.239)</td>
<td>(0.270)</td>
<td>(0.915)</td>
<td>(0.920)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (in months)</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>1.111</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighbourhood-level variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple deprivation</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td>0.935</td>
<td>-0.591</td>
<td>0.554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.144)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.421)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>1.138</td>
<td>-0.465</td>
<td>0.628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.332)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic majority</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>1.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant majority</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>0.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-8.114</td>
<td>-8.017</td>
<td>-8.262</td>
<td>-8.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.102)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.670)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$u_0$ (Neighbourhood level variance)</td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>2.025</td>
<td>1.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.155)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.743)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPC (Neighbourhood)</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(p = 0.112)</td>
<td>(p = 0.146)</td>
<td>(p = 0.006)</td>
<td>(p = 0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%Variance explained by model</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aRandom Intercepts Model. Dependent variable: whether the children were able to correctly recognize and name the respective sport (coded ‘1’) or not (coded ‘0’).

*bSee discussion of methodology for an explanation of these neighbourhood-level variables.

*cCalculated simply from the correlation between observed values and predicted values from the model.

Dummy variable coded ‘1’ for Protestants in Models 1 and 2 and ‘1’ for Catholics in Models 3 and 4.

times more likely (1.704 times more likely) to be able to identify hurling than girls. As before, these two effects of gender and ethnicity tended to operate independently of one another. This time, however, and given the larger differences that exist, it is not surprising to note that the combined effects of individual and neighbourhood-level variables were able to account for just under 20 percent of the total variation in the children’s responses.

Beyond this it is interesting to note from Model 8 that there is a relatively strong neighbourhood effect on this occasion with 38.1 percent of the variation in the children’s ability to recognize and correctly name hurling being accounted for by the neighbourhoods they come from. As Model 8 further illustrates, some of this variation would seem to be explained by the neighbourhood-level variables added into the model. While none of these is statistically significant, both the effects of multiple deprivation ($p = 0.160$, Chi-square = 1.971, d.f. = 1) and population density ($p = 0.161$, Chi-square = 1.962, d.f. = 1) were approaching statistical significance. As the nature of the coefficients indicate, a very slight tendency may therefore be apparent for children to be
more likely to recognize hurling if they come from neighbourhoods that are less deprived and/or also less densely populated.

**Discussion**

The main purpose of large-scale surveys such as the one reported here is to help identify and understand better broad patterns in the population with regard to young children’s attitudes and levels of awareness. In particular, a survey such as this one is able to tell us how widespread particular attitudes and levels of awareness are and whether these vary in relation to other factors such as gender, religion, socio-economic background and/or the types of neighbourhood that the children live in. Such information can play a vital role when placed alongside qualitative research. A survey of this type can, for example, help to determine whether the findings of a single qualitative case study are generalizable to the population as a whole and/or whether such findings are actually more characteristic of particular subgroups of the population. Also, surveys can be more exploratory; helping to uncover hitherto unknown patterns in relation to young children’s attitudes and awareness that can then be explored further through qualitative case studies.

The survey reported in this article is an example of the latter, with the findings helping to uncover patterns in relation to the development of young children’s ethnic awareness and attitudes in Northern Ireland that were unknown to this point and that, in turn, provide important directions for follow-up qualitative research to help to begin to understand the nature and causes of such patterns. In particular, it represents one of the first studies of this size and scope that has been able to show that the ethnic divisions between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland are impacting upon young children and also to provide important clues as to what the nature of this impact has been. What this study has shown is that even by the ages of three and four, young children living in Northern Ireland are already beginning to internalize and reflect the cultural dispositions of their respective communities. This has been evident, for example, in relation to flags, with Catholic children being more likely to prefer the Irish flag and Protestant children the British flag, and in relation to sports, where Protestant children are more likely to recognize hockey and Catholic children more likely to recognize hurling. Moreover, and within this, the present study has been able to highlight the gendered nature of these two cultural markers. Not only do both appeal more to boys than girls but these gender differences are equally evident among Catholic and Protestant children. Finally, and at this age, the study has shown that there is little neighbourhood effect in relation to such patterns; with these dispositions being equally likely to emerge regardless of the type of neighbourhood that a child lives in. The one exception to this was in relation to the children’s awareness of the Gaelic sport of hurling where the evidence from the survey suggests that there are particular communities where such levels of awareness are much higher; reflecting the fact that hurling has strong local support in particular communities.

Of course, methodologically, this study has its limitations. While the use of early childhood practitioners from the settings to collect the data themselves made it possible to undertake such a large-scale survey, it is likely to introduce some level of unreliability into the data. While we tried to reduce this as far as possible by using a very structured research instrument and by providing the practitioners with training in how to use it, there remains the possibility that some practitioners would have done it differently to others. However, the consistency of the findings and the fact that there was little between-setting variation in them suggests that this was unlikely to be a notable problem in this present case. Beyond this, the findings also suggest that the two cultural examples that were used in the survey (flags and sports) were gendered and that they appealed more to boys than girls. This was not anticipated when the two examples were selected for use in the survey.
Rather, flags and sports were chosen because they tend to represent two of the main ways in which ethnic differences between Catholics and Protestants are expressed. However, while the findings reported here indicate that these two examples are more appealing to boys than girls, it would be wrong to conclude from this that this is likely to be the same for all possible examples of cultural differences between the two communities and thus to use this to claim that boys of this age are developing stronger ethnic dispositions than girls. Rather, it may be that there are other examples of cultural differences which appeal more to girls than boys. Further research, using a wider range of examples, is clearly needed to explore this.

Perhaps the key point methodologically is that these two limitations are not inherent to the survey-based method itself but rather to the specific way it was designed and employed for this particular study. If we had the resources to use a small team of highly trained fieldworkers to collect the data who could, in turn, have worked closely together to ensure high levels of reliability between themselves, then we could have gone a long way to addressing the first limitation outlined above. Similarly, we could have addressed the second limitation simply by including a more comprehensive range of cultural examples. However, and even as it stands, this present survey has provided strong evidence that young children in Northern Ireland are already showing signs of an emerging ethnic habitus in the way that they are beginning to internalize and reproduce some of the cultural habits of their respective communities. Moreover, the findings also indicate that gender is likely to play a role in mediating the way in which such an emerging ethnic habitus is expressed. These, in themselves, are important findings that are not just of relevance to Northern Ireland but are likely to have relevance to the many other regions around the world that are characterized by ethnic divisions and segregation but where these are based on cultural rather than physical markers of difference. At the very least the findings clearly demonstrate that such ethnic divisions are capable of impacting upon the early dispositions and preferences of young children and that early childhood may therefore have an important preventative role to play in helping to promote a more open, diverse and inclusive appreciation of cultural differences among children and thus potentially reducing the development of future negative attitudes.

Of course, much more research is required to help inform decisions as to whether such programmes are necessary and, if so, what their focus and approach should be. For example, now it has been established that a form of ethnic habitus is emerging among children of this age in Northern Ireland, further survey-based research would be useful to help map out the nature and extent of the differing forms of habitus that exist and which cultural events and symbols these forms of habitus are associated with. However, there is also the need, alongside this, for in-depth qualitative research to explore how such patterns work their way out in the lives of the children themselves and how they interpret and make sense of the different cultural items; thus helping to increase our understanding of the reasons for the patterns that have been uncovered. Moreover, it would be important to increase the scope of such research to include older children in order to begin to track how such patterns develop with age and whether they are associated with the emergence of an explicit awareness of the Protestant and Catholic communities and the future development of negative attitudes and prejudices towards these. Such research would, in turn, need to also be multi-method in nature with quantitative research helping to identify the nature and extent of these developmental trends and qualitative research being better positioned to help us understand the reasons for these. All of this information would be crucial in helping to determine the nature and scope of any early interventions aimed at promoting respect for cultural diversity and reducing the development of ethnic prejudices.

Finally, this mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods is likely to raise more fundamental epistemological and ontological concerns for some. It could be argued, for example, that the type
of survey-based approach described in this article is of a positivist tradition that is incompatible with the interpretivist philosophy that underpins ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research. However, such an argument tends to be based upon the creation of a false dualism that sets up two opposing positions that, in reality, are rarely found being advocated among researchers (Pring, 2002). It is, for example, difficult to find any researcher these days who describes themselves as a positivist and who believes that the social world ‘out there’ can be accurately and objectively measured in an unproblematic way. Equally, there are few mainstream researchers who would subscribe to a completely relativist position whereby every situation is completely unique and where reality is simply constructed in the minds of individuals.

For the most part, researchers tend to adopt a more pragmatic position that recognizes, on the one hand, the importance and complexity of social interactions and how these are fundamentally mediated by the meanings and interpretations of the individuals involved but that also recognizes, on the other hand, that there are broader social structures and processes out there, beyond the immediacy of specific interactions, that do exert an influence on such interactions. The challenge for researchers therefore is to try to make sense of both the micro social interactions and relationships that exist in particular contexts (such as the home or the school) as well as the wider social structures and processes within which these take place (such as the effects of pre-existing norms and beliefs regarding gender roles or differences between ethnic groups or the effects of socio-economic background). In this task there are very few mainstream researchers who believe that they have the methods (whether qualitative or quantitative) to develop a complete or objective understanding of that which they are studying. Most mainstream researchers accept that all research is influenced to one degree of another by the choices and involvement of the researchers themselves. Similarly, very few researchers believe that everything they are interested in is directly knowable and/or measurable. Rather, and whether conducting qualitative or quantitative research, there is an acceptance that the findings produced can only ever be partial. There may well be certain elements of children’s social worlds that will remain unknown as qualitative researchers are simply unable to gain full access to these. Similarly, there are many wider social structures and processes that cannot be measured directly but that rely upon the use of proxy measures that can only even provide a partial and approximate insight into the nature and extent of those structures and processes.

The type of pragmatic approach outlined above, that can be loosely labelled as critical realist (see Archer et al., 1998), is that which has informed the present study and which lies at the heart of Bourdieu’s own work. In particular, and as mentioned earlier, while much of Bourdieu’s work was qualitative and ethnographic in nature, he was also well aware of the existence of wider societal structures and processes and how these exerted an influence on particular social contexts and situations. The innovation in Bourdieu’s work was his attempt, through the notion of habitus, to develop a conceptual tool that avoided the construction of dualisms regarding the individual and society or structure and agency. Rather, the habitus – as the internalization of wider structures and processes manifest through the routine and taken-for-granted actions of individuals – creates the mechanism for understanding individual interaction but also the wider structures that both shape, and are shaped by, such interaction. As Bourdieu (1993: 15) explains:

Society exists in two inseparable forms: on the one hand, institutions that may take the form of physical things, monuments, books, instruments, etc., and, on the other, the acquired dispositions, the durable ways of being or doing that are incorporated in bodies (and which I call habitus). The socialized body (what is called the individual or the person) is not opposed to society: it is one of its forms of existence.
This, then, is the ontological position that underpins the present study. Ethnic groups do not just exist in the minds of individuals but have an existence in broader social structures. Some of these structures are physical in nature (in the context of Northern Ireland this would include the existence of segregated neighbourhoods and in other contexts can involve routine forms of discrimination and the segregation of ethnic groups in the labour market) but are also evident in the ways in which people tend to continue to identify with a particular ethnic group and engage in a range of practices that are durable and consistent and that tend to construct and reinforce that sense of identity. One of the tasks for researchers in attempting to understand ethnicity in young children’s social worlds, therefore, is to begin to understand when and how these routine practices begin to develop. The notion of the ethnic habitus is important in this regard as it, at one and the same time, helps us understand the micro-interactions, behaviours and perspectives of young children while also drawing our attention to the existence of broader social processes and structures. A fuller understanding of the ethnic habitus and how it works in the lives of young children therefore demands the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. In this regard, it is hoped that this article can contribute to a better understanding of the particular contribution that survey methods can made to this work.

Notes

1. See www.early-years.org.
2. The coefficient and its associated standard error for the interaction term of gender*religion added to Model 1 was -0.046 (0.295).
3. The coefficient and its associated standard error for the interaction term of gender*religion added to Model 1 was -0.325 (0.365).
4. The coefficient and its associated standard error for the interaction term of gender*religion added to Model 1 was -0.219 (0.433).
5. The coefficient and its associated standard error for the interaction term of gender*religion added to Model 1 was 10.257 (86.547).

References


