

Using expressive arts to explore multiple immigrant identities within intra-ethnic immigrant early adolescent friendships in Ireland.¹

Rachel Hoare Trinity College, Dublin

Correspondences to rmhoare@tcd.ie

Introduction

I'm *Rurish*, that means Russian and Irish at the same time, and my best friend is *Rurish* too, and sometimes we speak *Rurish* (giggles) and only we understand it and it means that we're a bit different, but that's who we are and I'm proud of it.

This quotation comes from a creative focus group (CFG) discussion session, where Anna (11)² who was born in Ireland to Russian parents. Her self-construction as 'Rurish' and description of speaking 'Rurish', represents a blending of her Irish and Russian identities and languages, which incorporates different aspects of both cultures. Her words suggest that sharing the negotiation and construction of this identity with her 'best friend', also of Russian heritage, is an important aspect of her identity formation process.

This article reports on a small-scale qualitative study which explores the intra-ethnic immigrant (IEI) friendship experiences of fifteen eleven- to twelve-year-olds with non-Irish heritage in Ireland. The aim of this study was two-fold. Firstly, it sought to gain insights into the ways in which a small group of early adolescent children with diverse cultural and linguistic heritage in the relatively new migration destination of Ireland, use IEI friendships to make sense of and validate their identity negotiation and enactment experiences. Secondly, the study aimed to demonstrate how the complementary child-centred methods of CFGs and journaling, using expressive arts psychotherapy practices, can provide different expressive pathways for the exploration of early adolescent lived experiences.

Context

The economic boom of the mid-1990s attracted immigrant workers to Ireland and the number of non-Irish nationals increased by 143% between 2002 and 2011, transforming Ireland from a country traditionally associated with emigration to one of net immigration (Glynn, Kelly, & MacEinri, 2013). The 2016 census recorded over 200 different nationalities and showed that almost 24% of under 18-year-olds in Ireland have non-Irish nationality or a non-Irish mother (CSO, 2016). The participants in this study form part of this demographic.

IEI friendships

Studies which have examined the friendship networks of native and immigrant young people in host nations, have frequently found that they have a preference for intra-ethnic over inter-ethnic friendships (Baerveldt, Van Duijn, Vermeij, & Van Hemert, 2004; Syed & Juan, 2012). Titzmann & Silbereisen, (2009) identify similarities in cultural background, a shared mother tongue and common acculturation issues as explanatory factors. Nguyen, Wong, & Park, (2015) argue that the sense of belonging experienced within intra-ethnic friendships can protect against the negative impact of race-related difficulties.

Although De Anstiss & Ziaian, (2010) document the importance of close friendship networks for psychosocial support amongst refugee adolescents, they frame them as a barrier to mental health access, as those seeking support are more likely to confide in their intra-ethnic friends than look for professional help. Intra-ethnic friendships have also been blamed for preventing integration (Vedder & Phinney, 2014), which reinforces the importance in the current study of exploring the under-researched ways in which IEI friendships can serve valuable identity-related functions, thereby supporting the construction of a positive sense of self.

Methodology

CFGs and journaling, incorporating activities with an evidence base in expressive arts psychotherapy literature and practice, were used in the spirit of facilitating a greater depth of expression through different sensory pathways. However, it is important to note that the

research was not part of a therapeutic intervention and the researcher was not known to the participants in her capacity as a psychotherapist. Such a dual role would have been confusing for the participants and unethical as participants may have felt obliged to participate and confidentiality / anonymity may have been compromised.

A purposive sample of three groups of five non-Irish heritage 11- and 12-year olds (seven boys and eight girls) were self-selected from three primary schools situated in traditionally working class areas with ethnically diverse populations in Dublin. Discussion was facilitated in mixed gender groups given the high level of participant familiarity. The different stages of gaining informed consent involved the children, the school principal, Board of Management, class teachers and parents. Ethical approval was granted by Trinity College, Dublin. While the research topic choice was researcher-led, each stage was shaped to varying degrees by the children.

Creative Focus Groups

CFGs provided a safe familiar peer group setting (Greene & Hill, 2005) and playful creative activities helped to minimise anxiety. After brief introductions, each child was asked to write down the most important characteristic of a best friend on a small piece of paper, which they inserted into a balloon. They were then encouraged to chase the balloons around the room and when the author rang a bell they had to burst a balloon and read out the note. This activity opened up a broad discussion of friendship experiences whilst recognising the importance of physical activity in energising mind, brain and body—one of the central tenets of creative therapeutic work with children and adolescents (Prendiville & Howard, 2017; Van Der Kolk, 2012).

Participants were then shown how to use chalk to colour and layer salt in a jar. They were asked to: 'Imagine that each coloured layer represents a different aspect of friendship: what different aspects can you think of and are these influenced by where your friends' parents come from?' This was designed to put the participants at ease by accessing the regulatory, expressive and social benefits of being playful with sensory materials (Jennings, 2011). The responses shaped the guiding questions used in the journaling phase, the impetus for which came from a female

participant who expressed disappointment that the friendship discussion had to end. Her suggestion of writing down their thoughts in a journal was greeted enthusiastically by the other participants and the researcher organised to meet them again so that they could finalise the details.

Journaling: a window into lived experiences

The use of expressive writing to explore and process feelings, ideas and memories, has long been found to cultivate a sense of ownership and control over self-expression as well as providing a safer and more private channel for disclosing thoughts and feelings (Baraitser, 2014; Bolton, 1999; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). The researcher facilitated a group meeting of the participants where they used creative materials to brainstorm the details of the journaling task. From this they decided to make daily entries about their friendship experiences during a two-week period. The researcher reassured them that the journals would not be judged on content, grammar, spelling or vocabulary and would only be seen by the researcher, to encourage them to write freely without worrying about potential structural issues and to allay any anxiety that the material might be seen by their teachers.

Analysis

The data was analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect participant identity. CFG transcripts and journal entries were read repeatedly for familiarisation with the complexity and scope of the data. Issues relevant to the research objectives were assigned codes, which were combined into the following five key themes related to IEI friendships according to similarity and prevalence:

- Loyalty and trust
- A safe space for the validation of identity
- Parental encouragement
- Deep relational intensity
- Separation, conflict and rupture

Results

Participants reported feeling most secure within their IEI friendships, highlighting an increased ease of communication and a more profound mutual understanding. This enabled conversations around potentially sensitive cultural challenges such as the wearing of the headscarf:

Soon we must decide whether we are going to wear the headscarf and we talk about that a lot, but I couldn't talk to anyone else about it cos I couldn't trust them. (Rania, 12, F, Algeria).

IEI friendships also provided a safe space and enabling context in which participants could explore identity enactments related to both heritage and Irish reference groups, such as this exchange transacted through alliances with national football teams:

Once I went with Karolina to watch Ireland play Poland at football with my dad. We took a Polish flag and an Irish flag and when Poland scored we got the Polish flag and went 'wooooo', and when Ireland scored we took the Irish flag and went 'wooooo', cos we knew we felt Polish and Irish at the same time.' (Lena, 12, F, Poland)

Lena's comments concerning the outcome of the match may be conceptualised as a metaphor for the identity negotiation process with both identities being validated within the safe IEI friendship space:

We didn't really care who won, we just loved cheering for both teams together. It was funny that being with Karolina made me braver and wave the flag and shout loads. (Lena, 12, F, Poland)

Another participant used her journal to evoke the IEI friendship space as a safe place in which to experience and positively affirm the coexistence of their two cultures through music and film:

Today me and Sade listened to Nigerian hip hop music and Jay Z. Sometimes we watch different Nollywood films too (giggles). It's so fun with just the two of us. I couldn't do that with anyone else. (Dayo, 12, F, Nigeria)

Rania reported her mother's use of positive affirmation to influence her friendship choices:

My mum likes me being friends with other Muslim girls, cos we have the same beliefs and she's extra nice about my Muslim friends- (Rania, 12, F, Algeria).

The deep relational intensity of IEI friendships was expressed by the female participants who were found to engage more readily than the males in the CFG discussions and were more open and reflective in the journaling activity:

It's true that my best friend has the same background as me, and I just feel that I can only be properly myself when I'm with her (Maria, 12, F, Estonia)

Three female participants expressed their traumatic experiences of friendship rupture and separation in their journals. Lena devotes a full page in her journal to writing about 'what breaks friends apart' in IEI friendships:

Bullying happens a lot and your friend doesn't want to embarrass herself in front of the bully, so she acts like them. It happened to me with my best friend Hanna. Two girls were being mean about my mum's accent and Hanna started joining in and the friendship was broken, even though Hanna's mum is Polish too. (Lena, 12, F, Poland).

Karolina's reaction to her best friend returning to Poland illustrates the intensity and visceral nature of experiencing this separation:

When your best friend moves back to Poland and you only see her through the Internet, it's really sad. Although you still remember all the memories together, you feel alone and traumatised. I actually couldn't stop shaking because I felt so lonely. (Karolina, 12, F, Poland).

For these female participants, the strong relational intensity of IEI friendships appeared to amplify feelings of loss and loneliness after friendship rupture and return migration. Overall, these results demonstrate how IEI friendships provide a safe space, or an emotional sanctuary,

for these young adolescents, where identities can be safely experienced, explored, transacted and enacted in different creative ways.

Discussion

By exploring the constructed meaning negotiated within the CFGs and the more personal insights disclosed in the journals, the researcher gained rich insight into the nuances and complexities of early adolescent IEI friendships within a small self-selected group of 11-12 year olds in Dublin. The narratives demonstrated that the preferred IEI friendships of the participants were characterised by deeply-felt loyalty and trust, a profound sense of safety, and multifaceted linguistic and cultural mutual understandings, all of which have a positive impact on the validation and integration of multiple identity affiliations.

The combination of ethnic homophily and the identity-sensitive developmental stage of early adolescence appeared to amplify the relevance of loyalty and trust, echoing the findings of Kisfalusi (2016), who found higher levels of trust, closeness and intimacy in intra-ethnic than inter-ethnic friendships amongst Hungarian Roma adolescents. The opportunity for peer support and approval afforded by IEI friendships was particularly valuable for children constructing a dual or multiple ethnic identity given that this identity was likely to differ from that of their parents, who were often found to actively encourage IEI friendships for their children, a phenomenon also observed by (Kwak, 2003) in his review of intergenerational immigrant family relations.

The value of providing different expressive pathways and stimulating the articulation of multiple voices through child and researcher-led participation (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), must be highlighted as an important feature of the study, whilst acknowledging that this was most conducive to female engagement. The well-intentioned choice of mixed-sex CFGs may also have discouraged male participation. The findings therefore reveal more about the lived friendship experiences of female participants.

In addition to providing rich insights into the nuances and complexities of early adolescent IEI friendships, this study also raises numerous questions which are worthy of further investigation

including the psycho-social impact of friendship rupture, the potential of IEI friendships for enabling conversations around sensitive cultural challenges, and the impact of an implicit friendship loyalty and trust hierarchy on acculturation processes.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings identify early adolescent IEI friendships as supportive contexts for second generation identity exploration and validation and have important implications for all professionals who are interested in understanding and supporting the needs of young people with diverse cultural heritage.

¹ This paper is based on the following article: Hoare, R. (2019) 'I can only be properly myself when I'm with her': Early adolescent intra-ethnic immigrant group friendships as a safe space for identity exploration, negotiation and validation. *Childhood*, 26, 2: 202-220.

² All identifying information was removed from the transcripts and participants were provided with a pseudonym

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Author

- Rachel Hoare is a lecturer in French language and sociolinguistics in Trinity College in the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies. She is also an expressive arts psychotherapist who provides therapeutic support to unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Ireland on behalf of TUSLA as well as supervising Masters dissertations in the Children's Therapy Centre in Mullingar. Her research interests include migrant languages and identity, refugees and coping strategies, trauma-informed practice with those who have been forcibly displaced and child disability in Francophone Africa.