Franco-Ontarian Women and Multiple Positions of Identity and Belonging: A Study from Northern Ontario, Canada

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Abstract: While Putnam’s communitarian conceptualization of social capital has significantly influenced our understanding of community cohesion, the concept of social capital is highly contested. Questions have been raised about the ways in which agency and power operate in a community’s sense of connectedness. Within this critique, little attention has been paid to the conceptualization of cultural identity when framed in dominant constructions of social capital. This paper contends that Bourdieu’s critical perspective on social capital is better placed to examine the complex relationships between multiple, conflicting and overlapping positions of cultural identity with a sense of belonging. In addition, a Bourdieurian analysis acknowledges that the dynamic relationships of habitus, capital and field produce multiple identities associated with conflicting notions of connectedness which are contextually contingent. The paper argues that ethnography is best placed to offer a different perspective to de-contextualized data, and supports any examination of identity and belonging as best viewed within the context in which such concepts develop and are situated.

Keywords: belonging, cultural identity, ethnography, Franco-Ontarian, habitus, language, social capital

Introduction

Exploring notions of identity in relation to a sense of belonging is a problematic undertaking. Identity is multi-faceted and communities are dynamic in their composition and contingent upon changing external relationships with other social groups. The concept of community cohesion and sense of belonging to a bounded community are often linked through the communitarian concept of social capital described by Putnam (1993) and have been associated with improved health (See Wakefield and Poland 2005 for a review of the literature). Although seductive, Putnam’s dominant discourse of social capital is hotly contested, not least because of its assumptions that communities are bounded and that social identities are stable and homogenous. Despite these loaded assumptions there is a growing willingness to use the parameters of Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital in order to ‘measure’ the cohesion of a community at a point in time. When social surveys use such constructs, for example by asking about the density of an individual’s social networks, their active participation in the collective life of the community and their ease in accessing civic institutional resources (Putnam 1993), there is a risk of oversimplifying complex and multi-layered social behaviour with deleterious consequences. The ‘snapshot’ picture of
one version of ‘a community’ may at best be fleetingly representative or at worst misleading and result in health and social policy which ignores the ‘meanings, experiences and practices’ of minority communities (Gronseth and Oakley 2007).

This paper presents a study conducted in the wake of a community health survey in Ontario which produced data suggesting that a higher number of Franco-Ontarians rated their sense of belonging as ‘poor’ when compared to Anglophones of a similar age (Picard and Allaire 2005). The report and its interpretation were received with gloom by Franco-Ontarian community activists and providers of health and social care who were increasingly questioning the integrity of ‘the Franco-Ontarian community’ in Sudbury and who feared social fragmentation. Did the survey data indicate a community in distress, manifest through low self-ratings of health and well-being? How authentic was the report’s conclusion that Franco-Ontarians felt more disconnected to each other than their Anglophone counterparts? In order to address these concerns the study reported here was designed to provide a contextualized picture of contemporary Franco-Ontarian gendered perceptions of cultural identity and their relationship to notions of belonging and sense of community.

Background

Canada is considered to be created by three founding peoples: the First Nations or Aboriginal peoples, the Anglophone and the Francophone immigrants. The Anglophones have always been the dominant group in terms of numbers and political power. Contemporary Franco-Ontarians can trace their lineage as far back as the late 1600s when French traders, missionaries and explorers sought to extend the boundaries of the French empire and migrated to the Americas. The majority of Francophones settled in Quebec but from the nineteenth century onwards the widespread expansion of agriculture and exploitation of the land to create an emerging forestry industry became a powerful pull for French migration into Ontario. Established Anglophone communities were not always receptive to the influx of Francophones and the communities remained divided (Allaire 2001). Westward migration continued with the transcontinental railway creating further employment opportunities alongside the emerging mining industries of copper and nickel (idem). The segregated educational system which developed at the time revealed the fault lines between the socio-linguistic groups, and remains a theatre for the tension across the linguistic divides (Churchill 1984). French was forbidden from usage in schools from 1885 and again reinforced in 1912 through further legislation, despite strong opposition. The effects of the 1912 edict are still palpable in present-day Canada as Franco-Ontarian students were only offered the possibility of secondary school education as recently as 1968, with provincial provision not a legal requirement until the 1970s (postgraduate education following later). The most recent Federal legislation promoting bilingual parity was in 2004.

Study Design

In order to explore Franco-Ontarian women’s constructions of identity and their relationship to notions of belonging, an ethnographic approach was chosen. Ethnography, a methodology at the heart of anthropology, foregrounds the importance of context when gathering data about the lived social worlds of people. As Gronseth and Oakley write, ‘the power of anthropology (is) in revealing the deep significance of the emic layers of peoples’ lives; layers that in turn have a one-to-one relationship to their health and well-being’ (2007: 2).

The study was located in Sudbury, Northern Ontario, a nickel mining and railway town with a population of 274,222 (2001 survey),
amongst whom 18% consider themselves Francophone (see http://ofa.gov.on.ca). Fieldwork was conducted from the only community-based Francophone primary care, social and educational centre, which is also linked to a network of other Francophone institutions. The majority of clients accessing services at the Centre are women. Like women the world over who are seen as culture bearers Franco-Ontarian women have been described as holding a particular place in Canadian Francophone culture, both perceived as experiencing multiple marginalities (Denis 2001) whilst at the same time considered to be actively promoting Francophone culture (Fox 1995). The study sought to focus upon the perspectives of women, although a mixed gendered picture was gathered during participant observation. A number of Francophone settings featured in the study and included a women’s refuge, a drop-in health and social care clinic for homeless Francophone men and women, the medical school at Laurentienne University which actively promotes Francophonie (a term used often to denote Francophone culture), and the only Francophone Further Education College in Sudbury. I was invited to a number of social gatherings and civic occasions and was fortunate to coincide one month of fieldwork with the annual celebration of Francophonie in Sudbury. This offers a particular window into public Franco-Ontarian culture and includes theatre performances, le salon de lire (a festival of Francophone literature) and gastronomic events celebrating Franco-Ontarian cuisine.

In addition to participant observation the data collection was supported by a series of 21 one-to-one interviews, two paired interviews and one focus group, all with women held at a number of Francophone locations. The sample was pragmatic and used snowballing as a technique (Kuzel 1999), with women recommending possible further contacts. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, informal manner in order to put the women at ease. The age range represented by the women spanned from 17 years to 71 years, with the modal age located within the 45 to 55 years band. Interviews were conducted in French, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed.

The data gathering was informed by a view that ethnography generates data which is created rather than collected. Fabian writes of performative as opposed to informative ethnography where ‘data’ is generated through a mutual enactment or performance between the actors; he likens the role of ethnographer as ‘no longer that of questioner; … but a provider of occasions, a catalyst in the weakest sense, and a producer in the strongest’ (1990: 6–7). The role of the researcher within the dynamic dyad of ethnographer and participant is discussed below in the presentation of the study findings. Furthermore, the data collection was enriched and triangulated by accessing historical texts from a wide range of material resources including public records, organizational and institutional reports, newspaper cuttings and archived material at the community Centre.

For many of the women informal discussions and the interviews began with their curiosity about the purpose of the study and the researcher’s own motivation for being involved in such work. Time was spent at the beginning of each discussion to explain how the study had come about and why I was interested in exploring this subject. I am a bilingual but predominantly Anglophone British woman who practises as a General Practitioner (family physician) in the U.K. I live in a bilingual (English/French-speaking) household where English dominates. The resistance of my children to speak any language other than the lingua franca of their local community is firmly established in the family’s history. From a professional perspective another vantage point is offered. As a physician I have always worked in communities subject to high levels of deprivation and marginalization and this provides another lens through which to interpret the experiences of minority Franco-Ontarians living in contemporary Canada.
The data gathered throughout the project was analysed in an inductive process as themes and key issues emerged from the rich descriptions and multi-sourced data. Using an iterative process, an interconnecting framework of theoretical explanations evolved based on the empirical data and was mapped to established theories. This is presented as a narrative in the extended section below which presents the findings and discussion together. In addition, reflexivity has long been recognized as ‘a central element of ethnographic work’ (Reeves, Kuper and Hodges 2008) and the narrative presented reflects the intertwined product of my position and the creation of material through the dynamic ethnographic process.

The Multiple Currencies of Language

The very definition of ‘Francophone’ is problematic in Ontario as it has become such a plastic term covering a multitude of positions; from using French as the primary language to a passive understanding based on belonging to a family with French-speaking relatives. As such it is impossible and unhelpful to generalize but one useful observation is that the majority of women under the age of 45 (who cite French as their mother tongue) are bilingual, in contrast to older women for whom French is typically their primary language and who express discomfort and difficulty expressing themselves in English. All the women featured in the study were born into Francophone households and their comments reveal the plurality of how language is used and interpreted. The research findings are presented in relation to Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus, field and capital and are supported by verbatim quotations from study informants.

Language and Habitus

For Francophone women the role of the French language in defining one’s sense of both an individual and a collective identity has a pivotal importance. Women’s accounts of their Francophone identity, almost without exception, began and ended with the role of the French language. Comments such as ‘I was raised in a culture which is transmitted through its language’ (spoken by a 44-year-old mother and experienced social care worker) and ‘For me, to be Francophone is to consider my language, my culture, my heritage. It is who I am, my identity. Beyond all that I am, I am firstly Francophone’ (from a 39-year-old mother and university administrator) illustrate this overarching finding. Such expressions epitomize the instinctive responses made to questions of cultural identity. Language was presented as the ‘lifeblood’, the heart of Francophonie, in contrast to English being ‘a language of the head’, and it was viewed as ‘a gift’ from previous generations; a link to ancestral heritage.

However, identity is elusive and evades pinning down both to ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. A 21-year-old student and mother who had recently moved from Quebec asked, ‘What does being Francophone mean to me? It’s how I was born! It’s all I know!’ Similarly, concepts of identity are fluid and tacit. Cognitive constructions of identity are ‘cultural in nature’ and ‘need to be seen as matters of conscience ... as a consequence, access to and understanding of them by outsiders may be profoundly problematic’ writes Cohen (2000: 2) in a volume inspired by the work of Barth (1969). Teasing out what is natural from what is culturally constructed has been a central theme of anthropology, with theorists such as Strathern (1992) proposing that nature and culture act simultaneously rather than there being a ‘universalism or particularism’ (Gronseth and Oakley (2007: 2). Barth’s (ibid.) seminal writings on identity and boundaries were ground breaking and set the scene for later critical theorists, notably Bourdieu whose development of habitus is informed by Barth’s position (Bourdieu 1977). Barth contended that ethnic identity was contingent on the circum-
stances and relative positions of others: ‘the substance of ethnicity responds to the nature of the boundary’ (Cohen 2000: 3). His conceptualization of identity ‘built on the qualitative differences between cognitive categories and “lived experience” and on the processes through which they are reconciled’ (Barth 2000). This position is explored by Lakoff (1987), who describes how our cognitive maps develop out of a set of rich and unfolding ‘kinesthetic image schemas or patterns that constantly recur in our everyday bodily experiences’ (1987: 21). These ideas were further developed by Bourdieu, whose concept of habitus sought to bridge the external, social world with the internal world. Habitus are cognitive structures or internalized schemes, present from birth, through which people ‘perceive, understand, appreciate and evaluate the social world’ (Ritzer and Goodman 2003). Bourdieu’s concepts describe a dialectical relationship between the objective and external world and the internal subjective world. It is through practice that the habitus is created and as a result of practice that the social world is created (1977). ‘Practices are not objectively determined, nor are they the product of free will’ (Ritzer and Goodman 2003: 517) and as a result they confer a practical logic or ‘common sense’ which is not always easy to articulate. Hence, when women were asked to describe Francophonie or their thoughts on Francophone identity it was often difficult for them to articulate their social worlds, which are often more about lived and embodied experiences than they are cognitive constructs.

Identity, Belonging and Bourdieu

Interconnected with habitus is Bourdieu notion of field which refers to a network of social relations rather than a structure but which are different to Putnam’s social capital networks, since these relations ‘exist apart from individual consciousness and will’, and are played out on ‘a type of competitive market place’ (Ritzer and Goodman 2003: 522). Bourdieu described fields as social spaces within which actors and institutions operate (1977). The boundaries of such fields are created in response to exchanges of interchangeable forms of capital which are underpinned by dynamic power relationships; these relationships are predicated on movement between the actors within the field and also outside of the bounded space. ‘Individuals and institutions, based on their habitus, are positioned and position themselves in a field’ (Samuelson and Steffan 2004). Structural inequality, oppression and limited access to resources and capital will determine the fields in which the identity is socially constructed and enacted. This study found that there were fields of particular importance to Francophone women with regard to their lived social worlds. In summary, these were the domestic arena; the worlds of education and employment; health (experiences of and health-seeking behaviour) and civic life. Below, each field is mapped to Bourdieu’s theory of practice which links his concepts of habitus, field and capital.

In Bourdieu’s critique of the construction and organization of socially mediated lives, habitus and fields are interrelated to capital, a notion he suggests which should be understood as a kind of power or as the ‘energy of social physics’ and not simply in traditional terms of economics (1977). Bourdieu identified four forms of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic, although other anthropologists have added bodily capital to this classification (Wacquant 1995, Meinert 2004). Economic capital is to be considered as the accumulation of different forms of material wealth whilst social capital is the sum of existing or potential resources the individual or a group disposes of based on its network of formal and informal relationships (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104–105). Cultural capital refers to ‘ownership’ of information, including intellectual and artistic and legitimate knowledge; symbolic capital is related to one’s honour and prestige. Positions in a field are determined
by the kinds and quantities of capital possessed, either by the group or the individual and revealed through habitus. Applying this theoretical structure to the study showed that expressions of identity coupled with a sense of belonging, when narrated by Franco-Ontarian women, depended entirely on the context in which they found themselves and their position within the respective field.

**Language, Identity and the Home**

The data revealed the domestic arena to be of primordial importance. Women described the home as the space where they are most likely to feel at ease and to express their Francophone identity. A young, 21-year-old woman working as a youth worker and living with her parents and siblings said, ‘At home we are French. We all speak in French together’, juxtaposed against the *Franglais* which is often heard in mixed settings even where Francophones predominate. There was a strong sense of conviviality and unity in gatherings of family and close friends, indicated in the following example spoken by a 42-year-old mother of two teenagers who said, ‘When we meet there is a feeling of belonging and the family is important, the unity within the family and also the loyalty to each other we share. And when I say “family” I’m not just referring to blood lines’.

Social gatherings, be they intimate family, community or religious (Catholic) celebrations were conducted in French and associated with joy and warmth as evoked in the words of a 39-year-old working mother who was part of a large extended family

and then we’re all sitting around the table, singing until I don’t know what time, the kids as well. It’s all my generation who gather at my place, my cousins, and it’s us who organize the music and the singing. We try to encourage the aunts and uncles to join in because they used to do the same for us when we were little. Now we try and continue the traditions and keep hold of them. Also for Francophone families religious celebrations are important and keep the family united.

Anglophones were described as ‘looking in’, often covetously, as indicated in the following statement from a 55-year-old grandmother who loved to entertain, ‘I think a lot of Anglophones envy the Franco-Ontarian way of doing things. I have often heard said, “you Francophones really know how to have a good time, how to have fun, how to enjoy food ...”’.

The collegiality and the centrality of food observed during fieldwork suggested an accumulation of cultural capital occurring at these events which bolstered women’s sense of belonging, reduced feelings of isolation and was an investment in social capital. The women derived great pleasure from shared occasions which celebrated Francophonie, often through the consumption of traditional Franco-Ontarian cuisine, which symbolized an agrarian past built on farming and the timber industry. Family and religious celebrations offered an enhancement of social capital through an enrichment of social relationships, they accrued cultural capital in both keeping alive past folk traditions and reinforcing French as a present-day language and they contributed to symbolic capital through valorizing Francophonie as a legitimate social activity of which one could be proud.

**Language, Identity, Education and Work**

With regard to education, which was viewed by the participants as a preparation for work in the adult world rather than as an end in itself, a sense of ambivalence emerged in which French was seen both as an advantage but also an encumbrance, depending on the context in which it was spoken. Iniquitous provision of education has blighted Francophones since the early twentieth century and was only begun to be addressed in the late 1960s with the limited provision of further education. A 42-year-old health worker who trained in nursing in an
Anglophone college said with frustration, ‘I grew up on the outskirts of Sudbury. My parents have always spoken French at home and I went to all Francophone schools until post-secondary level because at the time it was not available. The choices were very limited for 16 years plus ... I think that situation made a real impact. ’

Franco-Ontarian women who had been educated in Anglophone schools held unhappy memories of being ridiculed and not surprisingly found it difficult to be positive of their Francophone ancestry as adults. An unemployed 32-year-old woman living alone and struggling with mental health problems said, ‘At school they said we breed like rabbits and it’s “disgusting”. We used to get punished at school for speaking in French so I always thought it was a bad thing to do.’

Women who were bilingual actively chose to be identified as either French or English speaking, in terms of their education and their opportunities for employment, and thus saw their bilingualism as an asset. Young people, however, appeared much more ambivalent with English accepted as the global language and French considered only advantageous if it was standardized and ‘good French’ and not the ‘hybridized version’ typically spoken by Franco-Ontarians – as indicated by a 55-year-old not in paid employment who said, ‘Here we use many more anglicized phrases. In Quebec their French is better than ours because here its two French words, one English.’

This sentiment is supported by a 42-year-old community health worker who supervised Francophone students on placements:

We need to stop being so obsessed with (the purity) of the language, it’s very frustrating for young people. They wonder why go to a French college when all through secondary school you were grilled constantly for not speaking good enough French. It’s much easier in English. Why go through the hassle? And the job market is in English too! Hence, many of our youth see no importance in it.

Franco-Ontarian young people were presented as being at the periphery of both languages and doubly disempowered, since many felt they lacked mastery of either language; in contrast to certain Anglophone counterparts attending French Immersion schools who viewed the acquisition of bilingualism through formal education as a distinct advantage in employment. Similarly, for women older than 50 years of age, a clear theme of disadvantage emerged. An inability to express oneself with ease in the language of the work place left many older women feeling marginalized, and some expressed frustration that the Health and Community Centre was unwilling to offer courses in English. The Centre promoted French as the only language of expression in order to counter the peripheral position of French in almost all other public settings and as such refused to offer English classes to users of the Centre since that would have violated its raison d’etre.

This snapshot of the multiple ways in which language was viewed by a diverse community, influenced by the gender, age, educational background and setting of the speaker, demonstrates the complexity of allocating a score to being Francophone, as one might in a questionnaire. Younger Francophones expressed a sentiment of isolation in feeling both disconnected from their mother tongue and less than fluent in French and yet not seen as entirely Anglophone, hence not fully accepted as a member of ‘the Anglophone community’. For older bilingual women their linguistic skills were viewed as cultural capital with the possibility of increasing their economic capital through greater or better job opportunities. However, for many the rhetoric of bilingualism being an advantage was challenged by a restricted economic climate. Finally, for exclusive Francophone speakers there was a sense of marginalization and exclusion from economic activity which compromised their sense of cultural integrity and although it promoted Francophone solidarity it was associated with
vulnerability and created tension. This could be seen at an individual level but also within centres of Francophone life where the decision not to promote English language courses has disadvantaged those women with the least cultural and symbolic capital.

Language, Identity and Health

The field of health and its relationship to French and Francophone identity is complex. The backdrop of limited provision of healthcare to any Sudbury resident (with up to a third of residents unable to register with a family doctor [personal communication]) meant that expressing a preference to consult in French was subsumed as ‘unrealistic’ and women felt uncomfortable declaring their choice to speak with a Francophone healthcare provider. A 59-year-old Franco-Ontarian community activist and grandmother explained:

The question of fighting to have a Francophone doctor is rather one of fighting to have access to any doctor. With a Francophone doctor you can go further but the truth is that we have to be satisfied with what we have. We are not used to always having what we would like.

That said, women viewed the quality of Francophone consultations as superior to Anglophone consultations owing to the subtlety of language, the vitality of tacit communication which occurs at a non-verbal level using gestures and mirroring facial expressions and the different styles of communicating – as revealed in the words of a 49-year-old office worker: ‘You can say so much more in your mother tongue and if its a Francophone doctor you know that they are going to understand you.’

For women whose English has been deemed adequate by an Anglophone healthcare practitioner there was another layer of complexity as they dismissed technical competence for quality of interpersonal communication. This is manifest in the words of a young mother who had been worried about her two-year-old son’s symptoms, including his persistent vomiting:

She (the nurse) was saying to me that my English was good enough and to try and I kept repeating that it was too difficult for me and that I was unable to say exactly what I wanted to say until finally after one hour I managed to get hold of a French speaker. She (Anglophone nurse) wasn’t understanding what I was saying and so I just stopped speaking in English. I said, “I’ve tried long enough now, it’s your turn to make an effort and help me.” She just didn’t get it.

This young woman expressed a frustration that whilst her English was technically adequate the nurse seemed not to recognize or acknowledge her anxiety for her son and she felt unable to transmit the depth of her concern using a language that was not her mother tongue.

The data pertaining to encounters around health and health-seeking behaviour sits with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and how embodied dispositions including the style of communication, body language and tacit understanding are shared between social groups who inhabit overlapping social worlds from infancy. The mirroring seen between two people talking who share a common history arises at an unconscious level, although the women in this study were able to articulate the isolation they felt when communicating with an Anglophone health professional who might be understanding the gist of the problem but were missing the nuances and the quality of the associated suffering and worry. Technical mastery of a language might suffice for non-emotive problems but when ill-health was at stake there was a shortfall in the quality and depth of the interactions across a language barrier. Given the structural constraints, the women felt impelled to accept their lot but expressed a much deeper sense of identity and belonging when discussing health problems within the Francophone community. This quality of comprehension seemed to transcend the inevitable class differences which commonly arise between physicians and their
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minority patient populations and appeared to arise from shared experiences of being raised in Francophone households; a finding consistent with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus.

Language, Identity and Civic Life

An unequivocal view of the marginal role of a Franco-Ontarian presence in civic and public life emerged from the ethnographic data. This was epitomized in two oft quoted examples of civic exclusion: the refusal of the Sudbury civic authorities to permit the Franco-Ontarian flag to be on permanent display and the public display of Sudbury’s symbolic ‘nickel coin’ accompanied by an English translation only. The example of the flag was felt to be particularly contentious as the flag had been designed by local Franco-Ontarian academics and activists based at the bilingual Laurentienne University but was only allowed to be displayed for one week annually each September. A Quebecoise mother of five who was an active member of the Francophone community in Sudbury attested that

the community has been split up and divided because there is not always pride or a sense of belonging. Take the flag for instance – what does it mean? We cannot come together without a flag. The flag would mark our sense of belonging, so without it ….

Franco-Ontarian women in the study felt that their ability to effect change at a provincial political level was compromised by the derogatory stereotypes commonly associated with Franco-Ontarian life in Sudbury, as summarized in the words of a 54-year-old grandmother and social care manager: ‘At best we are viewed as a nuisance, at worst we are second or third class citizens who are trouble-makers’. Any public requests for improved services in French are seen as being met with derision or hostility, which was felt to compound the position of ‘inferiority’ and marginalization Franco-Ontarians felt they occupied in Sudbury society. A 39-year-old university employee referred to a recent community meeting which was set up to explore the possible outcomes of a new Francophone secondary school, and said, ‘The education authority had organized this meeting but then it was used as a means for venting anti-Francophone comments. … This negative anti-Francophone feeling is still very much alive in the community and it’s very sad to see it’.

In the political arena bilingualism offered no advantage; rather a Franco-Ontarian identity was a conspicuous disadvantage. Political success required submerging a Franco-Ontarian identity congruent with the prevailing political rhetoric of assimilation, exemplified in the words of a 47-year-old healthcare worker, ‘The policy of assimilation has been very, very strong. There has been nothing positive in the system to promote Francophonie’. This policy underpins past and present political positions and although the Federal stance is to promote equality amongst linguistic groups the lived reality has been that for Franco-Ontarians to live in harmony they must ‘keep their head down’ and not cause trouble by challenging the status quo. For those who refused to adopt this position there was an open-ended battle ahead, described in the words of a 48-year-old mother and Senior Manager in Health and Social Care as ‘To be Francophone is to choose to either swim every day or jump in the Anglophone boat and be carried along’.

For many in the study this decision was influenced by age, a period of reflection and the extent to which one could access different forms of capital. The passion and tenacity required are illustrated below by a 47-year-old Francophone healthcare worker whose own life story described periods of conflict centred on determining the primary language of the household. She says, ‘I have become more and more Francophone (with age) … I have returned to my origins, I am proud of them and I want them to survive. So for me it is a question of survival and of resisting assimilation, and I hope that future generations of my
lineage will also continue to be Francophone, and bilingual.'

The process of assimilation accords with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, defined as 'violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992: 167). Bourdieu's critique that the educational system is the major site for symbolic violence to be perpetrated conforms to the Franco-Ontarian experience without exception. Through the powerful covert political process of both assimilation and an educational system which was effectively closed to Francophones beyond junior school until the 1970s, with opportunities for higher education trailing even later, Francophones were both excluded from active participation and subject to the imposition of the language and symbolic system of those in power. The oppression this process engenders is articulated in the frustration of the woman quoted in the paragraph above who has lived under the weight of assimilation all her life and its attendant devaluation of Francophone communities. Whilst Bourdieu has actively supported the emancipation of people from this form of violence it is often achieved through resistance, which again is embodied in the words of the woman above who has become increasingly pro-active in asserting her Francophone identity. Resistance occurs at the boundaries of fields – boundaries which are themselves dynamic according to shifting loci of capital. The politics of assimilation has acted as a stranglehold on Francophonie but has also kindled the spark of resistance and cultural pride in certain sections of the Francophone communities who draw on their Francophone origins as a source of symbolic capital. This phenomenon is discussed further below in relation to the dynamic tension which arises out of the relationship between the two linguistic groups.

Language and Capital

Heller and Lebrie (2003) summarize the three dominant discourses on Franco-Canadian identity, language, state and the global context as (1) the traditional position with Francophones as Founding peoples and French integral to their identity; (2) the modern discourse where Francophone identity asserts a right to access certain resources and is supported by legislation and (3) the 'globalized discourse which sees language practice and identities as part of the economic domain' (Roy 2005). This study found evidence of women constructing their identities with regard to all three positions, with the primary discourse contingent upon the context. The earlier discussion around the advantage of French in the workplace demonstrated that there is an equivocal view of French as a commodity since its parameters are rigidly defined by others. That is to say the global market determines how it wants French to be spoken and consideration of its cultural associations are dismissible as irrelevant. As the global market in spheres such as tourism develops, Franco-Canadian identity is further moderated (Roy 2005). The study data showed that the women constructed their identities by calling upon any or all of the discourses Heller and Lebrie articulate, depending on the context in which they find themselves. This behaviour is largely unconscious and is a manifestation of ‘the logic of practice’ (Bourdieu 1990), and is described by Robbins, a Bourdieu scholar, as ‘polythetic – a practical logic (that) is capable of sustaining a multiplicity of confused and logically contradictory) meanings because the over-riding context of its operation is practical’ (1991: 112). Identities change according to what works for the individual actors and this can occur at an unconscious level, propelled by the need to deal with the demands of everyday life.

Multiple Communities across a Linguistic Divide

In teasing apart how a concept as fluid as identity is socially constructed, it is also imperative to explore the social context from which it develops. This involves debunking the myth that
there is only one Francophone community. Many women rejected the essentialist position of one homogenous community and talked in terms of multiple communities with an implicit sense of hierarchy, which dates from historical socio-economic stratification when a Francophone ‘elite’ were pitched against a ‘peasantry’. Global changes in patterns of migration and socio-economic processes have resulted in a diversified picture, which is summarized by a 52-year-old healthcare worker who had lived all her life in Sudbury:

I think that it’s a mixed community, there is not one Francophone community in Sudbury. There is the group such as myself who assert their rights, at both a personal and family level and also with regard to our education. Then there are the assimilated Francophones who have problems switching from one language to another and struggle to communicate in French. There are Francophones who come from abroad with a different reality and who are often disadvantaged from the point of accessing services. And then there is the community who have worked very hard to develop our services (in education and health). Finally, I think, there is the cultural community who celebrate St Jean …

This summary illuminates the differences in social capital which exist between groups and shows how it is problematic to assume an internally cohesive, bounded group as in Putnam’s development of social capital, since it is usually illusory. The social groups listed above have very little in common in terms of ‘shared norms, networks of reciprocity and trust between members’ (Putnam 1993) and yet to the outsider may be viewed, wrongly, as a ‘homogenous Francophone community’. Movement might occur between sub-groups but a dynamic relationship between external structural constraints and individual capital limits entry into other social sub-groups of ‘the Francophone community’.

To this picture one can add the backdrop of Anglo–Francophone relationships on which notions of identity and belonging are enacted. Anglophones have always been the dominant majority and sought to shape the objective structures which constitute the structural constraints on which everyday life is enacted. However, a Bourdieurian analysis suggests that power shifts through exchanges of capital, movements which are contingent on the context or field and ‘shaped by histories and experiences of domination and resistance’ (Wakefield and Poland 2005: 2825).

The relationship between the two socio-linguistic groups is played out in different fields, with the boundaries of these spaces less an indication of territorial boundaries than a reflection of the underlying tension which the groups mirror within their own respective notions of identity. Collective identities often arise as much out of opposition to an externally perceived identity as they do out of internal perceptions. Paine, conducting fieldwork in Australia (2000), describes the refractory relationship between different ethnic groups living in close proximity, in which the identity of one group is mediated by its perception of the identity of the other. The women in this study spoke of a strong sense of hostility and disrespect from ‘Anglophones’, which influenced their own view of themselves. For example, the view that Franco-Ontarians are seen by Anglophones as ‘scroungers and complainers’ was counterpoised with a fierce sense of pride and self-reliance. However, the intergroup tension could also be subtle and expressed more often as indifference, with a familiar retort from Anglophones being, ‘What’s the problem?’ This dominant discourse, which refused to see that there was a basis to Francophone discontent, sought to undermine their sense of struggle by denying that there was ‘a problem’ which needed to be addressed. This position was given credence by the long policy of assimilation which had resulted in many Francophones switching to speaking English exclusively and in some cited examples changing their family names to anglicized versions. A number of participants described this phenomenon as ‘The invisible Franco-Ontarian’ and some who
were mothers described their pain and sadness as their adult children chose to deny their Franco heritage through active resistance or a passive rejection, which saw them speaking only in English and dissociating themselves from collective expressions of Francophonie. This mixed picture of Francophone identity makes it difficult to categorize positions and also complicates outsider responses as mirrored by the range of Anglophone reactions from hostility to indifference.

However, because power exchanges are dynamic there is a bi-directional movement from putative centres of power to the edges and back which needs to be taken into account when exploring notions of cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Fernandez (1991) has contributed to our understanding of the confusion surrounding polarities of centre and periphery by arguing that these two positions are co-dependent, and suggesting that one needs to travel to the fringes of knowledge to understand and reflect on what is known ‘centrally’. This view affords Franco-Ontarian women a greater sense of agency when enacted within specific fields. By allowing women the spaces to accrue specific forms of capital, a more complex picture of identity, community and loci of power emerges which challenges the dominant discourse that it is the Anglophones who determine the grand narrative’s conclusion. So, although the Franco-Ontarian women’s voice was little heard in spheres of local government, in contrast, the strong sense of collegiality and commensality seen at Francophone social gatherings was the envy of Anglophones.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that examining the dynamic constructions of social identity Franco-Ontarian women use in association with notions of belonging is enriched by applying an ethnographic approach to the study rather than relying on objective measures of social capital which assume an essentialist version of communities and deny the importance and shifting role of context. Here the findings mirror work by Popay et al. (2003), who demonstrate that lay understandings of health inequalities contrast sharply when the subject is explored using either a survey or in-depth interviews. ‘Different methodologies provide different and not necessarily complimentary understandings of lay perspectives’ (2003: 1). The findings also indicate the need for policy makers to examine critically how data, which is to be used to inform policy, is gathered.

The immersion into Franco-Ontarian life which the period of fieldwork provided allowed not only for observations to be made on a continual basis but also for the development of relationships between myself and the study participants. The initial curiosity of why a British family doctor would want to study Francophone women and their notions of cultural identity was a good starting point but it needed to move from centre stage in order for the performative aspect of data creation and collection to occur. Postmodernism has made explicit the socially constructed nature of all data and as in any other ethnography there is interplay between the researcher and the study participants in which all are social actors and data analysis is an iterative, interpretative process influenced by the nature and quality of the social interactions.

The study might have been further enriched by exploring the perspectives of Anglo-Ontarians in Sudbury, whose position is represented vicariously. Anglo-Ontarians were accused of preventing Franco-Ontarians from fulfilling their potential in terms of economic, social and cultural capital by preventing them from ‘taking their rightful place’. This idiom was a frequent refrain and forms the title of an inspirational anthem used in Francophone gatherings. The perception that they were seen as ‘second or third class citizens’ was widespread and endlessly frustrating for the women; but
there was a consensus that organized resistance was not an option and education offered the best hope for changing attitudes, through greater co-operation across the socio-linguistic divide. Despite this measured response, a recurring metaphor was one of a continual ‘struggle’ or battle to achieve their desired status as equal and be able to express their Francophonie, as asserted by a 19-year-old student who was passionate about her Francophone heritage but at the same time aware of persisting inequalities. She declares: ‘The struggle must continue as we have not yet finished our fight for the right to be Francophone’. There was little sense of a beleaguered people but more a notion of strong cultural pride and connectedness which was at times bolstered and at others compromised, depending on the field of action. The fluidity of identity formation is recognized in Bourdieu’s use of strategy (1990), which refers to ‘the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints and possibilities which are the reality of any given field’ (Jenkins 1992: 83). Women made daily decisions about the shape and significance of their Franco-Ontarian identity and how much they were prepared to or able to invest in its manifestation, according to the context in which they found themselves and with reference to what had previously worked in a similar situation. This pragmatic response sits at the heart of the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1990). Whilst strategies depend on the positions of agents in the field, they are not necessarily premeditated or following conscious rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 101).

Despite its multiple ‘currencies’ and the fact that speaking French was a disadvantage in many social situations, being actively Francophone emerged as the richest source of symbolic capital Franco-Ontarians could possess. It was their greatest link to the past, which was honoured, and the ‘glue’ which bound them together to maintain a strong sense of connectedness. A 54-year-old who had moved from Quebec when her children were small to settle in Ontario and learn English as an adult said: ‘Our Francophonie is the fire within which inspires us. With a sense of pride we can achieve much … it will take a lot to extinguish that pride. There are maybe times when it does not burn so bright or needs a little stoking to regain its brilliance …’.

In conclusion, representations of cultural identities and notions of belonging are complex, dynamic and contextually contingent. Their study requires examining the historico-socio-economic conflation of structures out of which they have grown, and recognizing the limits upon agency which structural constraints can impose. Although fluid and open to ‘playing the game’ (Bourdieu 1990), identities are not negotiable in terms of capital, which is accrued in relation to an individual’s or group’s habitus and its relationship to the field. Analysing cultural identities and how they impact on one’s connectedness to a community calls upon a methodology as textured and rich as reflexive ethnography, rather than a more positivist utilitarian approach to capturing data based on Putnam’s concept of social capital. Using a mixed methodological approach, it is possible to produce a ‘thick’ (Geertz 1973) and triangulated account of identity and belonging as it ebbs and flows in relation to boundary, proximity to other social groups and the impact of these factors on habitus, capital and field.

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