

Developing an

It is a quiet Friday at the University of Surrey. The campus shimmers on the hillside in summer sunshine; a few postgrads lie on the grass, perhaps contemplating England's exit from the World Cup earlier that morning. As households around the country take down their flags of St George and stuff them back in the attic, it seems like the perfect time to discuss the topic of national identity with one of Britain's foremost developmental psychologists, Professor Martyn Barrett.

He seems to be the only person working today; never can a department boasting no fewer than 73 PhD students have looked so empty. One side of his sizeable office is lined with shelf upon shelf groaning with books on all aspects of child development, as befits an academic whose research has undergone a notable shift during his career. Martyn's interests have migrated from the study of language acquisition from a cognitive perspective, via brief dabblings in children's drawings and the perception of realism in television, to several major projects investigating the development of national identity in childhood.

Martyn's undergraduate education began at Cambridge in the early 1970s. He originally intended to study chemistry, but was lured away by the history and philosophy of science. The psychology element of his degree consisted largely of information processing with Donald Broadbent and neurophysiology with Colin Blakemore. 'One learned about the visual system in immense detail,' Martyn said. 'A lot of that material seemed very dry to me at the time.' However, a small group of developmental psychologists (including Martin Richards, Joanna Ryan, Paul Light and Elena Lieven) fired his imagination. In

DAVID GILES interviews Martyn Barrett.

1972 the publication of Piaget's *Biology and Knowledge* led to a university debate that inspired Martyn to follow a developmental path: 'This was a very exciting event. It made me realise the deep epistemological implications of developmental psychology.'

A PhD on language development took Martyn to Sussex University, where under the supervision of Roger Goodwin his academic career began in earnest. 'In the mid-1970s the child language field was really exciting. It was the first wave of

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serious Chomskian influence, so there was a strong nativist argument running alongside the more pragmatic developmental approach. The challenge for me at the time was to assemble the jigsaw from the various pieces that were around, linking the early lexicon to cognitive development and the overall linguistic system.'

Much of this work was conducted at Roehampton Institute, where Martyn took up his first lecturing position. He moved on to Royal Holloway in 1987, but soon his interests began to veer away from child language. His interest in national identity was sparked off by a seemingly trivial incident – a conversation with his six-year-old son on a visit to Italy. 'In order to pass the time while we were travelling I asked him what he thought Italian people were like. He started to describe Italian people to me, and as he was giving me more descriptions and attributes of what he thought Italian people were like, what became clear to me was that he was actually giving me a description of the Italian family friend with whom we were going to stay. He was generalising from an exemplar to the entire national group.'

Martyn's new interests prompted a

move to Surrey, where Glynis Breakwell and her team had developed a major centre of expertise in the area of social identity. The result has been a major shift in perspective away from the cognitive approach of the child language field. 'This has been an exciting and creative team to be working with. I tend to be very cognitive and individualistic in my orientation, while the social psychologists are coming from a social group point of view; and a lot of productive ideas have come from the sparks thrown off by the very creative conflicts between these positions.'

In the mid-1990s Martyn secured EC funding to set up a cross-national project investigating the development of national identity in a number of countries. 'I was in conversations with colleagues in child language from Spain and Italy, and it turned out that some of them had interests in this area. We submitted the proposal on a wing and a prayer – we knew it was fearsomely competitive, but we were eventually awarded the funding to do that work.'

During the later stages of the project a chance communication from a psychologist in Georgia led to a second project being undertaken, this time involving a number of academics from the former Soviet Union. This project was funded by an EU-based funding body called INTAS (full title: The International Association for the Promotion of Cooperation with Scientists from the New Independent States of the Former Soviet Union). In addition to the Georgian contact, this new project included psychologists in Russia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan, along with some researchers from the Basque country who were already building on the previous European findings.

Working with psychologists across Europe has proved to be a real eye-opener for Martyn. 'I personally find it enriching and rewarding to have colleagues based in very different academic traditions – for example, I think the academic tradition

WEBLINKS

Martyn Barrett's site (including research activities and links, inaugural lecture and other talks):

www.surrey.ac.uk/Psychology/staff/MBarrett.htm

Children's views of Britain and Britishness project:

<http://devpsy.lboro.ac.uk/bps/project/>

identity

within Spain and Italy is very different from the Anglo-American tradition, but even more so within the former Soviet Union. They have a very distinctive and different academic style in the study of psychology. I was invited to a conference in Moscow with Mike Eysenck, and one of the features that struck Mike and myself was that our papers were the only ones presenting empirical data – all the others were theoretical position papers. And the whole style of psychologising struck me as being very different.

‘Another enormous difference about academic life in the ex-Soviet Union is the level of funding available to us. Basically

rouble was crashing in Russia, and I think for the people involved in the project in Russia it was like a godsend.’

The findings of all this research activity have thrown up a lot of surprises, challenging some of the ways that identity development has been conceived by both cognitive and social psychologists. Firstly, Martyn had initially expected to identify some kind of age-related stage at which national identity became salient for all children, irrespective of national context, as cognitive developmental theory would predict. But data from Spain have thrown a spanner in that particular works. ‘The Basque data are especially interesting,

children are more likely to be seeing people from other national groups, thereby enhancing the salience of their own national group.’ The study also found widespread differences in the national identity development of children living in the same location but belonging to different ethnic groups, as well as between children belonging to the same ethnic group but attending schools using different languages of education.

This summer Martyn will have been engaged in publishing the findings from the second project. At the same time he will have also been collating data from another project, this time organised by the BPS, on children’s views of Britain and Britishness. This project was organised to tie in with the Society’s centenary in 2001, and has brought together researchers from all parts of the UK. This project has reinforced the conclusion that there is a lot of variability in the development of national identity, and that national identity is more salient in the capital city.

‘We found that children growing up in London exhibit stronger national identification than children growing up elsewhere in Britain. But even in London the sense of national identity varies depending on children’s ethnic group membership. For example, we found that second and third generation Indian and Pakistani children in London identified with being British to a lesser extent than their white English peers. But what was really intriguing was that these Asian children did not consistently identify with being British any more than they identified with being English.

‘This raises the question of whether Britishness really is a superordinate all-inclusive category that some people have held it to be, or whether Britishness is actually a problematic category for members of ethnic minority groups to identify with. This issue was highlighted in the Parekh Report a couple of years ago: how members of ethnic minority groups negotiate and subjectively construe the relationship between their ethnic group membership and their membership of the national group. This is the issue which I really want to look at next...’



life is very difficult being an academic there. The salaries by Western standards are extremely low, there is not the institutional funding and support that we have here – they just don’t have the access to library and computing facilities. There are so many things that we take for granted. One of the items that we requested funding for was a generator for the partner in Tbilisi, Georgia, because at that time there would periodically be major power failures, and you would lose all the work on your computer. The only way you could ensure that this didn’t wipe out a day’s work is by having your own generator generating electricity for your own computer. The overwhelming bulk of the project money went to the former Soviet Union. The project was happening at a time when the

because our current theories of development argue that the reduction of prejudice with age is a consequence of changes in how the child conceptualises large-scale social groups. The Basque data do not show any such developmental pattern.’

There have also been unexpected differences between children living in different regions of the same country. ‘In Russia we collected data in Moscow and Smolensk and found that the Russian identity was more salient to Moscow children. It may be that this is the effect of Moscow being the capital, and that children there are confronted with many icons that represent the Russian state, such as Red Square, the Kremlin, and so on. Or it could be that there are more tourists, and that