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Cultural Homecoming and the Irish Language

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In the aftermath of colonisation, many formerly colonised societies have become disconnected from their pre-colonial cultural heritage due to its subjugation and destruction by the respective colonial power. This loss injures and suspends their cultural identity(ies), which in the longer-term negatively impacts their emotional well-being and mental health. Despite extensive research on the relationship between heritage, identity, and well-being among Indigenous communities in North America and Australasia, there have been relatively few studies of this nature concerning cultural loss in Ireland. This research is therefore focused on the Irish language as a case study relative to cultural loss, revitalisation and Irish identity. This study investigates the impact of (re)learning Irish on people from/of the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, diasporic communities of Irish immigrants, and those of Irish descent living in England and the United States; reconnecting to their Irish heritage and identity by way of learning and gaining fluency in the Irish language. What is more, I have devised the concepts of cultural exile and cultural homecoming to illustrate and exemplify how Irish people and those of Irish descent cultivate a stronger cultural identity through their ancestral language, and how this pertains to their emotional well-being and mental health.

A century has passed since Irish independence, yet a cultural void permeates Irish society. Ireland is now cemented as an independent and established European nation, yet in contrast to our neighbours on the mainland, our cultural fingerprints are sluggish and greatly weakened from their pre-colonial condition. In the twenty- first century, Irish culture undoubtedly punches above its weight. The resurgence of popularity towards the Irish language (hereafter *Gaeilge*) and among Irish youth on social media, the booming Irish film industry, international acclaim of contemporary Irish musicians, writers and authors, and the revival of

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ancient festivals adhering to the Celtic Calendar, such as Samhain and Bealtaine, all point to the Irish cultural landscape bearing considerable weight.

However, unlike many of our European counterparts, for centuries Irish people were systematically and brutally denied their right to cultural expression. In the subsequent absence of Irish culture and language, a cultural vacuum emerged in Ireland, in which English language and customs were imposed and frequently enforced. From the sixth to the seventeenth century, Gaeilge was the dominant spoken language in Ireland.[1] Yet, despite being recognised today as Ireland's first official language, UNESCO has classified Gaeilge as 'definitely endangered'[2] and is reported to be spoken regularly by just 70,000 people,[3] out of a population of 5.15 million.[4]

In 1169, the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland triggered a centuries-long assault on Gaeilge and traditional Irish customs, whereafter Gaeilge's dominance as a spoken language of four million speakers came to an end during the Great Famine of 1845– 52,[5] with the highest mortality rates in Irish-speaking areas.[6] Gaeilge's deterioration culminated in the late nineteenth century in Irish national schools, where students were beaten with a 'bata scóir' if caught speaking Gaeilge.[7] A bata scóir was a wooden or metal stick on which notches were carved every time a student was caught speaking Gaeilge; after a certain number of marks, the student would be beaten with it.[8] When a language is literally beaten out of the minds of a people, is it surprising that this would have a lasting and catastrophic psychological impact?

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1. David Mitchell and Megan Miller, 'Reconciliation through Language Learning? A Case Study of the Turas Irish Language Project in East Belfast', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 42 (2017), 235–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1414278

2. UNESCO, 'Irish Language', 30 January 2024, Available at https://en.wal.unesco.org/countries/ireland/languages/irish, [Last accessed 14 January 2025].

3. CSO - Central Statistics Office, 'Census 2022 Results - The Irish Language and Education', 19 December 2023, Available at https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2023pressreleases/pressstatementcensus2022resultsprofile8-theirishlanguageandeducation/, [Last accessed 7 December 2024].

4. CSO - Central Statistics Office, 'Census of Population 2022 - Summary Results', 20 October 2023, Available at https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/populationchanges/#:~:text=Population%20Change&text=After%20a%20constant%20decline%20since,population%20of%20Ireland%20was%205%2C149%2C139, [Last accessed 7 December 2024].

5. Michael C. Coleman, '"You Might All Be Speaking Swedish Today": Language Change in 19th-Century Finland and Ireland', *Scandinavian Journal of History,* 35 (2009), 44–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/03468750903315215

6. John Crowley et al., *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845–52* (Cork, 2012).

7. Brehon Academy, 'The Forgotten Weapon of Cultural Oppression: The "Bata Scóir" and Its Devastating Impact on Irish Language and Identity', 14 March 2023, Available at https://brehonacademy.org/the-forgotten-weapon-of-cultural-oppression-the-bata-scoir-and-its-devastating-impact-on-irish-language-and-identity/, [Last accessed 4 October 2023].

8. Ibid.

A people's language is irrevocably merged with their sense of self – how they see, express and situate themselves in the world. When cultural markers are stripped away, it makes room for an outside culture to establish itself as the dominant culture of that community. As a result, the subjugated community is suddenly devoid of almost everything that made it unique and distinct, unable to express themselves through their speech, customs, dress and rituals, while also being unable to belong to the oppressor's culture, effectively leaving them culturally stateless. This experience has a profound psychological effect, resulting in what I have termed 'cultural exile'. Cultural exile can be defined as having no strong sense of affinity or belonging towards any specific culture or cultural group, leaving a person 'exiled' as they are unable to express themselves through the language or cultural practices of any one particular group or community. While this concept can relate to any formerly colonised group or community that has suffered cultural loss, in my view it portrays the reality of many Irish people as it situates them as culturally disconnected yet physically still at home.

To that end, I argue that when a culture is unable to expand and grow organically, by extension the cultural and collective identity of its people stagnates and is left hanging in suspension. Indeed, both Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi argue that colonisation results in the colonised being dominated both socially and psychologically,[9] after which the psychological effects persist long after political control ends. Colonisation essentially disrupts or 'interrupts' the natural development of a people's cultural identity, as the destruction of their native language deprives them of a 'marker of their collective identity'.[10] By contrast, the reverse can also transpire, namely that the reintroduction of the subjugated language in a community reinforces an integral and sometimes unexplored aspect of their sense of self, resulting in a heightened sense of emotional well-being, such as happiness, confidence and self-expression. I define this experience as the concept of *'cultural homecoming'*, as I believe it portrays the feeling of returning home and gaining a reinforced sense of self and well-being upon connecting more deeply with one's heritage.

During the preliminary stages of this research, I recruited and conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen members from the Irish language organisation Conradh na Gaeilge, a social and cultural organisation that promotes the learning of Gaeilge and Irish culture on a global scale.[11] I focused specifically on Irish and Northern Irish citizens, both in Ireland and in diasporic communities

9. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London, 1967); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonised* (Boston, 1967).

10. Catherine Nash, 'Irish Placenames: Post-Colonial Locations', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 24 (1999), 460.

11. Conradh na Gaeilge, 'Homepage', n.d., Available at https://www.cnag.ie/ga/ [Last accessed 5 February 2024].

abroad,[12] in addition to people of Irish descent in the United Kingdom and the United States, wherein I dissected their relationship with Gaeilge and their Irish identity. This study's objective is to reveal how new and returning Gaeilge speakers can consolidate their sense of Irish identity by (re)developing a stronger connection with Gaeilge, and consequently, experience a greater sense of emotional well-being. The structure of this article consists of five sections. Following the introduction, the second section explores the theoretical foundation and reviews existing literature on language and identity within the context of colonialism, sociology, history and sociolinguistics. The third section outlines this paper's methodology, while the fourth presents the findings. The findings include the participants' personal experiences regarding the effects of cultural loss in Ireland, their relationship with their Irish identity and heritage in relation to Gaeilge, and the subsequent impact on their well-being. Subsequently, the fifth section discusses and interprets the findings, and the sixth section concludes this study.

1. Background

1.1 Interrupted identity: Language and the cornerstones of self

At its core, identity is not a one-dimensional concept. While perceived by many as something categorical, a singular entity embodying our innermost selves, identity must instead be viewed as a complex, multi-layered psychological structure. What's your name? Where do you live? Where are you from? Where is your family from? What do you do for work/for fun? The most commonly asked questions upon meeting someone reveal the foundations of how someone commonly makes up their sense of self, namely, nationality, ethnicity, place identity, and self-expression. If we consider these four to be identity 'cornerstones', each forming as a rough blueprint for each person's individual identity, we may also consider that the wider canvas of our identity is flexible, something fluid that can change as a person changes throughout their life and through their life choices.

Tom Inglis compares the malleable nature of identity to a person flitting between different identities, 'like a bee visiting different plants',[13] suggesting that identity is neither fixed nor permanent; moreover, it is something we have personal control over. In their words, identity can be best defined as 'a

12. A group of people who share a cultural and regional origin but are living away from their traditional homeland.

13. Tom Inglis, 'Local Belonging, Identities and Sense of Place in Contemporary Ireland', *University College Dublin - Institute for British-Irish Studies* (2009), 12. https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/2414/1/P%26D_Disscussion_Paper_4.pdf

cultural tool-kit that people use to construct an image and understanding of themselves'.[14] Through this lens, we can picture identity formation as a flexible system of several moving parts, necessary to construct our self-image and the image we present to others, with place, ethnicity, nationality and self-expression underpinning the foundations.

However, what of cultural identity? UNESCO has described cultural identity as a shared sense of identity within a cultural group,[15] which is often defined by different facets of culture and heritage, such as language, traditions, rituals, gastronomy, art, architecture, music, dress, cultural values, religion, etc.[16] Each of these embodies different elements of cultural expression, which we can define as the vehicle through which one's traditional culture is expressed, wherein communities and individuals can present themselves and who they are. However, it must be emphasised that a person or community may also express themselves through foreign cultures; it is not limited to just one's own.

The positive effects of cultural heritage on identity have been widely explored.[17] Indeed, heritage is also described as that which cements a community's identity.[18] In a case study centred on an Inuit language training program, Sylvia Moore illustrates the profound change in the participants after learning their native language, with one describing their experience as finding 'a piece of the puzzle you didn't know was missing'.[19] Laura-Jane Smith also recounts how, through claiming ownership of their Indigenous ancestry, Alaska was able to effectively develop 'a strong sense of identity and self-esteem' among their local youth.[20] These examples of reinforced identity and self-esteem directly reflect the concept I've termed 'cultural homecoming', capturing the experience of those who, upon reconnecting to their cultural heritage— language, dance, cultural traditions, etc.— experience an increased feeling of happiness, reinforced identity and general well-being. I chose the word 'homecoming' as I felt it evokes the feeling of returning home, influenced by connecting more deeply with one's heritage.

14. Ibid.

15. UNESCO, 'ePlatform on Intercultural Dialogue', n.d., Available at https://www.unesco.org/interculturaldialogue/en/concept-glossary [Last accessed 10 November 2024].

16. UNESCO, 'Intangible Cultural Heritage Domains', 2011, Available at https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/01857-EN.pdf [Last accessed 10 November 2024].

17. Brian Graham and Peter Howard, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Burlington, 2008); Stuart Dunmore, 'Language Decline and the "Theory of Cornish Distinctiveness": The Historiography of Language and Identity in Early Modern Cornwall', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 31 (2011), 91–105; Máiréad Nic Craith, *Narratives of Place, Belonging and Language: An Intercultural Perspective* (London, 2012).

18. Ullrich Kockel and Máiréad Nic Craith, *Cultural Heritages as Reflexive Traditions (*New York, 2007); Laura-Jane Smith et al., *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present* (New York, 2018).

19. Sylvia Moore, 'Language and Identity in an Indigenous Teacher Education Program', *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 78 (2019), 4. https://doi.org/10.1080/22423982.2018.1506213

20. Laura-Jane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York, 2006), 289.

In particular, language has been recognised as a leading factor in determining a unique identity. Stuart Hall and Paul DuGay believe that language has the power to define a 'unified stable identity',[21] whereas Aidan Pine and Mark Turin characterise language as a marker of social and cultural vitality.[22] Additionally, Masud Khawaja refers to language as a 'natural resource'[23] that he claims is fundamental to Indigenous collective identity. These definitions suggest that language is a defining influence towards building a strong and realised cultural identity. Michael Chandler and Christopher Lalonde support this idea, equating culture, with an emphasis on language, with strength of identity, and suggest that a weakened or declining culture destabilises our collective sense of self.[24] This theory positions language as a psychological component of identity, indicating that without it our mental health and well-being suffer.

Gaeilge has been described as a mark of Irish cultural distinction, and without it, Ireland would be 'digested without trace or remainder by England'.[25] The subjugation of Gaeilge and its effects on Irish identity have also been widely discussed.[26] In the sixteenth century, it was believed that by forcing the Irish to give up their Irish names and language, it would in time lead them to 'quite forget their Irish nation',[27] suggesting that by suppressing Gaeilge, the English would 'obliterate Irish identity'.[28] This reiterates language's position as a core component of a strong cultural identity, and implies that a people's identity is in fact dependent on its language, and its loss allows a more dominant culture to reshape it as they see fit.

According to Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, a people's language demonstrates who and what they were 'even better than their history',[29] portraying language as a kind of community consciousness wherein a people's intellect, morals, thoughts

21. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, 1996), 90.

22. Aidan Pine and Mark Turin, 'Language Revitalization' in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Linguistics* (Oxford, 2017). https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.8

23. Masud Khawaja, 'Consequences and Remedies of Indigenous Language Loss in Canada', *Societies,* 11 (2021), 1. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11030089

24. Michael J. Chandler and Christopher Lalonde, 'Cultural Continuity as a Hedge against Suicide in Canada's First Nations', *Transcultural Psychiatry,* 35 (1998), 191–219. https://doi.org/10.1177/136346159803500202

25. John MacNamara, 'The Irish Language and Nationalism', *The Crane Bag,* 1 (1977), 41.

26. Seamas O'Buachalla, 'Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981', *European Journal of Education,* 19 (1984), 75–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/1503260; Patricia Kachuk, 'A Resistance to British Cultural Hegemony: Irish-Language Activism in West Belfast', *Anthropologica,* 36 (1994), 135–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/25605768; Padraig O'Riagáin, *Language Policy and Social Reproduction: Ireland, 1893–1993* (Oxford, 1997); Diarmait Mac Giolla Chriost, *The Irish Language in Ireland: From Goídel to Globalisation* (Abingdon, 2005).

27. Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (Oxford, 1970), 156.

28. Maureen S. G. Hawkins, '"We Must Learn Where We Live": Language, Identity, and the Colonial Condition in Brian Friel's *Translations*', *Éire-Ireland,* 38 (2003), 23. https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2003.0013

29. Patrick F. Kavanagh, *Ireland's Defence – Her Language* [Pamphlet] (Gaelic League, 1902), 1.

and beliefs are kept. Tony Crowley supports this, likening Gaeilge to 'the repository of the nation's past'.[30] Likewise, the linguist Ken Hale compares language loss to bombing the Louvre Museum: 'When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art. It's like dropping a bomb on a museum, the Louvre'.[31] After the Irish War of Independence of 1919– 21, when Ireland first gained independence from Britain, Irish revolutionary leader and statesman Michael Collins also observed the relationship between Gaeilge and Irish self-expression, asking, 'How can we express our most subtle thoughts and finest feelings in a foreign tongue?'.[32] Here, language is likened to a sort of cultural archive, a hive of information directly connecting us with our forebears and collective history, able to reveal the distinct thought patterns and emotional expressions unique to one's people.

That said, if a foreign language is enforced on a people, are their inherent psychological structures then thrown off balance? If language is intrinsically tied to a person's thoughts and feelings, does its subjugation also repress an innate part of their identity? Cut off from a fundamental facet of their self-expression and unable to categorically belong to the culture of the conquering language, does this in turn leave them culturally displaced or stateless? Michael O'Hickey mirrors this concern, stressing that the threat of Anglicisation renders Irish identity undefined, 'mongrel', 'colourless', and 'nondescript'.[33] This description, while harsh, brings me to argue that language and culture are the main vehicles of Irish consciousness, a cornerstone upon which we build, develop and embody our authentic selves, as well as the defining factors that distinguish us from other nations and communities. Moreover, it reiterates the idea of Gaeilge's position as being somewhat stateless or culturally 'exiled' and suggests that Gaeilge, while in no way dead, is somewhat displaced or has been made the 'other' in its own home.

In 1996, the United Nations Development Programme published their annual report on human development,[34] which identified that the enforcement of a dominant language serves as what John Walsh describes as a 'culturally repressive form of development',[35] hindering the growth of other languages and cultures while accelerating the dominant power's own progress. If so, the repres-

30. Tony Crowley, 'Language, Politics and Identity in Ireland: A Historical Overview' in Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Sociolinguistics in Ireland* (London, 2016), 11. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137453471_9

31. Comment by the American linguist Ken Hale cited in *The Economist* (November 3, 2001), 89, 105.

32. Michael Collins, *The Path to Freedom* (Dublin, 1922), 100.

33. Michael P. O'Hickey, *The True National Idea* [Pamphlet] (Gaelic League, 1898), 4.

34. United Nations, 'Human Development Report 1996', 1 January 1996, Available at https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1996 [Last accessed 4 October 2023].

35. John C. Walsh, *The Influence of the Promotion of the Irish Language on Ireland's Socio-Economic Development* (PhD dissertation, Dublin City University, 2006), 110.

sion and erasure of Gaeilge as Ireland's primary spoken language interrupted the natural evolution of Ireland's cultural landscape. I argue that Irish cultural identity then stagnated over time as Gaeilge and Irish cultural norms declined, whereupon this 'interrupted identity' triggered a form of arrested development in Irish identity and the Irish psyche, unable to move forward due to English cultural domination and Ireland's collective unprocessed trauma.

Despite considerable efforts to acknowledge and reflect on the legacy of Ireland's colonial history, such as national memorials, famine commemorations and museum exhibitions, I argue that on an emotional level Ireland has neither resolved nor recovered from its historical trauma. Moreover, we can view this so-called interrupted identity through the lens of Vamik Volkan's idea of the 'chosen trauma' of a nation,[36] an event(s) that, when the nation has failed to mourn this trauma, defines its national identity and becomes frozen, thus inhibiting its cultural development and keeping it and its people in a state of purgatory. Ultimately, the slow decay of Gaeilge and Irish cultural traditions is intertwined with Ireland's unprocessed trauma; over seven centuries of colonisation— subjugation, slaughter, famine and cultural genocide— created a deep emotional wound in the collective Irish psyche that has been passed down generationally to the present day.

1.2 Cultural exile: The psychological impacts of heritage

As a concept, well-being is a conditional state. Described as a positive state of being achieved when our 'personal, relational, and collective needs' are satisfied,[37] to be 'well' in human society hinges upon a range of external and internal factors— physical and mental health, meaningful relationships, purpose, financial security, belonging, community, secure housing, self-expression, self-worth and a strong sense of identity. Well-being is best considered a spectrum of these determining factors, wherein if one or more are absent or at risk, our broader happiness and life satisfaction suffer. In this context, well-being is both conditional and unconditional: conditional as it relies on specific criteria to manifest and unconditional with regard to its determining factors. While identity is more fluid and malleable, often changing as a person changes, the causal factors behind well-being are fixed and unchanging. Can a person's well-being truly thrive in the face of illness, poverty, self-hatred or isolation? If we consider these determinants to be pillars of well-being, we can better understand that,

36. Vamik D. Volkan, 'Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity', *Group Analysis,* 34 (2001), 79–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/05333160122077730

37. Isaac Prilleltensky and Geoffrey B. Nelson, *Doing Psychology Critically: Making a Difference in Diverse Settings* (New York, 2002), 8.

as a framework, the nature of well-being is, to a large extent, symbiotic— a collectivist embodiment of human health and happiness that cooperates to remain whole and realised.

This cooperative outlook on well-being is mirrored in the findings of the Barngarla Language and Wellbeing Study.[38] Devised to document the positive impacts of language reclamation on the Barngarla Aboriginal community in South Australia, a framework for emotional well-being was constructed according to eight themes identified: connection to spirituality and ancestry; connection to body; connection to mind and emotions; connection to family and kinship; connection to community; connection to culture; connection to country and connection to self.[39] In this framework, well-being is conceptualised as several pieces of a larger whole, upholding and providing stability to the self. That said, the themes identified in this study encompass many human emotional needs, which bears the question: must our core emotional needs be met before we can build a concrete sense of self? Or rather, are identity and well-being interdependent, two interconnected bodies reliant on the other's regular subsistence? From this perspective, the cultivation of both identity and well-being can be seen as a collaborative effort. As we collectively engage with our culture and ancestry, our minds and bodies, our family and community, our identity is reinforced as we nurture our own well-being.

In contrast to those found in most Western societies, this framework and other Indigenous frameworks of well-being place greater emphasis on culture as a central component of well-being's structural makeup, framing culture as the building blocks towards 'a sense of wholeness'[40] and 'the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle'.[41] Through this lens, culture is a frequently overlooked factor in what constitutes our holistic well-being. The music we listen to, the books we read, the films, series and plays we watch, the concerts and festivals we go to, the museums we visit and the languages we speak play a part in anchoring us deeper within ourselves. Ultimately, culture serves as an amplifier to our self-expression. Through different mediums of culture, we explore the deeper parts of ourselves; we express our feelings, both joyful and painful; we feel seen and understood in our life experiences; and we come together in groups and communities to enjoy our special interests. All of this reinforces our unique sense of self and cultural well-being, allowing us to play with and express unexplored aspects of our identity and providing a concrete sense of belonging to our community, our country and places where we make our home.

38. Leda Sivak *et al*., '"Language Breathes Life"—Barngarla Community Perspectives on the Wellbeing Impacts of Reclaiming a Dormant Australian Aboriginal Language', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 16 (2019), 3918. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16203918

39. Ibid.

40. Khawaja, 'Consequences and Remedies', 6.

41. Sivak *et al*., '"Language Breathes Life', 8.

In recent decades, the concept of cultural well-being has been increasingly recognised in foreign cultural policies, most notably in Wales and New Zealand. In 2006, Wellington City Council designed a 'Cultural Wellbeing Strategy', wherein cultural well-being was described as a requisite for a sense of belonging, collective identity, community and greater quality of life,[42] with emphasis placed on language and other intangible assets. In Wales, one of the primary aims of the 2015 'Wellbeing of Future Generations Act' was 'a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language',[43] which also cited a symbol of Welsh well-being as the ability to speak Welsh.[44] The European Commission has also recognised the importance of culture and heritage for quality of life and psychological well-being, having launched the project 'CultureForHealth' in 2020 for the development of culture and well-being in the EU.[45] Likewise, the Arts and Health Lead in the World Health Organisation (WHO), Christopher Bailey, described culture and the arts to be 'no different than recommending good behaviour or exercise. They're a core part of what makes us human'.[46] Through this lens, culture is presented as a linchpin that contributes to maintaining our collective identity, community and quality of life, as essential to our health as diet and exercise.

In this vein, many academics have identified language as a chief determinant of well-being,[47] having been attributed to self-esteem, group identity[48] and

42. Wellington City Council, 'Cultural Wellbeing Strategy - Shaping Wellington's Unique Identity', 2006, Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20240604043939/https:/wellington.govt.nz/~/media/your-council/plans-policies-and-bylaws/plans-and-policies/a-to-z/cultural/files/cultural.pdf, [Last accessed 28 November 2024].

43. Welsh Government, 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015)', 30 January 2024, Available at https://law.gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-wales-act-2015, [Last accessed 15 June 2024].

44. Welsh Government, 'Well-being of Wales 2017–18', https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-01/well-being-wales-2017-18.pdf, [Last accessed 15 June 2024].

45. CultureForHealth, 'What is CultureForHealth?', n.d., Available at https://www.cultureforhealth.eu/about-the-project/, [Last accessed 28 July 2024].

46. The Art of Wellbeing: How Europe Is Using Culture for Its Health Benefits, *The Parliament Magazine*, 15 December 2023. https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/culture-world-health-organization-europe-mothers.

47. Jennifer D. Campbell *et al*., 'Self-Concept Clarity: Measurement, Personality Correlates, and Cultural Boundaries', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70 (1996), 141–56. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.1.141; Mike B. Salzman and Michael J. Halloran, 'Cultural Trauma and Recovery: Cultural Meaning, Self-Esteem, and the Reconstruction of the Cultural Anxiety Buffer' in Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole and Tom Pyszczynski (eds), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (New York, 2004), 231–46; Seth J. Schwartz et al., 'The Relationships of Personal and Cultural Identity to Adaptive and Maladaptive Psychosocial Functioning in Emerging Adults', *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 150 (2009), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540903366784; Esther Usborne and Roxane De La Sablonnière, 'Understanding My Culture Means Understanding Myself: The Function of Cultural Identity Clarity for Personal Identity Clarity and Personal Psychological Well-Being', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 44 (2014), 436–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12061

48. Mitchell and Miller, 'Reconciliation through Language Learning?' 235–53.

belonging.[49] There is also a clear correlation between language loss and suicide in Indigenous communities.[50] Darcy Hallett et al. examined 150 Indigenous Inuit communities (circa 14,000 people)[51] and found that the suicide rates in 'high-language' Indigenous communities,[52] where at least 50 per cent of its members could speak their ancestral language, were six times lower than in 'low-language' communities.[53] What is more, Margrethe Bals et al. and Marc Zimmerman et al. observed improved mental health and self-esteem among Indigenous youth in both the Norwegian Arctic Circle and North America after engaging more deeply with their native languages.[54] These outcomes confirm the intersection between language, well-being and our wider mental health, indicating that language is indeed a stabilising factor that supports and reinforces our well-being.

That said, why does language influence our well-being to such a great extent? According to Donald Taylor and Esther Usborne, clarity of cultural identity is paramount to building a strong self-concept and psychological well-being, claiming that a psychologically healthy person would have 'a clearly defined personal and collective identity'.[55] Language is a significant cultural marker irrespective of nationality or location, a national and cultural symbol that indirectly heralds a person's cultural background. It is therefore logical that as language often characterises cultural identity, language loss would sow great confusion around a group's identity, particularly after the enforcement of a new dominant language, destabilising their self-concept, their sense of belonging to their homeland, and their self-expression in the process. In the decades following the famine, when most Irish people no longer spoke Gaeilge, did that make them English? In the present day, are the Irish now English because it remains the majority's first language? Certainly not, yet it cannot be denied that as Gaeilge was subjugated and later declined as the pre-eminent spoken language in Ireland, this has created space for the more powerful English language and culture

49. Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (London, 1994).

50. Darcy Hallett *et al.*, 'Aboriginal Language Knowledge and Youth Suicide', *Cognitive Development*, 22 (2007), 392–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2007.02.001

51. Ibid.

52. Communities with higher levels of language knowledge.

53. Communities with lower levels of language knowledge.

54. Margrethe Bals *et al.*, 'The Relationship Between Internalizing and Externalizing Symptoms and Cultural Resilience Factors in Indigenous Sami Youth from Arctic Norway', *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 70 (2011), 37–45. https://doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v70i1.17790; Marc Zimmerman et al., 'The Enculturation Hypothesis: Exploring Direct and Protective Effects among Native American Youth' in Hamilton I. McCubbin, Elizabeth A. Thompson, and Anne I. Thompson (eds), *Resiliency in Ethnic Minority Families, Native and Immigrant American Families* (Wisconsin, 1994), 199–220.

55. Donald M. Taylor and Esther Usborne, 'When I Know Who "We" Are, I Can Be "Me": The Primary Role of Cultural Identity Clarity for Psychological Well-Being', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 47 (2010), 95. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461510364569

to irreversibly embed itself into every domain of Irish society, not least in education, the judicial system and the government, leaving Irish identity confused and clouded by English influence.

Taylor and Usborne support this idea, arguing that colonised communities who have experienced cultural destruction have no clearly defined collective identity, and as a result, are in a 'cultural collective identity vacuum'.[56] Similarly, Khawaja claims that language loss and undefined cultural identity create people who are 'torn between two cultures'[57] and who feel 'lost when they do not easily fit into either'.[58] These descriptions directly reflect the experience of what I call 'cultural exile'. When a colonised group cannot express themselves in either their native culture or that of their oppressor or now feel that they do not belong to either culture, this can generate great confusion and distress around their cultural identity. However, this concept captures this experience of uncertain cultural identity and non-belonging not only among formerly colonised societies but also among people who have emigrated abroad, second- and third- generation immigrants, and multi racial and ethnically diverse people, as well as those still under colonial rule; this concept can relate to any person or community in a state of conflict between two or more cultures. Douglas Hyde, a founding member of the Gaelic League, discussed this experience of uncertainty surrounding Irish identity, arguing that the Irish were 'imitating England and yet apparently hating it'[59] and were 'ceasing to be Irish without becoming English'.[60] Hyde also claimed that the Irish were living in a 'half-way house',[61] unable to express themselves culturally yet unable to adapt to the enforced English cultural practices. This perspective presents the Irish as disoriented and confused, depicting them as having no distinct cultural identity, neither Irish nor English.

What is more, the psychological impacts of colonisation, including control of culture, have been associated with specific behaviours and patterns, including a sense of inferiority, alcohol abuse, self-hatred, and restricted identity.[62] Similar patterns have been noted in Irish people, with shame, self-hatred and worthlessness,[63] and 'disturbing levels of contempt and self-hatred' frequently identified.[64] Garrett O'Connor diagnoses the 'malignant shame' in Irish people

56. Ibid, 100.
57. Khawaja, 'Consequences and Remedies', 2.
58. Ibid.
59. Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' in Charles Gavan Duffy (ed.), *Revival of Irish Literature* (London, 1904), 121.
60. Ibid., 119.
61. Ibid., 120.
62. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonised*.
63. Vincent Kenny, 'The Post-Colonial Personality', *The Crane Bag*, 9 (1985), 70–8.
64. Geraldine Moane, 'Postcolonial Legacies and the Irish Psyche' in Tom Inglis (ed.), *Are the Irish Different?* (Manchester, 2014), 122.

as a mixture of low self-esteem, emotional suppression and cultural inferiority, accrediting this to the deep-rooted and lingering effects of British domination in Ireland, which he argues the Irish have internalised and transmitted across each generation.[65] I argue that this cultural inferiority is in part a longstanding effect of the denigration of Gaeilge and Irish people, most notably throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the Victorian era, Irish people were considered 'backward', 'inferior',[66] and 'wild, reckless and indolent',[67] where hostility towards the Irish was 'extended to their language'.[68] Gaeilge was seen as an 'inferior language'[69] spoken by 'backward, rural and ignorant members of society'.[70] According to Farrel Corcoran, this view of Gaeilge derived from the ideological codes from England which portrayed the Catholic Irish as a 'biologically inferior species'.[71]

From Moore's perspective, the Irish internalised these negative stereotypes of themselves and of Gaeilge, instilling a widespread sense of inferiority and shame towards themselves and their language.[72] Hyde supports this, accrediting Gaeilge's defamation with an Ireland where the people 'blush and hang their heads when overheard speaking their own language'.[73] This disdain towards Gaeilge reflects Gandhi's concept of internalised colonisation, wherein colonised peoples 'believe in their own inferiority'.[74] Fanon interprets this relationship between cultural loss and shame by arguing that colonised societies frequently come to respect their coloniser's culture better than their own.[75] Indeed, according to Glynis Breakwell, if a language is stigmatised, its speakers may develop a negative self-image and, subsequently, experience great psychological distress.[76]

65. Garrett O'Connor, 'Recognizing and Healing Malignant Shame: A Statement About the Urgent Need for Psychological and Spiritual Recovery from the Effects of Colonialism in Ireland' in Trisha Ziff, Lucy Lippard, Pilar, Perez and Javier de la Garza (eds), *Distant Relations* (Los Angeles, 1995), 120–61.

66. Anna Slatinská, 'The Irish Language – A Unique Part of Irish Life and Cultural Revitalisation and Protection', *Intercultural Relations,* 1 (2017), 57. https://doi.org/10.12797/rm.01.2017.02.04

67. Anna Slatinská, 'The Irish Language – a Unique Part of Irish Life and Cultural Revitalisation and Protection', *Intercultural Relations,* 1 (2017), 62. https://doi.org/10.12797/rm.01.2017.02.04

68. Ibid.

69. Jana Pecnikova and Anna Slatinska, 'Language Maintenance and Language Death: The Case of the Irish Language', *Russian Journal of Linguistics,* 23 (2019), 50. https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9182-2019-23-1-40-61

70. Ibid.

71. Farrel Corcoran, 'Linguistic Colonialism and the Survival of Subaltern Languages: English and Irish', *Javnost - the Public*, 1 (1994), 63. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.1994.11008574

72. Moore, 'Language and Identity', 1–7.

73. Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', 137.

74. Rhea Gandhi, as cited in Lennox K. Thomas, 'Empires of Mind: Colonial History and its Implications for Counselling and Psychotherapy', *Psychodynamic Practice,* 19 (2013), 121. https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2013.778484

75. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

76. Glynis M. Breakwell, *Coping with Threatened Identities* (London, 1986).

Thus, the degradation of a language often results in its native speakers internalising this negative representation and subsequently abandoning it in favour of that of their colonial oppressor. These examples strongly indicate that when a language is maligned and misrepresented, it affects its speakers as if they themselves had been publicly shamed and humiliated.

There is thus great evidence to suggest that the loss, destruction and denigration of language and culture unequivocally damage a colonised people's emotional well-being, most noticeably by instilling self-hatred, internalised shame, cultural inferiority, confused identity, cultural exile and isolation, in addition to difficulties with self-expression. With this in mind, I argue that language, culture and heritage serve as psychological necessities; if, based on the previously reviewed literature, we argue that language is aligned with identity, then to destroy and hate a language is to destroy and hate its speakers. To eradicate a language is to injure and pollute a group's pre-existing cultural identity, generating immense confusion, self-loathing and destructive behaviour. Indeed, Laing compares the destruction of a colonised people's language with destroying their experience, ultimately a violent extension of the 'power to define reality',[77] suggesting that destroying a community's experience will provoke destructive behaviour among the colonised, claiming that 'if our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive'.[78] To this end, the reverse must also be true, namely that the reclamation and revitalisation of language improves and reinforces a positive state of well-being, resulting in increased self-esteem, a more distinct sense of self, greater ease of cultural expression, and lower rates of mental illness and suicide.

2. Methods

This study draws upon data collected from a series of semi-structured interviews with sixteen people studying and learning Gaeilge with the Irish-language organisation, Conradh na Gaeilge. In January 2022, Conradh na Gaeilge was contacted directly to formally obtain approval to recruit their members, after which a Zoom meeting was arranged to explain and clarify all relevant details of the research. Upon receiving approval, the recruitment process then began primarily through a snowball effect, with descriptions and advertisements of my research disseminated via Conradh na Gaeilge's digital newsletter, word of mouth, and local Conradh na Gaeilge branches' WhatsApp groups. I was subsequently invited to virtually attend and present this research at Conradh na Gaeilge London's annual conference, Cómhdháil na Breataine 2022, after which three further participants were recruited.

77. Ronald Laing, as cited in Paul Levine, *Divisions* (Toronto, 1975), 4.
78. Ronald Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York, 1967), 12.

Once the recruitment process had concluded, the interviews were scheduled and the participants' informed consent obtained. One participant decided against their interview being recorded and instead provided their answers to each interview question in writing. Before recording each interview, I restated the aim of the study, answered any last-minute questions on the participants' side, and reassured them that they would remain completely anonymous should that be their preference. While several participants consented to have their first names included in the finished article, other participants did not, so, for consistency, all of the participants' names in this article are pseudonyms. In addition, the participants were made aware of my intention to submit the finished article for publication and were kept abreast of relevant updates throughout the process.

The interviews were carried out between 6 April and 24 May 2022 via Zoom, and the participants were each asked eighteen questions,[79] after which follow-up questions were asked whenever relevant to the study and to the topic of conversation. Of the sixteen participants that took part in this study, the sample included eight men and eight women. The ages of the participants ranged between the ages of twenty- one and seventy- nine, the mean age being forty- five. The recruitment process was not specific to (1) age or (2) gender, and were selected irrespective of background, employment, race or sexuality. All interviews were conducted in English. The recorded interview data was subsequently transcribed and the audio files were verified to ensure the transcriptions' accuracy. Qualitative content analysis was then carried out manually on the interview data.

3. Findings

By analysing their direct experiences, three recurring themes emerged in the subsequent qualitative content analysis. Of the three themes, each serves as a heading for the specific personal experiences and insights observed by the participants during the language reclamation process.

79. The participants of this study were asked eighteen interview questions, some of which included the following:

- What made you decide to learn/improve upon your Irish?
- What does the ability to speak Irish/the Irish language mean to you personally?
- What is the main aspect of learning Irish that you enjoy the most?
- Has learning or improving your Irish affected your life in any noticeable way?
- Since you began to learn/improve your Irish, do you feel any differently towards Ireland/ your Irish heritage?
- If Ireland achieved national fluency in the Irish language, what do you believe the effects/ outcomes would be?

3.1 Effects of cultural loss

3.1.1 Loss of self

Several participants associated Gaeilge's decline with a distinct loss of self among Irish people, with one claiming that language loss weakens a person's self-worth and 'sense of being'**.**

> 'You do lose a part of who you are. And you do lose a part of your ancestors and I think it weakens your sense of being. I think it weakens your sense of self worth.' **-** Clíona

> 'We won't be at home in ourselves until we have our language.' **-** Diarmuid

The relationship between language loss and lack of cultural distinction was explored again in terms of Irish people being 'lost' and 'forgotten' without Gaeilge.

> 'When you can introduce yourself in your own language, I think there's something special about that … I feel like sometimes maybe Irish people might feel a bit lost or forgotten, because sometimes people can't do that.' - Roisín

Participants also believed that Gaeilge's decline was tied up with Irish psychological and generational trauma, arguing that Irish people today were only now unravelling it.

> 'The psychological trauma that has passed down through the generations since the famine and that's wrapped up with the loss of the language … and I feel like we're only now … unravelling all that trauma.' - Lorcan

Additionally, participants recognised that English dominance in Ireland has damaged its unique cultural identity, with one declaring that Ireland is becoming 'more English'. Others discussed how globally Ireland is often confused for a satellite of the UK, describing Ireland as lacking 'cultural distinction' and with many outside Ireland unaware that Gaeilge is even a language.

> 'Ireland for a small country has a huge cultural identity and punches way above its weight. But … there are also still quite a lot of people globally who would go, "Oh Ireland, that's part of the UK, right?"' - Rowan

> 'After independence, I think a lot of people in the UK then started to see Ireland as just a backwards looking very religious country that spoke English. There was no kind of cultural distinction.' **-** Rowan

> 'A lot of people that I speak to just like in my town don't know that Irish is even a language.' - Caitriona

3.1.2 Cultural self-loathing

Several participants reported previously experiencing disdain for Gaeilge, with many citing first-hand negative experiences learning the language in school and others from hearing complaints about how Gaeilge is 'a waste of time' and 'not useful'.

> 'People tell me that it's a waste of time to speak the language? They've gone to school … and have a negative feeling and negative reaction to the language as a result of that.' - Cara

> 'Going back to the late 1900s and the early 1920s … and I suppose even going back to the Famine, there was no employment and the people had to leave to get work … and a lot of them would have had the view that Gaelic didn't do anything … Kind of a sense of it being not useful.' - Muireann

Others were critical of this negative attitude towards Gaeilge, with one declaring that it has led to a type of 'cultural self-loathing' among Irish people, suggesting that contempt for the language has been internalised into self-disdain over time. Another complained that Irish people's attitude towards the language was the 'real problem'.

> 'Cultural self loathing, and so on exists in this country … You know the way if you speak negatively about yourself … Even though you're half joking, it might kind of seep into your being.' - Diarmuid

> 'The real problem today is really with the Irish themselves and their attitude toward the language.' - Cara

Another participant of Irish descent shared their experience of Irish people expressing guilt that their Gaeilge was worse than those who had grown up abroad.

> 'That guilt can hold people back … I'll talk to somebody in Irish when I'm over … but they don't want to talk to me because I'm foreign and because they feel guilty that they perceive me as having a higher standard of Irish.' - Caitriona

3.2 Irish heritage and identity

3.2.1 Connection to Ireland

After becoming more fluent in Gaeilge, participants reported feeling an increased sense of belonging to Ireland. One revealed that Ireland had previously felt 'distant' from them before learning Gaeilge, while another claimed to feel 'more Irish' as a result.

> 'It feels like something lifting off my shoulders a bit … I start thinking that maybe I do have some connection to that country that was always very distant to me, and there's that sense of belonging.' - Rowan

> 'It is definitely a sense of belonging … I feel more Irish because I can speak Irish.' **-** Clíona

Irish place names— that is to say, place names across Ireland in their original translations in Gaeilge— were discussed extensively by the participants, who described how they felt considerably closer to Ireland itself after learning Gaeilge, as they now understood the true history and significance behind the places where they lived or came from. They expressed a deeper awareness of the relationship between Gaeilge and the land itself, with one claiming that Gaeilge hides a 'hidden history'.

> 'The Irish language explains the world a lot better than English I think … like, how the Irish language is linked to where you live … That's kind of a hidden history in a way for a lot of people.' - John

3.2.2 Connection to ancestors

A recurring theme in this study was people equating their ability to speak Gaeilge with a means to feel closer to their Irish forebears, with one stating that speaking Gaeilge was a 'spiritual' thing, and by doing so they were connecting with 'the voices of the past'**.** Another believed they were maintaining a link with 'a thousand-year-old chain' of previous generations.

> 'It's kind of like a spiritual thing …it does feel like you are connecting with sort of the voices of the past because like until a hundred years ago … every one of my forebears for probably almost a thousand years previously, would have spoken pretty much only Irish.' - John

> 'It means to me a real sense of pride. You're maintaining that link with a thousand-year-old chain … and so it was really important to me then to speak Irish to my children.'**-** Lorcan

3.2.3 Connection to self

Participants claimed that they experienced a sharp increase in their sense of Irish identity as a result of their increased fluency. Many recognised Gaeilge as a means of retaining a unique Irish identity, while one reported that the language had 'copper fastened' their feelings towards their Irish heritage.

> 'If we lose our language, we lose a part of our own identity and history.' **-** Ruairí

> 'Without a doubt learning Irish has copper fastened my feelings of Irish heritage, I speak Irish therefore I am Irish.' **-** Eoghan

Similarly, participants from Irish diasporic communities revealed that Gaeilge strongly 'reinforces' their Irish identity while living abroad**,** while another described Gaeilge as a means to retain their 'sense of self'.

> 'Despite the fact I live in England, I am distinctly Irish … And speaking Irish again, sort of reinforces that identity.' **-** Eamon

> 'It is a source of enjoyment, pride, cultural expression and identity which is particularly important when living outside of Ireland to retain a sense of self.' - Ruairí

3.3 Impact on well-being

3.3.1 Confidence

Having gained proficiency in Gaeilge, participants noted a marked increase in their personal confidence. One participant claimed to use Gaeilge for comfort before public events, as it caused them to 'feel comfortable' in themselves.

> 'And I'm definitely more confident … when I occasionally had to find myself in front of an audience, I used to speak a little bit of Irish as a trick for me to catch my breath and feel comfortable in myself.' - Diarmuid

People accredited Gaeilge with their increased self-esteem, as one noted that speaking Gaeilge made them feel 'happy with myself'. Participants also reflected on feeling like a more 'complete' person after becoming more fluent in Gaeilge. Moreover, another participant discussed how their newfound confidence led to greater interest and openness to other cultures.

> 'It gives me pride … and I think it also gives me confidence in terms of being happy with myself.' **-** Damian

> 'I felt that by age eighteen with competency in the language that I became a much more complete person.' **-** Lorcan

> 'It makes me very confident in who I am and therefore makes me more open and … celebratory of other peoples' cultures.' - Maeve

3.3.2 Happiness

Participants observed a marked increase in their general happiness as they began to master Gaeilge. One expressed that they were now 'a happier person' while feeling excited and motivated when speaking the language. Others noticed feeling happier speaking Gaeilge and again noticed something more 'complete' within them as a result.

> 'I feel more confident when I'm speaking Irish … I'm a happier person, I feel, and a lot more motivated.' - Roisín

> 'For some reason I feel happier speaking Irish. I think I just feel like there's something more complete in me, you know.' - Diarmuid

One participant stated that they were happiest when speaking Gaeilge, as opposed to English, revealing that without it, something is 'missing' from them and that they'd be 'lonely' without it.

> 'I feel something is missing for me, or if I was without Irish for a month, I'd be lonely from it … it's at the point at which I'm my happiest speaking Irish' **-** Diarmuid

Another identified Gaeilge as a source of great fulfilment for them, citing it as a key factor in their 'inner happiness'.

> 'And like I just don't think that my life would be as fulfilled … I don't think I would have that inner happiness.' - Clodagh

3.3.3 Self-expression

Greater self-expression when speaking Gaeilge was explored extensively by the participants. One described it as the 'right language' for them and said that they felt more self-assured speaking Gaeilge than English.

> 'Maybe I'm just more self-assured of who I am and it feels more that it's the right language for me or something … it's your native language and you feel kind of more connected in that sense.' - Clodagh

Similarly, one participant explained how Gaeilge 'understands' them compared to when they speak English.

> 'I can feel more confident when I'm speaking Irish … the language understands me and I understand the language and what I want to say comes out better.' - Aoibheann

Participants also believed that Gaeilge was easier to understand dynamically than English; one participant noted that there were more ways in Irish to express oneself and that to express oneself emotionally was 'clearer'.

> 'I feel like there's a lot more ways in Irish to express yourself than there are in English. The vocabulary around emotions is much clearer in Irish.' - Clodagh

> 'You can understand a word in Irish far easier or quicker than you could in another language, because usually they make more sense … Like a ladybird in English is a ladybird, but in Irish it's bóín dé which translates to God's little cow because of the black dots.' - Roisín

One participant of Irish descent conveyed that they felt better about having Irish citizenship after gaining competency in Gaeilge, as by learning Gaeilge, they were doing something that made them 'comfortable' with their identity.

> 'I feel a bit more comfortable saying I have Irish citizenship … I feel like I'm … doing something that makes me feel more comfortable with my identity.' - Rowan

4. Discussion

This study's findings confirm that language, identity and well-being are deeply interconnected. They reveal that gaining proficiency in one's native or ancestral language leads to a clearer and more distinct cultural identity, which, in this case, results in a stronger sense of 'Irishness' and heightened feelings of belonging, connection to Ireland, and connection to one's ancestry, while also providing a means for self-expression that supports happiness and confidence. This result indicates that identity is indeed fluid, a framework that can shift or deepen over time, and in this regard, a deeper connection with a person's traditional language can be transformative. What is more, the findings reflect the idea that the suppression and denigration of a language can create great shame and a sense of cultural inferiority within its speakers, which, among the participants, resulted in their suffering from 'cultural self-loathing', disdain for their language, and an ill-defined and indistinct identity, observed both within themselves and Irish people on a wider scale. Based on the evidence, it is undeniable that language and culture possess an anchoring effect, equipping a person with unique and defined cultural markers that allow them to situate themselves within a specific location or cultural group and further solidify their cultural identity. It is possible that this cultural and linguistic positioning is what induces greater belonging during language reclamation, as at once they feel more connected to their homeland and their ancestors as well as having a more deep-rooted sense of who they are, which in turn creates feelings of psychological safety and subsequent well-being.

It is also readily apparent that language reclamation follows a direct pipeline, namely the following: language/ culture - identity - well-being. When the native language or culture is reintroduced and reintegrated into the colonised group or individual, they subsequently experience a stronger and more concrete sense of self and cultural identity, which then directly contributes to their reinforced positive well-being. This claim of feeling more 'complete' after learning Gaeilge indicates that there is a direct correlation between proficiency in one's native language and an inner stability of self. That is not to say that being unable to speak one's native language removes or destroys one's innate personality, cultural identity or broader sense of self; however, I argue that identity should be seen as a puzzle, wherein language functions as a cornerstone and, when absent, can separate a major piece from the whole unit. Additionally, the reports of

greater confidence and self-esteem among the participants parallel Breakwell's theory[80] that if a language is stigmatised, its speakers will internalise this stigma towards themselves and develop a negative self-image. However, the findings indicate the reverse and strongly resemble the effects of cultural homecoming,[81] namely that, upon immersion in Gaeilge, the participants gained strength from the language, as well as greater self-worth, confidence, and self-assurance. Language and culture essentially facilitate a homecoming to the self, in a manner of speaking. This conclusion strongly suggests that language and culture are indeed critical for society as a whole, not only as a proven stimulus for happiness, self-esteem, confidence, and greater self-expression but also as a potential safeguard towards preventing and improving mental health issues.

By the same token, the concept of cultural exile is clearly reflected in the study's findings. According to the participants, Ireland is commonly perceived by many as merely a 'backwards looking' country that speaks English, just 'part of the UK', while many others do not know that Gaeilge is 'even a language'. This result suggests Ireland is in a state of limbo, neither fully Irish nor fully English. They are not English, yet without Gaeilge as Ireland's dominant language or as a near- bilingual state, they are merely considered a subsidiary to the UK. Thus, is it surprising that without Gaeilge, many Irish people may feel 'lost', 'forgotten' and 'not at home' in themselves? That being so, this strongly supports Taylor and Usborne's theory[82] that clarity of cultural identity is essential to building a strong self-concept, as without their traditional language a people will struggle to determine and fully cement their cultural self. I consider that the participants may have already felt a reasonably strong sense of Irish identity prior to learning Gaeilge, yet on account of this study's findings, it is logical to suggest that learning and becoming proficient in Gaeilge allowed them to consolidate and reinforce a deeper and fuller sense of their Irish sense of self.

The greater self-expression noted by the participants is particularly striking. Gaeilge is the 'right language' for them, as what they say 'comes out better', indicating that culture can indeed be an amplifier to self-expression. Gaeilge 'understands' them; it provides comfort and connection more so than English, their first language, and in a comparatively shorter period of time. This result begs the question: does language reclamation revive an existing psychological link with the ancestral language? It is interesting to consider: does a language's structure exist in the minds of its people on an intergenerational level, even decades and centuries after language loss? And is language reclamation merely slotting a missing piece back into place? William Smyth relates this idea to Gaeilge's decline, contending that 'their thought patterns and cultural understandings

80. Breakwell, *Coping with Threatened Identities*.
81. The emphasis is mine.
82. Taylor and Usborne, 'When I Know Who "We" Are', 93–111.

were still embedded in the Irish language'.[83] Through this lens, I propose that different cultural groups are born with uniquely tailored linguistic programming and cultural blueprints within their respective cognitive makeup, as part of a wider community consciousness. What is more, I consider that even following language loss, this blueprint remains within the specific group's psyche, and when reintroduced, a person feels a deep recognition and familiar connection with the language.

Based on the evidence, while there is a clear need for greater cultural distinction in Ireland, I stress that a country can be culturally unique while still remaining open and welcoming to other cultures and traditions. There are many examples of cultural revival efforts and cultural heritage on a wider scale becoming entangled with white supremacy and racism,[84] and as such, language and cultural reclamation are not an excuse for xenophobia and intolerance.

4.1 Limitations

Despite the results establishing Gaeilge as having positively affected the participants' identity and well-being, it is clear that this study has certain limitations. The sample of participants used was small and thus only represented a very small part of the populations of each group. Likewise, as this study was focused solely on the current and recent effects of Gaeilge on the participants, I had little insight into the participants' sense of cultural identity and well-being prior to connecting or reconnecting to Gaeilge. I must also acknowledge that the sample could be considered somewhat biased, as I have chosen a group of people who have actively chosen to learn Gaeilge, as opposed to those who have little interest in the language at all. Additionally, the sample included people who were both Caucasian and either Irish born or of Irish descent, and thus there is no insight into how Gaeilge and Irishness affect Irish people of colour or immigrants in Ireland. However, this could be explored with further study.

83. William Smyth, 'Towards a Traumatic Geography of Ireland 1530–1760 and Beyond: The Evidence of Irish Language Texts', *Historical Geography,* 42 (2014), 48.

84. David Farrell-Banks and Lorna-Jane Richardson, 'Heritage, Archaeology, Ancestry, and the Far Right' in Antonia Vaughan, Joan Braune, Meghan Tinsley, and Aurelien Mondon (eds), *The Ethics of Researching the Far Right: Critical Approaches and Reflections* (Manchester, 2024), 149–60 https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526173898.00020; 'How Hate Groups Misuse Medieval Symbolism to Promote White Supremacy, University of Alberta, 20 January 2020. https://www.ualberta.ca/en/folio/2020/01/commentary--how-hate-groups-misuse-medieval-symbolism-to-promote-white-supremacy.html; 'White Supremacists are Misappropriating Norse Mythology', *University of Alberta,* 30 July 2020. https://www.ualberta.ca/en/folio/2020/07/white-supremacists-are-misappropriating-norse-mythology-says-expert.html; Natasha Casey, 'Beyond the Pale: Irishness and White Supremacy in 1990s America', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies,* 43 (2020), 146–71.

5. Conclusion

Compared to many former colonies, it is undeniable that Irish language and culture continue to carry considerable weight. Yet there is still great uncertainty surrounding Irish cultural identity and significant risk to Gaeilge. With only 1.36 per cent of the population speaking Gaeilge regularly and UNESCO having marked it as 'definitely endangered',[85] it is beyond question that Ireland remains clouded by English cultural dominance. Using Ireland and Gaeilge as an example, the aim of this study has been to demonstrate how language reclamation in formerly colonised communities and cultural revitalisation on a wider scale are strongly connected to the development of a deeper and more realised sense of self, which in turn positively influences well-being and mental health.

The evidence is very compelling. The loss, suppression, and denigration of Gaeilge over time have resulted in an Irish society of reduced cultural distinction as it becomes 'more English'. Moreover, the findings depict an Ireland where Irish people are a bit 'lost' and disdainful of their native language, as it's considered a 'waste of time', and where contempt for Gaeilge has developed into a pervasive cultural self-loathing. They also demonstrate that gaining proficiency in Gaeilge reinforced the participants' Irish cultural identity, with people in the study reporting a significant change when they spoke Gaeilge regularly. Likewise, they developed a deeper sense of belonging more inherently to Ireland, feeling 'more Irish' as a result, while also experiencing a greater connection to their Irish ancestors. Moreover, the findings reveal that learning Gaeilge had deeply positive impacts on their emotional well-being, including an increase in their confidence, happiness, self-worth, and self-expression and a feeling of being more 'complete'.

Within these findings, the basis for the concepts I have proposed for this study— cultural homecoming and cultural exile— is strongly supported. They reveal a direct correlation between language reclamation, emotional welfare, and a stronger self-concept, directly aligning with the premise of cultural homecoming, whereby reintegrating with one's native language or culture generates a reinforced sense of self, happiness and well-being, thus experiencing a manner of 'homecoming' within the self. Likewise, as perceived by the participants, the findings reflect a severe lack of cultural distinction in Ireland as well as confusion and uncertainty around Irish cultural identity. This strongly resembles the effects of cultural exile, wherein, as a result of Gaeilge's decline, Ireland is frequently viewed as only a 'backwards' subsidiary of the UK, with many Irish people feeling 'lost', 'forgotten' and 'not at home' within themselves. Ultimately,

85. UNESCO, 'Irish Language', 30 January 2024, Available at https://en.wal.unesco.org/countries/ireland/languages/irish, [Last accessed 14 January 2025].

the evidence reiterates that general well-being is indeed conditional on a clear and defined cultural identity, which the evidence confirms can be supported and made 'complete' by language reclamation. Moreover, the findings suggest that the suppression and denigration of a people's language can create an enduring shame and cultural inferiority within its speakers and community, to which this disdain can extend to their language.

While I consider this research a stepping stone for this specific field of research, I recognise the need for further study as the findings have raised additional questions. For future research, I believe it would be beneficial to expand on the themes explored in this study into new avenues of research, including belonging, self-esteem, confidence, cultural expression, and cultural self-loathing, in addition to the concepts of cultural homecoming and cultural exile. From my perspective, this would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the language/ culture - identity - well-being pipeline and encourage the representation of identity and well-being as comprehensive systems of moving parts and not fixed, one-dimensional entities. Moreover, I believe this approach will stress the emotional and psycho-social outcomes of formerly colonised communities that have strong connections to their heritage and ancestral languages, which may raise awareness and generate financial support for language and cultural reclamation efforts.

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