

MARKERS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY: AN ANALYTIC HIERARCHY EVALUATION

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SUMMARY

The paper is in three parts. The first part is a brief review of the development and characteristics of the Scotch-Irish/Ulster-American ethnic group of the United States. In this we discuss the changes in attitude toward ethnicity that have developed over the last half-century and how the Scotch-Irish are adapting in this new environment. In the main part of the paper, we present the results of a pilot investigation of factors contributing to the Scotch-Irish sense of identity. Responses to a survey are analyzed to produce weighted rankings of relevant categories at several levels of detail. The analytical methodology is the paired comparison approach of the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP). In the final section, we discuss possible approaches to further research and the manner in which such research might be conducted. This paper is a revision and update of work originally carried out and published in 2002 (Alexander, 2002).

PART 1. THE SCOTCH-IRISH

A question worth asking is, why are the Scotch-Irish (that is people of Ulster origin living in the United States) so different from the Ulster émigré groups in other parts of the world? One answer is that the USA is a republic, while most other destinations for Ulster immigration around the world maintain a constitutional linkage with the United Kingdom. However this is a result, not a cause, of the unique characteristics of the Scotch-Irish: the Scotch-Irish were in the vanguard of those who fought to sever the British connection; of those who were not, many left for Canada after the Revolution. A more complete answer may lie in the broader historical trends that allowed, and perhaps made inevitable, the emergence of the United States itself as an independent nation.

First, there is the background against which settlement took place. The flow of immigrants from Ulster became a steady stream after 1719, long before nineteenth century concepts of romantic nationalism became fashionable. The allegiance of these immigrants, if any, would be to the King and not to some abstract idea of the nation. England and Scotland had united only a few years before, and Ireland was administered as a separate kingdom until almost one hundred years later. In Ulster, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Scottish, English, French, and other settlers would have seen the monarch as their unifying symbol. They came to a land where royal authority may have existed on the coast, but was not much in evidence on the frontier where many of the Scotch-Irish found themselves. There was no reason for them to think of themselves as anything other than American. Later arrivals from Ulster were, and are, subject to a similar experience. The acceptance of United States citizenship involved rejection of the earlier allegiance, and absorption into an ethnic group that is uncompromisingly American.

This rejection of allegiance is critical. In the British Commonwealth, the other main destination of Ulster emigrants, there may be no sense of a change of nationality. In Canada, many early immigrants were British sympathizers who went north after the success of the American Revolution. Also, whether by design or happenstance, the pace of immigration did not outrun the capability of the imperial power to enforce its authority. As settlements spread across Canada, the Redcoats (at first of the British Army and later the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) accompanied or preceded them.

Again, in Australia there was no question of the flow of immigration overwhelming the growth of the imperial authority. It was too far away and, because much early immigration was involuntary, the British administration was always postured to use force, when necessary, to enforce its will.

Most ethnic groups in the USA have a clearly defined original national identity. The Scotch-Irish, of course, come from Ulster, but the residents of Ulster have consistently eschewed any claim to nationhood. Thus, the Scotch-Irish are an ethnic national group in the USA without a nation overseas. This is an almost unique situation. Scottish-Americans reflect the strong sense of nationhood felt by their ethnic kin in Scotland, as do Polish-Americans, Greek-Americans, English-Americans, Irish-Americans, Welsh-Americans, etc., with their respective ethnic kin. Only the

Scotch-Irish constitute a freestanding ethnic group without a nation, or an aspiration to nationhood, in their former homeland.¹

In the early nineteenth century, the mainstream culture in the United States was white, protestant, and largely northern European in origin. As the century progressed, the flow of immigrants from the early origins continued and grew; over time they were joined, first by Irish Catholics fleeing the potato famine and, later, by Italians and a whole spectrum of eastern Europeans, such as Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews, fleeing pogroms in Poland and Russia. On the west coast the Chinese came in large numbers to work on railroad construction and at a variety of other jobs for which there was a shortage of local labor.

For a long time there was a high-minded belief in the ideal of a “melting pot”. That is to say, eventually all would merge into one mainstream American culture and differences in national origin and ethnic identity would be forgotten. As charter members of the mainstream culture, the Scotch-Irish were enthusiastic in their support of the melting pot ideal. However, it gradually became clear that the concept was not valid. Many of these later arrivals and their descendants wished to retain cherished parts of their old world culture while at the same time adopting as much as was needed of the mainstream culture (language, education, etc.) to function and prosper in the mainstream American world. As in other parts of the world, the broadened access to higher education that followed World War II led directly to a better understanding of and pride in ethnicity. In recent years, the Internet has stimulated interest in genealogy, as records around the world have become accessible from desktop computers.

The Scotch-Irish did not have a national organization until late in the nineteenth century. We do not know with any certainty why they did not feel the need until that time.

PART 2: QUESTIONNAIRE AND ANALYSIS

Method of Analysis: In order to shed some light on how the Scotch-Irish perceive themselves, we conducted a pilot study. Selected members of the Scotch-Irish Society of the USA were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their attitudes to a range of topics that the author believed to have relevance to their self-identification as being Scotch-Irish. The questionnaire was structured in such a way that relative weights as well as rankings would emerge from the process. The hierarchical form of the questionnaire allows quantified comparisons to be developed from qualitative comparisons of the elements, a pair at a time. Among other applications, the process is widely used in business and government to decide which research programs to fund and how available funds should be allocated between programs; it is also particularly useful in conflict analysis. There is an extensive literature on the method: the present example is a very simple application.

The Hierarchy: When one approaches the issue of ethnic identity, a number of broad general categories come to mind as a first level of investigation. As indicated in Figure 1, we have, after some consultation, identified five broad areas that someone who identified himself or herself as Scotch-Irish would consider relevant to the sense of being Scotch-Irish, and would have a view on their importance. These are Cultural Awareness, Ethics and Values, Historical Awareness, Family History and Traditions, and Ethnic Self-Identity. These broad categories form logical groupings for the topics listed below them in the hierarchy. These are considered relevant to the self awareness of members of the group as an authentic ethnic category.

At the second level, we have twenty very diverse items and, although we can make meaningful comparisons between items within a group, it would be almost impossible to make direct comparisons between items from different groups. The preliminary assessment of the first level categories allows us to derive global weightings of the twenty items.

With the historical branch, we proceed to a third level where events in United States history, European history, and British Isles history are weighted under their individual headings, and then re-weighted by applying the weights from the level above. Similarly, the Family History and Tradition branch is extended down from the Documented Genealogy category to assess whether there is a preference for the male, the female, or both lines of descent. Again, the Ethnic Self-Identity branch is extended to enable consideration of points of origin beyond Ulster.

A sidebar issue is, how do we view different periods of arrival in the United States? Initially we attempted to integrate this into the main structure, but it became clear that it did not belong there. However, we retained the question because we thought the answers to this might correlate with individual judgements, or might help us to understand any anomalies in the responses to the other questions. This was not borne out. However, the responses to this question are analyzed and reported below.

¹ There may be some similarity between the sense of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity and that of the Scotch-Irish. Latino identity does not seem to imply any strong sense of identification with Spain or Spanish concerns.

The histories of the three regions, the United States, Europe, and the British Isles were each subdivided into five eras, events, or processes as indicated later in the text. These subdivisions were chosen for their perceived relevance to the sense of being Scotch-Irish, not for their ranking in terms of global historical importance.

Under the Ethnic Self Identity category, the item Records to Ulster and Elsewhere is taken to a further level of detail. A significant number of arrivals in Ulster, in the seventeenth century and later, had left places other than Scotland. Does this matter in the context of being Scotch-Irish? To explore this, we have included a comparative evaluation of other prior origins such as England, France, Wales, and a non-specific Elsewhere. Elsewhere could include origins such as Spain (the Armada), the Netherlands (soldiers remaining in Ulster after serving with William), and a host of other places.

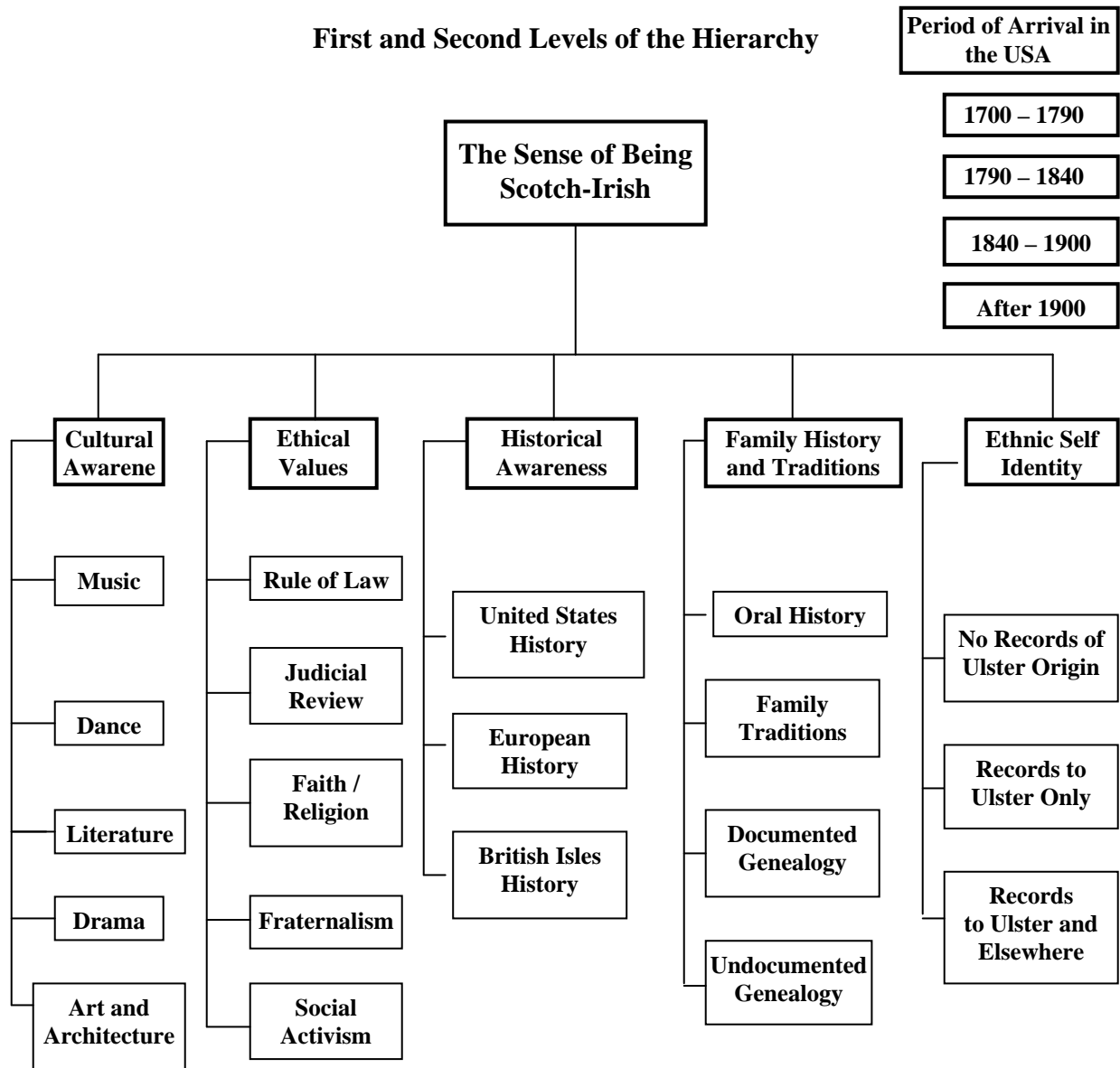


Figure 1. Categories Contributing to the Sense of Being Scotch-Irish

Respondents: Fourteen people, out of seventeen solicited, responded with a completed questionnaire. Table 1 gives information on the geographical location of the respondents, and the approximate period of their family’s arrival in the USA. An interesting sidebar issue is how important is the date of a family’s arrival in the Colonies or in the

USA as a marker of Scotch-Irish identity. As might be expected early arrival is seen as being entitled to respect. This is illustrated by Figure 2 below.

Respondent ID	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Family's Date of Arrival	Mid 1900s	Mid 1900s	Mid 1900s	Mid 1700s	Early 1700s	Late 1800s	Late 1700s	Late 1700s	Early 1700s	Early 1700s	Mid 1900s	Mid 1800s	Mid 1900s	Early 1800s
Residence	NY	PA	NJ	PA	CA	FL	NC	DE	AZ	OH	NJ	SC	PA	GA

Table 1. Respondent's Period of Family Arrival in the USA and Current Residence.

Figure 2 is a chart of the average relative importance derived for the period of family arrival in the United States.

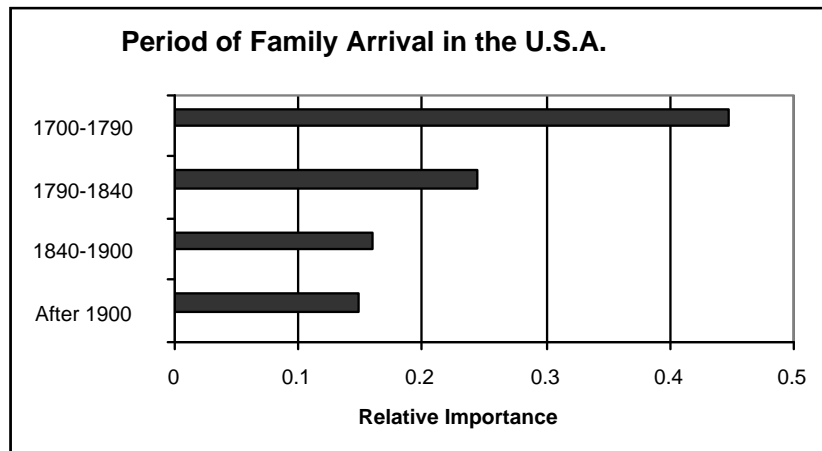


Figure 2. Relative Importance of Different Periods of Arrival in the USA

Weighting for First Level Categories: The weights derived from the responses to the first level category questions are shown in Figure 3.

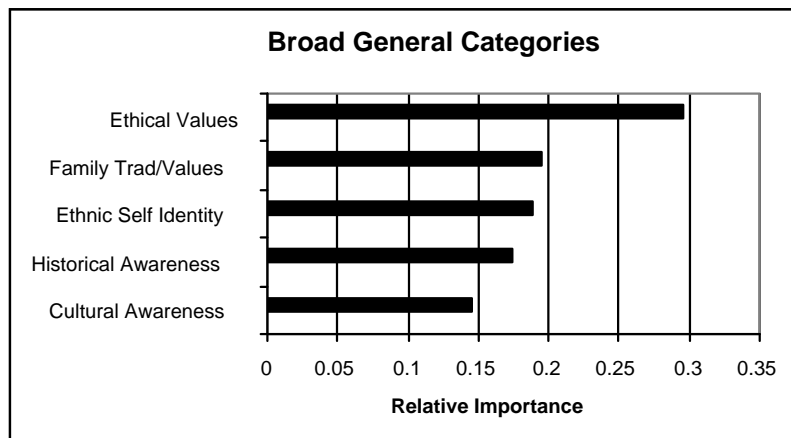


Figure 3. Mean Relative Weights of First Level Categories.

The ordering of the items in Figure 3 shows that the category labeled Ethical Values was, on average, given the highest weighting, and this may be understandable when we look at the sub-categories which it includes. Respect

for the Rule of Law, Judicial Review of Legislation, Faith and Religion, etc., are core American concepts often linked with the Scotch-Irish.

Weightings for Second Level Categories: We will first present the weightings within the second level branches of the hierarchy, starting with **Cultural Awareness**.

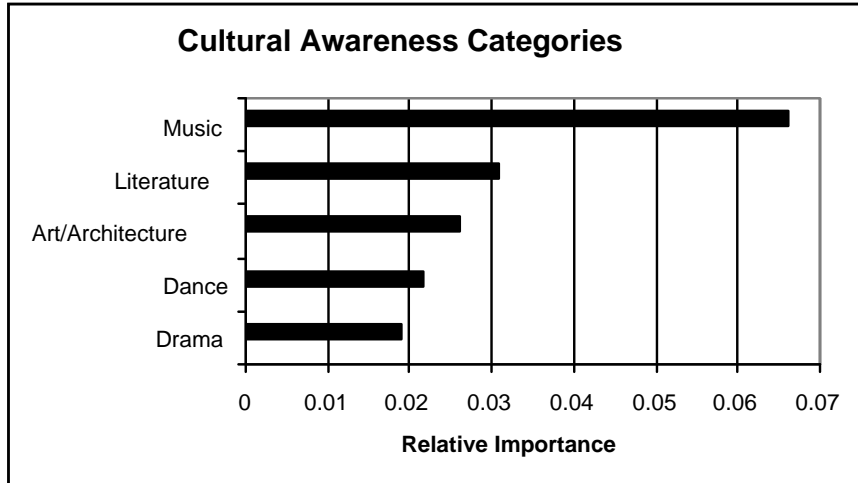


Figure 4: Chart of Mean Relative Weights of Cultural Awareness Categories

Figure 4 shows that, on average, Music as a category is rated more than twice as highly as the other items. This may reflect the importance attached to the music of the Appalachians, Blue Grass, etc., as cultural markers of the Scotch-Irish.

Ethics and Values: Figure 5 shows the relative weightings of the categories of ethics and values.

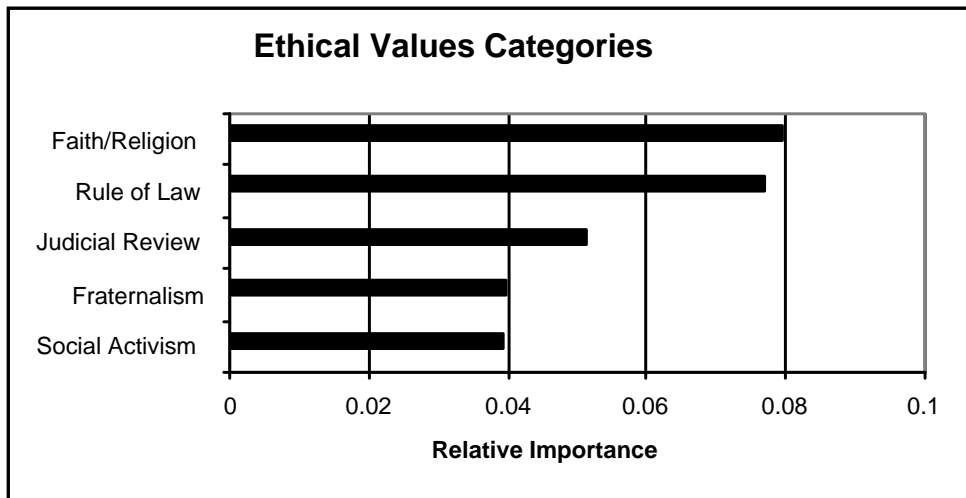


Figure 5. Relative Importance of Ethical Values Categories

Historical Awareness: There are three categories in Historical Awareness. However, each is taken to a further level of detail. The weightings for the categories of United States History, European History, and British Isles History are given in Figure 6.

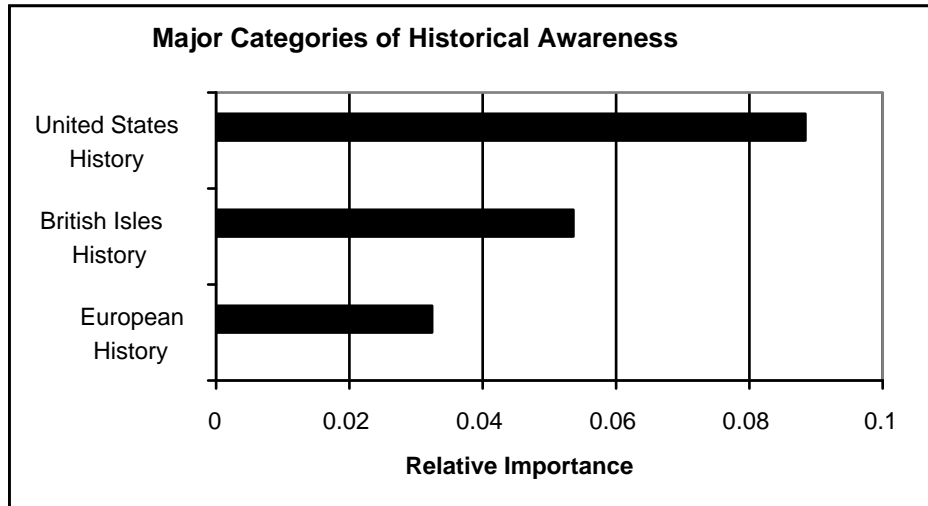


Figure 6: Relative Importance of Major History Categories

The order and relative importance seen in Figure 6 are not surprising since the Scotch-Irish are an American ethnic group. These three categories are each subdivided into five more detailed items, as shown in Figure 7, chosen for their perceived relevance to the consciousness of being Scotch-Irish. We now proceed to look at the subdivisions in these regional histories.

United States History

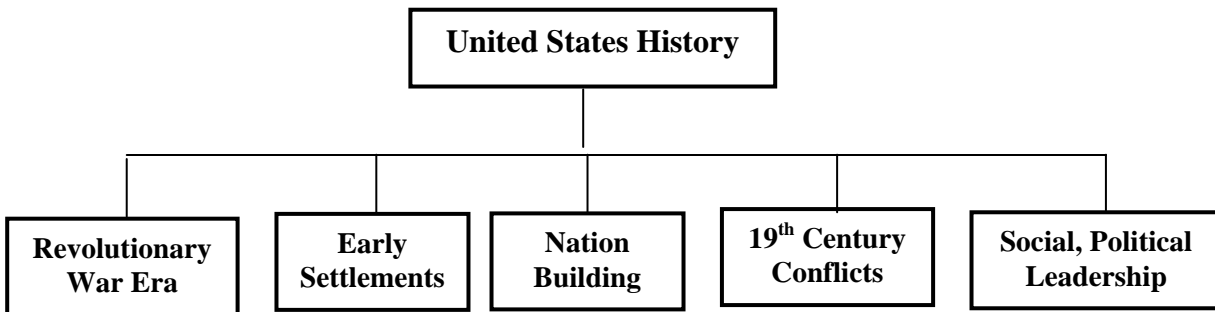


Figure 7: Topics in United States History

The weightings of the relative importance of these subgroups of United States History, as derived from the usual AHP method, are tabulated in Figure 8.

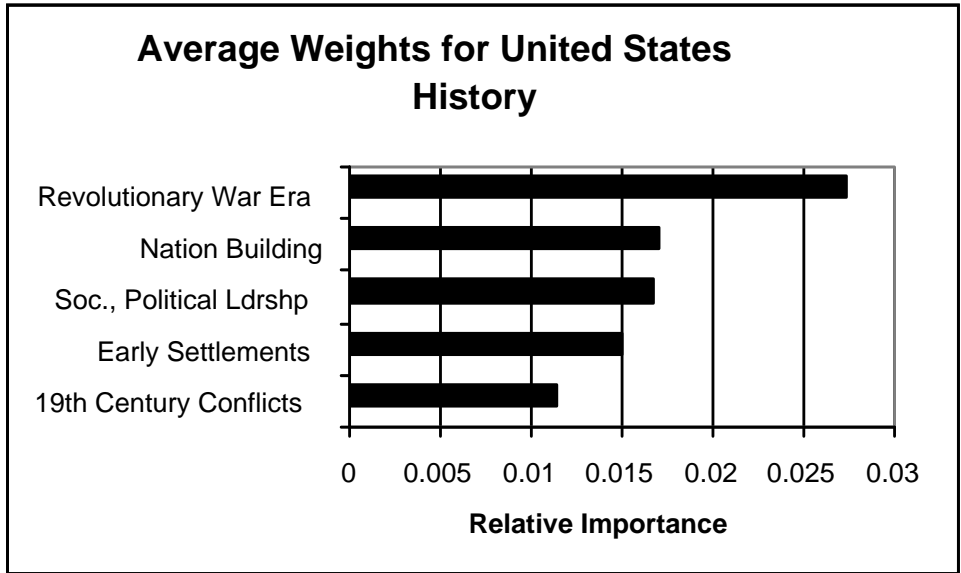


Figure 8. Chart of Relative Importance of Topics in United States History

European History

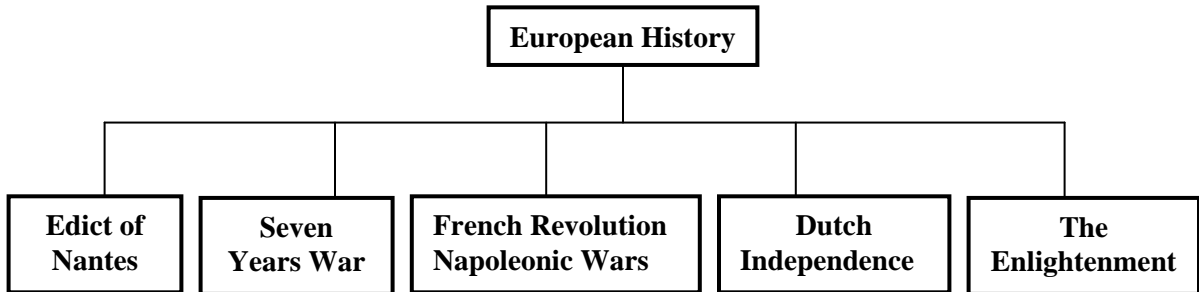


Figure 9: Events in European History

The topics shown in Figure 9 are considered to have some bearing on the emergence of the Scotch-Irish in the United States. They were rated by the respondents, with the results shown in Figure 10.

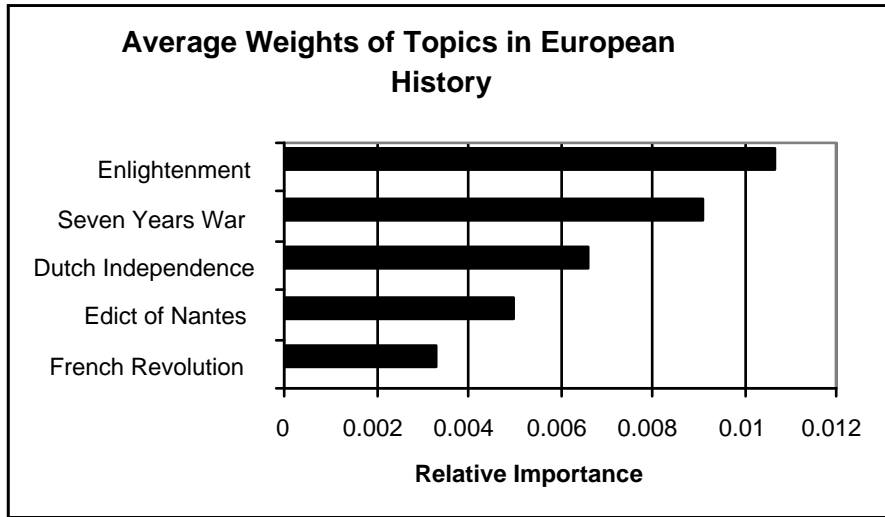


Figure 10: Chart of Relative Importance of Aspects of European History

The weighted ranking of these topics is interesting. It may reflect the importance that is attached to the effect of the Enlightenment on United States political philosophy, in addition to any specifically Scotch-Irish relevance.

British Isles History

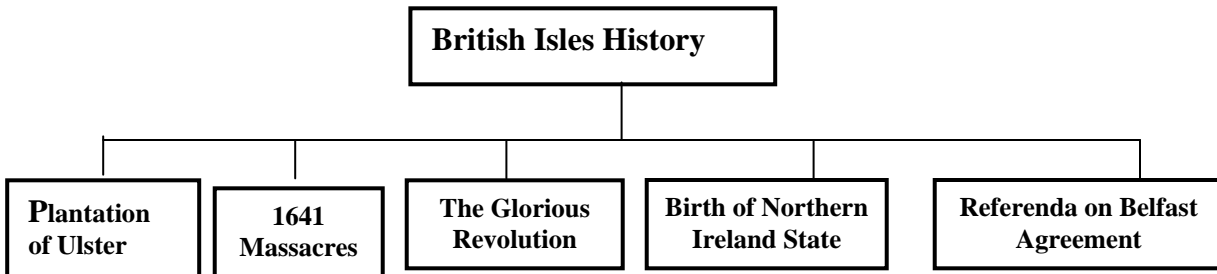


Figure 11: Events in History of British Isles

Figure 11 shows the topics selected for evaluation of their importance to the sense of being Scotch-Irish. The list could have been longer, but the author considered these sufficient for an initial pilot study.

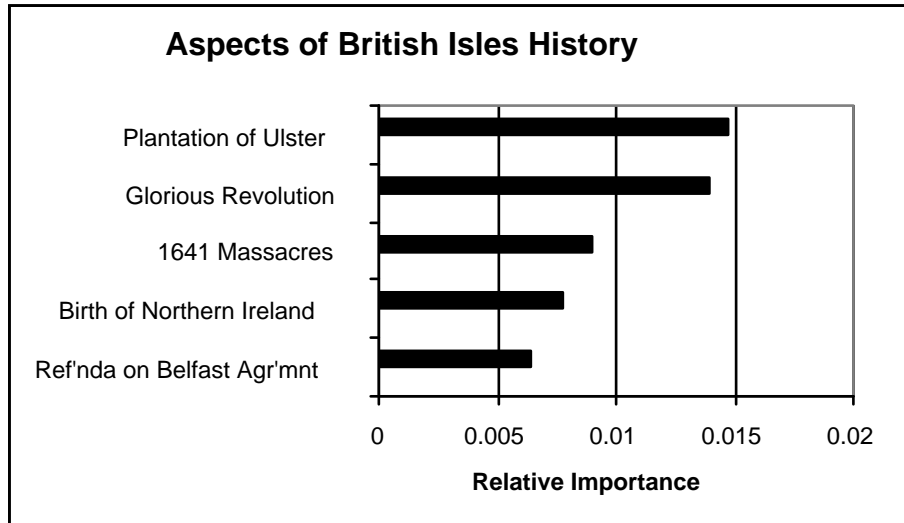


Figure 12: Chart of Relative Importance of Aspects of British Isles History

It is interesting and, on reflection, perhaps obvious that events in Ulster which were necessary precursors of the creation of a Scotch-Irish ethnic group carry a greater importance than events in the recent past. The Scotch-Irish constitute an ongoing ethnic strand in United States culture that continues independently of events in the British Isles.

We now proceed to a discussion of the results for the other branches of the hierarchy.

Family History and Traditions

At this point, we come back to the second level of the hierarchy in Figure 1. The items considered under the heading of Family History and Traditions were Oral History, Family Traditions (and customs), Documented Genealogy and Undocumented Genealogy. The category of Documented Genealogy is evaluated at a third level by asking what importance is attached to descent through a male line, a female line, or both. (Former Governor Pataki of New York claimed to be Irish- American, presumably through a female line.)

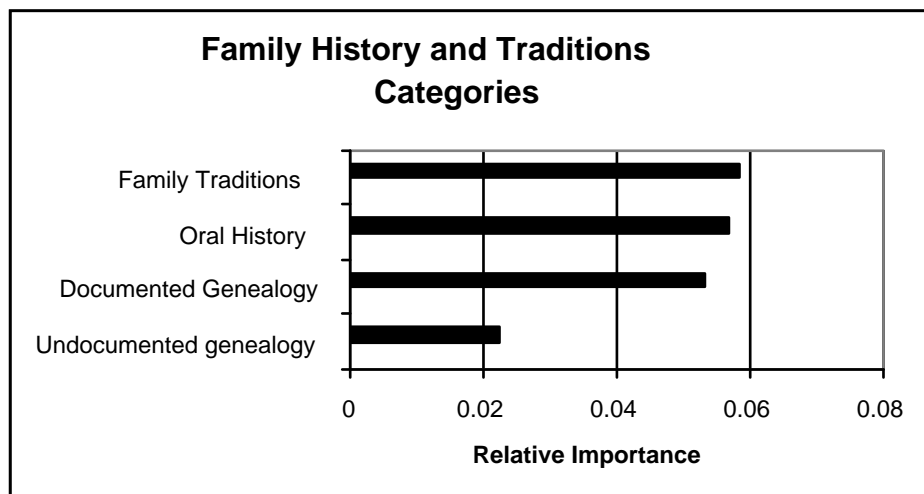


Figure 13: Chart of Relative Importance of Family History and Traditions Items

Lines of Descent: The item Documented Genealogy was subdivided into three possible lines of descent, male only, female only, and both male and female. The weightings derived for this set of questions are shown in Figure 14.

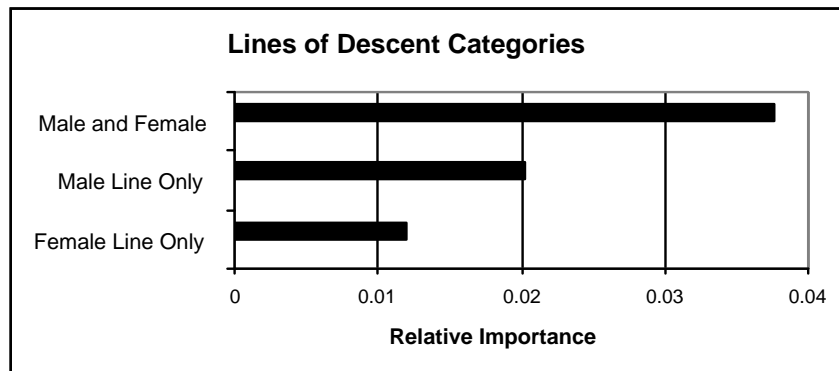


Figure 14: Chart of Relative Importance Attached to Lines of Descent

Ethnic Self Identity:

We now proceed to Ethnic Self Identity, the final branch of the hierarchy shown in Figure 1. This category addresses the relative importance of having family records back to Ulster, of not having records to Ulster, and having records to Ulster and elsewhere. Many people who know that they are Scotch-Irish do not have documentation of their family’s residence in Ulster. If records beyond Ulster exist, then we go to a more detailed level and evaluate the feeling about origins other than Scotland, in the context of belonging to the Scotch-Irish ethnic group. The comparative weights for the first set of questions are shown in Figure 15.

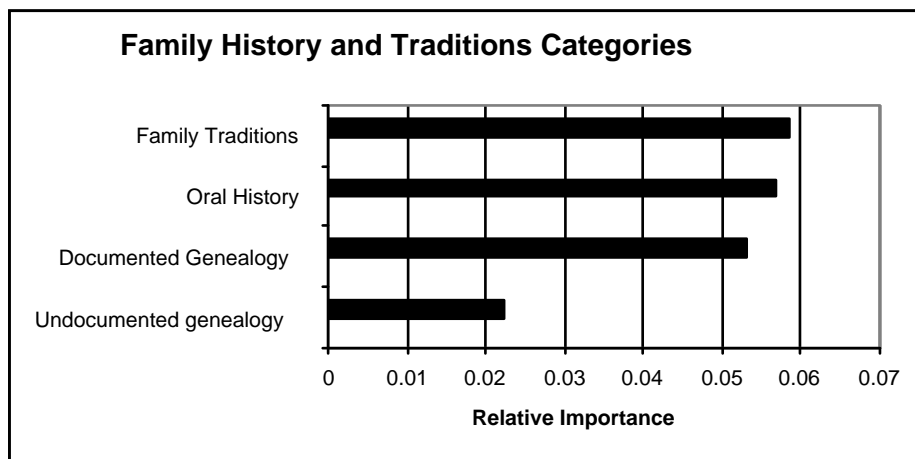


Figure 15: Chart of Relative Esteem Accorded Different Family Records

Origins other than Scotland

The item Records to Ulster and Elsewhere implies a documentary knowledge of origins prior to a family’s arrival in Ulster. The use of the term Scotch-Irish for the Ulster-American ethnic group does not necessarily imply that all Scotch-Irish originated in Scotland before their families settled in Ulster. In addition to Scottish elements, other nationalities have contributed significantly to the mix: for example, English, French Huguenot, Welsh, Spanish, etc. The average weights derived from the questionnaire are charted in Figure 16.

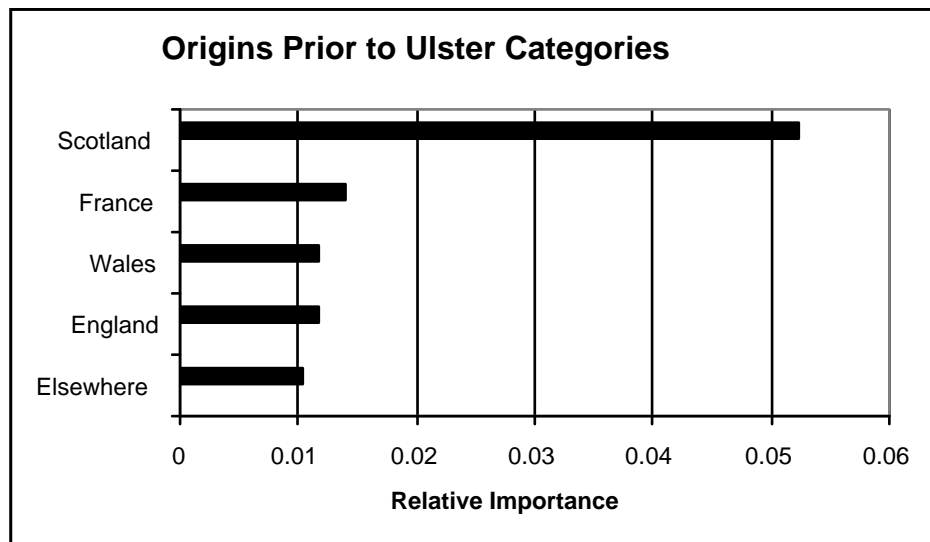


Figure 16: Relative Importance of Origins Prior to Settlement in Ulster

CONSOLIDATION OF WEIGHTINGS FROM DIFFERENT BRANCHES OF THE HIERARCHY

Level Two Topics.

Up to this point, we have been comparing the weightings of closely related topics in different branches of the hierarchy. We may however compare the weightings of topics that are unrelated so long as they exist at the same level. Thus, we may compare in a meaningful way all the topics that occur at the second level shown in Figure 1. This results in the distribution of weightings shown in Figure 17 and illustrates the power of this method of analysis and the interleaving of priorities from different primary topics.

It is not surprising that American History and Family Records to Ulster and Elsewhere top the list but the ordering and weighting of many of the other items were not predicted outcomes of the study. For example, British History scores well below Music and The Rule of Law.

Consolidation of the History Subgroup.

The consolidation of the history branch into one chart reveals several results that are at first sight surprising. American history takes precedence, with the Revolutionary War Era in the top rank followed closely by three other topics evaluated for the American history category. The Early Settlement category, which is the period of greatest interest to Scotch-Irish academic historians, comes in fourth, and with significantly less weight.

Early events in the history of the British Isles such as the Plantation of Ulster and the Glorious Revolution have importance, but recent events, such as the Good Friday Agreement and the Establishment of the Northern Ireland State, are given much lower weightings. This was not intuitively expected, but it may relate to the fact that the Scotch-Irish ethnic group has never depended on the existence of a nation-state for its sense of identity.

Comparison of Average Weights for Level Two Categories

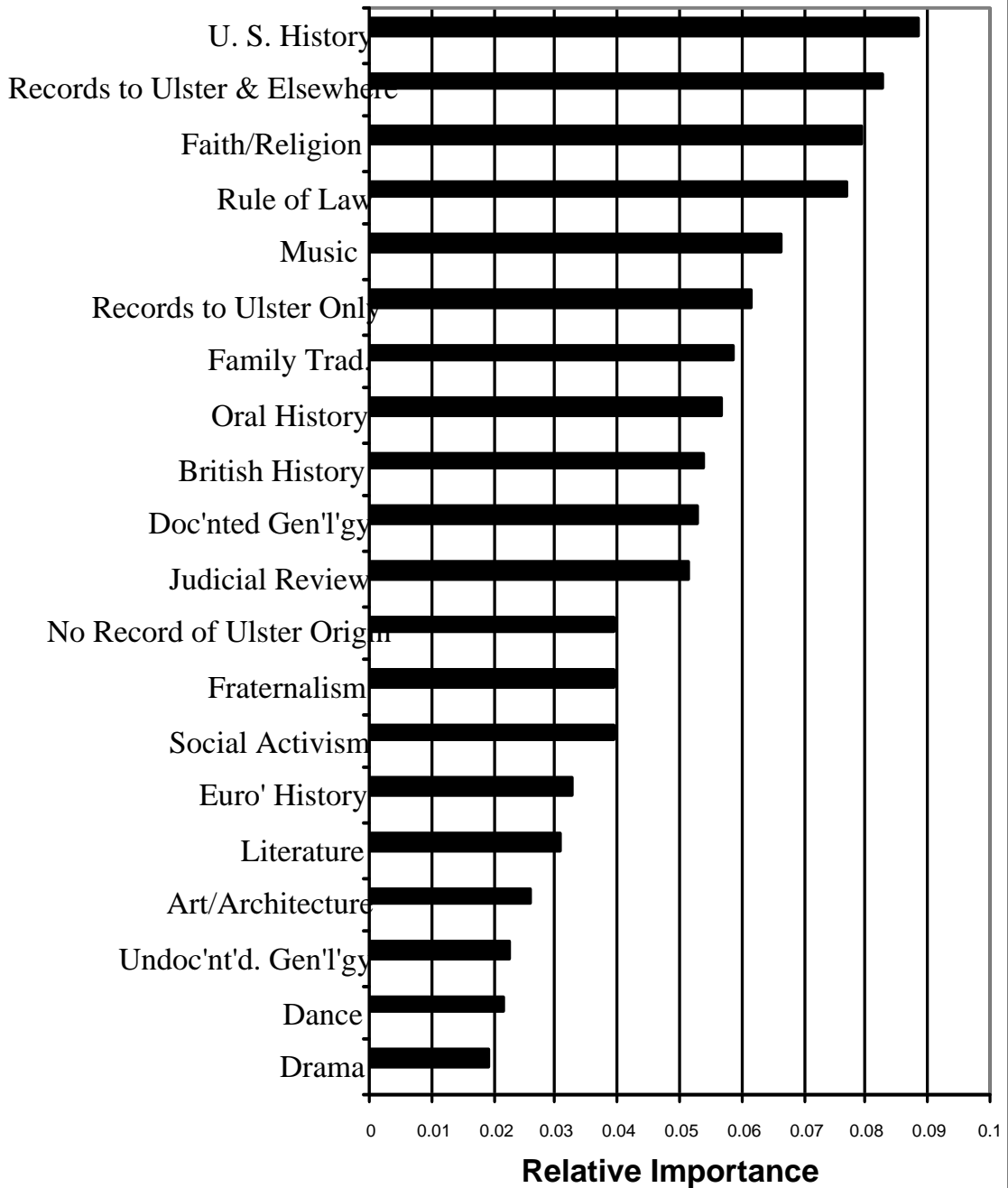


Figure 17: Consolidation of Level 2 Categories

Average Weights of Historical Events

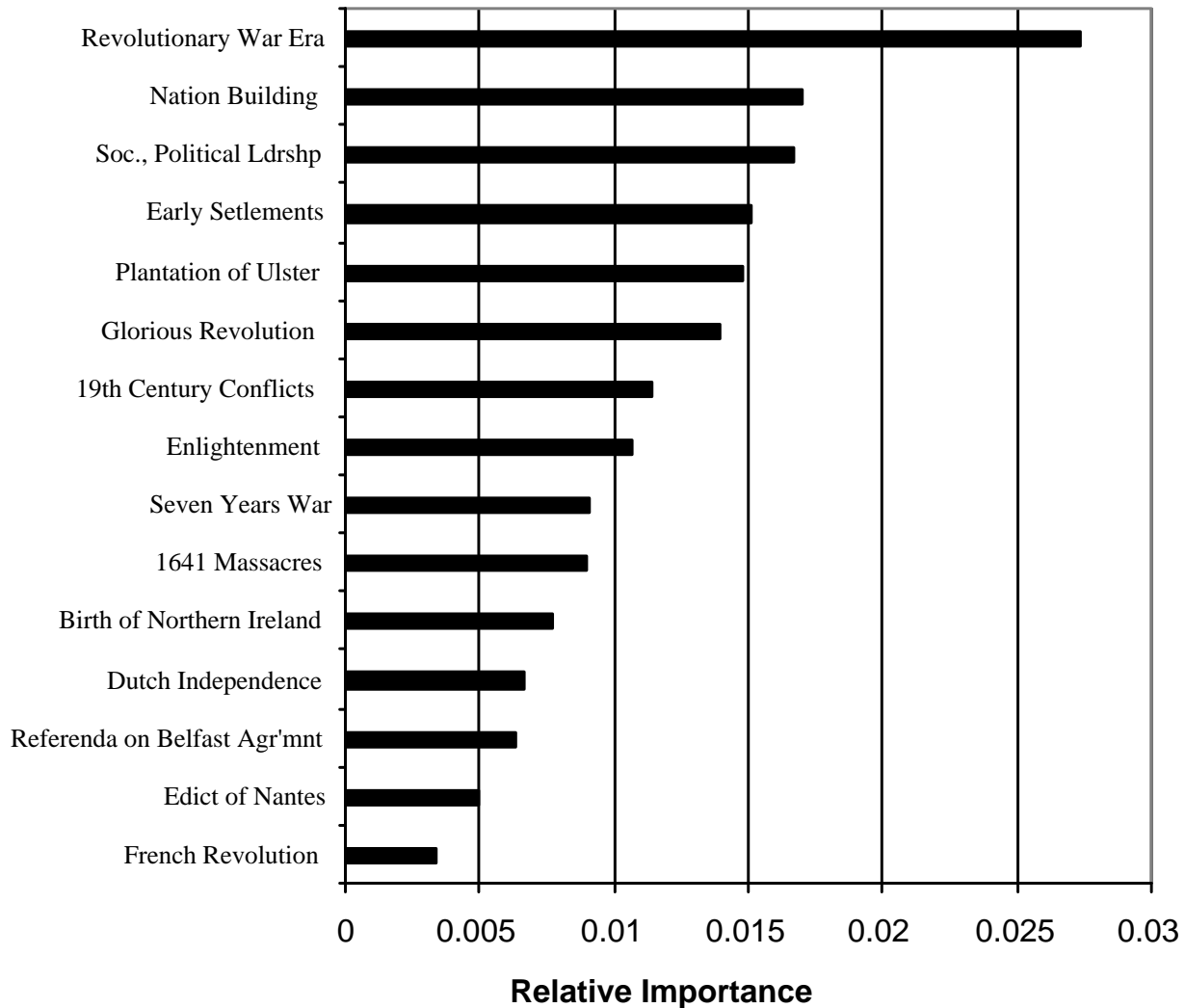


Figure 18: Consolidation of Weightings of Historical Events

PART 3. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to recognize that this was a pilot study that applied a powerful methodology from the discipline of operations research in an investigation that constituted a new approach to issues of ethnic identity. Since the study was completed, some limitations and weaknesses have become evident.

First is the question of sample size. In the social sciences, thirty is usually regarded as a minimum sample size for statistical investigations. With a sample of fewer than thirty, there is a possibility that a different sample set, or an expanded sample, might lead to a different result. This would be critically important in situations where the results would be used in making economic policy decisions. In the present study, the final number of respondents was fourteen, well short of the number needed had we intended to use the results to decide the allocation and budgeting of human or capital resources in a corporate or government project or group of projects.

However, it may be observed that in corporate applications of the AHP, decisions may often be made by a small number of people. The apparent agreement on the judgments arrived at in the application of the method may be unduly influenced by the presence of a dominant personality or a senior executive. In the present study, all respondents were working independently and this issue could not arise. Thus the size of the sample group was less significant than it might seem at first sight. A potentially more serious issue is that of variance. The answers from a sample group working as individuals might exhibit so much variance as to make the averaging of the results meaningless. We checked for variance at each stage of the process and observed only limited variance; the maximum variance observed fell within a two sigma deviation from the mean. However, in other similar social research applications, this should be a matter for some attention.

In this particular investigation, our objective was limited to exploring the relative importance of a number of factors that contribute to the sense of being Scotch-Irish; we hoped to shed light on what the term Scotch-Irish means to those who identify with this ethnic group. We do not go on to develop plans or agenda, which in a typical application of the AHP would require additional steps involving such concepts as cost/benefits analyses and dynamic projections of actions to be taken. From a common sense viewpoint, it seems likely that the overall pattern would change only marginally with a larger sample. Overall, the outcomes make sense, although some were not intuitively obvious at the beginning of the study.

A second flaw is in the definition of the hierarchy. If we want to make comparisons of weights across a given level (as we do at Level 2, Figure 1), it is desirable to have approximately the same number of categories in each branch. The larger number of items under Cultural Awareness and Ethics and Values means that the weights flowing from the level above are diluted more than those in the other three branches. We will need to give this matter attention if we expand the study with a larger sample at some future time.

Comments on Level 2 Weightings: It is noteworthy that, even with its weighting handicap, Music, one of the categories under Cultural Awareness, scores at a higher level than certain others with less diluted weighting. This indicates that Music is an important marker of identity. It is also noteworthy that, in the consolidated list in Figure 17, British History achieves only a middling score and that European History has a relatively low weight, although the History branch has fewer items and therefore less dilution.

Comments on History Weightings: In the level below the general History category, we have five items in each of American, British, and European history, so the flaw of uneven dilution discussed above does not apply when we consolidate the weightings of these items (as shown in Figure 18).

As expected, from the weighting of the three regional histories (Figure 6), events in American history take precedence. The Revolutionary War Era is given by far the greatest weight. However, the Plantation of Ulster and the Glorious Revolution follow closely behind topics in American history such as the Early [Scotch-Irish] Settlements.

The low priorities given the Birth of Northern Ireland and the Referenda on the Good Friday Agreement were not anticipated. However, on reflection, this dichotomy in weighting between these and the Plantation and Glorious Revolution makes sense. The existence of the Scotch-Irish ethnic group is directly dependent on the outcomes of these seventeenth century events. The Scotch-Irish existed in the United States long before twentieth century events in Ulster and will continue to exist, regardless of political or constitutional developments in the British Isles. In other words, the Scotch-Irish sense of identity does not depend on contemporary events.

Recommendations for Future Work

Revision and refinement: With the experience gained in this pilot study, it would be worthwhile to conduct a further investigation that takes care to avoid the flaws noted above. That is to say, have a sufficiently large sample that the statistical significance of the results is not in question; also, restructure the hierarchy to minimize bias at the lower levels by keeping the number of items in each branch more or less constant. We might also add additional categories to give a more detailed and comprehensive result.

Expansion of Study: The present investigation was undertaken in the spirit of “research for the sake of research”. However, a valid question is: what could or should be done with the results? For example, could we extend the reach of the study to provide guidance on allocation of research funds? This would take us into a decision-making role that is a way of life in industry and government. There, finite resources must be allocated between competing research and development programs, marketing strategies, weapons systems, to mention only a few of the challenges that are resolved by techniques such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process.

One may envision a research institute for ethnic studies planning the allocation of research funds. The study reported here takes us to the first stage of identifying the level of interest in different areas. The next phase would involve an expansion of the hierarchy to include the cost/benefit aspects of lines of inquiry associated with each topic. This would permit the selection of programs, and of schedules and budgets, to fit within the multiyear funding constraints.

Extension to other ethnic groups: As noted in the introduction, the Hispanic or Latino group displays similarities to the Scotch-Irish. Both are thoroughly American with little or no attachment to nation states in Europe. Both cultures pervade vast areas of the United States and in some areas they co-exist and overlap. It would surely be of interest to investigate the parallels and divergences between these quintessentially American ethnic identities.

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