



Racism and intolerance towards minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland

Lucy Michael



Prior to the 2016 EU referendum, there was an observable increase in racist and anti-immigrant sentiment in many media outlets, and expressed publicly by politicians and community leaders across the United Kingdom. The **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey** has asked questions on attitudes to minority ethnic communities since 2005, examining self-reported prejudice, perceptions of prejudice, acceptance of minority ethnic groups in intimate relationships, and levels of interaction. The data therefore provide a valuable indicator of the vulnerability of Northern Ireland to xenophobic discourses which understate the value of diversity and migration, and emphasise self-segregation and exclusion.

Racist incidents in Northern Ireland recorded by the PSNI almost doubled between 2012 and 2014 (PSNI, 2016), with

correspondingly high media coverage. Organised racist violence continues to be a focus of interest for both the state and civil society in Northern Ireland, despite a decrease in racist incidents in 2015. Segregation and social distance on ethnic lines are more widespread and damaging to long-term social relations. NILT data on social distance from 2006 to 2014 suggested that ethnic minority groups were increasingly accepted in Northern Ireland, despite pockets of entrenched racism and xenophobia. This Research Update uses data from the 2015 NILT survey to explore current patterns of racism and intolerance in Northern Ireland.

Prejudice

In 2015, 2 per cent of NILT survey respondents described themselves as 'very prejudiced' and 26 per cent as

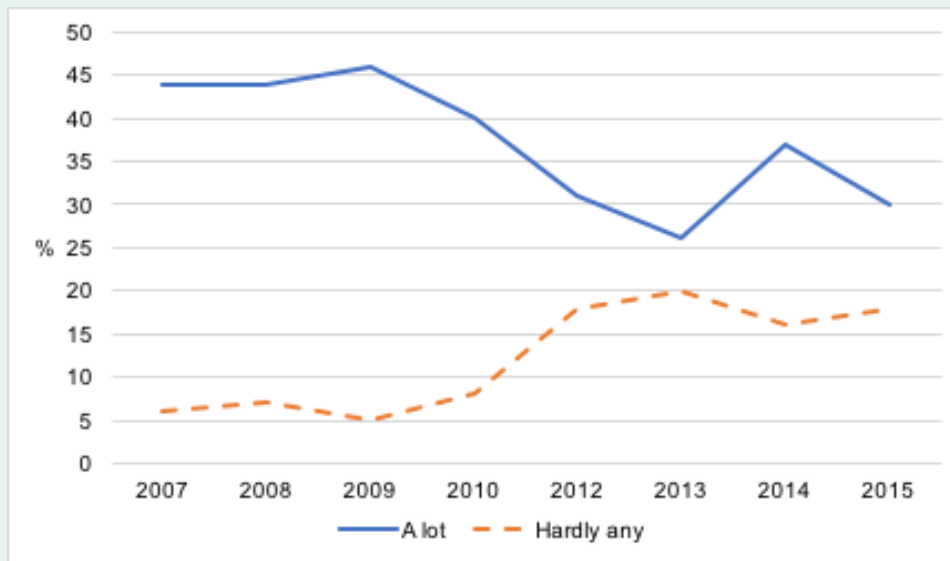
'a little prejudiced' against people of minority ethnic communities. There is a high proportion of people who believe that they are not prejudiced at all (69%), and this has been relatively stable since 2005. There is no notable difference by age group or gender, although Protestants were more likely to admit prejudice than Catholics (33% compared to 23%). However, a slight increase in self-reported prejudice since 2014 was driven by an increase in self-reported prejudice amongst Catholics (18% in 2014, and 23% in 2015).

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of prejudice against minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. Three in ten respondents thought there was a lot, and a further 49 per cent thought that there was a little. While 2014 data showed a clear increase on the previous year amongst those who believed there was 'a lot' of prejudice, this was reversed in 2015 – see Figure 1. Just 40 per cent believed that there is more prejudice now than 5 years ago, compared to 53 per cent in 2014. Looking forward, 32 per cent believed that there will be an increase in racial prejudice in Northern Ireland in 5 years' time, while less than a fifth (18%) were optimistic about a decrease. This latter figure demonstrates the lowest level of optimism since 2006.

Relationships

The 2015 data reveal that some groups are well integrated into Northern Ireland's communities, with friendships more frequently reported than in previous years. In general, the percentage of respondents who have friends from different ethnic or nationality backgrounds

Figure 1: Perceived prejudice against people from minority ethnic communities



increased since 2006. For example, the proportion of respondents having Polish friends doubled between 2006 and 2014 (from 11% to 22%), and rose again to 27 per cent in 2015. However, between 2014 and 2015, there has been a fall in the proportion of respondents having friends from Black (African, Caribbean) or Chinese backgrounds.

Regular positive interaction with people of a different background is key to building ethnic tolerance, acceptance of minorities and shared spaces (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2011). In 2015, half of respondents who have contact with someone from a minority ethnic group said their most frequent interaction was more intimate than just a greeting. This includes 29 per cent who described it as ‘a close interaction such as a lengthy conversation’, the highest proportion yet. However while friendships deepen, 44 per cent described their most regular interactions as ‘just a greeting’.

Daily, weekly and monthly contact with Eastern Europeans, and other minority ethnic groups (such as Chinese or Asian) is high, with half of respondents reporting such frequent contact (see Table 1). On the other hand, the majority of respondents reported having rare or no contact with Muslims (75%) or Irish Travellers (79%). Different rates of contact are to be expected with small numbers of Muslims and Irish Travellers

in Northern Ireland. A year-on-year comparison shows very slight increases in contact with Muslims and Irish Travellers, whilst contact with Eastern Europeans has fallen. This is particularly pronounced amongst Catholics: in 2015, 22 per cent of Catholic respondents had no contact at all with Eastern Europeans, compared with 14 per cent in 2014 and 8 per cent in 2013. Levels of Protestant contact with Eastern Europeans have remained stable.

Acceptance

Respondents were asked about their willingness to accept members of minority ethnic groups in different kinds of relationships. In 2015, as before, Muslims and Irish Travellers were least welcome, compared to notably higher acceptance ratings for Eastern Europeans and other minority ethnic groups (such

as Chinese or Asian) - see Table 2.

The data show a marked decline in acceptance for all groups as relative by marriage. Acceptance rates for Eastern Europeans, Irish Travellers and other minority ethnic groups (excluding Muslims) as relatives are nearly half those in 2009. Only 45 per cent of respondents would now accept Eastern Europeans as a relative by marriage, while 32 per cent would accept Muslims in that context.

Respondents were asked if they ever deliberately avoided contact with someone from a minority ethnic group or different country, and 82 per cent said they had never done so. Of the 15 per cent who admitted to doing so, half said it was because they were worried about language difficulties. Five per cent of respondents admitted to making their child avoid contact with a child from a minority ethnic community or different country to their own. Only a quarter of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘In relation to colour and ethnicity, I prefer to stick with people of my own kind’, while 53 per cent disagreed, showing a lower preference for self-segregation than in 2014 across all groups.

Racist behaviour

Few NILT respondents admitted to racist behaviour. Among the 28 per cent of people who said that they were prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities, the majority (83%) said they avoid displaying prejudiced behaviour. Eleven per cent of respondents admitted that they had called someone names to their face because of their

Table 1: Direct contact with specific groups

	%			
	Irish Travellers	Eastern Europeans	Other minority ethnic groups	Muslims
Daily	2	11	8	3
Once or twice a week	5	17	18	6
Once or twice a month	13	21	25	10
Very rarely	39	31	34	34
Not at all	40	18	15	42
Don't know	1	1	1	6

Table 2: Acceptance of minority groups

	% willing to accept minority groups as			
	Irish Travellers*	Eastern Europeans*	Other Minority Ethnic Groups	Muslims*
A tourist visiting Northern Ireland	-	86	88	69
A resident of Northern Ireland living and working here	-	81	88	63
A resident in my local area	-	70	79	55
Living in a house as a resident in my local area	48	-	-	-
A colleague at my work	48	62	66	50
A close friend of mine	35	50	53	40
A relative by way of marrying a close member of my family	30	45	47	32

* Excludes respondents who are members of that specific group

colour or ethnic origin, with twice as many Protestants (14%) as Catholics (7%) saying they had done this. People aged 18 to 34 years were most willing to admit to it. However, more than a fifth of respondents (21%) reported racist name calling by their friends, Protestants (24%) more than Catholics (14%). The response remains almost unchanged over a decade. Changes in behaviour over time can indicate changing social norms. Respondents were asked if they had ever as a child made jokes about others because of their colour or ethnic origin, and a separate question asked if they had done so as an adult. More than half (52%) said they had not done so as children, rising to two-thirds (69%) as an adult. Responses from Protestants and Catholics are similar. However, those aged 18 to 34 years were more likely to admit to making racist jokes as an adult.

Regular use of derogatory language is an indicator of exclusion, even where individuals do not perceive racism in their language or beliefs. Asked about using slang or derogatory names to refer to Irish Travellers, four out of ten admitted they used this language, with those aged 18 to 34 years most likely to do so. Catholics were slightly more likely than Protestants to do this, in line with higher

levels of contact and historical patterns of residential segregation (Drummond, 2007).

Addressing racism

In 2015 for the first time, NILT explored respondents' interventions when witnessing racism. Respondents were asked 'Have you ever told somebody else off for saying or doing something racist?'. Almost half (45%) said they had done so. People aged 18 to 24 years were much more likely than other groups to report doing so 'often' (16% compared to 6%).

More than two-fifths (41%) of people said that they had been in a situation where they witnessed racism and wanted to say something, but had not done anything. Protestants reported this more than Catholics (46% and 37% respectively). However, almost a fifth of people (19%) said that they had never been in a situation where someone was being racist. Given the frequency of racist incidents in Northern Ireland, and the levels of self-reported prejudice, this is more likely to indicate the inability to identify behaviours as racist than an absence of such situations. People aged 18 to 24 years were less likely than other age groups to say that they had never

been such a situation.

Diversity

So far, the data indicate low acceptance of ethnic minorities in intimate relationships in Northern Ireland. However, this is not paralleled by lower recognition of the value of diversity. Six out of ten respondents agreed that 'the culture and traditions of people from different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society'. Protestant agreement has risen from 50 per cent in 2014 to 55 per cent in 2015. Just 13 per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement.

There is strong agreement that more should be done to make sure that services and facilities like schools and libraries are accessible to people from minority ethnic communities: only 11 per cent of respondents disagreed in 2015. Furthermore, two thirds of respondents agreed that 'organisations and leaders in public life, such as politicians, community groups and churches, should encourage members of minority ethnic communities to participate in public life'. However, this has fallen from the figure of 74 per cent seen in 2013.

Asylum politics

The acceptance of Syrian refugees into Northern Ireland was the subject of a new question on the NILT survey in 2015. More than half of those surveyed (51%) agreed Syrians should be allowed to come to Northern Ireland, including 15 per cent who strongly agreed. People aged 55 to 64 years old were most in agreement. Just one quarter of respondents disagreed overall, including 12 per cent strongly disagreeing. Almost twice the proportion of Protestants as Catholics said that they thought Syrians should not be allowed to come to Northern Ireland (34% compared to 19%).

In the context of recent debates about Syrian refugees in Europe, and rising Islamophobia, the responses are more positive than might be expected, particularly in light of previous NILT findings. In 2005, 47 per cent said it was

right to be suspicious of Muslims, but 52 per cent agreed asylum seekers should be allowed to stay in Northern Ireland. The support for Syrian refugees in 2015 suggests that anti-refugee sentiment has not significantly risen over the decade.

Conclusion

The data suggest a mixed picture of racism and acceptance in Northern Ireland. Existing friendships have deepened and more people are reporting extended interactions. However, there is a fall in casual interaction, and decreasing acceptance of groups in specific contexts. Whilst admitting to using racist language, younger respondents reported the

highest level of intervention when witnessing racist behaviour. Self-reported prejudice must be considered in light of their generational experience and awareness of racism compared to older groups.

The findings of the 2015 NILT survey reflect, in some respects, similarities to the 2013 data. This might be explained by the high visibility of racist incidents in 2014 in the media and their possible impact on public perception in that year. The legacy of these incidents, however, has produced low levels of optimism about decreasing prejudice. The 2015 data reflects the most pessimistic view of future levels of prejudice recorded yet.

References

- Drummond, A. (2007). 'The construction of Irish Travellers (and Gypsies) as a "Problem"', in M. Ó hAodha (ed.) *Migrants and Memory: the Forgotten 'Postcolonials'*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Pettigrew, T.F. et al. (2011) 'Recent advances in intergroup contact theory', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 35, Issue 3, May 2011, Pp. 271–280.
- PSNI (2016) *Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland: Quarterly Update to 31 March 2016 (Providing final figures for 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016)*. Belfast: Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Key points

- Half of respondents who have contact with someone from a minority ethnic group, shared more than just a greeting with them. 29% described such contact as 'a close interaction such as a lengthy conversation', the highest level yet.
- The majority of respondents acknowledge the benefits of diversity and inclusion in governance, including a slight increase in acceptance of diversity in public spaces and institutions amongst Protestants.
- People aged 18 to 34 years are most likely to admit to racist language and behaviour. Those aged 18 to 24 years are most likely to intervene when they witness racism.
- Few respondents (18%) are optimistic that there will be less prejudice against minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland in 5 years' time.

The questions on attitudes to minority ethnic people were funded by The Executive Office. *Perceptive Insight* carried out the interviews for the 2015 survey. 1,202 adults took part.

Lucy Michael is a Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies at Ulster University.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

Magee campus, Ulster University
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 7167 5500
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3034
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk