



# Research Update

## Public Attitudes towards Disability in Northern Ireland

by Nick Acheson

Past surveys into public attitudes towards disabled people have shown consistent support for equality of opportunity for disabled people and a widely held perception that as a group, disabled people are treated unfairly in society. But generalised feelings of concern have not translated into action that has had any impact on the compelling evidence of continuing relative social exclusion of disabled people.

How might this be explained? Is there a mismatch between generalised feelings of concern, assumptions about who counts as a 'disabled person', and anxieties felt when confronted by specific circumstances where disabled and non-disabled people meet? The **Northern Ireland Life and Times** survey in 2003 sought to get below the surface to explore public conceptions of disability in greater detail.

The findings confirmed that disabled people in Northern Ireland are as a group, poorer, less well educated and much less likely to be in work than the rest of the population. Just over 27% of disabled adults have incomes of £135 a week or less compared to 11% of non-disabled adults. Approaching half of all disabled adults have incomes of £195 a week and almost three-quarters have incomes of £290 a week or less compared to about a



fifth of non-disabled adults having less than £195 a week and about 35% less than £290 a week.

Low incomes reflect low numbers of disabled people of working age in work. Labour Force Survey statistics show that 33% of disabled adults were employed compared to 66% of non-disabled adults in 2001. Furthermore 74% of disabled adults have no formal educational qualifications at all compared to 39% of non-disabled adults.

While a higher proportion of

people agreed that disabled people are treated unfairly than they did of any other group excepting elderly people, a large majority of both non-disabled (73%) and disabled people disagreed (69%). While this reflects a general lack of awareness of such issues, this apparent disinterest in the face of widespread inequality begs interesting questions about public perceptions of disability. This Research Update explores the views and attitudes of those who participated in the survey to three main issues: who is considered to be disabled, the extent of prejudice

in familiar and everyday situations and the levels of concern expressed about maintaining a safe social distance from disabled people.

## Who is disabled?

Unlike in the case of gender or age, it is not at all self-evident who is to count as disabled. Using a definition similar to that used in the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act, the Life and Times survey identified 24% of respondents with a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity and 20% reporting that this limited their activities.

The findings indicate that there may be significant numbers of people who fall within official definitions of disability, but who would not be considered disabled by many members of the public, including many disabled people.

Recent British research (Grewal et al., 2002) has concluded that people (including disabled people) draw quite sharp boundaries around disability that are much narrower than in current legal and administrative definitions. The Life and Times data supports this conclusion. Respondents were reluctant to allocate the label 'disability' without qualification; this is apparent even in the cases of mobility impairment, lack of sight and progressive illness, the circumstances most closely associated with disability.

Disabled respondents were consistently more inclusive than non-disabled people. But both groups were consistent in which circumstances they were more likely to judge people as 'disabled'.

They thus both accorded the highest priority to mobility problems and progressive illness and the lowest to severe disfigurement and speech impairment. A low proportion of respondents who considered a learning difficulty as disability is also noteworthy.

## Prejudice in familiar and everyday situations

Since few people willingly admit to being prejudiced, this is hard to measure. The Life and Times survey showed respondents a total of six vignettes or descriptions of an everyday encounter with a disabled person. Each respondent was asked about three of these. In five out of the six the commonest reaction was to feel sorry for the person, although this was usually accompanied by feelings of concern and genuine understanding. Never less than about a third of respondents said they would feel sorry for the person. In some cases over half of respondents would feel sorry and in one case disabled people were more likely to feel sorry than non-disabled people.

Negative feelings were unusual although 16% of respondents thought they would be embarrassed if approached in the street by a deaf person using sign language. In the case of being in a hurry in a supermarket checkout queue and stuck behind a person experiencing difficulty in paying, 12% of respondents thought they would be annoyed and a further 9% thought they would be embarrassed. The exception was the description of a young man

with florid symptoms of mental distress at a bus stop. While 32% of respondents reported that they would feel sorry for the person, feelings of suspicion, anxiety and embarrassment were expressed by between 18% and 25% of respondents. In contrast with the other five vignettes, relatively few respondents thought they would not be bothered.

Generally people wished to appear helpful, but the terms on which the help would be offered was coloured by their feelings. Where respondents thought they would offer help, this was often through a third party rather than the disabled person themselves. Many expressed concern, but this concern overlay feelings of sympathy fed by the assumption that disability is an experience of loss that sets people apart from the more 'normal' world. This was most apparent in the case of the mentally disturbed person at the bus stop where sympathy was overridden for many by anxiety and fear and where there was clear evidence of avoidance. No respondents thought they might complain to the service provider in those vignettes where the disabled person was experiencing difficulties as a result of the way they were being treated.

## Social distance

While it is true that some people thought that in general disabled people are treated unfairly, attitudes may change if the problems come closer to home. This may be expected in particular to the extent that the 'comfort zone' for many people

Table 1: Level of concern expressed about four scenarios among non-disabled people in Northern Ireland

	Hostel for mentally ill	Autistic child in child's class	Teacher with speech impairment	Relative marries a deaf person
	%	%	%	%
Very concerned	27	2	5	1
A bit concerned	46	21	33	14
Unconcerned	25	71	56	82
Other	1	1	2	1
Don't know	2	5	4	2

is one of some social distance and by the possibility that attitudes are modified as this comfort zone is threatened. Table 1 summarises the responses to a set of questions that asked how concerned respondents would be in the face of four varying situations.

The prospect of a hostel for mentally ill people in the neighbourhood clearly generated the greatest amount of concern of the four scenarios respondents were asked about. One quarter said they would be unconcerned in such circumstances and it was the only instance where many more expressed concern than were unconcerned. It is notable that the proportion of respondents that would be unconcerned about an autistic child in their class was considerably greater than those who would be unconcerned about a teacher with a speech impairment. People would be least concerned about a relative marrying a deaf person.

The evidence shows that people's anxiety levels increase if they feel that they would be directly affected

and by the type of perceived threat. The greater the level of concern, the greater was the feeling that the situation would have a direct negative impact. Judged by the evidence of the vignettes, it appears that the greatest levels of anxiety are generated by mental illness, and the results reported in Table 1 confirm this. The difference between the levels of concern in the two classroom-related scenarios may be explained by judgments about the likely impact on the respondent's child. Having a classmate with autism was judged less negatively in this respect than having a teacher with a speech impairment.

## Conclusion

The evidence reported here suggests that public attitudes towards disabled people are coloured by a rather narrow conception of the nature of disability, a concern to maintain a degree of social distance, particularly in the case of people with mental health problems and reactions dominated by feelings of pity and sympathy. In most

instances there was no significant difference in the attitudes of disabled and non-disabled people. This was compounded by a general lack of awareness of the relatively poor social and economic circumstances of disabled people (although it was higher than for other groups apart from elderly people). This constellation of attitudes has long been identified by disabled commentators as an important source of oppression. In the light of current policies that focus on equality and on addressing barriers to social inclusion they represent a considerable challenge.

The findings suggest that there is a fair way to go before public attitudes 'catch up' with public policy. While public agencies like the Equality Commission clearly have a role in promoting change, the evidence from the British study suggests where change when it comes, will emerge. This study was much more wide-ranging than the Life and Times survey and included more in depth interviews with both disabled and non-disabled people. The authors found that those holding more inclusive attitudes

usually cited knowing a disabled person who had achieved a great deal in every day life as the reason for their approach. This suggests that just as it was a small minority of disabled people who forced the changes in public policy approaches it will be disabled people who will also force changes in attitudes. But the lack of evidence of significant differences in the attitudes of non-

disabled and disabled people offers a cautionary note as to how soon this might occur.

## References

Grewal, Ini, Joy, Sarah, Lewis, Jane, Swales, Kirby and Woodfield, Kandy (2002) 'Disabled for Life?' attitudes towards, and experiences of disability in Britain, Department

of Work and Pensions Research Report No. 173, Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

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## Key Points

- Disabled people in Northern Ireland are as a group, poorer, less well educated and much less likely to be in work than the rest of the population
- While a higher proportion of people agreed that disabled people are treated unfairly than they did of any other group excepting elderly people, a large majority of both non-disabled (73%) and disabled people disagreed (69%).
- People in general have a narrow conception of the nature of disability and are reluctant to allocate the label 'disability'.
- There may be significant numbers of people who fall within official definitions of disability, but who would not be considered disabled by many members of the public
- Public attitudes towards disabled people tend to be dominated by feelings of pity and sympathy and are coloured by a concern to maintain a degree of social distance.

The 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey was carried out between November 2003 and February 2004. 1800 adults were interviewed in their own homes. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Service. The Life and Times Survey 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. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 02890 973034 with any queries.

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