



# Research Update

## Intimate Mixing – Bridging the Gap? Catholic-Protestant Relationships in Northern Ireland

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It is well documented in the research literature that Northern Ireland is a divided society where members of the two main religious groups, Catholics and Protestants, have limited opportunities to meet and interact with each other due to segregation in a number of key areas of social life (Niens, Cairns and Hewstone, 2003). The main focus of interest in segregation in Northern Ireland has been on education and housing and attempts have been made throughout the years of what are often termed the 'Troubles' to encourage religious mixing through integrated schools and mixed religion housing estates. Such efforts are based on the theory that bringing people together to interact in social situations can improve intergroup relations and remove prejudices – reported in the research literature as the 'contact hypothesis' (Hewstone et al, 2005). Indeed, successive governments have implemented a number of initiatives and spent millions of pounds to encourage contact between Catholics and Protestants and improve



community relations in Northern Ireland (Knox and Hughes, 1996).

One area of contact that has received little attention is that of intimate mixing between Catholics and Protestants through marriage or co-habitation. According to the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) mixed marriages, by the fact that they happen at all, can be seen as a start of the reconciliation which is so crucial for peace in Northern

Ireland. NIMMA suggests that when communities inter-marry families become inextricably linked and may gradually come to lose the fear they may have of one another. Such outcomes can contribute to the promotion of good relations and the development of a shared future, as advocated by the government in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM, 2005).

Although there are no official statistics on the number of mixed

Table 1: Marital status and age group by type of relationship

	Same religion %	Mixed religion %
<b>Marital Status*</b>		
Married	96	88
Living as married	4	12
Total	100	100
<b>Age Group*</b>		
18-24 years	2	4
25-34 years	13	22
35-44 years	24	30
45-54 years	24	26
55-64 years	21	13
65+ years	17	6
Total	100	100

\*statistically significant  $p < 0.001$

religion marriages or partnerships in Northern Ireland, figures from the latest Census (2001) and from social attitudes surveys estimate that it is somewhere between 5% and 12% (**Northern Ireland Life and Times** survey (NILT), 2005). There is also a dearth of information on the characteristics and attitudes of the people who choose to enter into

such relationships. What research evidence there is on mixed religion partnerships in Northern Ireland has generally been based on small samples of married couples using qualitative data collection methods that are difficult to generalise to the population as a whole. This is partly due to the small number of respondents living in mixed religion relationships picked up in surveys of

random samples of the population in any one year. Each year around 10% of respondents to the NILT survey say their partner is a different religion to them. As this is a small number it is not possible to carry out detailed analyses on the characteristics and attitudes of those who choose to marry or live with people who are of a different religion to them. To overcome

Figure 1: Income by type of relationship

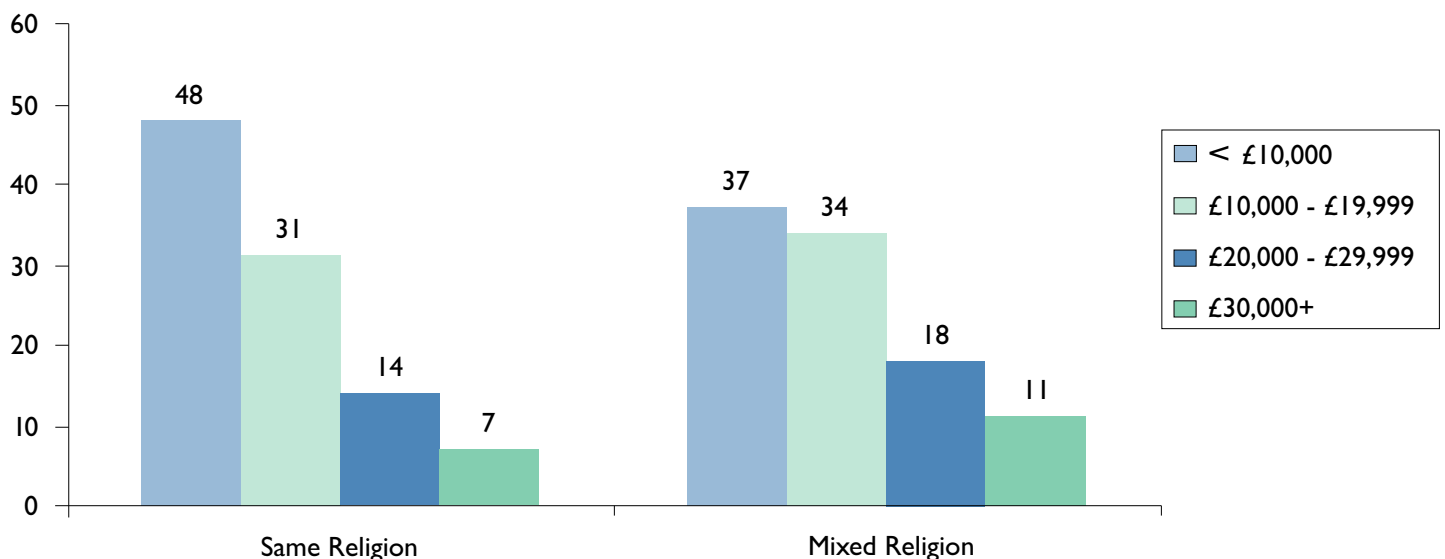


Table 2: Highest educational qualification and social class by type of relationship

	Same religion %	Mixed religion %
<b>Highest Educational Qualification*</b>		
BTec Higher or higher	17	25
A Level/BTec	10	16
GCSE/'O' Level/CSE	23	26
Other	41	27
None	9	7
Total	100	100
<b>Social Class</b>		
Professional/ Managerial	30	33
Skilled non-manual	22	24
Skilled manual	19	17
Partly skilled	19	19
Unskilled	10	7
Total	100	100

\*statistically significant  $p < 0.001$

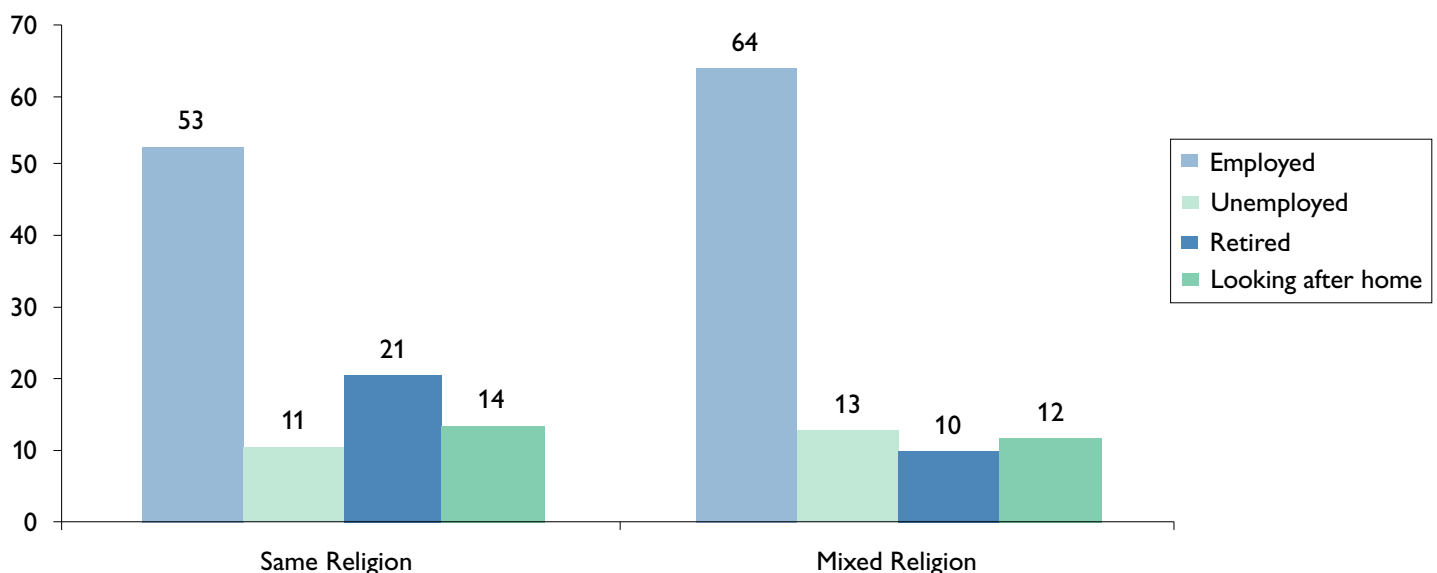
this problem, a dataset has been created that pools eight years (1998 to 2005) of information on respondents to the NILT survey and which contains questions that have been asked in all eight years. Using this method, the number of respondents who say their partner is a different religion than they

are is 802. This represents 10% of all respondents who had partners (8,299).

This Research Update uses the pooled dataset to examine the characteristics and attitudes of people who have chosen to enter into mixed religion relationships

to establish baseline figures for comparison in future years as Northern Ireland emerges from conflict into a new era of peace in which such relationships may become an accepted and normal part of society.

Figure 2: Employment status by type of relationship



## Marital Status and Age

As Table 1 shows, three times as many respondents who were in mixed religion partnerships were not married as those who lived with a partner who was the same religion as they were (12% and 4% respectively). They also tended to be younger than their same religion counterparts with 56% being under the age of 45 years compared with 39%. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some people in mixed relationships may choose not to marry because of the complexities involved in deciding where to marry and so on.

## Socio-economic status

There is a suggestion that mixed

marriage is predominantly a middle class phenomenon (Morgan et al, 1996). Evidence from the NILT survey partly supports this contention. Respondents in mixed religion partnerships had significantly higher incomes (Figure 1) and better educational qualifications than those of their counterparts living in same religion partnerships (Table 2). At the lowest end of the income scale 48% of respondents who were living in same religion partnerships had an income which was less than £10,000 per annum compared with 37% of those who were living in mixed religion partnerships. Conversely, more of the latter than the former had annual incomes of £30,000 or more (11% and 7% respectively). Two in five (41%) respondents living with someone who was a different religion than they were had qualifications

that were of A-level standard or above compared with only 27% of respondents who lived with someone of the same religion. Hewstone et al (2005) suggest that higher educational levels are generally associated with 'less virulent outgroup attitudes' (pg 22) and research studies carried out in Northern Ireland have shown that contact at the university level has a positive effect on attitudes towards the 'other' group (e.g. Cairns et al, 1993). As Table 2 shows, there were no significant differences in relation to the respondent's social class (based on current or previous job).

## Employment

Reflecting the age difference noted above, many more respondents who were living in mixed religion partnerships were employed (64%)

Table 3: Ever lived outside Northern Ireland and type of school attended by type of relationship

	Same religion %	Mixed religion %
<b>Ever lived outside Northern Ireland*</b>		
Yes	21	35
No	79	65
Total	100	100
<b>Type of school attended*</b>		
Integrated	1	2
Fairly mixed	10	14
Same religion	89	84
Total	100	100
<b>Child in your care ever attend mixed school*</b>		
Yes	17	32
No	83	68
Total	100	100

\*statistically significant  $p < 0.001$

Table 4: Party support and identity by type of relationship

	Same religion %	Mixed religion %
<b>Party Support*</b>		
Sinn Fein, SDLP etc. ('Nationalist' parties)	37	28
Alliance	6	17
DUP, UUP etc. ('Unionist' parties)	50	40
Other	3	8
None	4	7
Total	100	100
<b>Identity*</b>		
Unionist	44	29
Nationalist	28	12
Neither Nationalist nor Unionist	27	59
Total	100	100

\*statistically significant  $p < 0.001$

and fewer were retired (10%) than those who were living with people who had the same religion as them (53% and 21% respectively) (Figure 2).

## Other factors related to living in mixed religion partnerships

As Table 3 shows respondents who lived in mixed religion partnerships (35%) were significantly more likely those who did not (21%) to have lived outside Northern Ireland for more than six months. They were also more likely than their same religion counterparts to say they had attended either formally integrated or mixed schools - 16% of respondents who lived in mixed religion partnerships said they had attended an integrated or mixed school compared with 11%

of those whose partner was the same religion as them. In addition, nearly twice as many respondents (32%) who were in a mixed religion partnership as those who were not (17%) said that a child in their care had attended a mixed religion school in Northern Ireland.

## Party support and Identity

Hayes et al (2006) reported that people who had attended formally integrated or mixed religion schools in Northern Ireland appeared to have less sectarian views than those who attended schools with pupils only of the same religion as themselves. They were also 'more likely to reject traditional identities and allegiances than those who had attended a segregated one' (pg 2). In line with these findings, Table 4 shows that significantly more adults who were in mixed religion relationships (17%) than

those who were not (6%) said they supported the Alliance party. They were also much more likely than respondents in same religion partnerships to say they were neither Nationalist nor Unionist (59% and 27% respectively).

## Conclusion

The findings show that there are differences in the socio-demographic characteristics of people who live in mixed religion partnerships compared with their contemporaries who live in same religion partnerships. The former tend to be younger, better educated and to have higher incomes although they do not differ in their social class, at least as defined by their current or most recent job. These findings support previous results based on small-scale qualitative research carried out with mixed religion married couples which suggested that mixed marriage

is predominantly a middle class phenomenon (Morgan et al, 1996). In addition to differences in socio-economic characteristics, this research also found that there was significant variation in two important areas of contact with the 'other' community between those who were in mixed religion partnerships and those who were not; namely the former were more likely to have spent time outside Northern Ireland and to have attended mixed religion schools. Many more of them also said that a child in their care had attended a mixed religion school. Furthermore, respondents who were in mixed religion partnerships tended to reject traditional identities and allegiances compared to those who were in same religion partnerships. This was shown by the fact that respondents in mixed religion partnerships were less likely to align themselves with what are traditionally perceived to be Catholic (e.g. Sinn Fein) and Protestant (e.g. DUP) political parties and more likely to reject Unionist and Nationalist identities than those in same religion relationships. These findings add to the weight of evidence suggesting that contact with the 'other' community may have long-term benefits in promoting a less sectarian outlook which may help to bridge the gap between Catholics and Protestants that exists in Northern Ireland (Hayes et al, 2006).

Overall, this research has provided much-needed information on the

characteristics and attitudes of people in Northern Ireland who live in mixed religion partnerships. The analysis was, of course, restricted by the number and scope of time-series questions that are asked in the NILT survey each year. It is recommended that more research is carried out into mixed religion partnerships in Northern Ireland. This research could be expanded to include groups that people outside Northern Ireland might consider mixed such as Christian/non Christian and mixed ethnic backgrounds.

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## References

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## Key Points

- Three times as many respondents who were in mixed religion partnerships were not married (12%) as those who lived in same religion partnerships (4%).
- Respondents who were in mixed religion partnerships were more likely to be younger, better educated and to have higher incomes than those who were in relationships with people of the same religion as themselves; however there was no significant difference in social class.
- More respondents who lived in mixed religion partnerships (35%) than those who did not (21%) had lived outside Northern Ireland for more than six months and they were also more likely to have attended mixed religion schools (16% and 11% respectively).
- Almost twice as many respondents (32%) who were in a mixed religion partnership as those who were not (17%) said that a child in their care had attended a mixed religion school in Northern Ireland.
- More adults who were in mixed religion partnerships (17%) than those who were not (6%) said they supported the Alliance party rather than parties that are traditionally perceived to be Catholic (e.g. Sinn Fein) and Protestant (e.g. DUP).
- Respondents in mixed religion partnerships were also much more likely than their counterparts who lived in same religion partnerships to say they were neither Nationalist nor Unionist (59% and 27% respectively).

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. Adults are interviewed in their own home by an independent research company. The 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 director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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