Research Update

In their own words: Young People's Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Since 2003, the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey has collected data on 16 year olds' attitudes to a variety of societal issues in Northern Ireland. There is great interest in the perceptions of young people to changing relations between the two main communities here (Protestants and Catholics). Young people are asked to answer two key questions reflecting on changes in the past five years, and predictions for the coming five years. Additionally, YLT offers respondents an opportunity to add further commentary by including the following open-ended question: *'Is there anything else you would like to say about community relations in Northern Ireland?'*. Approximately 30% of YLT respondents complete this open-ended question each year indicating that around 4000 16 year olds have shared their perspectives of growing up in a post-conflict society since 2003.

While there has been extensive exploration of young people's perceptions of community relations using the quantitative survey data (Schubotz, 2017; Schubotz and Devine, 2014), this Research Update is the first to systematically explore young people's perceptions using qualitative responses. Using randomly selected datasets (2008, 2013, 2016), initial analysis uncovered a number of overarching themes with several topics appearing within each of these. These are explored in detail below with a selection of verbatim quotes included to support the commentary.

Main themes

Initial examination identified that some young people feel optimistic about community relations with comments falling under the theme of **'good, getting there'**, while others recognise that **'more needs to**

'No More' – mural unveiled in East Belfast 2010.

be done'**, with others noting that relations between the two main communities remain **'not good, still divided'**. Other comments from young people allude to different topics or perceptions of community relations that differ from these three themes. These comments provide further insight into the thoughts and perceptions of Northern Ireland's young people and were included under a fourth category, **'other'**, to allow their inclusion in analysis.

Table 1: Total number and proportion of respondents falling into the four main themes of comments. By survey year

	Survey year					
	2008		2013		2016	
Main themes	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
(1) Good, getting there	28	77	10	37	15	41
(2) More needs to be done	30	84	35	134	42	118
(3) Not good, still divided	27	75	46	175	35	97
(4) Other	15	43	8	32	9	24

As shown in Table 1, in 2008, 28% of young people expressed comments suggesting that community relations were 'good, getting there'. This dropped to 10% in 2013, and has seen marginal recovery in 2016 (15%). More respondents expressed negative views in 2013 (46%), believing that community relations were not good and Northern Ireland was still very much divided. A similar pattern was apparent in the answers to the survey question about perceptions of relations between the two main communities over the previous five years, where positive views expressed in 2008 (68%) dropped to 45% in 2013 (Schubotz and Devine, 2014).

External events and policy developments can impact on individual attitudes. For example, positive comments in 2008 may reflect optimism following the introduction of devolution a year earlier. 2007 was also the year when the Northern Ireland school curriculum was revised to promote children and young people's personal, emotional and social development and encourage positive values and attitudes towards others and their communities. On the other hand, negative views expressed in 2013 may be a reaction to the widely publicised dispute around flying the Union flag at Belfast City Hall, in December 2012.

Of those who completed the open-ended question, no significant differences are apparent between the views of Catholics and Protestants in relation to how they feel about the state of community relations for any of the three years. The proportion of YLT respondents who think that there is still more to be done in terms of enhancing community relations was higher in 2016 (42%) than it was in 2013 (35%) and 2008 (30%) (Table 1). Females were significantly more likely than males to express this opinion in 2016.

For the three selected survey years, the number of responses is too small to carry out meaningful statistical analysis on the individual sub-themes. However, there is consistency between both quantitative and qualitative responses in that the majority of those who expressed pessimistic views when asked "*What about relations between Protestants and Catholics? Would you say they are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same now as then?*" also expressed more negative views in their comments to the open ended question. The same consistency was seen amongst those who expressed pessimism when asked to predict how relations would be in 5 years' time. Comments by those who responded positively to these two survey questions were split intermittently between two overarching themes - 'good, getting there' and 'more needs to be done'.

Categorising the comments on the basis of these four overarching themes allows further exploration of the topics emerging within each of these. Some respondents' comments lacked enough detail to attribute their statements to a specific issue. However, where respondents did give more detail, common sub-themes began to emerge. Counting the number of times particular sub-themes appear in the comments gives an indication of how relevant the issue is in that particular year. Many of the sub-themes overlap across the main themes and across years, but they can have a different meaning. For example, when 'generational influences' were commented on by respondents with the most positive views, it was mostly in the context of young people being more open-minded. In contrast, when 'generational influences' appeared in the comments of respondents with the most negative views, it was usually in the context of older generations passing on bigoted views. This is examined in more detail by looking at the most prevalent topics to emerge within each of the main over-arching themes, across the three selected years. These are interesting because they can help shed light on the reasons why young people answer other survey questions in the way they do.

1. Good, getting there

For those respondents whose answers fell under the 'good, getting there' theme, '*generational influences*' featured in all three years. Respondents in this category were more likely to say young people are more open-minded than older generations, with most participants believing that attitudes would be '*diluted through the generations*' as younger people become adults.

> I think the younger generation will sort it out. The current governing generation caused the problems. Things will be far better without them.
>
> (Male, Catholic, 2008)

'*Cross-community/social interaction*' and '*integrated education*' were two issues that featured in respondents' comments in 2008 and 2016, but not 2013. Cross-community events/projects, and opportunities for different religions to come together and form friendships, were viewed as having a positive influence on the state of community relations, as explained by the following respondent:

> I went to an [integrated] school, year 8 - year 12 and I found that nobody cared who you were in religion or sexuality or race they all just were friends because of the person.
>
> (Female, No religion, 2016)

More young people in 2008 made comments alluding to hope for the future. This is in contrast to 2013 and 2016 where '*hope*' was not very evident. The following comments illustrate this point:

> It's good as Northern Ireland is becoming more modern and someday it could be just like London or New York but only safer.
>
> (Male, no religion, 2008)

> ...I hope they don't go back to what it was like during the Troubles.
>
> (Female, Protestant, 2016)

'*Area effects*' featured in the 2013 comments as a reason for positive attitudes, but not in 2008 and 2016. Generally, the perception of respondents who mentioned 'area effects' in 2013 was that large urban areas are more affected by religious hostility and political unrest than more rural areas.

> Mainly only hotly debated and provoked around Belfast areas, compared to remainder of Northern Ireland. Areas like the Ards Peninsula, religion isn't that important a factor when talking or mixing with others.
>
> (Male, Protestant, 2013)

One of the more complex sub-themes to emerge is the way '*increased ethnic diversity*' is perceived to account for improved community relations between Protestants and Catholics. Two distinct opinions are discernible. Firstly, young people who think that increased diversity has *directly* encouraged good relations by encouraging

Table 2: Summary of the most common sub-themes for 'Good, getting there' by survey years. In brackets: Frequency of occurrence

Good, getting there		
2008	**2013**	**2016**
Hope (32)	Generational influences (7)	Guarded optimism (8)
Cross community/ Social interaction (19)	Area effect (6)	Generational influences (5)
Generational influences (9)	Increased ethnic diversity (3)	Cross community interaction (4)
Religion doesn't matter (7)		Integrated education (4)
Integrated education (4)		Respect (4)
Increased ethnic diversity (3)		

people to be more inclusive and outward thinking overall. Secondly, those who believe increased diversity has *indirectly* improved relations between Protestants and Catholics by shifting attention from religion to race. Both views are captured within the positive comments section for 2008 and 2013, but not in 2016.

2. More needs to be done

As Table 3 shows, this section supports the findings reported in the previous section because many of the issues that participants identified as requiring more effort are the same factors identified as promoting positive attitudes. For example, many participants are of the opinion that there should be greater cross-community and social interaction, with more community events and greater opportunities to interact with others. Others made comments relating to changing attitudes through the generations. Expanding integrated education was an issue often discussed in 2008 and 2013, and not just by respondents attending an integrated school. These three issues are combined in one quote made by a young male currently attending grammar school:

> *Cross community projects are short term and are therefore extremely ineffective. When the current generation of youths become older then cross community relations will get better because my generation doesn't care or know very much about*

our past. The past is the past. Children at a primary school age should go to integrated schools, but that won't work for anyone older unless they already have this experience.
(Male, no religion given, 2013)

What is interesting about this quote is the emphasis placed on integrated education from an early age and the opinion that integrated education is less effective if only undertaken at post-primary stage.

'*Generational influences*' are another significant issue in the body of comments. However, in contrast to believing young

people are more open-minded than older generations, respondents are more likely to point to narrow views held by young people, as a result of past negative experiences of their parents. Comments also included advice on how this might be addressed. Education, for example, was mentioned as a way of combating young negative attitudes, with an emphasis on learning about different people's background, as the following quote illustrates:

> *Children are the future for relations between different communities, it is vital that we as the young people and leaders of the next generation are properly taught about not just their own backgrounds, but the backgrounds of many different cultures in Northern Ireland.*
>
> (Male, no religion, 2013)

As in the previous section, respondents also commented on '*area effect*'. This issue was mostly discussed in 2016, often in terms of acknowledging that tensions remain, but distancing themselves from it, where a line is drawn between 'us and them' (Lister, 2004: 101), as evidenced in the quote below:

> *It seems that in poorer areas where the educational system isn't as valued by young people there is more likely to be prejudice.*
>
> (Female, no religion, 2016)

Table 3: Summary of the most common sub-themes for 'More needs to be done' by selected years. In brackets: Frequencies of occurrence.

More needs to be done		
2008	**2013**	**2016**
Positive/ Negative (15)	More integrated education (11)	Positive/ Negative (21)
Forget the past (12)	Flags/Emblems/ Parades (9)	More cross community engagement/ opportunities (17)
More cross community/ social integration (12)	Generational influences (7)	Area effect (16)
More equality/ respect (8)	Wise up (7)	Generational influences (12)
More integrated education (7)		Stuck in/ Forget the past (11)
		More respect (8)

3. Not good, still divided

The views of different generations and where you live also emerge within respondents' comments under this theme as influencing factors. However, viewpoints are notable by a pessimistic tone and a sense of permanency that suggests some young people have become resigned to a bad situation. When references are made to the views of older generations, it is usually described as parents passing on their bigoted views to their children. In 2008, the transferring of negative views across generations was the most common issue discussed. Being 's*tuck in the past*' was also a common sub-theme running across all three years. But, unlike the previous section, respondents' comments were less likely to offer advice on how, or if, the situation could be confronted.

It was also more common in this section for comments to recount personal experiences that often included negative self-conscious emotions such as 'sad' and 'worried'. This was particularly the case in 2016 (see Table 4). Survey questions asking young people if they think spaces such as leisure centres, parks and shopping centres are shared and open to Protestants and Catholics have been asked since 2012. Responses to these questions show approximately 90% of young people believe these spaces are definitely or probably shared and open to both communities However, this was not the opinion of the following respondent who felt 'scared' to go to her local shopping centre:

> *We have a local shopping centre which is in-between a Protestant community and a Catholic community and sometimes I feel scared to go to my local shopping centre. The two sides sometimes riot and things get worse for a few weeks and then dies down. But will the fight ever stop? I think it is down to the parents on how they bring their children up but also the area which influences them.*
>
> (Female, Protestant, 2008)

There were also sub-themes which emerged here that were not evident in the other sections: most notably '*flags, emblems, marches*' and '*disillusionment with politics/politicians*'. Unsurprisingly, '*flags, emblems, marches*' featured predominantly in the 2013 negative comments, with many commenting specifically on the flag dispute at the City Hall. The issue of flags and other physical representations was still being referred to in 2016, but less frequently than 2013. The tone of the comments about flags etc. in 2016 was less partisan with some respondents putting forward compromises:

> *I think both flags should be on Stormont and no street markings on kerbs.*
>
> (Female, Catholic, 2016)

'*Political disillusionment*' featured largely across all three years. Open-ended responses from 2013 contained many negative comments, mostly referring to things such as lack of political leadership, and inability or unwillingness of politicians to cooperate with each other. This was also the case in 2016, with many expressing frustration at political procrastination:

> *Community relations will only change if the NI government (DUP and Sinn Fein) stop wasting time and show their supporters they can work together with each other.*
>
> (Male, no religion, 2016)

In particular, the UK decision to leave the EU following the referendum in June 2016 has been influential in shaping some of the 2016 negative comments about the state of community relations in Northern Ireland. For the following respondent, her concern is that leaving the EU may move the Northern Ireland constitutional question to the top of the political agenda:

> *I think that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be worsened by the EU referendum as some might want a United Ireland so we can stay in the EU.*
>
> (Female, Protestant, 2016)

4. Other

The 'Other' category facilitates an examination of comments which are difficult to allocate into the three overarching standpoints. Comments may not specifically indicate a particular view on community relations, but are nonetheless important. Common sub-themes include '*Religious beliefs*' - where respondents discuss personal religious sentiments; '*Nothing to do with me*' – where young people do not care; and '*Religion doesn't matter anymore*' – where young people feel that religion is irrelevant now. Negative views on the increase in minority ethnic populations are particularly noticeable in 2013 compared to the other years. The tone of comments in 2013 was mostly one of resentment, with a feeling of one group being favoured over another. The following quote is an example:

> *I don't agree with ethnic minorities getting benefits and free use of our health service.*
>
> (Male, Catholic, 2013)

Table 4: Summary of the most common sub-themes for 'Not good, still divided' by survey years. In brackets: Frequencies of occurrence.

Not good, still divided		
2008	**2013**	**2016**
Generational influences (16)	Flags/Emblems/ Parades (53)	Politics/ politicians (17)
Stuck in the past (11)	Generational influences (19)	Stuck in the past (7)
Area effect (7)	Politics/ politicians (15)	Negative self-conscious emotions (7)
Politics/ politicians (6)	Stuck in the past (8)	Flags/Emblems/ Parades (5)
Negative self-conscious emotions (4)		

Table 5: Summary of the most common sub-themes for 'Other' by survey years. In brackets: Frequencies of occurrence.

Other		
2008	**2013**	**2016**
Religious beliefs (5)	Race (8)	Religious beliefs (6)
Doesn't affect me (4)	Increased ethnic diversity (negative) (7)	Social inequalities (5)
Race (4)	Increased ethnic diversity (positive) (2)	Nothing to do with me (4)
Politics (4)		

Additional sub-themes can act as a useful barometer for charting young people's attitudes to issues that, while not linked to community relations in a traditional sense (that is, between Catholic and Protestant communities), are linked with the state of relationships between people in general. Relationships between older and younger people are just one example:

The older people have so much hate for us, but if we are respecting them then they need to show us some respect.

(Female, Protestant, 2016)

This 'Other' category will also help monitor the frequency of emergent topics within sub-themes – homelessness, for example:

Stop caring so much about people's personal affairs, by highlighting subjects like religion constantly, it just makes more of a reason for people to be angry, focus time on those in need e.g. homeless and might die if they get no help.

(Male, Protestant, 2016)

Discussion

This Research Update discusses an on-going analysis of comments made by respondents to an open-ended question asked in YLT since 2003. It is important to note that not all respondents complete the open ended question, suggesting that those who do may hold stronger views than those who do not, and this may not be a true representation of young people as a whole. Responses vary in length and depth while providing a valuable insight into why

participants respond to certain questions in the way that they do. For example, there was a high degree of overlap between those who responded negatively to the two survey questions about the state of community relations five years ago and in five years' time and those who responded negatively to the open-ended question. Thus, the reasons given in these comments have good relevance.

The analysis has shown that social and community interaction formed a significant part of comments from respondents who expressed the most positive attitudes. Integrated education was also represented in this body of comments. For these respondents, cross-community and social interaction were reasons why they believed relations were good. Comments about generational influences indicated an awareness that young people have an ability to be more forward thinking.

The comments also provide a focus on areas that young people have specified as requiring more work. Among the suggestions, facilitating opportunities for breaking down religious barriers emerged as a priority. Points of action discussed by young people included the need for greater education about other cultures further afield and the need to educate older people. Compromise on the issue of flags, parades and so forth was a point of concern, particularly in 2013, indicating that young people pay attention to what is happening around them. Another issue identified as needing attention (and not unrelated to flags etc.) had to do with Northern Ireland's past. References to the past in this section criss-crossed between being stuck in the past and forgetting the past. How exactly this should be tackled

is not evident from the comments, but there is a distinct awareness that dealing with the past is an issue that needs more work. However, when respondents with very negative views commented on being 'stuck in the past', attitudes were more final and also featured across the three years in question. This suggests that any discussion about how to deal with these important issues would benefit from input from young people. Yet, when young people were asked in the 2013 and 2016 surveys if they felt that they had 'any influence in the decisions taken in Northern Ireland', only 8% in both years believed they had (this question was not asked in 2008), indicating a need to address this perceived lack of influence.

The negative comments in 2013 are reflective of a difficult year, where protests and demonstrations were widely covered in the local and national media. Therefore, the negative comments referring to a perceived lack of political leadership and disappointment at politicians' reluctance to work together were not a surprise. However, negative comments relating to similar political issues remain evident three years later, in 2016. The analysis so far indicates that young people continue to expect more from their political representatives.

YLT has a tradition of including open-ended questions in their survey as they are a way of giving agency to respondents by allowing them space to expand on their opinion, voiced through closed-ended survey questions (O'Cathain and Thomas, 2004). As such, these comments provide a focus on some key factors that contribute to young people's negative and positive attitudes and their sense of what needs to be done. Their comments also point to the value of promoting young people's greater participation in debates about wider decisions that affect their lives. As mentioned in the introduction, this is still a work in progress and the open-ended comments will continue to be analysed in a similar way. However, this type of analysis is a complement to, and not a substitute for, properly designed qualitative research.

References

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Key Points

- Young people who left optimistic comments thought cross-community and social interaction had a positive influence on community relations. Constructive generational influences were thought to contribute to good relations.

- Positive comments made about community relations in 2008 contained references to 'hope' that was not evident in 2013 or 2016.

- Comments made by respondents who thought more work was required included references to increasing opportunities for more cross-community integration; forgetting the past; and the need for more respect.

- Respondents who left negative comments across the three years referred often to destructive generational influences; and disillusionment with politicians and the political system in general.

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Young Life and Times (YLT) is carried out annually and documents the opinion of 16 year olds on a wide range of social issues. YLT 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. The questions on community relations were funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister/The Executive Office.