



Research Update

Us and them?

Paula Devine and Dirk Schubotz

Introduction

Community relations has been a much researched and much debated topic in Northern Ireland. During Northern Ireland's history, relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities have been constantly shifting. However, building trust and confidence between and within communities and tackling sectarianism have been identified as key priorities for the government. The 16 year olds of today have lived most of their lives in rapidly changing times following the 1994 ceasefires. Thus, by recording the attitudes of young people in Northern Ireland we can try to gain an understanding of how society in Northern Ireland and community relations may look in the near future.

The 2003 **Young Life and Times (YLT) survey** asked the opinions of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social issues. This Research Update focuses on community relations in Northern Ireland, and draws upon the responses of the 902 young people who took part in the survey.

Identity

Much of the community relations practice in Northern Ireland focuses on single-identity work, and one YLT respondent commented that '*knowing your own identity is very important*'. But what exactly does identity mean for young people here? In Northern Ireland, as across the world, identity is increasingly recognised as being multi-faceted. The Young Life and Times survey tried to measure identity in several ways, the first of



these being in terms of national identity.

The vast majority of respondents (96%) were able to describe themselves as belonging to one of four categories: British (28%), Irish (39%), Ulster (4%) or Northern Irish (25%). Unsurprisingly, there was some correlation between national identity and religion. For example, 92% of respondents who identified themselves as Irish were Catholic. Over three quarters of respondents who described themselves as British (78%) were Protestant. However, the distribution was not totally clear-cut, as 7% of 'British' respondents were Catholic. It is interesting that one quarter of respondents described themselves as Northern Irish, over one half of whom (55%) were Protestant, 31% were Catholic and 15% had no religion. The responses of those with no religion were distributed across all categories: British (37%), Irish (16%), Ulster (3%) and Northern Irish (32%). A further 9% said that they did not know what national identity they had.

For three out of five respondents (60%), their national identity was something that they felt was important to them. Around one fifth of respondents (21%) said that national identity was neither important nor unimportant to them. For 18% of respondents it was not important.

In order to explore a second facet of identity, respondents were asked if they regarded themselves as belonging to a particular religion. One in eight (12%) said that they did not, while 47% said that they were Catholic and 40% said that they were Protestants. Only two respondents belonged to non-Christian religions. Three out of five respondents (59%) said that their religious identity (defined as whether the respondent is Catholic or Protestant or something else – even if they don't go to church) was important to them. This is the same proportion who said that their national identity was important.

When asked if they regarded themselves as members of the

Protestant community or the Catholic community, 43% of respondents saw themselves as part of the former, while 45% saw themselves as part of the latter. One in eight (12%) did not see themselves as belonging to either community.

Attitudes to the 'other'

Given that most respondents identified themselves as being part of the Protestant or Catholic communities, how did they feel about the 'other'? Table 1 shows that approximately three quarters of respondents felt favourably towards their own group. Respondents were less positive about the other community, with Catholics feeling more favourable about the Protestant community (45%) than vice versa (38%). Significantly, this is not mirrored by overtly negative feelings, and in fact, only one in ten respondents said that they felt unfavourable towards the other community. Instead, feelings were more ambiguous, and respondents were more likely to say that they felt neither favourable nor unfavourable.

Respondents who said that they were from neither community had almost identical views about Protestants and Catholics: just under one half felt favourable, and one half felt neither favourable nor unfavourable.

Table 1: Feelings about the Catholic and Protestant communities

	%					
	Feeling about Catholic Community			Feeling about Protestant community		
	Part of the Protestant community	Part of the Catholic community	Neither	Part of the Protestant community	Part of the Catholic community	Neither
Favourable	38	77	47	74	45	48
Neither favourable nor unfavourable	49	20	50	25	43	50
Unfavourable	11	1	2	1	9	2

Respondents were then asked to identify what has been the most important influence on their views about the other main religious community. As shown in Table 2, family was the most important influence for just under one half of respondents (47%), followed by friends (21%). This

distribution was true for members of both the Protestant and Catholic communities, although Catholics were more likely to cite school as the most important influence. One in eight respondents identified other influences, which mostly included a combination of factors.

Table 2: Most important influence on views about the other religious community

	%		
	Protestant	Catholic	All
Your family	44	49	47
Your friends	23	20	21
Your school	5	12	9
Your church	8	5	6
Other	14	12	13
Don't know	5	3	4

These figures are confirmed by some of the open-ended comments. For example, one respondent noted that:

'I think many children are still growing up with strong influences from their parents who encourage them to dislike Protestants or Catholics before they can make their own mind up. Therefore when they have their children they'll encourage the same ideas and so it is a bit of a vicious cycle!'

How much contact do young people have?

Segregation is very much part of the education system in Northern Ireland, and thus part of the lives of the Young Life and Times respondents. Only 6% of respondents attended a planned integrated school. In contrast, nine

out of ten respondents (89%) attended a school that they described as consisting most, nearly all or fully of students who were either Catholic or Protestant.

Similarly, segregated housing is very much a fact of life for a large part of the population in Northern Ireland. Reflecting this, only 29% of YLT respondents said that they lived in a mixed-religion neighbourhood. In contrast, approximately two thirds of respondents from Catholic and Protestant communities lived in areas that were predominantly of their own religion (63% and 69% respectively). Given these levels of segregation, how much inter-community mixing is there between those respondents who said that they were part of the Catholic or Protestant communities?

Four out of five of these respondents (79%) have had contact with pupils from a different religious community during their time at school. Many of these contacts were made as part of inter-school projects. Respondents from the Protestant community were slightly more likely to report that they have had contact (83%) than Catholics (76%) and young women were slightly more likely to have had contact (82%) than young men (75%).

A small majority of respondents experienced cross-community contact outside school: just over one half of respondents (52%) said that they often or sometimes socialised with people from a different religious background. Again, Protestants were slightly more likely than Catholics to have had such contact at least sometimes (55% and 50%). One in five respondents said that they never socialised or played sports with young people who had a different religion to themselves.

Respondents were then asked how many close friends they had from the other main religious community. As might be expected, respondents living

in segregated areas were much more likely to have no friends from other religious backgrounds than respondents who lived in mixed neighbourhoods (see Table 3). Nearly one half of respondents (47%) living in mainly Catholic areas, and one third living in mainly Protestant areas (34%) had no friends from the other main religious community. The relevant figure for respondents living in mixed areas was 15%.

With regard to schooling the findings are even starker. Table 3 shows that only 3% of those who attended schools with a mixed religious intake said they had no friends from other religious backgrounds. This compares with 32% of respondents who went to schools with a majority Protestant intake and 39% of respondents who went to schools with a majority Catholic intake.

Table 3: How many friends do you have from the other main religious community?

	%					
	Religious composition of neighbourhood			Religious composition of school		
	Mainly Catholic	Mainly Protestant	Mixed	Majority Protestant	Majority Catholic	About half and half
None at all	47	34	15	32	39	3
One	9	8	8	10	7	5
Two to five	24	29	34	29	28	31
Six to ten	6	8	14	9	8	17
More than ten	8	17	28	17	12	39
Don't know	6	6	3	4	6	5

The comment of one respondent reflects these statistics:

'Because most of the schools we go to and the areas that we live in are of the same religion, we don't get a chance to meet people of a different religion that often.'

How much contact do young people want?

The findings so far indicate that residential and educational segregation is experienced by many YLT respondents. However, are respondents happy for this pattern to continue, or would they prefer more inter-community contact? In order to explore this, respondents were asked about their preferences for mixed-, or

own-religion neighbourhoods and workplaces. They were also asked if they would prefer to send their own children to integrated or segregated schools. Overall, respondents were strongly in favour of mixed-religion workplaces (71%), although support was less strong for mixed-religion neighbourhoods (53%) and schools (48%).

Large numbers of YLT respondents commented on this issue of integration. Most felt that more integration would lead to a better understanding between people. The following quote represents this view:

'People make such a big deal about religious and political status. If everywhere became areas of mixed religion people would come to realise how alike we all are, and perhaps some hatred would be dismissed.'

However, others outlined the reasons for their support of single-religion schools:

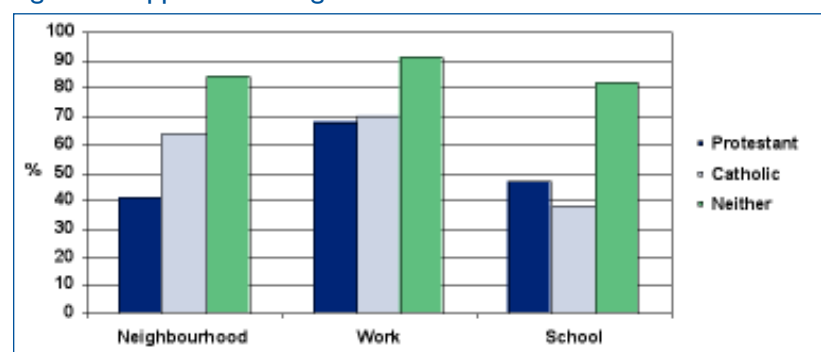
'I would like my children to go to a school of their own religion so they can learn and develop through it, without the influence of others.'

Figure 1 shows that respondents who were part of neither the Protestant nor Catholic communities were very strongly in favour of integrated neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools. Respondents who saw themselves as part of the Catholic or Protestant communities had very similar attitudes relating to mixed-religion workplaces. However, members of the Protestant community were more likely than those from the Catholic community (47% and 38% respectively) to favour mixed-religion schools, while the reverse was true in relation to neighbourhoods.

Community relations in the future

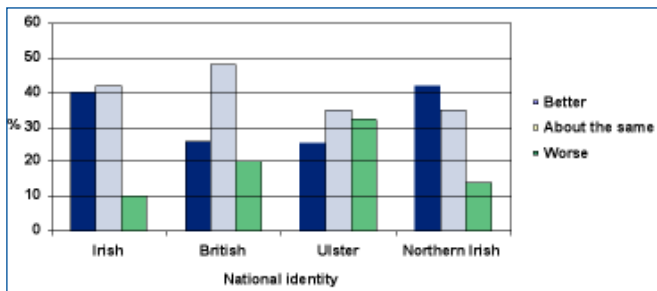
Finally, the survey explored attitudes to the future of community relations in Northern Ireland. When asked what relations between Protestants and Catholics would be in five years time, the largest proportion of respondents thought that they would be about the same (42%). A smaller proportion (36%) thought that relations would be better, while only 15% thought that they would be worse. However, Figure 2 shows that there were considerable differences between young people with different national identities. Interestingly, those who said they were Northern Irish were most confident (42%) that relations between Catholics and Protestants would be better in five years time. The most common response from young people with an Irish, a British or an Ulster identity was that the relationship would remain

Figure 1: Support for integration



about the same as now. Respondents who said their national identity was Ulster held the most sceptical views, with one third (33%) saying that relations would be worse than they are now.

Figure 2: In five years time, will relations between Protestants and Catholics be better than now, worse or about the same?



In terms of religious identity, young people who said they belonged to the Catholic community were most positive about the future of relations between Protestants and Catholics in five years time, with 45% of them thinking it would be better, and 39% believing it would be the same. Only 9% thought relations would be worse in five years time. In contrast, of those belonging to the Protestant community, 45% believed relations would be about the same, 27% said they would be better and 22% believed they would be worse. Those who did not regard themselves as belonging to either community were also most likely (38%) to say the relations between Catholics and Protestants would remain about the same, 36% thought they would get better, whereas 15% believed they would deteriorate.

Conclusion

The 2003 Young Life and Times survey provides an interesting snapshot of young people's attitudes to community relations issues in Northern Ireland. In addition, within a rapidly changing social and political environment, it also provides a baseline against which attitudes in the future can be compared. As one respondent said:

'The young people of today are the generation of tomorrow, so their opinions and lives should be taken more seriously.'

The results indicate that national and religious identity are important issues in the lives of 16 year olds in

Northern Ireland in 2003. However, although residential and educational segregation also play a large part in their lives, there is evidence to suggest that respondents would prefer more integration in terms of neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. As young people on the edge of adulthood, will it be possible to transfer these preferences into reality?

Paula Devine and Dirk Schubotz are both team members of ARK based at the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research, Queen's University Belfast.

The Young Life and Times survey has been funded by EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland 2000-2004, Measure 2:1 – Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace.

Photograph reproduced with permission of the N Ireland Youth Council.

Key Points

- Both religious and national identity are seen as being important.
- Although many respondents do not say that they are favourable about the other religious community, very few feel overtly negative.
- The main influence on such views was respondents' family.
- The majority of respondents go to segregated schools and live in segregated areas. These respondents tend to have fewer close friends who are of a different religion.
- A small majority of respondents experienced cross-community contact outside school.
- Respondents would like to see more integration within neighbourhoods and schools, and especially within workplaces.
- Few respondents (15%) feel that relations between Catholics and Protestants will get worse in five years time, and 36% believe they will get better.

The Young Life and Times survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. In 2003, 902 young people aged 16 completed the survey in one of three ways: online, by self-completion questionnaire or by phone.

The Young 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 young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) or call the survey team at Queen's University (028 9097 3947) with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University, Belfast and University of Ulster.

Aberfoyle House Magee Campus University of Ulster
Northland Road Londonderry BT48 7 JA

Tel: 028 7137 5513 Fax: 028 7137 5510
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

Institute of Governance Public Policy and Social Research
Queen's University Belfast Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 2551
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk