



Research Update

What now?

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Introduction

The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey gives young people the chance to tell us about their experiences of school, and their views on politics, sectarianism and other social issues. Each year, YLT invites all young people who had celebrated their 16th birthday in February of that year to participate. In 2004, approximately 2000 16-year olds were asked to take part, and 824 completed the questionnaire online, by phone, or more commonly, by post. YLT also invites respondents to suggest topics for the following year's survey, thus helping to ensure that the issues covered are relevant to the lives of young people in Northern Ireland today.

This Update will focus on the extensive set of questions relating to community relations asked in the 2004 survey. Comparisons will also be made with the 2003 survey in order to track how attitudes have changed, or not.

Political background

In September 2004, YLT asked 16-year olds across Northern Ireland about their attitudes to, and experiences of, community relations. The previous survey had taken place in June 2003 (see Devine and Schubotz, 2004; Fullerton, 2004). In the meantime, the Northern Ireland Assembly election had taken place in November 2003. This election resulted in the DUP replacing the UUP as strongest Unionist party and Sinn Féin winning most seats in the Nationalist/Republican camp. The victory of the DUP and Sinn Féin was repeated in the European Parliament elections in June 2004. As a result, the political landscape in Northern Ireland appears to be more polarised now than 15 months ago. So what now? Have these voting patterns, as well as a stalled Northern Ireland Assembly,

impacted on young people's views of community relations?

Interestingly, a number of respondents in the 2003 Young Life and Times survey had already sensed this developing polarisation, as the following quote shows:

'Politically people are polarising. The DUP and Sinn Féin will soon be the target parties. This can only lead to a deterioration in community relations.'

Whilst this respondent's prediction about the political polarisation did materialise, this Update will explore whether or not there is any evidence of a deterioration of community relations among 16-year olds between the two YLT surveys.

The current state of community relations

In both 2003 and 2004 respondents were asked how they viewed the current state of community relations compared with five years ago and in relation to five years time.

Overall, there was a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who thought that community relations had improved over the previous five years, with a smaller increase in those thinking that community relations would increase in the future. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that Catholics were significantly more likely to say that community relations had improved, and were also most optimistic about community relations in the future. In 2003, 16-year old Catholics had very similar opinions about the future to those in 2004. Protestants, on the other

Table 1: Would you say relations between Catholics and Protestants are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same?

	%							
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion		All	
	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004
Better	48	53	34	42	39	45	41	48
Worse	13	15	22	17	14	11	17	16
About the same	34	29	40	35	39	37	37	32

Table 2: In 5 years time, do you think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better than now, worse than now, or about the same as now?

	%							
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion		All	
	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004
Better	44	44	27	35	37	32	36	39
Worse	9	11	21	14	15	20	15	14
About the same	41	39	45	44	38	37	42	40

hand, were much more optimistic about community relations in 2004. This is in contrast to the continuous decline in Protestant confidence in community relations identified by respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (MacGinty, 2004). Whether or not the increased optimism of Protestant YLT respondents is related to the voting gains of the DUP is as yet unclear. Interestingly, those with no religion were the only group that was slightly less optimistic about community relations in 2004 than in 2003 (Table 2). Again, one possible explanation could be political polarisation. Across all groups, the proportion of respondents in 2004 who thought that community relations are worse now than five years ago, or that they would be worse in the future, is lower than in 2003.

Will religion always make a difference?

Respondents remain convinced that religion will always make a difference to how people in Northern Ireland feel about each other (86% in 2003 and in 2004). Protestants were more likely to have this view (91% in both years), than Catholics (84% in 2003 and 86% in 2004). Of those respondents with no religion, 78% felt that religion would always make a difference to people's feelings about each other (79% in 2003). Many comments from young people confirmed this view, for example:

'I don't think relations between Catholics and Protestants will ever really improve because religious prejudices are passed down from parents to their children. Religious hatred is not a natural thing; it is not in-born, it is created by people.'

Does religion make a difference?

If young people perceive that religion will always make a difference, what difference does religion make in reality? In 2004, 11% of YLT respondents attended schools that they described as religiously mixed, that is about half Protestant and half Catholic. Five percent of respondents said they attended a planned integrated school. Just over one quarter (28%) of respondents

lived in mixed-religion neighbourhoods. So, how does this territorial and educational segregation impact on friendship patterns?

Table 3 shows that one in four (25%) respondents living in mixed religious neighbourhoods said they had no friends from the other main religious community, compared to one in three who lived in mainly Protestant communities (32%) and over four in ten (42%) who lived in mainly Catholic communities. The difference between respondents in terms of schooling was even starker. Respondents who attended schools with a mixed religious intake were three times less likely than respondents who attended mainly Protestant schools and four times less likely than respondents who attended mainly Catholic schools to say that they had no friends from the other main religious community.

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	All or majority Catholic	All or majority Protestant	About half and half
None at all	42	32	25	40	31	9
One	9	11	7	10	10	2
Two to five	26	25	29	26	25	38
Six to ten	7	12	16	8	13	20
More than ten	11	12	17	11	13	22
Don't know	4	8	4	5	7	9

Three out of five respondents (61%) had taken part in cross-community projects. Three quarters of these respondents described their contact with people from the other religious community either as positive or very positive. Catholics were more likely (78%) to report positive experiences from these events than Protestants (70%). Only 4% said this contact was negative or very negative, thus suggesting support for the long-term cross-community contact schemes. Again, the following respondent's comment support this claim:

'I think the government should increase cross-community relations at an earlier age, after all the children of today are the adults of tomorrow. We carry the opinions we receive at a young age into our teenage and adult years.'

How much contact do young people want?

So, how much contact do young people want? YLT asked respondents if they preferred to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, work in a mixed-religion environment or send their children to a mixed-religion school. Table 4 indicates that overall, support for mixed-religion schools and workplaces has decreased since 2003. Respondents who were neither Catholic nor Protestant were

most likely to prefer mixed-religion environments. Catholics were least likely to want their children educated in mixed-religion schools. Protestants, on the other hand, were least likely to want to live in mixed religion neighbourhoods.

How about minority ethnic communities?

Although relations between Catholics and Protestants will continue to dominate debates about community relations in

Table 4: Support for integration

	%					
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion	
	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004
Mixed neighbourhood	56	52	45	47	64	67
Mixed workplace	72	69	70	64	76	76
Mixed schools	41	34	50	45	70	68

Table 5: How favourable or unfavourable do you feel about people from minority ethnic communities?

	%						
	School attended			Religion			All
	Grammar	Secondary	Planned integrated	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	
Favourable	44	36	35	46	34	35	39
Neither nor	48	47	49	44	49	52	48
Unfavourable	6	7	7	4	11	4	7
Don't know	2	9	7	6	4	8	6

Northern Ireland, an increase in the number of people from minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland – and more so an increased awareness in racially-motivated attacks - has resulted in a growing consciousness that good community relations have to be developed across all sections in society. One respondent to the YLT survey said:

'As I am not originally from this country I am able to look at the matter from an outsider's perspective. I find that most people in this country are very racist.'

Table 6: Would most people mind if a close relative would marry someone from a different race or ethnic origin? And would respondents mind themselves?

	%					
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion	
	Most People	Respondent	Most people	Respondent	Most people	Respondent
Would mind a lot	17	4	27	9	22	2
Would mind a little	43	14	51	28	44	10
Would not mind	30	80	15	60	21	83
Don't know	10	3	7	3	13	4

Ireland was at least 11%. Only 2% of respondents thought that the percentage was below 1%, which matches the closest estimate available from the Census.

Table 5 shows that two out of five (39%) respondents said they felt favourable or very favourable towards people from ethnic minority backgrounds. While nearly half of respondents (48%) said that they felt neither favourable nor unfavourable, 7% said they felt unfavourably.

There were no significant differences between the attitudes of males and females. However, there were significant differences according to religious background, and also depending on the type of school attended. Catholics and respondents attending grammar schools felt most favourably.

Respondents were also asked if they thought that most people in Northern Ireland would mind if a close relative would marry someone of a different race or ethnic origin. One in five (22%) young people felt that most people would mind a lot, almost half (46%) thought that most people would mind a little, and 22% said that most people would not mind. As Table 6 shows, there were significant differences among respondents from different religious backgrounds. Protestants were significantly more likely than Catholics to say that most people would mind a lot.

Results from other surveys, such as the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, show that respondents perceived most people in Northern Ireland to be less tolerant than they themselves were (Wigfall-Williams and Robinson, 2001). Following this pattern, the majority of YLT respondents (72%) said that they would not mind if a relative married someone from a different race or ethnic origin, considerably higher than the 22% who thought that most people would not mind. Again, Protestants were significantly more likely than Catholics and respondents of no religion to say that they would mind a little or a lot. Whilst there was little difference between males' and females' views on how other people would feel about a close relative marrying someone from a different race or ethnic background, on a personal level males were significantly more likely to say that

they would mind. Over three quarters of females (78%) compared to less than two thirds of males (64%) said they would personally not mind.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the most interesting aspects of the results of the 2004 YLT survey was the increased confidence in community relations among young Protestants. It will be interesting to see if this upward trend is maintained in future years.

The YLT data provide optimism for the future of community relations, as those respondents who experience mixed-religion schools and neighbourhoods have developed friendships across the socio-religious divide, which will potentially last into adulthood. The positive experiences that young people had in cross-community projects will hopefully also be recorded and encourage more such projects to take place and be set up.

There is also room for pessimism, as despite these positive cross-community experiences, support for mixed-religion schools and workplaces has actually decreased since 2003.

In addition, despite fairly positive attitudes towards minority ethnic communities, the gross overestimation of size of such communities living in Northern Ireland gives some cause for concern. This blurred perception, as well as the rise in the number of racially-motivated attacks, reinforce the need for community relations projects to address the issue of race now.

The Young Life and Times survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland.

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 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.

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

Key Points

- In 2004, almost half (48%) of all respondents thought that community relations had improved compared to five years ago. Four in ten (39%) respondents thought that community relations would be better in five years time.
- Compared to 2003, there was an increase in young Protestants' belief that community relations would be better in five years time.
- Respondents living in segregated neighbourhoods and those attending segregated schools were much more likely to have no friends who were of a different religion.
- Support for integration of schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods had slightly decreased compared to 2003.
- Most respondents overestimated the proportion of people from minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland, but only 7% of respondents said they felt unfavourable towards them.