

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

RESEARCH UPDATE

Number 8

November 2001

A World Apart: Mixed marriage in Northern Ireland

By Wanda Wigfall-Williams
and Gillian Robinson

Religion is an integral part of Northern Ireland, and as such has been the nexus of legal, social, and psychological conflict. It has been vital in its influence regarding the choice of marriage partner, the role of stereotyping the “other” and the effect on the ongoing processes of living, working, and learning together in daily life as a community. Cross-religious marriage can be viewed as one important avenue for improving relationships between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. From a practical perspective, mixed marriages represent a blurring of ethnic distinctions in current and future generations. Furthermore, these marriages appear to serve as a symbolic contradiction to negative stereotypes as well as a source of positive familial contact between differing ethnic groups.

This update uses results from the 1989 Northern Ireland *Social Attitudes Survey*, and 1998 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* to help gain insight into personal and societal perceptions towards mixed marriages in Northern Ireland. And although the information is not in any way an attempt to justify the range of hostility exhibited by some members of the community toward these families, it does shed light on individual and group opinions. In order to understand normative beliefs and behaviors, it is important to identify and to examine underlying perceptions and preferences regarding ethnic difference.

Ever since 1989 the number of mixed marriages in Northern Ireland has, very slowly, inched upwards. These figures are also influenced by the growth in the number of people who have no religion at all.

The social impact of cross-cultural marriages and the likelihood of their continued growth would

appear to be mediated by several factors. Central among them is the manner in which mixed marriages, their causes, and their short and long-term future are perceived by the general public.

Table 1: Is your husband/wife/partner the same religion as you?

	%				
	1989	1991	1993	1995	1998
Yes	94	92	92	90	87
No	6	6	6	8	9
No religion	-	2	1	0	4

Society and mixed marriages

When asked about society’s perceptions toward mixed marriage, 16% of those interviewed for the *Life and Times Survey* in 1998 thought that most people in Northern Ireland would “mind a lot” if one of their close relatives were to marry someone of a different religion. This figure represents a very significant decline over the decade. Nine years previously, over a third of those interviewed thought that people in general would mind a lot. There is a corresponding increase in the number of people who believe that most people ‘would not mind’ from 28% in 1989 to 44% in 1998.

Table 2: Would most people mind if one of their close relatives were to marry someone of a different religion?

	%		
	1989	1998	Change
Would mind a lot	34	16	-18
Would mind a little	33	35	+2
Would not mind	28	44	+16
Don't know	4	6	+2

This sense of a new societal tolerance is shared among both Protestant and Catholic respondents. There was a 19% decrease in the number of Protestant respondents who indicated that they thought that members of society “would mind a lot” in 1998 from those interviewed in 1989. For the same comparison period, Catholic respondents

reflected a 16% decrease. However the familiar pattern of Catholics perceiving more tolerance in this area than do Protestants is still as visible in 1998 as it was in 1989. Catholics do not see (or acknowledge) the societal barriers in the same way that Protestants do.

Table 3: Would most people mind if one of their close relatives were to marry someone of a different religion? (Protestants and Catholics)

	%			
	Catholic		Protestant	
	1989	1998	1989	1998
Would mind a lot	25	9	41	22
Would mind a little	29	29	34	39
Would not mind	43	55	18	34
Don't know	3	6	6	5

Mixed marriages within the family

But although it is interesting to note how respondents' perceptions of society's mores have changed, what is to the point is whether respondents themselves are now more willing to accept a mixed marriage within their own family. On the face of it, there has been a modest, but not particularly marked, shift over the decade. Fewer people in 1998 would now 'mind a lot' if one of their close relatives were to marry someone of a different religion.

Table 4: Personal view of inter-religious marriage

	%		
	1989	1998	Change
Would mind a lot	16	10	-6
Would mind a little	15	16	+1
Would not mind	68	71	+3
Don't know	2	4	+2

But bigger differences become apparent looking at Protestant and Catholic respondents separately. Catholic attitudes have changed little over the decade and it is still the case that Catholics are more likely than Protestants to profess that they would not mind a mixed marriage in the family.

However the gap between the two has narrowed over the last decade and there has been a significant shift in Protestant attitudes. A quarter of Protestants in 1989 said that they would mind a lot if a close relative were to marry outside their religion – this has dropped 9 percentage points to 16% in 1998. Sixty percent of Protestants now say

they would not mind – 79% of Catholics say the same.

Table 5: Personal view of inter-religious marriage (Protestants and Catholics)

	%			
	Catholic		Protestant	
	1989	1998	1989	1998
Would mind a lot	6	4	25	16
Would mind a little	10	13	21	20
Would not mind	82	79	53	60
Don't know	2	4	2	4

A new spirit of tolerance?

From the point of view of community relations policies these results are encouraging. A new spirit of personal tolerance along with a broad-based acknowledgement that society has changed in the last ten years. Yet it is clear that many of the other community relations indicators that our surveys have monitored do not mirror this picture.

Where a mixed couple chooses to live, work and send their children to school are matters that require tremendous thought and negotiation. Since 1989, surveys have questioned respondents as to whether they would prefer mixed-religion neighbourhoods, mixed religion workplaces and integrated schools for their children.

Table 6: Neighbourhood preference

	%		
	1989	1998	Change
Own religion only	23	22	-1
Mixed religion	72	73	+1
Don't know	5	5	0

There is virtually no change overall between the years 1989 and 1998 and (although the figures are not reported here) there are also no significant changes among the views of Protestant respondents and Catholic respondents.

The figures are also completely stable when it comes to workplace preferences, although Catholics show a slightly greater preference for a mixed workplace in 1999 than nine years previously.

Table 7: Workplace preference

	%		
	1989	1998	Change
Own religion only	10	9	-1
Mixed religion	85	86	+1
Don't know	5	5	0

It is in the endorsement of integrated schooling where the kinds of shifts in tolerance suggested by the mixed marriage data are to be found.

Table 8: School preference

	%		
	1989	1998	Change
Own religion only	37	23	-14
Mixed religion	56	66	+10
Don't know	7	12	+5

What is more, this increase in support is evident among both Protestant and Catholic communities. In 1998 72% of Catholics would support mixed religion schooling for their children (at least in principle). Protestant respondents are a little less certain – 57% would support this, but the numbers who would stick with own religion schools has certainly declined (from 41% to 29%) over the decade.

Table 9: School preference. (Protestant and Catholic)

	%			
	Catholic		Protestant	
	1989	1998	1989	1998
Own religion only	37	21	41	29
Mixed religion	54	72	53	57
Don't know	9	8	6	14

Of course it is important to keep in mind that support for integrated schooling in principle has never been matched by demand in practice.

Beyond religion

In most western cultures these days, any paper on mixed marriages there would naturally be a reference to marriages between partners of different ethnic groups. Not in Northern Ireland of course - but in the 1998 Life and Times Survey white respondents were indeed asked their views about intermarriage with people of Chinese origin.

The results are extremely interesting. Overall respondents thought that societal tolerance for

inter-racial marriages was marginally less than for mixed-religion marriages, but the overall picture was really very similar.

Table 10: Would most people mind...? (inter-religious and inter-racial marriages)

	%		
	Inter-religious	Inter-racial	Difference
Would mind a lot	16	16	0
Would mind a little	35	36	+1
Would not mind	44	38	-6
Don't know	6	10	+4

Unusually though, Protestant and Catholic respondents are quite similar in their views. Unusual because Catholic respondents, on the whole, tend to be more liberal (and to perceive society as more liberal) than Protestants. And while 55% of Catholics believed that religious mixed marriages were well tolerated, only 40% thought the same about inter-racial marriages.

Table 11: Would most people mind...? (inter-racial marriages, Protestants and Catholics)

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	All
Would mind a lot	17	16	16
Would mind a little	34	39	36
Would not mind	40	35	38
Don't know	9	10	10

In terms of how people view the prospect of an inter-racial marriage within their own family – Protestants are fairly consistent. Although slightly more would 'mind a lot' about a mixed-religion marriage, the same proportion are sanguine about inter-racial marriages as are about mixed-religion marriages (60%).

Table 12: Personal view of inter-racial marriage (Protestants and Catholics)

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	All
Would mind a lot	11	10	10
Would mind a little	21	24	21
Would not mind	63	61	64
Don't know	5	5	5

Catholics, on the other hand are much less tolerant about inter-racial marriages in the family than they are about mixed-religion marriages. Only 63% say that they would not mind, compared with 82% for inter-religious marriages. Nearly a third admit that they would indeed mind. Having said this of course, the attitudes of Catholics and Protestants

are nearly identical on this (Table 12). It is not that Catholics are less tolerant of inter-racial marriages than are Protestants, it is that they are noticeably *more* tolerant than Protestants of mixed-religion marriages.

Conclusion

Attitudes to mixed marriages have shifted discernibly over the last decade, as has the number of mixed marriages itself. People are more likely to see such marriages as generally accepted within society and Protestants are now more willing to find such a marriage acceptable within their own family circle. Yet although these results are highly positive it is important not to lose sight of the

divisions that remain. In the last years of the 20th century it is still the case that less than 10% of marriages are inter-religious and that half of those interviewed would not like either an inter-religious or inter-racial marriage within their own family circle.

The questions on mixed marriages were funded by the Community Relations Unit and we are very grateful to them for their support. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding. Wanda Wigfall-Williams is the Tip O'Neill fellow at UNU/INCORE at the University of Ulster. Gillian Robinson is Director of ARK (Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive) and Senior Lecturer in the School of Policy Studies at the University of Ulster.

KEY POINTS

- The number of mixed marriages in Northern Ireland has risen slowly over the last ten years.
- People are much more likely than they were ten years ago to believe that such marriages are generally accepted in Northern Ireland society.
- Catholic respondents are still more optimistic than Protestants about how mixed marriages are generally accepted in society.
- Catholic respondents are still more likely than Protestants to say that they would not mind a mixed marriage within their own family – but the gap has narrowed over the decade.
- In 1989, 25% of Protestants said that they would ‘mind a lot’ if one of their close relatives chose to marry someone of a different religion, but in 1998 this had fallen to 16%. 60% of Protestants now say that they would not mind such a marriage.
- This new spirit of tolerance towards mixed marriages is not matched by an increased public desire to live in mixed neighbourhoods or attend mixed work-places, but it is accompanied by a strong decrease in support for single-religion schooling.
- Catholics feel that mixed religion marriages are more accepted by Northern Ireland society than are inter-racial marriages.

Protestants and Catholics have very similar attitudes about inter-racial marriages within their own families, but Catholics are less tolerant of such than they are of mixed-religion marriages.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In the 1998 survey, 1800 adults were interviewed on the main survey. Interviews were carried out by *Research and Evaluation Services*.

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.qub.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.