



Into the mix

Paula Devine

Community relations, especially the relationship between the Catholic and Protestant communities, continue to be a major issue in Northern Ireland. This was particularly true in 2012, a year which has been described as ‘a game of two halves’. The political and social situation for the earlier part of the year was relatively stable and peaceful. Notable events include the handshake between Queen Elizabeth and Martin McGuinness, and the announcement of the 2013 G8 summit in Fermanagh (Nolan, 2013). However, on 3 December, Belfast City Council took the decision to restrict the flying of the Union flag on Belfast City Hall to 18 designated days. This led to a series of protests and demonstrations, which had serious implications for community relations in Northern Ireland. It was at the end of this mixed-up year that the 2012 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey was run.

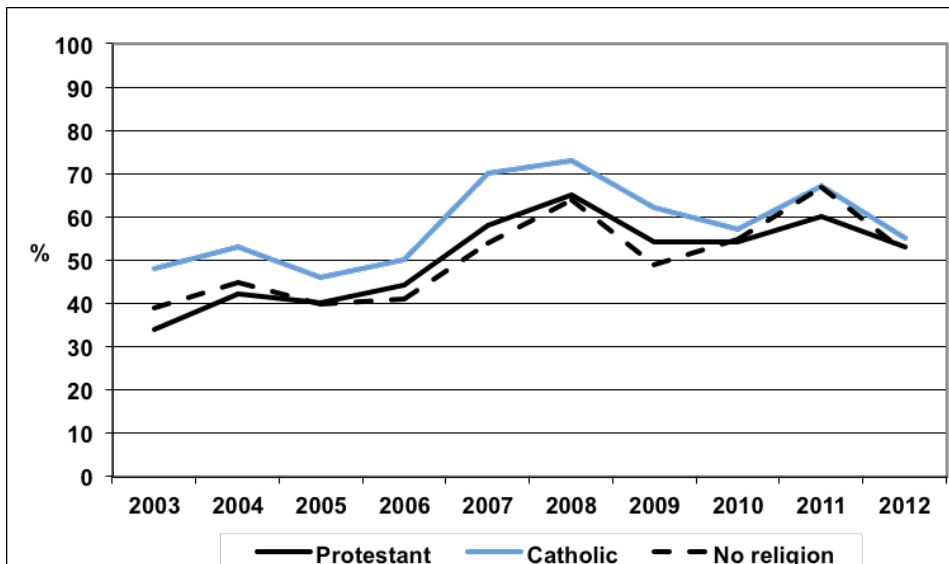
Community relations and cross-community contact have been a constant feature of YLT surveys since they started monitoring the attitudes of 16 year olds in 2003. As well as being asked questions, survey participants are given the opportunity to write in any comments they wish to make about community relations, and to suggest topics and/or questions for further YLT surveys. This Research Update will use these data to explore the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds towards community relations and cross-community mixing.

Cross-community relations

The survey has consistently asked how relations between Protestants and Catholics compared with five years previously, which allows us to track any

changes over time. Many of these changes reflect contemporary political or social events, and Figure 1 shows that there has been some fluctuation over the years. Overall, there is a general sense that relations have got better, rising from 41 per cent in 2003 to 53 per cent in 2012. The high point was in 2008 (68%), perhaps reflecting optimism following the introduction of devolution in May 2007. Another visible pattern is that the attitudes of different groups have begun to converge. From 2003 to 2010, Catholic respondents were the most positive about community relations: in 2007, 70 per cent of these young people thought that community relations had got better, compared with 54 per cent of those with no religion (a difference of 16 percentage points). But in 2012, however, attitudes between these groups were very similar, with a difference of only 3 percentage points.

Figure 1: % believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago, by religion



Of course, this downturn in the perception of cross-community relations is not unexpected, given the tension surrounding the flag protests. Many of the YLT respondents commented on the tension, and several highlighted how much, or how little, the flying of the Union flag meant to them:

I feel that the flag of my country should be flown in my capital city, without making any excuses or apologies for it.

Nowadays people are fighting for no reason. Purely for the fun of it. They don't actually care what they are fighting for (e.g. a flag no one even noticed was there.)

In relation to the future, 45 per cent of young people thought that cross-community relations would be better in five years time, which reverses the upward turn seen between 2010 and 2011. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the flag protests, Protestant respondents were least likely to be optimistic about future community relations.

Cross-community mixing

Analysis of earlier Young Life and Times results has shown that 16 year olds in Northern Ireland increasingly have contact across the religious divide (Devine and Robinson, 2012). The results from the 2012 survey show a similar pattern. Six out of ten YLT respondents who said they were from the Protestant or Catholic community say that they very often or sometimes socialise or play sport with people from a different religious community. Whilst one quarter (24%) had no close friends from the other main religious community, 21 per cent had more than ten. For many of the survey participants, cross-community contact is seen as being vital for the future of Northern Ireland, for example:

I think more could be done within schools and youth groups so people of different communities could mix, this would help to dissolve prejudice on both sides which seem to be the root of the problem.

As in previous years, more than half of the 2012 YLT respondents (61%) had taken part in a cross-community project, and very few (3%) had had negative experiences of them. There was a general acknowledgement of the value of cross-community projects – over three quarters of respondents thought that if there were more of these activities then relations between different religions would be better (see Table 1). At the same time, there was a strong sense that cross-community events can sometimes feel awkward because participants are

automatically expected to get on with people they don't know – over three quarters of respondents agreed with this.

Despite the perceived importance of cross-community projects, the access to such schemes can be limited. Just over one half of respondents agreed that most people would like to have more friends of a different religion, but never have the opportunity, and 45 per cent said that there were no facilities in their area where they can meet with people of a different religion.

Many respondents gave further comments on cross-community projects, with some being positive, whilst others were more cautious:

When I did community relations work, I had so much fun and learnt a lot along the way, about the Catholic side - I made new friends and it would be great if there were more for youth of Northern Ireland.

I think too much emphasis is being put on cross-community relations with younger children. They may not realise the significance of different religions until after they've been told they should get on well with them. This can cause a split to begin.

Others suggested ways in which such activities could be improved, for example:

More work needs to be done to mix different people. This I feel should be through sport such as rugby and football.

Cross community projects would be better if organised by schools rather than out of the school.

Cross community youth projects are few and far between and must be actively sought out by young people. It seems to be few young people are involved, or giving the chance to be. People who have already taking part in cross community group can be prioritised for another one when they aren't in need of it as much.

Shared spaces

At the time of writing, the First Minister and deputy First Minister had just announced their intention to publish in May 2013 the new Good Relations Strategy, "Together: Building a United Community". They outlined a package of strategic actions which will help build a prosperous, peaceful and safe society. This means that services and facilities in Northern Ireland should be shared spaces, that is, they are 'shared and open' to both Protestants and Catholics. In order to see if this was the experience of young people, YLT respondents were asked if four types of facilities within their

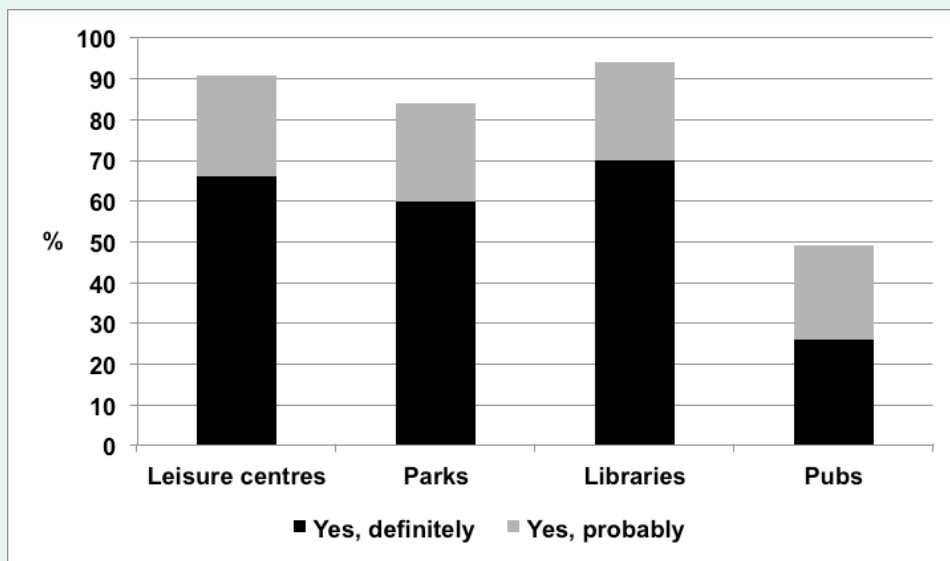
Table 1: Attitudes to cross-community projects

	% agree/strongly agree
If more cross-community projects were formed relations between different religions would be better	77
Sometimes cross-community events can feel awkward not because of sectarian prejudices, but because you are automatically expected to get on with people you don't know	78
Most people would like to have more friends of a different religion, but never have the opportunity	55
I would like to have more friends of a different religion, but I don't have the opportunity	35
There are no facilities in my area where I can meet with people of a different religion	45
I would like to take part in a cross-community project, but there are none in my local area	29

own area were 'shared and open' to both communities.

There was a strong sense that leisure centres, parks and libraries were mixed: at least six out of ten respondents definitely thought they were shared and open, with at least a further 20 per cent saying that they probably were (see Figure 2). However, this was not so strong in relation to pubs: around one half (49%) thought that they were shared and open, and a similar proportion (42%) said that they were not. A further 11 per cent were not sure, which may reflect that all respondents were aged 16 years old, and so may not go into pubs in their local area.

Figure 2: 'Shared and open' facilities



Of course, whilst many people may have no objection themselves to cross-community mixing, their personal safety, and perceived personal risk is an issue, as one respondent highlighted:

I think that all the events organised for young people to cooperate in a project etc. are very beneficial; however people shouldn't assume that we will get along as everyone has a different boundary of safety. So the community should attempt not to segregate but sometimes it is the only way to remain safe.

Thus, YLT respondents were asked to consider that there was an event that

Table 2: Perceived safety of different premises

	% saying very/quite safe			
	All	Protestant	Catholic	No religion
A GAA club	57	24	90	52
An Orange hall	41	74	13	42
A Catholic secondary school	69	47	95	62
A Protestant secondary school	69	88	52	67

they wanted to go to in a nearby town, and how safe they would feel if it was to be held in different premises. As Table 2 shows, overall, schools were perceived as being safer than a GAA club, with Orange Halls being seen as the least safe.

As might be expected, 90 per cent of Catholic respondents felt safe going to

higher in relation to a GAA club than an Orange Hall.

Conclusions

This Research Update explored community relations in Northern Ireland at a time of much tension due to ongoing flag protests, and as might be expected, this is reflected in the 2012 YLT survey results. The optimism of cross-community relations has decreased, and Protestant respondents are least likely to be optimistic about them improving. Reflecting society in general, the comments from the respondents showed a diversity of views in relation to the flags issue.

Nevertheless, cross-community projects were seen to be very important to the 1,210 16 year olds that took part in the survey. Many of the comments highlighted the benefits, or deficiencies of such schemes, reflecting the high level of interest among respondents. It is these experiences that are important to highlight to policy makers and to the facilitators of such schemes.

One pertinent issue is that of Shared Education, where some schools might be closed and some join together, or teachers, classes and facilities may be shared between schools. This was also explored in YLT, and issues of overcrowding and general disruption were raised by many respondents, although bullying and lack of mixing between pupils were the main concerns (Lloyd, 2013). Thus, cross-community mixing continues to be of major relevance both in terms of daily life and government policy.

Key points

- 53% of YLT respondents felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than five years ago.
- 45% thought that cross-community relations would be better in five years time, and Protestant respondents were least optimistic.
- 60% of YLT respondents from the Protestant or Catholic community socialise or play sport with people from a different religious community.
- Among all YLT respondents, 60% had taken part in a cross-community project.
- 77% thought that more cross-community projects would mean that relations between different religions would be better.
- However, 78% felt that cross-community events can sometimes feel awkward because participants are expected to get on with people they don't know.
- Leisure centres, parks and libraries in local areas were perceived as being shared and open to both Catholics and Protestants. However, only 49% thought this of local pubs.
- 69% of YLT respondents felt that attending an event in a secondary school was safe, compared to 57% thinking this of a GAA club and 41% of an Orange Hall.

The questions on community relations were funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

References

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Lloyd, Katrina, 2013, *Shared Education: Views of Children and Young People*, ARK Research Update 82

Nolan, Paul, 2013, *The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report. Number two*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

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The **Young Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion of 16 year olds on a wide range of issues. It is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/yIt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

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