Research Update

A 'Shared Society?' Attitudes on immigration and diversity

Philip McDermott

In the past decade, debates on multiculturalism and racial equality have become a more prominent feature of political and social discussion in Northern Ireland. The region has been home to a number of small but well-established ethnic minority communities for a number of decades, most notably the Indian and Chinese communities which have been in the region since the 1930s and 1960s respectively. However, the 2004 expansion of the European Union (EU) facilitated the further arrival of thousands of individuals from new member states, notably Poland and Lithuania. Moreover, lessening levels of violence and a relative economic stability, especially in the period 1998-2008, made Northern Ireland a more attractive location for migrant workers, and consequently a more culturally diverse society. This is indicated by the results of the 2011 census which showed that 4.5% of Northern Ireland's population were born outside Great Britain and Ireland, compared with 1.5% a decade earlier (NISRA, 2011). Such changes have occurred in a post-conflict period when government has focused on the need to create both a 'Shared Future' and improve access of opportunity and equality for all. Consequently, discussions on respecting and understanding all forms of cultural diversity have become a feature of wider efforts to eradicate the potential for a return to violent conflict. It is pertinent, therefore, that the 2012 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey acknowledged this through the continued inclusion of a series of questions on immigration and multiculturalism. This research report looks at four specific issues: the data on the EU's role in driving current migration trends to Northern Ireland, the perceived impact that migrants have made to the region, the levels of contact that respondents have had with migrants, and finally perceptions of current levels of discrimination and prejudice.
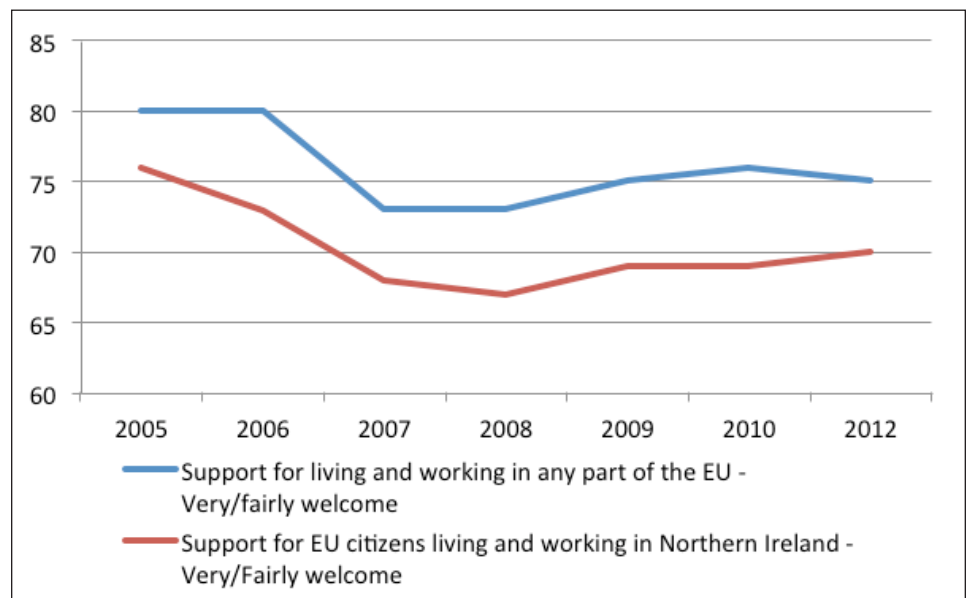
Migration and the EU

In recent years, social and political debates in the UK and Ireland have focused on the impact of EU membership on immigration levels. The arrival of migrants to these regions after the 2004 expansion has certainly divided opinion. While some are concerned about the pressures now placed on public services and the economy as a whole, others have argued that new migrants are a vital element of economic development and enrich society culturally. Given that these debates also have current relevance for residents of Northern Ireland, NILT asked respondents to comment on their own perceptions of EU membership and recent immigration.

When asked about the individual right to freely travel and work within the EU, 75% viewed this as either 'very welcome' or 'fairly welcome'. However, a slightly lower 70% welcomed the specific rights of EU migrants to reside in Northern Ireland, indicating that the belief of a right in principle does not necessarily translate as easily into reality. Since 2005 NILT has revealed that the levels of support for freedom to move and work in the EU have remained fairly steady, with a small decrease in 2007 and 2008 – perceptions which perhaps arose as a consequence of the beginning of the global economic crisis, a period synonymous with an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment in some quarters of political and media discourse.

It also appears that the population's generally positive attitude towards free movement in the EU does not translate into support for an increase in immigration levels. When asked, only 10% stated that

Figure 1: Support for living and working in any part of the EU and for other EU citizens living and working in Northern Ireland

Support for living and working in any part of the EU - Very/fairly welcome

Support for EU citizens living and working in Northern Ireland - Very/Fairly welcome

immigration should increase, while a further 43% preferred levels to remain as they were. Indeed, a further 47% supported a reduction in the number of migrants coming to the region. It is noteworthy, however, that levels of support for immigration appear to be higher in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain where three-quarters of respondents to the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) supported a reduction in in-migration (Ford et al, 2012: 29). Such oppositional attitudes have perhaps manifested in Great Britain since the 1950s, whereas immigration on a large scale to Northern Ireland has largely occurred only in the past decade. It remains to be seen as to whether or not future results will show growing parallels with sentiments in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Impact of Immigration

Further questions were asked on the wider effects of immigration. These focused on the impact on Northern Ireland overall, on the economy, and on the cultural life of the region. Responses showed that only 24% viewed immigration as bad overall, with a further 31% stating that it was neither good nor bad. However, the largest number of respondents (45%) saw immigration as 'good' or 'very good' overall. In relation to the economy, 43% noted that immigration was either 'good' or 'very good', although of the three questions this appeared to have slightly lower levels of support. Again, this is perhaps unsurprising given that large-scale immigration has often been touted as a factor in the economic downturn in some quarters of social and political debate.

The most positive contribution was viewed to have taken place in the cultural sphere where half the respondents viewed Northern Ireland's new diversity as having a good or very good impact. This may be testament to the work of migrant organisations, arts bodies, local councils and the voluntary sector; all of which have actively promoted an awareness of cultural pluralism in public places under the wider peace process objective of a 'Shared Future' mentioned earlier. Events like the Belfast *Mela* and Polish Cultural Week are now visible working elements of the new communities and their contributions to cultural life. It may also be the case that the

Table 1: Views of immigration inflows

% saying that the number of immigrants should be	%	
	NI	GB
Increased a lot or a little	10	3
Remain the same as it is	43	18
Reduced a little	21	24
Reduced a lot	26	51

In order to allow comparison with BSA figures, the 'don't know' responses have been omitted

visibility of new identities provides welcome alternative views to the 'orange' and 'green' divisions which have traditionally delineated cultural life here.
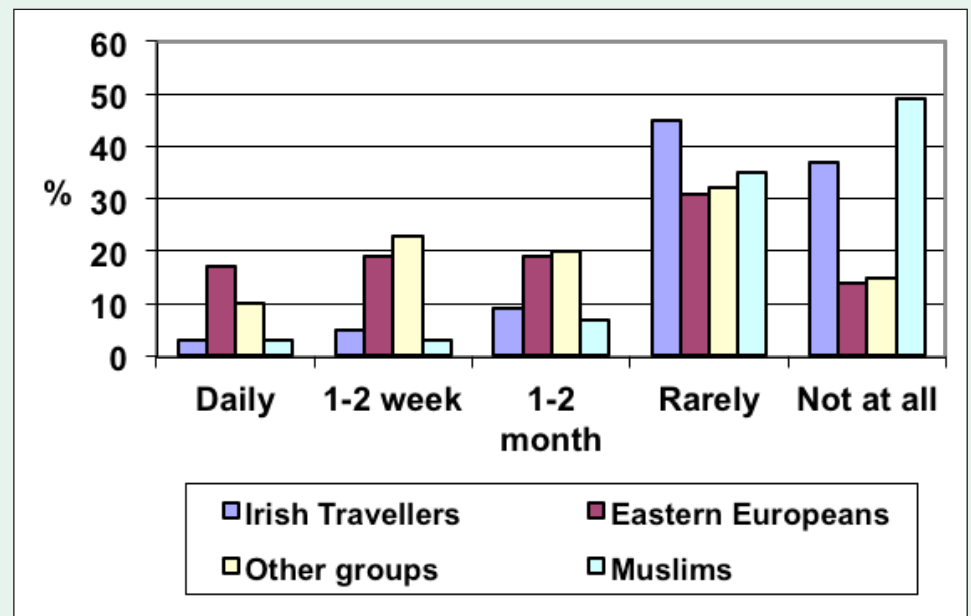
Contact with Minority Ethnic Communities

The survey also investigated levels of personal contact with four groups: Eastern Europeans, Irish Travellers, other minority ethnic groups and Muslims. The data show Eastern Europeans as the category encountered most often. Of those

surveyed, 17% had contact with this group on a daily basis, whilst a further 19% said that they had some form of interaction with an Eastern European once or twice a week. This is predictable given that this category accounts for a major proportion of those who have come to Northern Ireland in the past decade. Furthermore, their visibility has clearly increased in many urban and rural locations throughout Northern Ireland. Language has been a key identifier and Polish and Lithuanian, in particular, are commonly heard in public places. There are many Eastern European foodstores which are often painted in national colours and schools have seen an increase in children

Table 2: Impact of immigration for Northern Ireland

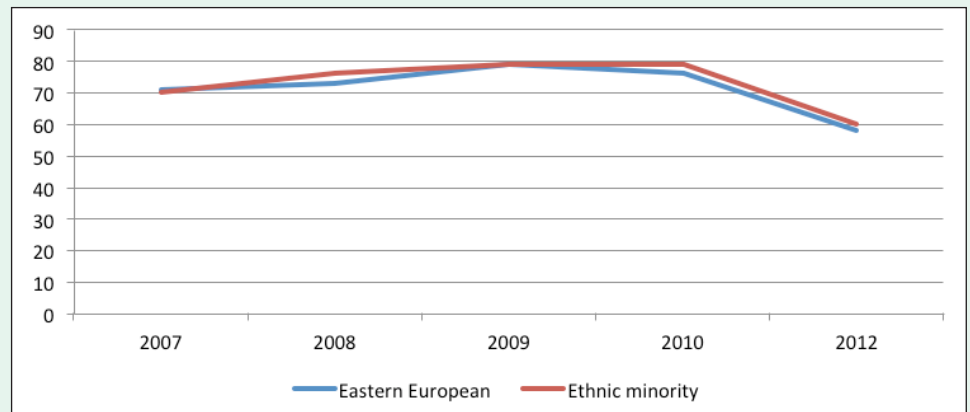|	%		
	For NI	For NI economy	For NI cultural life
Very bad	5	10	4
Bad	19	22	17
Neither good nor bad	31	26	30
Good	38	36	39
Very good	7	7	11

Figure 2: Frequency of contact

from this section of the population (DENI, 2012). This relatively prominent position is further verified by the fact that only 14% of respondents to NILT said that they *never* had contact with Eastern Europeans.

By contrast, 49% said they have no contact with Muslims, whilst 37% had never made contact with a member of the Irish Traveller population. These results potentially point to a number of issues. First, the 2011 census identified these groups as constituting a much smaller section of the population than Eastern Europeans, perhaps decreasing the likelihood of a meeting (NISRA, 2011). However, the results of NILT may be indicative of prejudices and marginalisation faced by Muslims and nomadic communities in a wider global context. Finally, it may not always be simple to ascertain whether or not someone has met a Muslim or a Traveller unless that information is disclosed during the interaction. For example, someone's identity as a Muslim may be viewed as a private matter, whilst a Traveller may have no clear distinctions from the wider population. Consequently, respondents may have had interactions with Travellers or Muslims but were not aware of this at the time.

The data also provide insight into the type of contact encountered by respondents. Only 26% said that they had a close interaction (such as a lengthy conversation) with those from a minority ethnic community. By contrast, 46% noted that their contact had merely taken the form of a short greeting. This indicates that while there is communication at some level between members of the host population and ethnic minorities, there is still much work to be done in promoting wider inter-cultural relationships. Helping to improve such connections may be a particularly important issue to consider in the future work of public bodies (like museums and libraries), schools and universities, community relations organisations and sports-based initiatives. Working environments are also a vital part of the future promotion of Good Relations as it appears to be here where much of the current interaction occurs.

Further results from the survey reveal that levels of acceptance of the four groups are not static and are dependent on the nature and level of the contact involved. For example, 88% of respondents stated that they would accept Eastern Europeans

Figure 3: Would willingly accept as a relative by marriage

temporarily 'as a tourist to Northern Ireland' but only around 60% stated that they would accept an Eastern European permanently into their close family through marriage. Therefore, while migrants are acknowledged to some extent as part of the reality of wider public life, the potential acceptance of such newcomers into more personal spaces, like the family domain, is viewed with less enthusiasm, especially amongst older respondents. It is plausible that historically low levels of mixed-religion marriage between the two largest communities in Northern Ireland (see Lloyd and Robinson, 2008) have contributed to this position because the idea of a 'mono-cultural' family is still an accepted norm in some quarters. However, further investigation reveals that the support for mixed-race marriages has decreased even when compared to results from the 2008 survey. In 2008, 73% of respondents had stated that they would not mind if a relative of theirs married an Eastern European. This trend also appears to apply to other ethnic minority groups. In 2008, 76% said that they would accept a member of an ethnic minority group through marriage but this had dropped to around 60% by 2012. The rationale for this change in the space of five years is certainly an issue worthy of further investigation as it does in some way indicate a diminishing of race relations.

Changing levels of prejudice

The NILT data also provide information on how prejudiced the respondents think Northern Ireland is for members of minority ethnic communities. Despite the existence of some positive attitudes towards immigration, there was still a common belief that members of minority

ethnic communities in Northern Ireland are subject to prejudice. Overall, 79% stated that prejudice exists against people from minority ethnic communities here. Of these, 48% said that that they believed that there was 'a little prejudice', whilst a further 31% believed that there was a 'lot of prejudice'. This perception has no doubt been compounded by some well-documented incidences of racist hate crime in the media. A particular example of this involved the forced eviction of members of the Roma community from the Lisburn Road area in South Belfast which made headlines nationally and internationally in 2009. Just under one in five respondents said that there was hardly any prejudice.

What is disturbing is that when asked to compare current levels of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland to five years ago most people (41%) thought the problem had got worse, while only 17% stated that racism was less common now. Even more pessimistic was the belief that levels of racism would not reduce in the next five years, with 38% stating that the problem would stay the same. A further 31% thought that the problem would only continue to get worse.

Table 3: Racial prejudice now compared with 5 years ago and in 5 years time.

	%
More now than 5 years ago	41
Less now	17
About the same	35
Don't know	6
More in 5 years time	31
Less	22
About the same	38
Don't know	9

Conclusion

The data from the 2012 NILT indicate that race, ethnicity and cultural diversity continue to be complex questions for a Northern Ireland which is still in transition from conflict to a stable peace. Overall, respondents seemed largely supportive in principle of increasing levels of diversity and the impact of these social changes. However, these feelings appeared to dissipate when participants were faced with the scenario of having closer personal contact with migrants. These have been enduring concerns which have been raised in other NILT surveys in the past number of years and require further qualitative study to understand the nuances of the trends identified in the survey. These results identify key questions for those policy-makers and practitioners working in the area of Good Relations. Clearly race relations issues should be regarded as a core element in "Together: Building a United Community", the government's overarching social strategy for post-conflict Northern Ireland (OFMDFM, 2013). Indeed, the inclusion of a Racial Equality Strategy as part of the proposals is a welcome development. The focus of future strategies must now firmly be on the practical application of equality needs and intercultural dialogue at grass roots community level. Only then might some of the concerns identified in the 2012 NILT be counteracted and tackled effectively.

References

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Key points

- Although respondents generally supported the *idea* of free movement within the European Union, there still appears to be apprehension when this idea is applied specifically to Northern Ireland.

- The impact of immigration was viewed favourably with almost half of respondents stating that new immigrants were either good or very good for Northern Ireland. Cultural life was viewed as the aspect of society which has benefitted most.

- Eastern Europeans were the immigrant group which came into contact with the host population most often. Muslims and Irish Travellers came into less contact with the host population.

- Racial prejudice was viewed as a problem which had got worse since 2007. The majority of respondents felt that race relations would not improve in the next five years. This emphasizes the importance of race relations in the context of future Good Relations strategies.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2012, 1204 adults were interviewed in their own homes. Fieldwork was carried out by Perceptive Insight.

The 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.ark.ac.uk/nilt**) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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