



Research Update

Changes in national and religious identity of 16 year olds over time

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Introduction

Group identity has long been a subject of particular importance in Northern Ireland. The continuing relevance of questions of identity is reflected in the ongoing presence of this topic in debates within academic discourse, as well as within wider political discussions, in the media, and in society generally. Northern Ireland's tumultuous history is one marked by tension and conflict, with the pivotal 1998 Belfast Agreement signalling a significant reduction in the violence associated with the most recent extended period of conflict known as 'the Troubles'. Since then, much effort has been poured into initiatives that aim to shape Northern Ireland into a place for people to live together peacefully regardless of national or religious background.

This Research Update specifically considers the topic of identity amongst young people in Northern Ireland, and whether the way that young people perceive their identity status is changing over time. The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey has been attempting to capture young people's sense of national and religious identity since its inception in 2003. Every year, 16-year olds are asked how they self-categorise in terms of both religious and national identity, and what level of importance they attach to these categories.

Complex and enduring: the relevance of questions of identity in the Northern Irish context

Identity remains a topic of interest in light of the violence and tension which has in the past been a defining feature of day-to-day life in Northern Ireland, and which continues to influence it today. The conflict has been understood as 'arising from two competing positions between two ethno-national groups with religion acting as a socially determined boundary.' (Muldoon et al, 2007, p.90). This description places identity categories at the centre of the Troubles, in particular a person's national identity, as well as the religious community to which they belong.

Violence from either side has been comparatively low in recent years. Yet, the ingrained sense of difference and separateness which has defined life in Northern Ireland in the past is such that it still continues to shape and demarcate boundaries within its localities to this day. This is a matter of great interest to community workers, policy makers and a variety of people in public and social roles who are attempting to understand how to engender and maintain positive community relations. Many residential areas across Northern Ireland remain segregated (Hayward, Dowds and Shaw 2014), and bear signs and symbols which act as an expression of loyalty to particular community, such as flags and murals. Additionally, schools remain largely segregated environments.

National and religious identity over time

Figures 1 and 2 display the percentage of responses given by each yearly

Figure 1: National identity of YLT respondents over time (%)

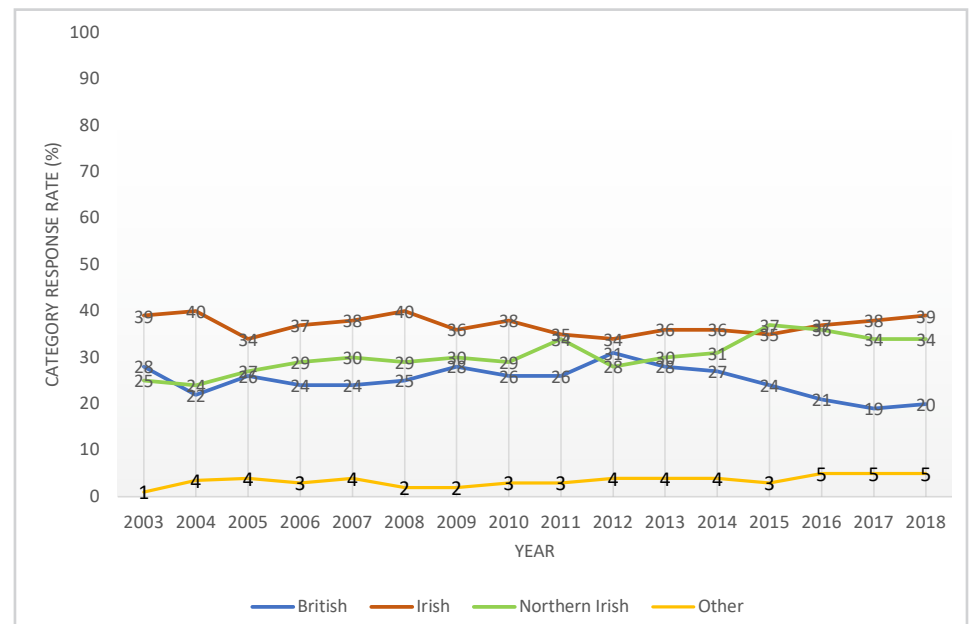
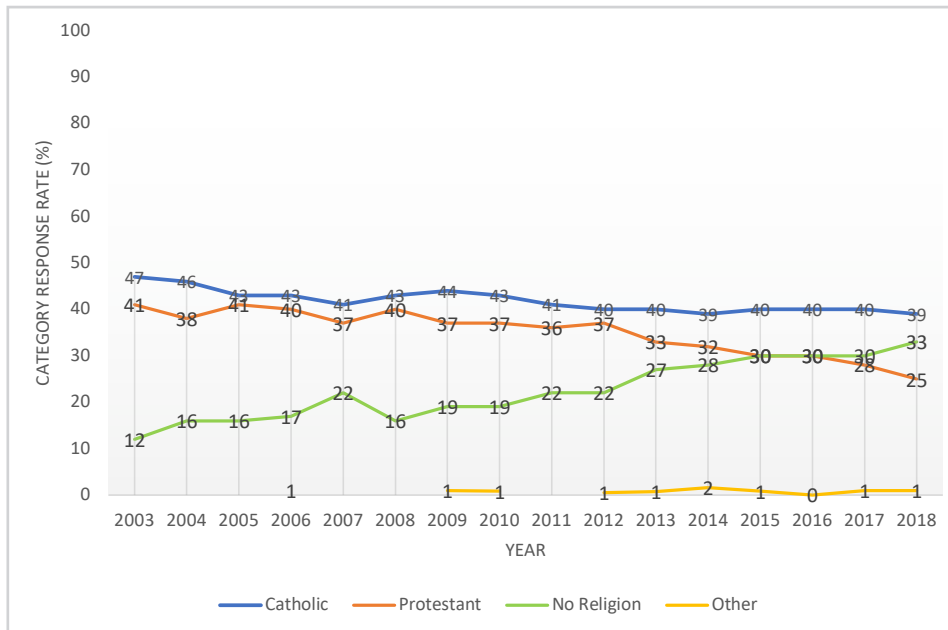


Figure 2: Religious identity of YLT respondents over time (%)



survey sample for categories referring to national identity and religious identity, respectively.

Figure 1 reveals that the percentage of respondents who declare their national identity as being Irish has remained fairly consistently in the high thirties for the past fifteen years, with the percentage reaching 39% in both the 2003 and 2018 surveys. There has been more noticeable change in the percentage of respondents reporting their national identity as being British or Northern Irish. Comparing the 2003 results with those collected in 2018, the Northern Irish category saw an increase from 25% of the sample giving this response to 34%. Conversely, in the same time period, the percentage of participants identifying as British declined from 28% to 20%, although for both categories there was also much more fluctuation than for those identifying as Irish over the 15-year period.

Figure 2 shows that, though taken together the proportions of people identifying as Protestant or Catholic make up the majority of the sample (2003: 88%, 2018: 64%), both groups have been decreasing in size over time. The number of respondents

identifying religiously as Protestant has, in particular, been shrinking over the years, with a 16 percentage points decrease by 2018 compared with response rates in 2003. Figure 2 also illustrates the change in the proportion of people who report having no religious identity or allegiance. This category has seen considerable growth of 21 percentage

points over the course of 15 years, with more people identifying as having no religion than identifying as being Protestant over the most recent two years of the YLT survey.

On the surface of it, the data seems to suggest that people who would have once claimed the British identity are beginning to embrace the Northern Irish identity category in its place. However, Table 1 gives a clearer picture. This table displays three snapshots of data, taken from the 2003, 2010 and 2018 YLT surveys, which reveal how respondents associating with different religious categories have self-identified in terms of their national identity.

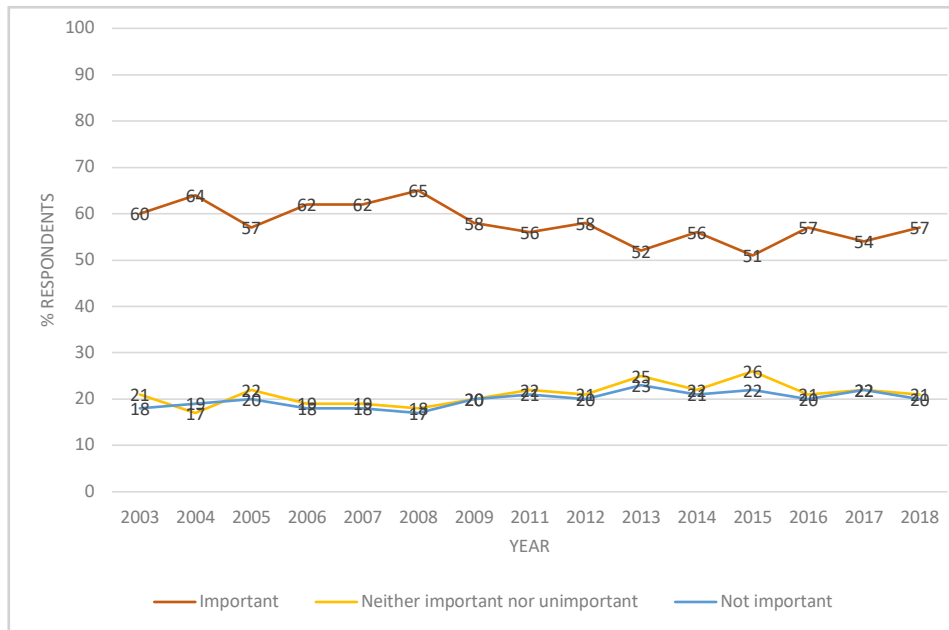
Table 1 reveals that over the years the percentage of Catholic respondents identifying with the Irish national identity has marginally increased, whereas the number of Catholic respondents associating with the Northern Irish identity category has decreased. On the other hand, the percentage of Protestant respondents identifying as Northern Irish has grown

Table 1: Religious identity by National identity at three points in time.¹

	National identity					
	British	Irish	Northern Irish	Ulster	Other	Total
Religious identity 2003						
Catholic	4.0%	77.1%	16.4%	0.5%	0.7%	98.7%
Protestant	51.4%	3.2%	33.0%	9.5%	1.4%	98.5%
No religion	36.5%	16.5%	31.7%	2.9%	1.9%	89.3%
Religious identity 2010						
Catholic	3.0%	78.2%	15.4%	0.3%	2.1%	99.0%
Protestant	52.4%	1.4%	42.4%	2.4%	1.4%	100.0%
No religion	27.9%	22.4%	36.1%	2.7%	8.8%	97.9%
Religious identity 2018						
Catholic	2.9%	79.7%	11.2%	0.0%	5.0%	98.8%
Protestant	48.1%	1.9%	45.0%	4.4%	0.6%	100.0%
No religion	17.9%	23.1%	49.1%	0.0%	6.4%	96.5%

¹ The missing data category (which includes responses of 'don't know') has been excluded from the table, which explains why the totals often do not add up to 100

Figure 3. Importance placed on national identity over time (%)²



² The 'Important' and 'Very important' categories are merged for this figure as are 'Not important' 'Not very important' categories

over time by 12 percentage points in 15 years. **Table 1** also shows that the number of Protestant respondents claiming a British identity has only decreased by a few percentage points between 2003 and 2018. There is another significant category at play here, and that is those respondents who declare having no religious identity. This category, which in and of itself has been subject to significant growth, has seen a decreasing proportion of its respondents identifying with the British national identity (by around a half) and a growth in percentage of respondents identifying with the Northern Irish identity. This is noteworthy because it represents a simultaneous growth in two categories which are comparatively less polarised, and seems to re-emphasise the link between the Protestant and Catholic religious categories and their typical national identity counterparts. The following examination of importance placed on identity categories over time may further illuminate this trend.

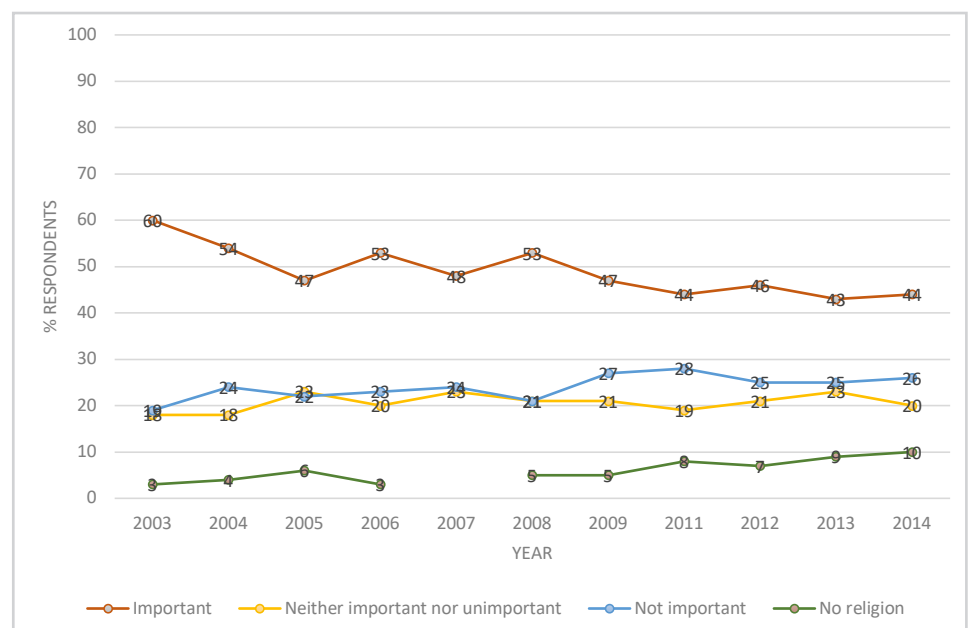
Importance placed on national and religious identity over time

Figures 3 and 4 focus on the level of importance that respondents attribute

Over the time period covered, the proportion of respondents who said that religious identity was 'important' or 'very important' to them gradually decreased from 60% in 2003 to 44% in 2014. The proportion of people broadly reporting that they find their national identity to be unimportant has consistently hovered at around 20%.

On the other hand, the percentage of respondents reporting that they feel their religious identity is important has been steadily declining. As figure 4 illustrates, the proportion of people indicating that they attach importance to their religious identity has declined by 16 percentage points between 2003 and 2014, dropping from about 60% to 44%. People reporting that their religious identity is not important continue to make up the smaller proportion of responses, but from 2009 onwards the proportion of the overall sample indicating this response was consistently around 25% or above. Another notable feature is the increasing representation of people who chose to answer this question with 'no religion'. This corroborates with the information picked up by the 'religious

Figure 4: Importance placed on religious identity over time (%)³



³ The 'Important' and 'Very important' categories are merged for this figure as are 'Not important' 'Not very important' categories

Table 2: Religious identity by importance of religious identity

	Religious identity importance		
	Important	Neither	No important
Religious ID 2014			
Catholic	59.6%	24.5%	17.4%
Protestant	57.7%	20.4%	20.7%

identity' category variable, which similarly shows a steady increase of people reporting no religious identity.

The increasing rates of people describing themselves as not having a religious identity is perhaps not so surprising when we consider the broader context: much of the traditionally Christian west is witnessing a decline in numbers of people practicing the Christian faith. The true extent of this trend in the Northern Irish context is more complicated to measure. Real rates of declining levels of faith may be obscured in this data due to the very fact that religious categories in Northern Ireland also refer to political ones. At the last count in 2014, both Protestant and Catholic groups had similar proportions of respondents indicating that their religious identity was important to them, as can be seen in **Table 2**.

To try and unpick more about the levels of importance placed on nationality, **Table 3** offers a breakdown of responses by national identity. Responses from four surveys are reported to give an idea of difference over time. Irish respondents have consistently been most likely to rate the importance they place on their national identity as very important. The percentage of both Irish and British respondents placing high importance on their national identity does appear to be slowly declining, but the percentages of people selecting 'quite important' stay at roughly the same level. The Northern Irish group seems to confer a comparatively low level of importance to their national identity, and are more likely to choose either level of lower importance than

the Catholic or Protestant groups.

It may be helpful to interpret the higher rates of importance placed on national identity by Irish respondents with further consideration of the Northern Irish context. Northern Ireland is a shared but contested space, although officially a constituent part of the United Kingdom, and the Irish identity implicitly suggests an affinity with Ireland. This marries up with Life and Times research which has indicated that Catholic communities are likely to report lower rates of a sense of belonging in Northern Ireland, although a stronger sense of connection with their community (Hayward, Dowds and Shaw, 2014). This perhaps also sheds light on the slightly lower rate of Catholic respondents

reporting that their religious identity is unimportant to them compared with Protestants which was reflected in the 2014 sample (see **Table 2**.)

Concluding remarks

Continuing to monitor trends in identity is important for a variety of reasons. It can offer us insight into the often ambiguous nature of the relationship between religious identity and national identity. It allows us to monitor the strength of group identity feeling, which might in turn reveal something about levels of tension between communities. Furthermore, it also allows us to monitor demographic changes in Northern Ireland, which has over the years become home to a more diverse population.

In terms of national identity, Northern Irish is a growing category, and individuals claiming this identity status are less likely to feel very strongly about the importance of it. In terms of religious identity, the 'no religion' group appears to have seen substantial growth, whilst numbers of Catholic

Table 3: National identity by importance placed on national identity, taken from four points in time.

	National identity importance				
	Very important	Quite important	Neither	Not very important	Not at all important
National ID 2003					
British	27.3%	33.3%	24.1%	8.4%	6.4%
Irish	43.1%	31.8%	15.5%	6.2%	3.4%
Northern Irish	10.2%	28.9%	25.3%	17.3%	17.8%
National ID 2008					
British	26.9%	35.2%	18.1%	8.8%	8.8%
Irish	42.0%	34.6%	13.4%	5.7%	4.4%
Northern Irish	17.0%	31.7%	25.1%	16.2%	9.2%
National ID 2013					
British	24.2%	29.5%	26.3%	11.3%	7.6%
Irish	31.7%	29.3%	23.4%	9.3%	5.7%
Northern Irish	8.8%	28.7%	27.5%	17.6%	16.7%
National ID 2018					
British	24.6%	31.7%	24.6%	8.7%	7.9%
Irish	38.4%	36%	16.5%	6.6%	1.7%
Northern Irish	6.8%	34%	31.1%	18.4%	7.8%

Key Points

- In terms of religious identity, the most noticeable change comes from the increase in those declaring 'no religion'. The number of young people identifying with the religious categories 'Protestant' or 'Catholic' has been in a slow and steady decline.
- In terms of national identity, the numbers of young people claiming the 'Irish' identity has fluctuated between 34% and 40% over the past 15 years. Over the same period, the 'British' category has seen an 8 percentage point decrease to 20%, whereas the 'Northern Irish' category has grown by 9 percentage points, reaching 34%.
- Those identifying as Northern Irish are the least likely to place high importance on their national identity. Those identifying as Irish are most likely to place high importance on their national identity.

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