

# Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey: Monitoring Change in Diverse Societies

**Paula Devine**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this paper is to discuss how the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey provides a vehicle to monitor change in a diverse society.

The socio-political history of Northern Ireland especially since the onset of The Troubles' in 1968 is well documented, and is equally well contested. What cannot be argued is the human cost: since 1968, over 3,500 people were killed and up to 100,000 injured<sup>1</sup>. The conflict has traditionally been seen as one between two groups (Protestant and Catholic), although the reality is that the conflict has not been driven primarily by religion. Instead, issues of identity, sovereignty, equality, power and geography are equally pertinent and longstanding. Despite the ongoing Peace Process, there remains a degree of distrust between Protestant and Catholic people, and so Northern Ireland is still a deeply divided society. Thus, the social and economic costs of the conflict have been high, with spatial and social segregation between Protestants and Catholics being a persistent pattern in relation to where people live, attend school, socialise and work.<sup>2</sup>

Of course it can be argued that diversity across a range of dimensions has been lacking in Northern Ireland, given that the main division is focused upon the Protestant and Catholic communities living here. However, new societal and demographic forces have come into play over the past decade, and are challenging this claim of lack of diversity. In particular, the expansion of the European Union and other external social, economic and political events, have meant that immigration to Northern Ireland has increased. The 2001 Census of Population indicated that 0.8 per cent of the Northern Ireland population had an ethnicity other than 'white', whilst a further 1.8 per cent were born outside the United Kingdom or Ireland<sup>3</sup>. By 2011, these figures were 1.8 per cent and 4.5 per cent respectively. While these figures are small in absolute terms, this change in the population has now been reflected in good relations research more generally, and broadens out the traditional Protestant/Catholic focus<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, within this context of social, political and demographic shifts, it is important to have a mechanism to monitor the direction and speed of such change.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEYS**

Monitoring such change (or the lack of it) in Northern Ireland is the focus of two major attitudinal surveys: the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey, and the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey.

The Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey (NISA) ran from 1989 to 1996, and was a sister survey to the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA). By running the same modules as BSA, NISA provided a time-series of social attitudes, whilst facilitating comparisons with Britain. Funding for NISA ceased in 1996, although the need for a public attitudes survey was not in doubt. However, when funding was obtained for NILT, the context of the new political arrangements in Northern Ireland meant that it was more appropriate for this new survey to cut its links with its British counterpart.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey was launched in the autumn of 1998. Its mission is to monitor annually the attitudes and behaviour of people in Northern Ireland to provide a time-series and a public record of how our attitudes and behaviour develop on a wide range of social policy issues. Like NISA, NILT carries on the tradition of a time-series of attitudes, but in contrast, has shifted the focus away from comparisons with Britain. The main characteristics of the survey are that it is largely Northern Ireland focused, it is social policy focused, and it is designed to be used by the wider public in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, each year of the survey includes a substantial component which either continues an old NISA time-series, or replicates a BSA module.

The surveys share a similar methodology, and are cross-sectional surveys based on two-stage random samples of adults aged 18 years or over living in private households. The surveys also share a modular format, with each module comprising 40 to 50 question items on a particular topic. This allows a specific issue to be explored in depth, rather than asking a small number of questions on many issues (as in an omnibus survey). Each year's survey contains four or five modules, as well as an extensive background section on demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondent and their household. Given the survey focus on time series, at least two modules are repeated every year (such as *Political Attitudes, Community Relations, and Attitudes to Minority*

*Ethnic Groups*). However, a sizeable proportion of the individual questions within those modules may change to reflect specific debates, events or policy contexts. The rest of the survey varies annually, with all the modules designed to be repeated in years to come.

Funding comes from a range of sources, meaning that the survey can maintain its independence. Within NILT, each module within each year is funded separately, and funders have included the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), private philanthropic organisations, charitable bodies and government departments.

The datasets relating to NISA and NILT datasets are publicly available in national data archives. Furthermore, free and public access is a central ethos of NILT, and so tables of results, questionnaires, datasets and technical information are made available on the NILT website<sup>5</sup> within six months from the end of fieldwork, thus providing timely and free public access<sup>6</sup>.

## **NILT QUESTIONS**

As already indicated, NILT contains a module on community relations every year which explores respondents' perceptions and attitudes, covering the following general themes:

- Identity<sup>7</sup>
- Equality
- Actual contact and mixing<sup>8</sup>
- Tolerance of, or desire for, contact and mixing<sup>9</sup>
- Perceptions of relations<sup>10</sup>
- Constitutional preferences<sup>11</sup>
- Shared Spaces<sup>12</sup>
- Other government targets<sup>13</sup>

Some core questions are asked year on year, and are often carried over from the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, for example:

*What about relations between Protestants and Catholics? Would you say they are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same now as then?*

*And what about 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?*

In order to maintain the time series, the wording of these questions has to remain consistent over the years. Nevertheless, the scope and wording of other questions evolve over time, in order to reflect the changing social and political landscape. Thus, questions on marches and parades were integral to the survey from 1998 to 2000, and this reflects the importance of these issues at the time given the prominence of the Drumcree dispute. However, the exclusion of these questions after 2000 does not necessarily mean that parades and marches are no longer topical, but instead, other issues have been equally, or more, significant from year to year<sup>14</sup>.

The way that questions are asked has altered in order to acknowledge how public reactions can change to issues. From 2000, NILT respondents were asked if they felt intimidated by murals, kerb paintings or flags, in relation to loyalist symbols and then in relation to republican symbols. After several years, however, the interviewers running the pilot test of the questionnaire reported that several respondents said that they did not necessarily feel intimidated, but wanted some mechanism to express their annoyance at these displays. To reflect this, two additional questions have been used since 2004, which ask if respondents had ever felt annoyed by these murals, kerb paintings or flags<sup>15</sup>.

## **DON'T KNOW OR DON'T CARE?**

One important point to make about exploring public attitudes is that sometimes questions are asked about topics that the respondent has never thought about, or has not formed an opinion on. Thus, giving a 'don't know' response is perfectly valid. Indeed, exploring the pattern of such responses, either within a specific year, or across years, is particularly useful. What NILT does not do, however, is give respondents an explicit option to say 'I don't care'. This might come up because respondents are not interested in the specific topic, and perhaps would much prefer to be answering questions about an issue that they feel is more important, for example, health care or the economy. Alternatively, the 'I don't care' option may reflect respondents being equivocal about the topic, or wanting to state that they do not have a preference. For example, NILT has consistently included questions asking respondents about their preference for mixed-religion or own-religion workplaces, neighbourhoods and schools. Response options are 'mixed religion', 'own religion only' 'I don't know' and 'other response'. Analysis of responses to the question on neighbourhoods in 2010 shows that five per cent of all respondents gave an 'other' response that indicated that they had no preference, or did not mind.

## **SURVEYS: METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS**

Of course, surveys in general have many advantages, but have also attracted much criticism. As with all research methods, therefore, it is important to recognise their limitations.

Surveys are an efficient way of collecting the same types of information from a large number of people. This allows us to run the survey annually, and 1200 adults complete the NILT questionnaire each year. NILT uses a random sampling method, and so the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of this sample are representative of the total population. The data is statistically robust, and so we can generalise the results from the sample to the total population.

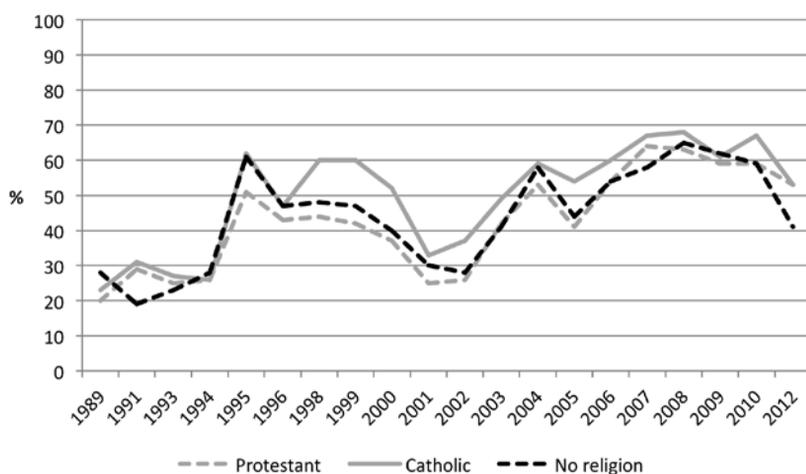
However, surveys are not ideal research instruments. While they provide an excellent way to find out what people think or what they do, the very structured framework of questions does not allow us to fully explore why people think or act the way they do. Furthermore, whilst analysis of survey data will allow us to establish if there is a statistical relationship or association between responses to two questions, it does not allow us to establish if one causes the other.

So what do these methodological debates mean in relation to NISA and NILT? Overall, these surveys provide an efficient and trusted mechanism to record attitudes in the rapidly changing policy and political environment of Northern Ireland. As highlighted earlier, 1200 adults across Northern Ireland are given the chance to voice their opinions. Obviously the questions are very structured, and cannot delve into the level of meaning that qualitative approaches can. Nevertheless, this broad brush approach has provided us with a very important time series of public attitudes, some of which have been asked since the inception of NISA in 1989. Many of these attitudes, especially those relating to community relations, are highly reactive to events, and so it is only by looking at trends over time can we 'iron out' some of this volatility<sup>16</sup>. As such, we often describe NILT and other time-series surveys as measuring the 'climate', rather than the day-to-day 'weather patterns'.

One example of the usefulness of time series analysis relates to a question exploring respondents' perception of relations between Protestants and Catholics. This has been asked in every year of NISA and NILT. Figure 1 shows that while the underlying trend is increasingly positive over the time period, there are distinct peaks and troughs which reflect contemporary political events. These include the optimism around the time of the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires and the signing of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, as well

as the deteriorating community relations around the time of the dispute at Holy Cross School in 2001. Thus, it is apposite for policy makers to analyse overall trends, rather than short-lived ‘blips’, so that they do not automatically change policy on the basis of a knee-jerk reaction.

**Figure 1: % of adults who think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years ago**



The publication in 2013 of *The Long View of Community Relations in Northern Ireland: 1989-2012*<sup>17</sup> provides an excellent example of the benefits of taking such a broad brush and time series approach. In particular, that report concluded that there has been an improvement in inter-community relationships; that values in relation to sharing are remarkably constant; and that nationality and constitutional issues may now allow for complex rather than simple solutions. Nevertheless, community relations in Northern Ireland remain extremely fragile and vulnerable to events and political changes. Such analysis would not be possible by taking a snap shot of data from an individual year.

As well as providing a resource for use by the general public (for example, by providing online tables of results, documentation and publications), two other aims of NILT are to provide a data source for more theoretical academic debate, as well as to inform public and policy debate. Devine and Robinson, in their paper<sup>18</sup> on the role of survey data within public policy making in Northern Ireland, highlight in particular four examples of how NILT data have been used

in relation to community relations policy: policy indicators, target evaluation, question design, and public consultation. For example, the paper shows how NILT survey data is used to measure public perception of the success of particular policies. However, this means that respondents are asked their view about how far the government has progressed in reaching their targets, regardless of whether the respondent agrees with that target or not. What might be a useful addition is a question within NILT asking the public about their view of where community relations policy should be going.

One potential limitation of NILT is that data is only available at Northern Ireland level as the small number of respondents taking part at lower geographic levels (such as District Council area, or town) would compromise anonymity and statistical robustness. However, this does not mean that the data is irrelevant, since most government policy is made at a macro-level, and so the availability of the survey data at Northern Ireland level is appropriate to feed into policy development<sup>19</sup>. Alternatively, questions from NILT surveys are often used in more local surveys, thus allowing comparisons to be made at local and macro geographic levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper describes how large-scale attitudinal surveys are used to monitor diversity in Northern Ireland, particularly within the context of community relations. Of course, Northern Ireland has now become a more diverse society in various ways, and the survey has adapted to reflect this. Thus, NILT now includes modules on attitudes to a range of minority ethnic groups, migration, asylum seekers, and so on. However, the time series questions on community relations will continue to be important, to let us track how and if our society is adapting.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Breen-Smyth and Northern Visions, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Schmid et al., 2010

<sup>3</sup> Nolan, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Devine and Robinson, 2014

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>

<sup>6</sup> For further information see Devine, 2013

<sup>7</sup> see Curtice, Devine and Ormston, 2013

<sup>8</sup> see Devine, 2014

<sup>9</sup> see Morrow, Robinson and Dowds, 2013

<sup>10</sup> see Devine, Robinson and Kelly, 2011

<sup>11</sup> see Curtice, Devine and Ormston, 2013

<sup>12</sup> see Devine, 2014

<sup>13</sup> see Devine and Robinson, 2014

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> For a longer discussion of how questions are adapted over time, see Devine and Robinson, 2014

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Morrow, Robinson and Dowds, 2013

<sup>18</sup> Devine and Robinson, 2014

<sup>19</sup> Devine and Robinson, 2014

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