

## ***Impact Case Study***

### **UoA 4: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience**

#### **Impact on Northern Ireland Policymaking from the use of findings on Community Relations**

##### **Summary**

This case study refers to the body of survey research evidence on public attitudes to community relations, gathered over a period of two decades in Northern Ireland. The thesis on 'impact' is that this body of work influenced government policies, public debate and good practice in equality procedures during the period 2008-2013. The survey results have become ubiquitous within debates and reports within/from government, political parties, journalists, lobbyists and NGOs and as a consequence have had significant and wide-ranging effects on Northern Ireland society.

##### **Research**

The underpinning research is the body of surveys that have taken place in Northern Ireland over the period 2002 to 2012. This has revealed a times-series in public attitudes to community relations that has had an impact on government policy, public debate and good practice in equality procedures. The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT) is an annual public attitudes survey covering a wide variety of social issues year on year. NILT follows the same methodology as its predecessor the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey (fielded between 1989 and 1996). A random sample of individuals (approximately 1200) are selected and interviewed face to face from across Northern Ireland. A range of social topics are included on the survey including the key time-series questions on politics and community relations that have been asked each year since 1989. Results are made publicly available on the NILT website six months after the end of fieldwork as are the key time-series on political attitudes and community relations. Key to the impact of the NILT research is that results are made publicly available online in lay-friendly tables so that any user from any sector may use the data free of charge and without permission. Policymakers, schoolchildren, journalists and lobby groups form part of the 3690 page views monthly (2012). Even apart from the impact of the body of work on community relations the NILT 'brand' has become a recognised and trusted reference for practitioners and users from all sectors.

The context for this area of research is key to the significance of the impact. Very little is of more importance to Northern Ireland society than that there should be no return to the conflict that dogged the thirty year period from 1968 to 1998. This body of research has therefore been critical in the post devolution period. Between 2002 and 2010 the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) results have shown a rise in the perceptions that relations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland have improved and are improving. Findings also show a consistent and increasing desire for mixed religion neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. Other time-series indicate a shift in identity – particularly for young Protestants from a 'British' to a 'Northern Irish' identity. Many more people in Northern Ireland now see themselves as British and Irish and an increased Irish identification among Catholics, and particularly among the young, goes hand in hand with a steady or even falling voiced desire for Irish reunification. Results also reveal the extent to which people believe that the Northern Ireland government is meeting its targets in terms of the Good Relations strategy. The most recent 2012 survey shows the dip in public confidence following the 2012 flag disputes.

The key outputs are the NILT Databases themselves published online between June 2008 and June 2013. Authors for all are Gillian Robinson (University of Ulster) and Paula Devine (Queen's University Belfast).

[http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Community\\_Relations/index.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/Community_Relations/index.html)  
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The quality of this research is evidenced by the ESRC grant (2006-2011) ARK Access Research Knowledge (formerly ARK : A Social and Political Archive for Northern Ireland) (of £2.7m) Individual modules of fieldwork were funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) with grants of 210K in 2007/8, 90K in 2010 and 319K in 2012.

## **Impact**

NILT databases have had impact because their regular production has influenced the continuation of policy development and public debate about how to achieve a peaceful shared future in Northern Ireland. This is because the simple NILT model - whereby independent open access results are released regularly into the public domain online in lay-friendly ways - allows users to make maximum unfettered use of this information. This impact is significant because the stakes are a peaceful shared future in Northern Ireland. Research findings that help frame policies that will guarantee no return to conflict are vital. Research findings that warn of potential threats to the unsteady peace have an immediate resonance. The impact is wide-reaching because NILT data has become ubiquitous within debates and reports within/from government, political parties, journalists, lobbyists and NGOs.

The history to the specific impact presented in the case study begins In March 2005 when the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) published 'A Shared Future: The policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland'. NILT is identified in this publication as providing potentially important monitoring in terms of attitudes and perceptions relating to the overall aims. Eleven high level outcomes from A Shared Future were identified and a total of forty six NILT indicators were identified in this action plan. From this point on NILT took on the role of officially producing these annual indicators. In January 2007, a baseline report was produced which contained 96 citations of NILT data relating to these indicators. Subsequently update reports were produced in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2013.

However it is the use of NILT data by non-governmental users that evidences the reach of this impact. With the resumption of devolution in May 2007, OFMDFM initiated the development of a new strategy that would integrate the race and community relations strategies. In the Programme for Government 2008-2011, the Shared Future strategy was not mentioned however a new programme on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) began to emerge but with seemingly ever long delays in its publication. During spring 2010, discussions in the Northern Ireland Assembly on CSI (or the lack of it) where Life and Times data were cited featured on 18th Feb 2010; 2nd March 2010 and 23rd June 2010.

The public consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) was officially launched on Tuesday 27 July 2010 and closed on 29 October 2010. CSI differed from A Shared Future in a number of ways not least that the new programme appeared to have more emphasis on separation rather than integration: the document referred to the creation of a shared and better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. However in order to maintain continuity

with A Shared Future, the draft report emphasised that the Good Relations Baseline Indicator Report (and NILT indicators) would be retained in order to measure future successes.

The publication of the CSI consultation generated enormous controversy. Twelve of the responses to the consultation made mention of ARK survey data (Alliance Party, Worker's Party, Commission for Victims and Survivors, Irish Peace Centre, Integrated Education Fund, Chartered Institute of Housing, NI Federation of Housing Associations, Public Health Agency, Sharing Education Learning Forum, Volunteer Now, Youth Council for Northern Ireland) but of particular note was the damning response from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (by Jennifer Ruane) which had widespread impact on public debate. This analysis criticised the jettisoning of the goal of 'reconciliation' emphasised in Shared Future and the notion that 'cultures' and 'identities' are given and stable entities. Ruane pointed to NILT data showing that many more people in Northern Ireland now see themselves as British and Irish and an increased Irish identification among Catholics, and particularly among the young, goes hand in hand with a steady or even falling voiced desire for Irish reunification. NILT findings also revealed that large sections of young Protestants are moving from a 'British' to a 'Northern Irish' identity. She warned that CSI posed a practical danger by focusing only on dominant cultures and in this context it is 'easy to revert to sectarian opposition'.

Alongside the CSI debate there was also been demand for government action in specific areas relating to community relations. Five Assembly questions were tabled by the Alliance party citing NILT data community relations highlighting the need for policy action by various government departments. In terms of lobbying for integrated/shared education, NILT figures were drawn upon in debates in September 2008 and November 2010. One particular committee debate in October 2010 drew the comment:

If there is an academic case, if the Life and Times survey supports it, if Bain indicates it, and if the financial rationale is already known, what is really of interest is why it is not happening. (Basil McCrea, 20th October 2010)

In May 2012 the Alliance party pulled out of talks relating to the production of a revised CSI strategy while in July 2012 the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Owen Patterson expressed his profound disappointment that there was still no publication of the revised CSI strategy. The flags dispute in late 2012 further increased demand for action on this key policy area and elicited the comment from the editor of one local paper:

All the political parties would do well, if they haven't already done so, to study the research from the University of Ulster/Queen's University's ARK project and from the Institute of British and Irish Studies in Dublin. (Ed Curran, Belfast Telegraph 2nd October 2012)

In April 2013 the new Secretary of State Theresa Villiers urged progress on the new strategy in a Northern Ireland Commons debate and paid tribute to ARK and other organisations helping people to understand the past:

Yesterday I visited the University of Ulster to learn more about its CAIN-ARK network, a resource shared with Queen's University Belfast which has had 64 million page views and which contains a huge amount of material on the troubles. I encourage anyone who wants to understand Northern Ireland's past to visit the website. (Theresa Villiers April 23rd April 2013, Column 813)

By May 2013 the CSI strategy had disappeared but the Northern Ireland Executive brought forward its new policy to build a shared future entitled Together-Building a United Community (TBUC). Again the Life and Times survey is cited a number of times in this key policy document.