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The Missing T: Baseline Attitudes Towards Transgender People in Northern Ireland

Gail Neill and Siobhán McAlister

In recent times we have witnessed unprecedented levels of interest in matters of gender and sexual diversity and identity. This has resulted in part from increased visibility, news coverage, entertainment storylines and celebrity culture. While part of the 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) acronym, the 'T' has often been overlooked or more generally subsumed in popular discourse, research and services. As such the focus has primarily been on sexual identity (LGB), rather than gender identity (T) and thus not reflective of transgender individuals, interests or topics.

Responding to this invisibility and mobilising around continued experiences of inequality and harassment, a trans movement has emerged with activists and organisations calling for recognition and inclusion. Alongside this, acknowledgment from LGBT organisations of the previously marginal position of transgender individuals and their concerns, has meant that gender identity is no longer side-lined, but explicit within their work.

This increased and explicit focus on transgender people has illuminated areas of continued inequality but has also been used in ways that have fuelled public panic, with the rights of transgender people often being set against the rights and safety of the non-transgender population. This is exemplified in recent high profile

debates regarding the use of public toilets, transgender women accessing domestic violence refuges, gender self-identification and competitive sports. In light of the often contradictory ways in which public attitudes and debate on these issues are presented, this Research Update provides an overview of contemporary public attitudes in Northern Ireland.

The Missing T in Survey Data

Transgender identities are 'complex and contested' even within the transgender community (Munro and Warren, 2004). The historic framing of sex and gender within medicine and biology is now supplemented with less fixed perspectives on identity. As such, there is no consistent definition but rather an understanding of 'fragmented pathways to trans becoming' (Pearce et al., 2019: 3). Indeed, the term transgender can refer to a broad range of identities and gender presentations.

This poses particular challenges for survey research given the need to provide definitions and questions understandable to a broad audience. It is difficult, for example, to ask questions that would fully reflect variance in identity/presentation and in corresponding attitudes. Added to this, the definitions provided can impact the responses given, with questions asking individuals to define their own levels of prejudice being open to 'social desirability bias' (Swales

and Attar Taylor, 2017). The nature and wording of survey questions can also impact on interpretation and the degree to which findings across countries can be compared.

Internationally, there are relatively few national surveys of attitudes towards transgender people. What exists tends to collect the views of particular groups (e.g. students, the medical profession), or conflate transgender with LGB. While the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey has previously collected data on attitudes towards LGB individuals, relationships, marriage and family, it has not collected attitudes towards transgender people. Thus while survey data in Northern Ireland suggests progressively more accepting attitudes to LGB people (Carr et al., 2015), we have limited information on whether this extends to the transgender population.

In an attempt to provide direct comparison with the rest of the UK, the 2018 NILT survey utilised some of the definitions and questions from the 2016 British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017). These adapted the language of gender identity questions previously developed and tested with groups of transgender and non-transgender people (Balarajan et al., 2011). While limitations still remain, the results provide a useful baseline to public attitudes in Northern Ireland that future data can be compared against.

Exploring Transprejudice

In both the BSA and NILT, the following definition was provided as an introduction to the questions: ‘People who are transgender have gone through all or part of a process (including thoughts or actions) to change the sex they were described as at birth to the gender they identify with, or intend to. This might include by changing their name, wearing different clothes, taking hormones or having gender reassignment surgery’. This definition reflects the legal description of gender reassignment in the 2010 Equality Act (see Balarajan et al., 2011).

Asked to rate their level of prejudice towards people who are transgender, seven out of ten respondents (72%) described themselves as ‘not prejudiced at all’, whilst 21 per cent expressed some level of prejudice (‘very’ or ‘a little’), and 7 per cent said that they did not know. Among BSA respondents, a higher proportion of people (82%) defined themselves as ‘not prejudiced’ at all (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017).

The NILT data shows, however, that there are some notable differences in self-identified prejudice across a range of demographic factors. As illustrated in Table 1, females were less prejudiced than males, while the youngest and oldest age groups reported more prejudice than those aged between 25 and 54 years. Prejudice was higher among those belonging to a Protestant denomination or having no religion (26%) than it was among Catholic respondents (15%). Added to this, one quarter (26%) of those who do not know anyone who is transgender reported some level of self-prejudice, which is almost three times the rate of those who do know someone who is transgender (9%).

Some of these findings may not be overly surprising. Previous research demonstrates, for example, that social distance or levels of contact impact transprejudice (King et al., 2009). Likewise, past NILT research has found women to have more accepting attitudes to minority groups and

Table 1: Prejudice and attitudes

	%	
	Prejudiced against people who are transgender	Same-sex sexual relations are wrong
All	21	27
Gender Identification		
Female	17	23
Male	27	32
Age		
18-24	28	22
25-34	17	15
35-44	15	21
45-54	16	20
55-64	26	27
65+	27	47
Religion		
Catholic	15	16
Protestant	26	39
No religion	26	21
Church Attendance		
Less than once per month	17	19
At least once per month	25	39
No religion	26	21

equality issues (Carr et al., 2015). Of course we should also remember that high rates of self-defined prejudice may actually demonstrate greater awareness and understanding of the issue, and hence the ability to reflect upon one’s own attitudes more accurately.

LGB and Transprejudice

As assumptions about minority sexual identities and minority gender identities are often interlinked, we might expect to find similar patterns in attitudes towards transgender people as we do in attitudes towards LGB people. If we take attitudes towards same-sex sexual relations as our proxy measure for attitudes towards LGB people, Table 1 shows that this pattern is true of the NILT data in some respects. Similar correlates in negative attitudes towards same-

sex relations and transprejudice were identified (e.g. males less accepting than females, Protestants less accepting than Catholics). Yet there are also notable variations.

Data from this survey demonstrates across almost all measures, higher levels of non-acceptance of same-sex relations than prejudice towards transgender people (see Table 1). In fact, over one third of those who believe same-sex relations to be ‘always’ or ‘almost always’ wrong (38%), and over one third of those who do not support marriage equality (36%), defined themselves as ‘not prejudiced’ towards transgender people (see Table 2). We cannot assume, therefore, that lack of acceptance of some groups and social issues equates with prejudice towards other minority groups. Indeed, for some, non-acceptance of same-sex relations is considerably

Table 2: Attitudes towards LGB issues and transprejudice

	%			
	Same sex relations wrong	Same sex relations not wrong	Same sex marriage not valid	Same sex marriage valid
Prejudiced against transgender	52	9	57	9
Not prejudiced against transgender	38	87	36	87

higher than their reported prejudice towards transgender people e.g. those aged 65 or over, those who identify as Protestant and those with higher levels of church attendance.

These findings may reflect differences in attitudes towards sexual identity and gender identity. However, the wording of the question - same-sex 'sexual relations' - may imply an act, rather than an identity (being) as was the case with the transgender questions. While future questions could, therefore, be worded to provide more comparable data, this does reveal the importance of examining attitudes towards transgender people separately from attitudes towards LGB people within surveys.

Prejudice in Practice?

Despite some variations, overall self-defined prejudice towards transgender people is relatively low (21%). Examining this more fully through a number of practical examples, survey respondents were asked their views on issues that have received relatively recent media and public attention. In all scenarios over half of those who answered the question said they would be comfortable or approving of: a transgender woman using a female toilet (asked of women only) (59%); a transgender man using a male toilet (asked of men only) (55%); a transgender woman using a refuge if experiencing domestic violence (54%); an individual having the right to change their sex on a birth certificate after two years of living in their 'acquired gender' (53%). Levels of comfort regarding the use of public toilets and use of domestic violence refuges among the Northern Ireland public are lower than among those who took part in the BSA (72%, 64% and 61% respectively). That said, in all

of the aforementioned cases, no more than three in ten people reported that they were uncomfortable or disapproving of these scenarios. While these questions are limited in that they assume a gender binary (i.e. a particular way of 'doing gender'), they do shed light on public attitudes towards high profile issues, and perhaps demonstrate that public attitudes are not as negative as the media discourse implies.

There are again some interesting findings when the attitudes expressed by NILT respondents are analysed by

social demographics (see **Table 3**). For example, the most comfortable/approving age group varies according to the scenario. Indeed the only factors that consistently correlate with the most approving/ comfortable attitudes are knowing someone who is transgender and/or being female. These findings demonstrate that we cannot assume that comfort/ acceptance on one issue equates with other issues, or that those whom the media present as most 'at risk' (e.g. female) are in fact most concerned about accessibility to toilets and domestic violence refuges.

Table 3: Levels of comfort/approval by demographic characteristics

	Most comfortable	Most uncomfortable
Transgender woman using a female toilet		
Age group	18-24 yrs (77%)	65+ yrs (46%)
Religious background	No religion (73%)	Protestant (33%)
Knowing someone who is transgender	Knowing (83%)	Not knowing (30%)
Transgender man using a male toilet		
Age group	45-54 yrs (70%)	18-24 yrs (44%)
Religious background	Catholic (64%)	Protestant (35%)
Knowing someone who is transgender	Knowing (73%)	Not knowing (30%)
Transgender woman using a refuge		
Age group	25-34 yrs (66%)	65+ yrs (36%)
Religious background	Catholic (63%)	Protestant (33%)
Knowing someone who is transgender	Knowing (71%)	Not knowing (27%)
Gender identification	Female (58%)	Male (26%)
Transgender person changing their sex on their birth certificate		
Age group	25-34 years (65%)	65+ yrs (32%)
Religious background	Catholic (64%)	Protestant (28%)
Knowing someone who is transgender	Knowing (78%)	Not knowing (26%)
Gender identification	Female (57%)	Male (26%)

Conclusion

The NILT survey results point to positive attitudes towards transgender people and fairly high levels of support for the realisation of their rights. This robust data on public attitudes is important in light of media discourse which often presents the extremes of public opinion in discussions about access to public amenities and services. It will be important, therefore, to continue to gauge public attitudes as policy discussion on these areas evolve.

Differences in attitudes towards transgender issues and LGB issues further demonstrate the need not only to include the T in survey research, but to ask specific yet nuanced questions. Including questions examining attitudes towards the visibility of transgender people (e.g. in public roles), for example, might be a better indicator of prejudice than self-defined ratings. This is particularly important to explore given that transgender people continue to report high levels of experienced prejudice and harassment. Future research would, therefore, benefit from collaboration with the trans community in framing the issues to be explored and the wording of survey questions. Indeed, given the pace with which understandings and expressions of gender identity are developing, there is a need to update questions to better capture attitudes towards more fluid, and non-binary identities.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

Key points

- A relatively small proportion of people self-identified as prejudiced towards transgender people (21%).
- Those who know a transgender person were less prejudiced and more approving of transgender rights.
- Over half of the survey population are approving of, or comfortable with, transgender people accessing public toilets, utilising domestic violence refuges and changing their legal gender.
- Females were considerably more comfortable than males of transgender people accessing domestic violence refuges, and of an individual's right to change their birth certificate to reflect their acquired gender.
- The NILT data demonstrates the importance of collecting and analysing attitudes towards gender identities separately to attitudes towards sexual identities.

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