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Public attitudes towards LGB equality

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Research Update

Public Attitudes Towards LGB Equality

Nicola Carr, Paula Devine, Siobhán McAlister and Gail Neill



Northern Ireland is the only place on the islands of Britain and Ireland where same-sex couples do not have the legal right to marry. Proposals to allow for marriage between same-sex couples have been debated in the Assembly on five occasions since 2012. On the last occasion in November of this year, and for the first time, a majority of MLAs voted in favour of the introduction of legislation. However, a 'Petition of Concern' triggered by the Democratic Unionist Party means that any legislation is effectively blocked. Meanwhile this subject will also be aired in the courts, where two same-sex couples are currently involved in a legal challenge regarding the failure to enact legal provision for marriage equality in Northern Ireland.

Other issues concerning gay and lesbian people have featured prominently in public debate in the past year. In April 2015, Jim Wells, then Minister for Health, resigned following a controversy in relation to his comments linking same-sex relationships with child abuse. In the following month, the High Court ruled that Ashers Bakery had unlawfully discriminated against a gay man in respect of the provision of a service (a cake bearing a slogan supporting gay marriage). Reaction to this judgement included renewed calls to introduce a so-called 'conscience clause' allowing individuals or businesses to refuse to provide services if they clash with their religious beliefs (Carr, 2015).

The heat that these issues have generated within political debate and public discourse has not been matched by policy or legislative development. A *Draft Sexual Orientation Strategy* was published in 2006 when Northern Ireland was under Direct Rule (see Gray et al., 2013 for a discussion). The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) committed to publishing a *Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan* with the objectives of promoting equality of opportunity and an environment free from harassment and abuse (OFMDFM, 2014). However, despite the fact that the consultation on this document ended in June 2014, to date no strategy has materialised. Part of the reason for policy stagnation is the retrenchment of political positions. It is therefore timely to look at public attitudes in relation to these issues.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey* has asked questions on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues since 1998. In 2012 the survey included a more in-depth series of questions on attitudes towards LGBT people. This was intended to provide a baseline of public opinion in advance of the publication of the *Sexual Orientation Strategy*. A Research Update based on the results of that survey focused specifically on attitudes towards lesbian and gay families, parenting and marriage (McAlister, Carr and Neill, 2014). This new Research Update focuses on the results from the survey data in 2013, where a similar set of questions were posed. Given the social, political and legislative debates noted above, it examines public attitudes on LGB equality in general, and attitudes towards same-sex marriage in particular. The survey also included questions relating to transgender issues. However, we have not explored attitudes towards transgender people and transgender equality. That would require a separate analysis of the data in order that transgender issues do not get confused with sexual orientation issues.

Perceptions of LGB equality

The survey asked questions relating to public perceptions of the fair/equal treatment of different social groups. That some have been asked repeatedly over time is useful for examining changes in social attitudes, and considering factors potentially impacting on these.

Table 1 provides an overview of the percentage of respondents who, over time, have felt that different groups are generally treated unfairly in Northern Ireland compared to other groups. Focusing specifically on LGB people, it is evident that public perceptions of unfair treatment have increased substantially since the question was first asked – from 18 per cent in 2001, rising to 41 per cent in 2009. Most recently, in 2012 and 2013, 40 per cent of respondents felt that LGB people are more unfairly treated than other groups. And in 2013, this was the second most frequently identified group, after Travellers.

Over the past ten years or so, Northern Ireland has experienced high profile policy discussion, public debate, legislative developments, legal challenges and publicity campaigns relating to the LGB population. In particular, following reports of increasing levels of hate crime, 2009 saw the launch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Hate Crime advertising

Figure 1: Attitudes to equality for LGB people

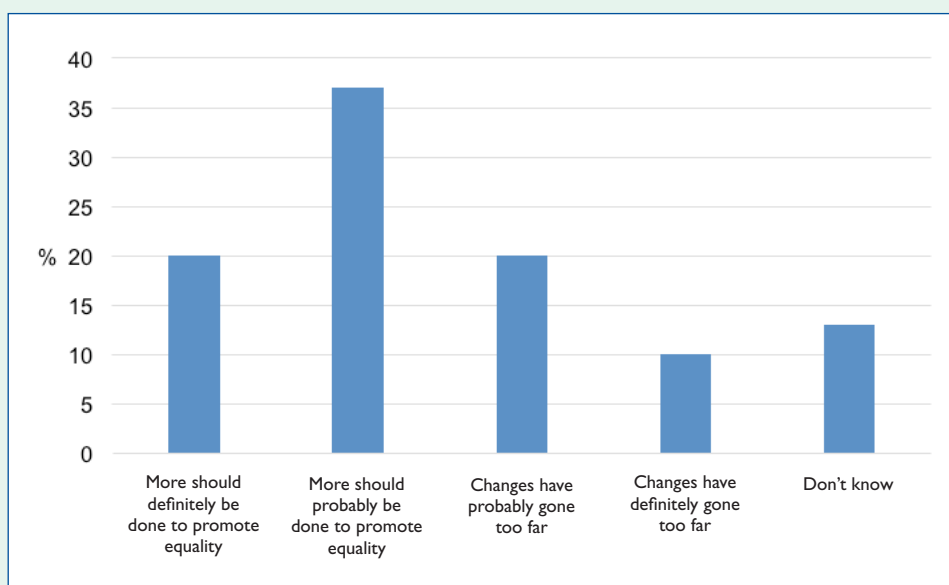


Table 1: Perceptions of unfair treatment of groups

	% identifying each group									
	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013
Catholics	8	4	8	4	5	5	5	4	9	14
Protestants	11	5	9	10	5	5	6	4	9	15
LGB	18	21	36	28	31	33	41	37	40	40
Disabled	23	27	35	26	26	28	25	27	27	31
Elderly	21	30	32	27	24	25	27	23	24	32
Travellers	22	23	33	26	28	36	45	42	35	42
Other ethnic minorities	10	22	45	38	39	34	45	38	25	37
Women	4	4	5	6	5	5	5	4	7	13
Men	1	1	3	2	1	2	2	1	4	8
Transgender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34	36
Children	-	-	-	5	3	4	3	4	5	13

campaign which included posters on billboards and bus shelters. These included graphic images of homophobic and other hate crimes, and have received considerable media attention. It may be possible, therefore, that these issues have combined to raise the visibility of equality issues and awareness of discrimination (unfair treatment) of LGB people. (See, for example, Anderson and Fetner (2008) for a discussion of the influence of social and cultural change on public attitudes towards homosexuality).

Advancing and teaching LGB equality

In addition to increased awareness of LGB inequality, over half of the NILT respondents in 2013 (56%) felt that more should definitely or probably be done to promote equality for LGB people in our society (see Figure 1).

Interestingly, a similar proportion (58%) felt that schools should teach about equality for lesbian and gay people, in the same way they do for other social groups. Consistent with previous survey findings of attitudes towards LGB people and LGB equality (Jarman, 2010; McAlister, Carr and Neill, 2014), the 2013 NILT findings show an association between attitudes towards teaching LGB equality in schools and age, gender, religious affiliation and personally knowing someone who is lesbian or gay.

As shown in Table 2, women were more supportive than men of equality for lesbian and gay people being taught in schools. The oldest age group (65+ years) reported relatively low levels of support for this (35%), while those who had most recently left school (18-24 year olds) expressed a high level of support (72%). Support was high among those who identified with no religion (73%), and

higher among those identifying as Catholic (66%) than those identifying as Protestant (43%). Finally, two thirds (66%) of those who said that they know a lesbian or gay person supported teaching equality on this issue in schools. This is almost twice the figure for those who reported not personally knowing someone (34%).

While there is increased awareness of LGB inequality, and over half of the sample believe more should be done to promote equality and to teach this in schools, it is noteworthy that close to one-third (31%) of the sample perceive that equality for lesbian and gay people has probably or definitely gone too far (see Figure 1).

This perception may equally be informed by high profile debates and cases whereby legal challenges and political arguments have sometimes been premised on the notion that the rights of one group (for example, LGB people), are being met at the expense of the rights of others. When these findings are broken down further to examine who thinks that equality for lesbian and gay people has gone too far, we find that a higher proportion of men than women think this (35% and 27% respectively). Other respondents more likely to hold this view are those with a Protestant affiliation (47%), respondents who are aged 65 years or older (55%), and those who do not know someone who is lesbian or gay (57%).

Same-sex marriage

In line with the figures on support for the further promotion of LGB equality and the teaching of these equality issues in schools, a similar percentage of people taking part in NILT reported support for the legal validation of same-sex marriage. Just less than six in ten respondents (59%) thought that marriages between same-sex couples should be recognised by law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages (see Table 3). Matching the pattern identified earlier in relation to perception of equality, closer examination reveals that women (63%) are more supportive than men (54%), and that those under 65 years are significantly more supportive than those over this age. Respondents who said that they have no religious affiliation (73%) or a Catholic affiliation (67%) are more supportive than

Table 2: Support for schools teaching about equality for lesbian and gay people

	% expressing support
Sex	
Men	54
Women	61
Age	
18-24 years	72
25-34 years	69
35-44 years	62
45-54 years	63
55-64 years	57
65+ years	35
Religion	
Catholic	66
Protestant	43
No religion	73
Personally knowing someone who is gay or lesbian	
Don't know someone	34
Know someone	66
All	58

those identifying as having a Protestant affiliation (46%). Likewise, those who personally know someone who is lesbian or gay (68%) are more than twice as likely to support same-sex marriage as those who do not know someone who is lesbian or gay (29%).

Given that the latest survey findings like those of the previous survey (McAlister, Carr and Neill, 2014) reveal lower levels of support among those defining as Protestant, it is important to attempt to understand in more detail attitudes within this group. Perhaps most significantly, and as illustrated in Table 3, 46% of this group do support same-sex marriage, which is slightly higher in fact than those who do not (42%). In other words, while the survey consistently highlights those with no religious affiliation and those defining as Catholic as more supportive than those identifying as Protestant, within the Protestant sub-category itself, there are in fact more people in support of marriage equality than not in support of it.

Further analysis reveals that those of a Protestant affiliation who think that same-sex marriage should be valid tend to be younger (mean age=48) than those who do not think that it should

be valid (mean age=60). Still focusing on those with a Protestant affiliation, a higher proportion of women than men support validation of same-sex marriage (50% and 41% respectively), as does a higher percentage of people who know someone who is lesbian or gay compared to someone who does not (53% and 17% respectively).

Conclusion

The most recent findings from the NILT survey reveal that public awareness and perception of LGB inequality has increased over time. Over half of the population support promoting LGB equality further; teaching this as an equality issue in schools; and same-sex marriage being legally validated. This suggests a significant level of public support for lesbian and gay equality, which reflects the attitudes of the majority of MLAs, but not current legislation.

While the evidence points to broadly positive public attitudes, it would be remiss not to note the continued discrimination reported by LGB people in Northern Ireland. For example, there has been a rise in the number of homophobic related incidents reported to the police

over the past 10 years: from 196 in 2004/05 to 334 in 2014/15 (PSNI, 2015). While such data are difficult to interpret, as a higher number of reported incidents may reflect a growing confidence in the police rather than a rise in the numbers per se, this nonetheless provides evidence of some of the challenges faced by LGB people on a day-to-day basis. As observed by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, strategies to promote sexual orientation equality need to tackle prejudicial attitudes and behaviour, and strengthen legal protections (ECNI, 2013). Furthermore, delivering these objectives will require political, civic and community leadership.

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Table 3: Attitudes on the legal validation of same-sex marriage by religious affiliation

	%			
	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion	All
Same-sex marriage should be valid	67	46	73	59
Same-sex marriage should not be valid	21	42	16	29
Don't know	13	12	11	12

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2013, 1210 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 website for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

Key points

- Public perception of the unfair treatment of LGB people has increased substantially over time.
- Over half of the respondents (56%) felt that more should be done to promote equality for LGB people.
- Over half (58%) also felt that LGB equality should be taught in schools along with equality for other social groups.
- Knowing someone who is lesbian or gay is associated with more positive attitudes towards LGB equality.
- Almost one-third of respondents felt that equality for lesbian and gay people had 'gone too far'.
- Almost six in ten respondents (59%) believe that marriage between same-sex couples should be legally validated.
- Among those identifying as Protestant, a slightly higher proportion were in support of same-sex marriage (46%) than not in support of it (42%).

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