Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Children's attitudes towards old age:
findings from the Kids' Life and Times Survey 2014

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The fact that the world's population is ageing tends is seen as the result of people living longer. In fact decreasing child mortality and falling birth rates are also major contributors to the increase in average life expectancy. Northern Ireland is part of this global trend. The 2015 mid-year population estimates indicate that 21% of Northern Ireland's population is aged under 16 years, whilst 16% of the population is aged 65 years or over. By 2027 there will be the same number of people in each of these age groups. In other words, 20% will be aged 0-15, equivalent numbers will be aged 65 or over. These age groups have been called the 'bookend generations' (Hagestad and Ulhenberg, 2006). Despite this, the impact of an ageing population on the lives of children is rarely investigated. This Policy Brief presents results which challenge policy-makers to think about how population ageing affects all age groups, particularly when societies are segregated along age lines.

Policy context
The policy environment in Northern Ireland has changed in 2016, with the reduction in the number of government departments from twelve to nine. In general, Northern Ireland has developed parallel government policies and strategies focusing on different age groups, including:
- *Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2021* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016)
- *Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: a Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006-2016* (OFMDFM, 2006)

In addition, each age group has a relevant commissioner. The post of Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established in 2003, whilst the post of Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland followed in 2011.

Policy and age

Despite these various policy documents, the definition of 'old', 'older', and 'age' is unclear. For example, it is no longer legal to enforce a default retirement age. Over the past 20 years, the age of eligibility for the State Pension in the UK has risen from 60 years for women and 65 years for men, to 67 between 2026 and 2028. Differing age thresholds are not restricted to older people, given that young people can leave school at 16, drive at 17 and vote at 18 years of age.

One common feature of policies, strategies and initiatives is that references to 'age' are narrowly focused on older people. For example, Belfast was the first city in Northern Ireland to join the World Health Organization's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities. An age-friendly city is 'an inclusive and accessible urban environment that promotes active ageing' (Belfast Strategic Partnership, 2014). The Age-friendly Belfast strapline is 'A city where older people live life to the full', which reinforces the message that 'age' is about 'older'.

In 2015, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister undertook a public consultation on proposals to extend age discrimination legislation, which focused on goods, facilities and services. The proposals received criticism (for example, from NICCY) for only applying to people aged 16 or over.

Age segregation

Northern Ireland has historically experienced segregation on several levels, and this is well documented. Data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey has shown a fall in support between 2010 and 2014 for mixed-religion neighbourhoods, and for mixed-religion workplaces (Morrow, 2015). Many of the policy responses to such segregation reinforce the need for integration, and have their theoretical basis in the Allport's (1979) contact theory. Contact theory suggests that contact between members of different groups can help reduce prejudice. Importantly, such contact needs to meet certain conditions, such as respect and cooperation. Thus, the current good relations policy *Together: Building a United Community* (OFMDFM, 2013) incorporates the vision that 'everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.'

However, segregation by age is also a feature of life in Northern Ireland. Public policy tends to divide people by age groups: childhood is for school, middle age is for work, and old age is for retirement. Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2006) argue that this type of age segregation may lead to a lack of mutual understanding between generations, and is a root cause of ageist attitudes. In addition, segregating the youngest and oldest generations into age-based institutions (such as schools or retirement communities) can lead to these groups of people being marginalised. Research has shown that deprivations in health and socio-economic status in childhood, impact on later life (Hayward and Gorman, 2004). Researchers have highlighted that the most successful ageing societies are those with higher levels of solidarity between generations (Carney et. al., 2014). This suggests that unless we encourage more

contact between the generations outside the family context, age segregation, and ageist attitudes, are likely to remain.
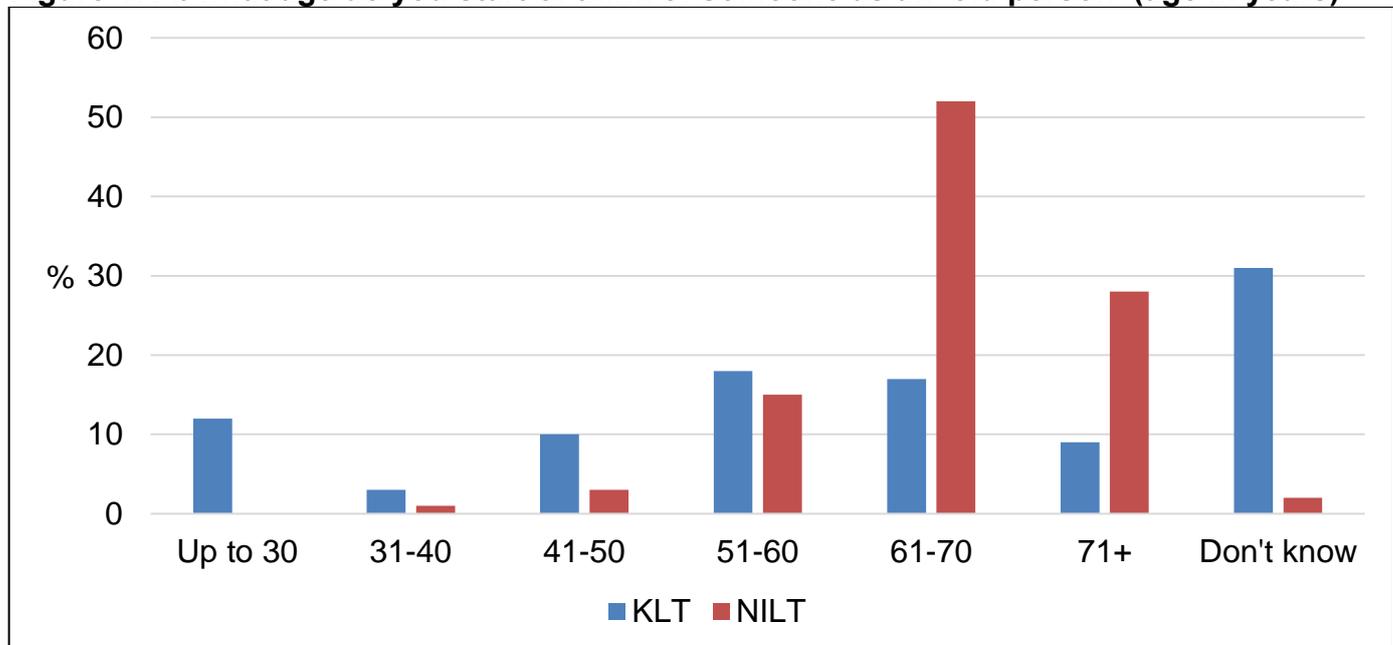
Kids' Life and Times Survey

Despite being aware of our changing population, little research has been undertaken to explore what children think about ageing and older people. Academic research has tended to work in the parallel silos of ageing and childhood studies. Therefore, questions about ageing and older people were included in the 2014 *Kids' Life and Times (KLT) Survey,* exploring the opinions of 10 and 11 years olds to ageing and ageism, especially in relation to older people. 4,757 children took part in the 2014 KLT, and half of these children (2,325) were asked to complete the section on ageing and ageism (Devine and Carney, 2015a). This research ran parallel to questions on this topic being asked of 1,211 adults within the 2014 *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey* (Devine and Carney, 2015b).

When does old age begin?

As highlighted earlier, age is an unclear concept. The phrase 'age is just a number' is often used, in order to highlight that roles and expectations related to specific chronological age groups are not fixed. Therefore, KLT and NILT respondents were asked at what age do they start to think of someone as an 'old person'. As Figure 1 shows, this is very much related to the age of the respondent. Among KLT respondents, the mean suggested age was 54 years, and some of the children thought that 30 was old. For NILT respondents, the mean suggested age was higher, at 69 years. Over one half (52%) of NILT respondents suggested that being aged 61-70 years was old.

Figure 1: At what age do you start of think of someone as an 'old person' (age in years)

Many of the children taking part in KLT were unsure of how to respond, with 31 per cent saying that they didn't know. Whilst some children specified precise ages, others rejected the idea that an exact age could be specified. Some KLT respondents explained their responses:
80, because I have a granny who is 80.

The concept of 'age is just a number' was also evident among the children's responses:

I don't think of them as old people. I just think of them as people they have lasted longer.

Growing older

The KLT respondents were asked to write down good and bad things about getting older. These comments suggest that, from a child's perspective, being older is often associated with freedom - especially from school – or the ability to do things that a child cannot, such driving or having money. Other comments focused on the higher status that adults are given. At the same time, there was concern about the negative side of growing older, such as lack of respect, and crime. There was some emphasis on coming to the end of life, or dying. Linked to this, was a sense of loss, loneliness, or not being able to do the things that you used to do.

The responses also suggested that children think about different time frames. For some, 'getting old' is in the long term, many years in the future, and perhaps the end of life. Other children are thinking about the medium term, about 10 to 15 years in the future. Again, this points to different perceptions and understanding of what chronological age means.

Inter-generational contact and respect

As we might expect, many of the children's comments refer to family members, and reciprocal help among generations. Attitudes towards inter-generational contact were mixed. Three in ten children (31%) thought that young and old people do not mix together often, whilst 46 per cent thought the opposite. There was strong support for such inter-generational contact, with 69 per cent of children thinking that it would be better if old and young people mixed together more often.

In order for prejudice to be reduced, contact theory specifies that inter-group contact needs to involve equal status of all groups. When asked which group of people is treated with the most respect, four in ten KLT respondents (41%) identified old people, followed by children (23%). Only 2 per cent identified teenagers. When it came to who was treated with the least respect, there was some symmetry in the responses, in that old people were least likely to be identified (8%), and teenagers were the most likely to be identified (30%).

The data suggest that there is a perception among children that older people are respected in society. Around three quarters (77%) of children taking part in KLT thought that old people are admired and respected by young people. A slightly smaller majority of NILT respondents (54%) thought this. The data also suggest that this respect is reciprocal. Only 16 per cent of children agreed that old people are not willing to listen to young people's views.

Perceptions of capabilities

In order to explore perceptions of older people's behavior and capabilities, KLT respondents were asked about four activities (moving around; being generous; remembering things; and living alone). For each of these, children identified which description best fitted the way they think about old people that they see or know. Half of respondents thought that old people are a bit slow when they move around, although only seven per cent said that they are slow and hold other people up. Old people were seen as generous, although in relation to memory, opinion was split. There was a general feeling that old people can live independently (23%) or with a bit of support (48%). Only five per cent of children said that old people cannot live on their own. Overall, these data suggest that children view old people as independent. The

data also suggest that children do not assume that older people are all the same; on the contrary, children seem to appreciate the diversity of the older population.

Future lives

Responses to the question 'What do you think you will be doing when you are aged 40?' consistently referred to multiple roles. These mostly focused on having active lives, and especially on work, family, or both. Some children were quite specific about the job that they thought they would be doing, such as a writer, a teacher, or farming. Other children imagined an unusual career, such as an astronaut. Still others were more modest in their expectations:

"My dream would be a sports star - but reality a geography teacher.

Whilst being aged 40 was seen as positive, the comments suggest that being aged 70 was a more mixed. There was a strong focus on family. Retirement was also a key issue, and many children focused on relaxation. There was a minor emphasis on frailty, and many children referred to illness or dying. Reciprocal help was highlighted, such as receiving help from family, and giving back to society. One child correctly noted that:

The law won't let you retire until you are 67 now so by the time I am 67 the number will have increased so probably still working.

There were some detailed visualisations of life at 70:

Sitting on a green armchair with a waistcoat and black shoes watching the television all fit and well.

Conclusion

The findings of the 2014 Kids' Life and Times survey indicate that being old, and the age at which people are seen as old, can be perceived very differently. For many KLT respondents, being aged 40 was associated with being active, and contributing to society, work and family. Being aged 70 or over was mainly seen as a time to relax. At that age, family was seen as important, with a focus on inter-generational support.

In general, children have a positive view of old people, with few suggesting that an older population presents problems. Children appreciate the diversity of older people, and so do not expect all old people to be the same. The responses also show us that children live in an age-segregated world and many are highly sensitive to the restrictions imposed on them due to their young age. The finding that teenagers are seen as the least respected group in society indicates that young people are at the receiving end of ageist attitudes.

Importantly, there is mutual respect between generations, and explicit support for more mixing between younger and older people. Inter-generational work (Henkin, 2015) has been championed by organisations such as Linking Generations Northern Ireland, and inter-generational practice is now acknowledged in many local and government plans.

In conclusion, an ageing population affects everyone. This research suggests that policy-makers should adopt a life course approach to policy-making - where each citizen is viewed as an individual with developmental potential from birth to death.

For more information on the Kids' Life and Times Survey, see www.ark.ac.uk/klt

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