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Youth Identities and the threat of 'Extremism'

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Youth Identities: The Context

- 2001 disturbances and tensions in other towns led to a policy re-think: Community Cohesion
- A clear focus on ethnic segregation and 'parallel lives' and how to overcome this
- Positive local evidence on this, but we need to know more about 'identities', including the possibility of shared identities

Youth Identities: The Context

- 7/7 bombings and subsequent plots highlight a real and ongoing Islamist terrorist threat
- Preventing Violent Extremism initiative, but with a problematic focus on Muslim communities only, and Muslim youth specifically
- Suggestion that 'British' identity is rejected by some young Muslims

Youth Identities: The Context

- Significantly increased electoral support for the BNP, accompanied by a higher profile
- English Defence League operating a deliberate 'strategy of tension'
- Increased political and academic focus on the 'white working class'
- 'Connecting Communities Fund' focussed on white areas 'under pressure'

Youth Identities: the context

- Young people have been central to all these events and policy developments
- Towns and cities either side of the Pennines have provided much of the focus
- Significant demographic pressures here – over 50% of all British Muslims are under the age of 25
- We need to understand youth identities, and the ways they are changing and developing, better

The Research process

- Long-standing relationship between the University, the local areas of Oldham and Rochdale and their agencies
- Issues under investigation are national problems
- Creative work already underway locally
- Aimed to generate helpful data for use in policy direction and further study

The Research Process

- Built on existing relationships and links
- Took an 'action' approach, aiming to build the confidence and skills of practitioners
- Youth Workers carried out research activity in their own settings
- Designed and used a range of research approaches to suit young people

The Research Process

- Individual and group interviews and discussions
- Questionnaires
- 'Identity' ranking sheets
- Word and sentence association exercises

  Recorded in a variety of ways, reflecting the youth work setting

Evidence: Muslim **and** British?

Please put these 8 types of 'Identity' in the order of importance to YOU, with *1= most important* and *8= least important* (please give each one a ranking number from 1 to 8):

- **British**
- **English**
- **Rochdale resident**
- **Ethnic background (e.g. Asian /White/Black)**
- **Northerner**
- **Religion (e.g. Muslim/Christian/Hindu)**
- **Local Area(e.g. Langley/ Littleborough)**
- **European**

Evidence: Muslim and British?

- Islam is overwhelmingly the most important form of Identity for Asian young people, but..
- This is **not** in conflict with being 'British', and most are 'proud to be British'
- Muslim young people see 'English' as being for White young people, not them
- White young people place more importance on 'English', rather than 'British'

Evidence: Muslim and British?

Self-ascribed ethnicity	Rank Religion 1/2	Rank 'English' 1/2	Rank 'British' 1/2
'White' categories	7	75	56
'Asian' categories	93	3	20
'Black' and other	44	56	44

Evidence: Muslim and British?

- We need more evidence about the relative strengths of faith and national identity but…
- 63% of those self-identifying as 'Muslim' definitely agreed with the statement *'I am proud to say that I am British'*(less than the 80% of the 'non-Muslim' group), and only 10% definitely disagreed,
- For Asian young people, 'British' is much more inclusive than 'English' , which is seen negatively as only being about White people but..
- Evidence from Scotland is that Pakistani-origin young people are very comfortable with a bi-cultural identity: 'Scottish Muslim', 'Scottish Asian' – can such identities develop in England?

Evidence: ways of understanding 'Muslim' identity

- Muslim young people more supportive of diversity than white young people:
- *"British means you can be multi-cultured yet keep your identity ."*

- *"British means being loyal to England and not being a terrorist and blowing it up."*

- *British means living with different people."*

Evidence: ways of understanding 'Muslim' identity

- 'Muslim' identity is much more prominent that 20/25 years ago
- 'Real' identity finally acknowledged publicly?
- Key events have shaped and strengthened this identity: Iranian revolution, first Gulf War, Satanic Verses controversy, as well as the (racist) media focus on Muslims
- Promotion of this identity by countries like Saudi Arabia
- Policy has focussed on specific ethnic groups and their differences, increasingly 'accepting' Muslims as a distinctly different group

Evidence: ways of understanding 'Muslim' identity

- Young people have consciously adopted and developed 'Muslim' identity over the past 20 years
- A proud and 'defensive' identity in the face of racism and ignorance
- A reaction that is actually about economic poverty and exclusion in the absence of a focus on class solidarities
- Islamic political groups have filled the vacuum left by lack of open discussion about integration and identity (Kenan Malik)
- Young women are looking to Islamic teaching to challenge cultural restrictions and norms that limit them
- Young men are using Islam to police and control young women in their own communities, whilst bolstering a male territorial identity (Macey, M./ Jacobson, J.)

Evidence: Ways of understanding 'Muslim' identity

- Muslim identity encourages some young men surveyed to make very prejudiced, faith-based judgements on others – these focus on being 'godless', 'immoral' and use of alcohol
- Significant family employment involvement in the 'night-time economy' may well be significantly influencing these opinions

Evidence: White identities under pressure?

- Strong racist language and prejudices from a significant proportion of the white young people surveyed
- Resentment of nearby Asian communities as being favoured by government policy and funding and doing better
- Significantly less support for diversity and more pessimism about future of multicultural society

Evidence: White identities under pressure?

Responses to the statement *'Different sorts of people get on well in *'* (name of local town)

Respondent Group	Definitely Agree (%)	Definitely Disagree (%)
Muslim	25	20
Non-Muslim	14	40

Evidence: White identities under pressure?

- 60% of the group self-identifying as 'Muslim' agreed that 'Britain is a stronger country because of difference' as opposed to 23% of the rest of the sample. In response to the converse statement that 'Britain is stronger if groups live separately', only 16% of the Muslim population definitely agreed and 71% definitely disagreed, as opposed to 36% of the non-Muslim remainder definitely agreeing and 30% definitely disagreeing.

Evidence: White identities under pressure?

- White young people have less experience of diversity
- Focus on ethnic minorities in the absence of a public focus on class inequality means that white working class communities and their needs have not been addressed (Runneymede Trust)
- Anti-racism has often been clumsy and has had a counter-productive impact on white young people (Hewitt, R.)
- BNP have filled the electoral and ideological vacuum left by other political parties losing interest in working class communities that have faced de-industrialisation and cultural change (Copsey, N)

Conclusion: Countering the threat of extremism

- Both White and Muslim working class communities have faced significant social exclusion, with evidence that 'self-essentialising' of identities has been one response
- Policy responses in the past have accepted and hardened physical and cultural ethnic segregation, so making separate identities more possible – PVE has carried on that approach
- In those conditions, it is easier for a minority of people to move from further from a separate identity towards 'extremism' or even 'violent extremism'

Conclusion : Countering the threat of Extremism

- Most young people in Oldham and Rochdale had segregated experiences but want more mixing and cohesion
- They do have friends of a different ethnic background in school, but hardly ever meet outside school
- Those that had experienced mixing were very positive about it, and most young people want more such contact
- This included support for mixed housing areas
- More cohesion is the only way to build 'resilience' against extremism, both within and across communities