Crossing the Line ? White young people and Community Cohesion

Abstract

The emergence of community cohesion as a British policy priority has represented a discursive shift in approaches to race relations, the emphasis on ethnic diversity downplayed in favour of commonality, shared values and the promotion of national identity. Central to community cohesion has been a focus on 'contact' as a way of overcoming 'parallel lives', and the need for communities to take responsibility within processes of contact and dialogue. The political focus, echoing past assimilationist discourses, has been on an alleged lack of integration on the part of Muslims; by contrast little attention is paid to how white working class young people view the contact central to cohesion strategies. This paper draws on case study evidence from Oldham and Rochdale, Greater Manchester to interpret the limited support the young white respondents have for, cross-ethnic contact, and the relevance of class experience to these views.

Key words: class, youth, ethnicity, multiculturalism, racism.

Introduction

The development of community cohesion as the priority of British 'race relations' policy following disturbances in northern towns and cities in the summer of 2001 has variously been interpreted as positive progress or as a return to the assimilationist agenda of the1960s. The Labour government's analysis (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001) of violence between young Muslims and the police (and white young men) in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford was that these events were symptomatic of generalised divides and tensions within Britain's multicultural towns and cities. This analysis asserted the prevalence of cultural and physical ethnic segregation, so blocking the development both of common identities and values, and of cross-ethnic contact. The proposed solution involved processes of 'contact,' and the associated building of common experiences and values (Cantle, 2001) to overcome 'parallel lives'(Ritchie, 2001) and the mutual fears and suspicions underpinning them. This perspective drew on Allport's 'contact theory' (1954), a social psychological model of how profound social or political divides can be overcome through carefully-

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constructed inter-group contact processes. These processes would need to be initiated over time, and in a way that would minimise the possibility that either group would feel that their 'own' identity was disrespected or under threat (Hewstone et al, 2007). However, recent research in this tradition has emphasised the complexity of factors affecting successful contact, acknowledging that, 'the assumption that contact always lessens conflicts and stresses between ethnic groups seems naive.' (Amir, 1998, p. 178)

This emphasis on contact-based community cohesion was consistent with wider New Labour social policy approaches (Bryson and Fisher, 2011) in that it emphasised communitarian notions of agency and responsibilization (Clarke, 2005), and identified active citizens and communities as essential ingredients of social progress. Between 2001and the 2010 UK General Election, community cohesion was 'mainstreamed' within wider Race Equality policy agendas (Home Office, 2005; DCLG, 2007b); with Local Authorities having a duty to promote and measure cohesion at the local level (DCLG, 2009). Many of the recommendations of the Cantle Report (2001), such as citizenship and language tests for new migrants, and listening to more diverse voices within ethnic minority communities, were revisited in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings of July 2005 (DCLG, 2007a). Despite their significance, there is only limited empirical evidence as to how community cohesion policies have been understood or implemented, or of community and individual responses to these policy approaches.

This paper aims to address that deficit by discussing data from research in two towns in the North-West of England, focussing on the attitudes of marginalised 'white' working class young people, in relation to the notion of 'parallel lives' and the role of contact in overcoming it. In discussing the 'white working class', our case study concerns communities, largely living in current or former social housing estates, dependent on industrial employment until the profound de-industrialisation of the 1980s lead for many to the economic and social marginalisation characterised as 'social exclusion' (Byrne, 1999). By focusing on this group, the paper aims to redress the unbalanced emphasis in the discourse of community cohesion on Muslim communities, and to suggest that both white communities , and class and socio-economic experiences generally, have been under-emphasised in discussion

both of the tensions inherent in 'parallel lives', and the prospects for successfully promoting contact to overcome it.

Although our research was concerned with the attitudes and experiences of young people of all ethnic backgrounds (Authors A and B), we focus here on findings related to young people identifying themselves as 'white'. The labels 'white' and 'Muslim', used in the following discussion, were self-ascribed through identification exercises. This reflected our theoretical stance in relation to the reciprocal and positional nature of identifications, and also enabled us to identify where there appeared to be meaningful differences in response. The field research context and methodologies are discussed below alongside presentation of data. We then discuss how we might interpret this data from white working class young people in the light of the prospects for a contact strategy designed to encourage community cohesion in areas identified as experiencing significant ethnic segregation and racial tensions.

Community cohesion: A racialised agenda?

The political and media discourse of community cohesion has been regarded as a racialised agenda in two senses. Firstly, it appeared to interpret the 'problem' of ethnic segregation in relation solely to Muslim communities. Secondly, it discursively constructs ethnic and cultural tensions as 'the problem', rather than as symptoms of deeper economic problems. A number of key themes can be detected within community cohesion discourse. The first is that of damaging ethnic segregation, where ethnically defined communities lead 'parallel lives' characterised by minimal mutual contact or common interest, and considerable suspicion and antagonism (Cantle, 2001). Whilst the implicit suggestion that ethnic segregation is both negative and increasing has been contested (Finney and Simpson, 2009; Carling, 2008), it is clear that in places like Oldham, Rochdale and Bradford, residential segregation, leading to segregated consumption of some public services, is significant (Burgess et al, 2005). This analysis poses monocultural 'bonding' social capital as problematic in the absence of 'bridging' forms of cross-ethnic contact (McGhee, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Underpinning this position is a critique of the unintended, negative consequences of past multiculturalist policies, with their pluralist approach to equality supplanting previous concern with inter-community relations. The result of the multi-cultural approach, it is argued, was progress in reducing educational and labour market disadvantage for some minority groups (Modood et al, 1997), but a significant

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weakening of concern with commonality. Local policies characterised by separate ethnic funding and facilities were seen to harden and deepen these ethnic divides (Cantle, 2005). Contested as the preceding analysis is, the real controversy has centred on the impression that the concern with segregation encodes anxieties about Muslim culture and identifications, in the euphemistic use of the term 'community' (Worley, 2005): *The official response to the riots evident in this and other reports lays much (but not all) of the responsibility for them on to Muslims* (Pilkington, 2008:4).This allegation stems, we feel, from a partial reading of the national (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001) and local (Ouseley, 2001; Ritchie, 2001) community cohesion reports, as well as the unbalanced political pronouncements that accompanied them (Travis, 2001). This partial reading implies that communities are segregating themselves: *We have concentrated on our terms of reference and focused on the very worrying drift towards self-segregation* (Ouseley, 2001: i).

Ouseley's agentic account of communities voluntarily embracing segregation, written before and published shortly after the Bradford riot, together with the subsequent focus on 'congregation', or voluntary clustering of ethnic minority communities (CRE, 2001), set a tone for national debates around the meaning of community cohesion that did not reflect Cantle's more nuanced and balanced analysis, and suggested that an excess of diversity is problematic for national solidarity (Goodhart, 2004; Ritchie, 2001). To critics, the very existence of this 'segregation' debate diverts attention from the continuing reality of racism, as historic racial practices within Oldham's housing market are central to its contemporary spatial segregation (Kundnani, 2001). Such criticisms were accentuated by the emphasis in several of the reports on the 'cultural practices' of Muslim communities, a phrase not applied to white communities (Alexander, 2004). This version of ethnicity represents culture as a unique property of the Other: monolithic, self-referential and inward looking, and generative of fixed identities, encouraging, as Jenkins points out, the reification of ethnic boundaries (2008, p 169). Ethnic categories need rather to be seen as 'cultural constructions with experiential, intersubjective, organisational and representational facets' (Anthias 2001, p. 844), with identifications and boundaries

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shaped by, and resulting in, shifting and interacting positionalities (Rattansi and Phoenix, 2009).

A similar critique sees the emphasis in the reports on the use of English, and on the persistence of strong links with countries of family origin (Cantle, 2001:19; Ritchie, 2001, Sec. 3:24 and 3:20) as a return to the assimilationist approach to policy officially abandoned in the 1960s, an era when it was expected that ethnic minorities should surrender their distinctive culture in a process characterised by Essed and Goldberg (2002) as 'cultural cloning'). While some identify the focus on cohesion and integration as being at odds with New Labour's earlier acknowledgement of 'Institutional Racism' (Back et al, 2002), the national community cohesion reports' consistent and even-handed focus on the racism and prejudices of white communities, and the contribution that they need to make to building a more cohesive future, including a call for more vigorous implementation of equal opportunities/anti-discriminatory measures, should also be recognised (Cantle, 2001: 23; Denham, 2001:20)The subsequent failure of the community cohesion agenda (DCLG, 2007a) to speak to white communities, was in spite of the fact that inter-racial tensions and violent racial incursions by some white men were central to the 2001 riots (Denham, 2001). Until recently, discussion of the role of white people, and their attitudes towards community cohesion and ethnic diversity (Sveinsson, 2009) has been limited, with the result that 'whiteness' itself is invisible (Bonnett, 2000), specifically the roles and perspectives of white young people and their communities in relation to the cohesion project.

 This focus on Muslims is congruent with the foregrounding of cultural factors rather than economic/structural forces (Kalra and Kapoor, 2009), in discussions of the causes of segregation and racial conflict. Cantle's answer to the question of why the 2001 riots occurred in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, was that other towns and cities, such as Leicester and Southall, had managed diversity more effectively. However, with Amin (2002), we would argue that the source of geographical differences in ethnic tensions lies in the economic changes that 'Northern Towns' like Oldham, Burnley, Bradford and Rochdale have experienced over the past 50 years. Ethnic tensions contributing to and symbolised by the 2001 riots are a symptom of deeper economic insecurities and changes within wider British society which have

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not been evenly-spread (Modood et al, 1997; Byrne, 1999). Oldham and Leicester are distinguished not by their management of ethnic diversity, but by the relative success of Leicester in developing a viable, post-industrial economy and diverse labour market. In fact, Indian-origin communities in Leicester are as spatially segregated as Muslim communities are in Oldham or Bradford, but are more successful, and hence 'integrated', in terms of educational success and employment (Bonney and LeGoff, 2007; Finney and Simpson, 2009). Similarly, the 'white working class' communities seen by the Labour government as 'under pressure', a euphemism for susceptibility to the BNP, and targeted by the short-lived 'Connecting Communities' fund (Denham, 2009), seem to be some of those spatially defined working class communities most affected by the de-industrialisation of the past thirty years. The very idea of a 'white' working class is, as Nayak argues (2009), historically contingent, and the borders of 'whiteness' shift with changes in public policy and population movements. The underpinning assumption of community cohesion appears to be that it is the segregation of those most similar in age and index of deprivation which is most potentially damaging to the social fabric, hence a focus on policies aimed at youth. Since the work of Les Back and Anne Phoenix in London in the 1990s, it has also been evident that achieving a genuinely nuanced understanding of race and youth identifications involves an appreciation of a complex range of factors, including the nature of interaction between local group identifications, which may involve shifting perceptions, alliances and positionalities (Back, 1993).   In the following section on methodology we describe what we perceive to be key aspects of the sites of our research, which distinguish it and its young people from the metropolitan environment examined by Back and Phoenix.

Methods

 This research follows other recent case study approaches to exploring issues of race, ethnicity, citizenship and identification in regions of the U.K. (Scourfield and Davies, 2005; Hopkins, 2007; Basit, 2009), both in attempting to be sensitive to the impact of local factors and issues, and in developing innovative approaches to collection of qualitative data in order to tap both explicit and tacit dimensions of identification. For example, our understanding of the implementation of community cohesion policies in Oldham (Author A) had suggested that, in youth work practice,

cohesion work was **not** assimilationist; rather, it involved working with and respecting different identities, following the principles of 'contact theory', whilst encouraging the augmentation of inclusive, over-arching identities. This suggested a need for a nuanced understanding of young people's feelings about ethnic diversity and contact.

Oldham witnessed the first of the 2001 riots, with four days of unrest that attracted unwelcome national attention (Ritchie, 2001).The neighbouring borough of Rochdale was assessed at that time as racially tense but avoided riots (Travis, 2006). Historically based around the textile industries, industrial employers in Oldham and Rochdale recruited labour from Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 1950s and 60s, and both areas now have significant ethnic segregation:

All the places with high or very high segregation are Pennine
towns crossing from West Yorkshire into Lancashire, north of Greater
Manchester. (ODPM, 2006:148)

This is illustrated locally in both housing and schools (Burgess et al, 2005). Oldham remains one of the few areas nationally where more white people report being the victim of a 'racial incident'; whilst such statistics are complex and often presented in highly-misleading ways, they indicate the racialised nature of lived experience (Ray and Smith, 2002).The gradual disappearance of the textile industries has had a profound impact on the socio-economic position of Oldham and Rochdale. Oldham was the 38th most deprived local authority out of 354 in England at the time of the 2001 disturbances (Oldham MBC, 2004), with both Oldham and Rochdale having electoral wards amongst the most deprived nationally (Rochdale MBC, 2009:7), and exhibiting high levels of economic and spatial 'social exclusion' affecting both white and Muslim communities.

Our sample was assembled through out-of school youth work provision. In order to maximise the potential for collecting data in a natural setting, youth workers were trained in basic research techniques and collaboratively devised a range of qualitative research tools that were then used in work with young people aged 13-19 over a two month period. The targeted 'social exclusion' focus of recent youth work

practice (Mizen, 2004), implies that this approach will over-represent socially excluded young people. This might skew the data, but arguably ethnic segregation and racialised opposition to the 'other', are precisely related to marginalised young people who have 'lost' from the re-structuring of globalisation (May, 1999). The youth work projects involved in the research were based in areas of disadvantage, with those focussed on white youth based in suburban and satellite areas largely consisting of social housing estates. All the white youth groups involved were mixed gender. Local High Schools were dominated by one ethnic group, rather than being genuinely ethnically mixed, whereas post-16 college or training provision was more ethnically mixed, arguably because of the lack of choice available.

Like Scourfield and Davies (2007) and Basit (2009), we used varied research methods including questionnaires, focus group discussions, word association and sentence completion exercises, and an 'Identity Ranking' exercise. All research activity was part of on-going youth group work, with decisions about which research methods were suitable made locally. Whilst being fully aware of the dangers of compliance and conformity in such group-based research approaches (Albrecht et al, 1993), the conviction was that the data would be more meaningful, and the responses more open and honest.

The data discussed below relates only to the responses of young people identifying themselves as 'white', with data relating to Muslim young people presented elsewhere (Authors A and B). The sampling and data collection approaches used demand caution in drawing conclusions. Nevertheless, clear patterns can be identified in the individual and group response of white working class young people to contact across ethnic boundaries.

Experiences of cross-ethnic contact
As noted above, the contextual factors surrounding 'inter-ethnic' contact, such as the environment in which contact takes place, or previous experience of contact, may have a profound effect on whether a contact strategy is successful. For example, Back found in his study of South London that young people tended to apply the simple binaries of racist discourse maintained by their parents erratically: *in this space there exists no simple process where the "bleaching" of difference occurs*

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under the hegemony of white dominance; rather a subtle process of appropriation of cultural heritages occurs which are placed together with a degree of fit, their meanings modified to such an extent they take on a new life (Back, 1993, 24). The social and spatial configuration of towns like Oldham and Rochdale, however, has produced an environment where this kind of syncretism is far more problematic.

In contrast to primary schools in Oldham and Rochdale, High Schools or colleges were not monocultural, offering environments where boundaries were more fluid and negotiable, and some white young people reported positive contact with Muslim young people in such educational settings, though this contact was limited and largely superficial. Most of our respondents had however experienced a primary education which was highly segregated. Both Muslim and white respondents identified the result as being a mutual wariness in social situations, even where respondents had no direct experience of racist behaviour. White young people who expressed more positive views about contact tended to attribute blame for the lack of mixing on a perceived diffidence among Asian/Muslim young people: *I try* (to mix) *but it's just a case of every time I do try you get that kind of bad attitude of like "keep away from me I don't want any trouble" .. I've noticed like when you're outside they kind of like, not ignore you in a bad way but they don't make the effort .. I think that's how it starts though when they're all like "oh well we don't mix with white people because things are going to kick off" I think it will kick off more if you refuse to speak to somebody.*

Outside of controlled educational environments, reported contact was negligible, with blame for this attached to the attitudes of their own families and peers, and associated fears about entering 'unsafe' territory, as exemplified by this 13 year old young man explaining why he never invited Muslim school friends home: *my mates and stuff...* (it would) *start fighting and got mates who don't like 'em.* This appears to support the 'parallel lives' analysis (Cantle, 2001), with white young people both pessimistic about the possibility of cross-ethnic contact, or not even seeing the point: *If they spoke to me I would* (talk to them) *but I wouldn't go up to them and start talking to them.* As is the case nationally (Kintrea et al, 2008),our respondents had mental maps, frequently racialised, of safe and unsafe 'territory' and the significant physical ethnic segregation in Oldham and Rochdale led to an overlap between

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'race' and territory found in other locality-based research (Webster, 1995): the significant Muslim populations of the actual town centres of Oldham and Rochdale led many white young people from suburban and satellite areas to construe the whole town centre and its amenities as unsafe for white young people: *If I like went to hang around with my friends, like meet other people, I wouldn't feel safe* and *It's a war zone, that's what I think.* White young people's racialised perception on the town centres was accompanied by wild exaggerations of the size of ethnic minority population. The response of one white young person to a question about the composition of Rochdale was typical: *Asian like Muslim and stuff, make up about 60/70% and the rest are white and black.*

Absence of Contact

This racialisation of the main towns that give the name to the Local Authority area is related to the noticeably more negative response of white young people to the Questionnaire assertion that :

'Different sorts of people get on well in (name of Local Authority area)?

TABLE 1

For a significant number of the young people surveyed, largely those experiencing the lack of cross-ethnic contact reported above, the resulting ignorance of difference tipped over into prejudices and stereotypes, some of them overtly hostile and racist in tone. For some young whites, such judgments of the 'other' were expressed in crude racist terms, such as: *Muslim people are money-grabbers*, *Rochdale is Pakistan now*, and *Multicultural means bombers*, suggesting that ethnic segregation and the lack of positive contact made such prejudices easier to hold. Some white young people surveyed reported a 'sense of unfairness' , mirroring wider research findings (Hewitt, 2005) amongst young people who inhabit an irredentist white working class narrative of expropriation, in which ethnic minority groups have been prioritised by policy makers: *They* (Asians) *get everything they want.* These respondents often felt they were looked down upon by the rest of society, contrary to past notions that white racist prejudices are about 'superiority': *I don't mind them being Asian if they didn't look down on us and take over; I wouldn't be bothered but everywhere you go you get looked down on by them, and it's your country, it's our*
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country. It was true that a minority of Muslim respondents, especially, young men, **were** highly judgemental about white young people, using religious terminology in describing them as 'immoral', 'godless' and 'drunken':

White people: Shameless, not believing in God, no respect for other people;

I don't understand their tradition – they haven't really got one, they haven't got a background

The complex relationship between ethnic identification and the experience of categorization (Jenkins, 2007, p.83) by 'others' revealed here underscores the importance of positionality in understanding the responses of each group, and the individuals that constitute the groups, to the idea of contact. The participants demonstrated a range of responses in all the data gathering exercises, some positive towards the idea of a multi-cultural Rochdale/Oldham and the contact that implied, but with a substantial group turning their faces firmly against the concept and the practice of boundary crossing.

A Cohesive future?

In this context, the strong preference amongst white young people surveyed across Oldham and Rochdale for 'English' as their favoured form of identification, rather than 'British', shown in Table 2 below, might be understood as a racialised form of nationality, an understanding supported by the Muslim young people surveyed who overwhelmingly saw 'English' as an exclusively white form of identity (Author A).

Table 2

Young people were asked for their views regarding ethnic diversity in society, and whether they regarded this as positive, using a 3-point attitude scale. While a large number of respondents indicated they were 'not sure' about many of the statements there were still notable differences between the groups self-identifying as Muslim and white young people. 60% of the group self-identifying as Muslim (n=76) agreed that *'Britain is a stronger country because of difference'* as opposed to 23% white young people (n=172). In response to the converse statement that *'Britain is stronger if groups live separately'*, only 16% of Muslims definitely agreed and 71% definitely disagreed, as opposed to 36% of the white group definitely agreeing and 30% definitely disagreeing, so displaying a small but significant white majority in

support of the idea that even greater ethnic segregation would be better for all concerned, a highly pessimistic conclusion some years after the prioritisation of community cohesion.

Discussion: Uncommitted to contact?

The scepticism of a substantial proportion of the white young people in our study concerning ethnic diversity and cross-ethnic boundary crossing is understandable, given the demographics of ethnicity, and this calls into doubt the stress on the 'problem' of Muslim integration. Given that the UK non-white ethnic minority population is currently only around 8-9% (Finney and Simpson, 2009) and that those communities are heavily concentrated in specific English conurbations (Modood et al, 1997), the corollary is that the communities most 'segregated' and most conditioned to living within monocultural norms are white communities: *it is the majority White populations that are the most isolated and least engaged with communities other than their own* (Finney and Simpson, 2009:111). This demographic reality and the clear statistical data showing that nationally no electoral wards can be called monocultural ethnic minority 'ghettos' in the American sense (Kalra and Kapoor, 2009), immediately suggests caution about some of the 'taken for granted' assumptions about ethnic segregation. This picture is true even in apparently multicultural local authorities like Oldham and Rochdale: in both cases the principal towns themselves have significant ethnic minority concentrations in certain electoral wards whose make up nevertheless does not contain more than 60% of non-white ethnic minorities, but the wider areas have suburban and satellite areas that are overwhelmingly white (Oldham MBC, 2006). This relative ethnic isolation of white young people, even in what are, statistically, 'multicultural' areas, might well in itself contribute to the less positive attitudes of white young people to diversity, and this is supported by research whose *results show that white children who are segregated from other races have far more intolerant attitudes than schools where whites mix with others* (Dodd, 2006:13).That survey examined the attitudes of 15 year olds across the north west of England on race, religion and integration, and found that belief in racial superiority was much higher in white majority schools than in Asian majority or ethnically-mixed schools (Dodd, 2006). Such attitudes stemming from white mono-cultural isolation and lack of cross-ethnic contact provide some

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explanation for the data presented above. However, resentment about ethnic diversity and multicultural contact can also be grounded in the relationship between racialised feelings and class experiences, discussed below. They include the problematic impact of multiculturalist policies, the profound social and cultural changes wrought on many white (and non-white) communities by de-industrialisation, the loss of focus on class in society as concern with ethnic equality has grown, and the resulting and highly questionable media representation of the white working class as an 'ethnically disadvantaged' group.

Multiculturalism, ethnic identification and class

The critique of the unintended impacts of multiculturalist policies over the past thirty years (Cantle, 2005) embraces policies such as ethnic monitoring, attempts to address ethnic inequalities in education and employment through action plans, and educational attempts to combat racism and promote positive understandings of diversity. The price for the positive outcomes of these policies has been seen to be the reification and essentialisation of ethnic identities, with fixed ethnic identities seen as the prime creators of experience in society (Bhavnani, 2001).Little attention has been given to intersectionality, the inter-connections between creators of identity and experience, and class has been largely erased from the discussion of equality. Equality policies have been seen as leading to a 'white backlash' (Hewitt, 2005) from young people who feel that they are the ones discriminated against, often by professionals who look down on their language, culture and community as 'racist' and ignorant. The resentment at perceived expropriation, exclusion, and condescension expressed by some of our respondents seems to support such wider discussion.

The data highlighted in Table 2 on white working class identifications arguably also highlights problematic features of past multiculturalist policies. Such approaches have focussed on and celebrated difference, but this raises questions over how white working class young people have understood and interpreted this policy focus on essentialised understandings of 'identity'. Its effect has not only been to highlight difference rather than commonality but to leave many white young people unsure about what 'their' culture and tradition is. This is partially because white Britishness is all around us as an uninterrogated norm (Bonnett, 2000), and because of the

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process of secularisation, and the wider loss of community focus and collective working class institutions brought about by socio-economic change.

In that context, a policy approach to diversity that focuses on religion, 'traditions' and ceremonies can marginalise many white young people, with research amongst young people in the North-East of England, an overwhelmingly white area of the country, showing white young people the least clear and confident as to what their 'ethnic background' and 'traditions' are (Nayak, 1999).

This focus on essentialised ethnic cultures has been exacerbated by a perception, reinforced by the redtop media, of a common failure to mark or celebrate symbols of Britishness or Englishness, whether flying national flags or marking St. George's Day. A view that such behaviour would be racist or exclusionary has fuelled the feelings of some white young people and their communities that they are 'not allowed' to celebrate their own identity, so handing the initiative to far-right racist organisations prepared to do so (Bragg, 2006). The strong support for 'English' as the preferred form of identity by the white young people we surveyed in Oldham and Rochdale, rather than the more inclusive 'British', suggests a racialised identity that echoes how the far-right BNP have exploited multiculturalist space to demand 'rights for whites' over the past two decades (Copsey, 2008).

The multiculturalist concern with ethnic identity developed at the same time as profound changes happened to class structures in Britain and to the way that 'class' was viewed. Central to this has been the large-scale de-industrialisation that has had marked effects on former manufacturing areas like Oldham and Rochdale. Portrayed as an inevitable development of globalisation that will ultimately benefit everyone, other commentators have seen this economic change, and the very significant marginalisation known as 'social exclusion', as a deliberate development by unregulated capitalism (Byrne, 1999). Beyond dispute is the fact that these changes have greatly undermined the stability and structures of working class communities in former industrial areas, impacting on the identities of the inhabitants, with class and employment-based identities weakening, and identities more based on ethnicity and cultural norms inevitably moving in to the vacuum (Collins, 2004). Here, 'whiteness' had not previously been interrogated because secure working class employment, stable communities, and associated cultural institutions supplied identity, but working class communities increasingly no longer have common experiences, or

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even work at all. At the same time, the way class itself is viewed in society has changed profoundly, with the language of class studiously ignored by politicians who prefer phrases like 'hard working families' , and the social exclusion prism of viewing social inequality arguably having a strong focus on individual responsibility and agency The result has been that disdain for the poorest sections of the working class, or 'chavs', has become publicly acceptable (Collins, 2004), and that significant sections of former Labour voters have been appealed to by the racial narratives of the far-right British National Party. This, and the continuation of an essentialised ethnic equality policy agenda at a time when life chances and experiences for different ethnic minority communities are increasingly diverse (Modood et al, 1997) goes some way to explain why some of the white young people we surveyed describe their marginalisation through racialised rather than class resentment, feeling negatively judged and sidelined by ethnic minorities. This wider discourse can be seen in the way that the 'white working class' have been discussed in relation to educational and housing experiences.

The real losers?

Historically, the close correlation between educational success and economic class background in Britain has been explained by some as being due to the antipathy of the working class to formal education. However, more recently , the 'white working class' have had their educational cause advocated from unlikely quarters, as a number of newspapers and political commentators have claimed that the white working class are the group **really** 'ethnically disadvantaged' within educational achievement. This rhetoric of class abandonment is now deployed to attack diversity measures in political discourse (Svenission, 2009a), with the result that white working class young people, including many of those we surveyed, offer a racialised understanding of their disadvantage, resenting Muslim communities who actually have had a similar economic experience over the past generation, rather than the mainly white middle and upper classes who have actually gained from neo-liberal economic re-structuring (Byrne, 1999). The claim that the educational achievement of the 'white working class' is poorer than ethnic minorities is based on a misleading use of both 'working class' as a concept, and on the actual data (Gilborn, 2009). Not only are such claims used to implicitly attack the 'unfairness' of multiculturalist policies of monitoring and achievement –raising, echoing the political strategies of

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far-right political groups (Copsey, 2008), but they also contain a judgementalism about the lack of success of the 'white working class': *By presenting the white working class in ethnic terms, as yet another cultural minority in a (dysfunctional) 'multicultural Britain', commentators risk giving a **cultural** reading of inequality* (Bottero, 2009:7, her emphasis).

This racialised understanding of experience has been exacerbated by the fact that the genuinely re-distributive educational measures introduced by the New Labour government, such as Sure Start, were studiously **not** badged as class-based policies; instead opaque terms like 'social exclusion' have been deployed. Unsurprisingly, as our data and other field-based research (Hewitt, 2005) indicates, a racialised picture of policies unfairly disadvantaging the 'white working class' has gained significant traction within white communities. Such discourses of unfairness around regeneration funding were seen as a significant trigger for the 2001 disturbances (Cantle, 2001), and have focussed on housing, with modern, equality-driven rules portrayed as responsible for housing shortages that have broken up traditional white communities (Dench et al, 2006). That sympathetic narrative of 'white flight' flies in the face of evidence about how increasing affluence leads to housing drift towards suburban and semi-rural areas for **all** ethnic groups (Finney and Simpson, 2009), but also racialises much more profound structural changes in the housing market and associated policy, such as the large reduction in social housing stocks (Garner, 2009). The inevitable resentment that sections of the (white) working class feel about their constrained housing options, with ownership often beyond their reach, has increasingly focussed on minority 'others', egged on by political and media discourses from both right and left that have focussed on 'race' and ethnic difference whilst ignoring class and social inequality.

Arguably, our survey area of Oldham and Rochdale is one of the 'hot spots' where this racialisation of social inequality issues, in a societal context where class is systematically denied, has increasingly influenced people's lived experiences partially because of deeply unhelpful media coverage and opportunistic inflammation by far -right parties. Such apparent manifestations of support for, or tolerance of, 'racism' has led supposedly anti-racist commentators to suggest that the white middle class are 'better' at ethnic diversity than the white working class (Ware, 2009),with : *working class whites exclusively cast in the role of villain* (Collins,

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2004:247). The evidence from working class-based youth cultures that have embraced ethnic diversity challenges this (Hebdidge,1979). Indeed, despite the significantly negative and pessimistic views of ethnic diversity amongst our white respondents, and the virulent racism that some of them expressed, there were still grounds for optimism. Firstly, the minority of white respondents who did attend ethnically-mixed schools or colleges said that they had 'friends' of a different ethnic background within that environment, with issues of family and peer pressure and associated issues of territorial safety being the constraints on meeting outside, rather than personal preferences. Secondly, young people of all ethnic backgrounds in our survey wanted more opportunities and sites to meet people of a different ethnic background, as one white young person indicated: *get youth clubs where you can put them together and then get them to be all right with each other*. This included support for the idea of mixed housing areas, something that is being prioritised across Oldham and Rochdale by the Housing Market Renewal initiative, and which builds on significant survey evidence across all ethnic groups locally for more ethnically-mixed housing developments (Phillips et al, 2008).

Conclusion

As the response to the 2011 riots demonstrated, public policy responses to disturbances like those in Northern towns in 2001 are rarely grounded in a nuanced analysis. So in spite of the balance expressed in the reports commissioned after the 2001 events, much of the political and media discourse around community cohesion (Travis, 2001;Goodhart, 2004; Alexander, 2004) focussed predominantly on the willingness of Muslim communities to integrate. Insufficient attention has been paid to the feelings and experiences of white communities, particularly working class ones experiencing economic and social marginalisation. In surveying white young people in working class communities within two former industrial areas badly affected by post-industrial re-structuring, we have sought to discuss the links between white working class negativity about the cross-ethnic contact integral to community cohesion, and wider class experiences and discourses in current British society. We have argued here that a number of wider structural and political factors can be understood as feeding in to the sort of white negativity and attitudes identified here and elsewhere (Hewitt, 2005). White people, even in 'multicultural' areas, are more likely to have 'segregated' experiences, and live in overwhelmingly monocultural

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white areas, so limiting experience of, and learning about, the realities, rather than the myths, of ethnic diversity (Finney and Simpson, 2009). Secondly, sections of the white working class, especially in areas profoundly changed and marginalised by post-industrial re-structuring such as Oldham and Rochdale, have viewed ethnic relations and the possibilities of cross-ethnic contact negatively in a context where class inequality and experience is denied and de-legitimised. Multiculturalist policies have largely ignored white identities (Nayak, 1999; Bonnett, 2000) in a political and societal context where the reality and meaning of class is increasingly denied (Svenisson, 2009a;Garner, 2009) , leading to some white people, including a substantial minority of the young people we surveyed, developing more racialised and exclusive understandings of identity. However a more optimistic view can be derived from the positive response of some of our white respondents to the idea of inter-ethnic contact, and from earlier research in our case study area around the implementation of community cohesion work with young people (Author A), that suggested young people of all ethnic groups were positive about opportunities to meet across ethnic divides in safe and well-planned circumstances. Cohesion activity that focussed on the active involvement of white young people and their communities in the processes of cross-ethnic contact would not 'solve' the problems of areas like Oldham and Rochdale, but would contribute positively to getting 'race' out of the way, and challenge the white young people displaying overt racialisation to re-think their attitudes and assumptions (Hanley, 2008). It would also allow a collective focus on the profound, class-based social inequalities that are currently limiting the potential of young people of all ethnic backgrounds.

Notes
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Table 1

Respondent Group	Definitely Agree (%)	Not sure (%)	Definitely Disagree (%)
Muslim	25	55	20
White	14	46	40

Table 2.

Self-ascribed ethnicity	Rank Religion 1 or 2 (%)	Rank English 1 or 2 (%)	Rank British 1 or 2 (%)
White British, English, White, White English, White Christian, British (N=57)	7	75	56
Asian Pakistani, British Muslim, Pakistani Kashmiri, Pakistani, British Asian, Bangladeshi/Bengali, British Bengali, British Asian (N=54)	93	3	20
Black African, Black British, Mixed Race, Other (N=16)	44	56	44