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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-ascribed ethnicity</th>
<th>Rank Religion 1/2</th>
<th>Rank ‘English’ 1/2</th>
<th>Rank ‘British’ 1/2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘White’ categories</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Asian’ categories</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Black’ and other</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 than 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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Group</th>
<th>Definitely Agree (%)</th>
<th>Definitely Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Muslim</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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