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The Impact of 'Community Cohesion' on Youth Work: A case study from Oldham

Paul Thomas

Initiated by the 2001 disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, 'community cohesion' offers a critique of the apparently negative race relations in many of Britain's towns and cities. Whilst highly contested, this concept has become a policy reality. So what does it mean for Youth Work? Drawing on empirical evidence from Oldham, this paper examines the impact of community cohesion on Youth Work policy and practice. It argues that, contrary to the largely hostile academic critique, community cohesion has been positively understood and supported by youth workers. Furthermore, community cohesion has enabled a 'modal shift' in youth work towards forms of practice rooted in the history and traditions of youth work, and has allowed youth work agencies to take pivotal roles in policy responses to ethnic segregation and tension. Inherent in this modal shift of practice is a critique of 'anti-racism', as it has been understood and practised by many welfare professionals.

Keywords: community cohesion; multiculturalism; youth work; anti-racism

The summer of 2001 saw serious street disturbances in a number of towns in the north of England. Whilst the events in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley had specific and localised triggers, all involved 'race' and racism, with South Asian young men clashing with the police and with white young men in each case. The disturbances and the resulting damage were viewed as the worst in Britain since the inner-city unrest of the early to mid 1980s. Government's response was an Inquiry and two reports (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001), whilst the affected local areas of Oldham (Ritchie, 2001), Burnley (Clarke, 2001) and Bradford (Ouseley, 2001) produced their own local analysis. In all these reports, the focus was not on the actual triggers and events that led to the outbreaks of disorder. Instead, there was a shared recognition that the violence represented deeper issues and tensions below the surface of Britain's supposed 'multi-cultural' society. Cantle (2001) bluntly characterised the 'riot' towns as ethnically segregated, with an absence of community cohesion caused by a lack of shared values, respect and mutual understanding. Whilst not using the term 'community cohesion', the local reports accepted that different ethnic communities were living separate, 'parallel lives' (Ritchie, 2001) in their towns. Although many commentators (Kundnani, 2001; Kalra, 2002; Alexander, 2004) have been highly critical of the assumptions and language of community cohesion, there has been acceptance across the political spectrum that the 2001 disturbances, and the resulting 'community cohesion debate', represent a watershed in post-war 'race relations' discourse and policy.

Since 2001 community cohesion has moved from being the dominant paradigm of explanation for the disturbances to becoming policy reality. Community cohesion is now a key pillar of government's race equality strategy (Home Office, 2005). Advice was given to all Local Authorities (LGA, 2002) both on how to initiate and how to measure the effectiveness of work around community cohesion, whilst the concern with evidence-based practice led to funding of pilot activities in fourteen 'Pathfinder' and fourteen (unfunded) 'Shadow' Local Authorities (Home Office, 2003). This policy shift has had direct impacts on youth work, with the National Youth Agency offering good practice guidance (NYA, 2002; 2004), and OFSTED inspections of Local Authority Youth Services focussing on performance around this key area (OFSTED, 2004).

Given these policy developments, it is somewhat surprising that there has been little or no empirical research into how community cohesion is understood and put into practice by different branches of welfare. Academic debate (Kalra, 2002; McGhee, 2003, Burnett, 2004; Worley, 2005) has focussed entirely on the language and discourse of the community cohesion reports and accompanying ministerial pronouncements. How is community cohesion actually understood by practitioners on the ground? What differences has it made, if any, to the assumptions and priorities of practice? In drawing on a small piece of research in Oldham soon after the 2001 disturbances, I speculated (Thomas, 2003) that youth work could potentially make a distinctive contribution to community cohesion. Green and Pinto (2005), in a rare empirical piece of community cohesion research based on evidence from a Local Authority Youth Service in South East England, highlighted this potential, but also showed the negligible impact on youth work practice of community cohesion due to limitations of understanding, commitment and resourcing. Within this, Green and Pinto concluded that:

There is a crucial need to address the lack of empirical research within the practical application of community cohesion policies. (2005:58)

I attempt to respond to that need by discussing initial findings from research carried out with youth workers in Oldham during 2005/2006. The data discussed was gathered as part of an ongoing doctoral study and material used here is from over 30 one-to-one interviews carried out with youth work staff at all levels of responsibility and experience in both the Local Authority Youth Service and voluntary sector youth and community work agencies in Oldham. As a white, male Youth and Community Work Lecturer, with professional and voluntary fieldwork experience in anti-racist and anti-oppressive Youth and Community Work practice, I have a deep interest in what community cohesion can and does represent for practice. Using this data, I suggest that in Oldham, community cohesion is clearly understood and supported by youth workers, and that the (necessary) prioritisation in Oldham of community cohesion has enabled a modal shift in youth work practice organisation and assumptions around 'race' and race relations. I also suggest that not only does youth work in Oldham have a (largely) successful story to tell around this community cohesion activity, but that it is practice based on what many would regard as 'traditional' (Smith, 1982; 2003) forms of youth work, based on association, experiential activity and fun.

Community cohesion?

Robinson (2005) has highlighted the fact that community cohesion had no pedigree as a concept or term prior to the reports into the 2001 disturbances. For some, this very newness raises suspicions that it represents a deliberate diversion from important issues of causes and responsibility. A parallel might be made here with New Labour's over-arching focus on social exclusion, for some a helpful way of describing new social and economic realities (Hills et al, 2002), for others (Levitas, 1998; Byrne, 1999) a deliberate form of containment and closure. Worley (2005) helpfully highlights the 'slippages' between 'community' and 'social' cohesion within government discourse post-2001, seeing this as symptomatic of a desire to avoid 'naming' certain issues or groups. However, Cantle (2001) and Denham (2001) are very clear on the meaning and relevance of community cohesion. For Cantle, the 2001 disturbances exposed stark ethnic/racial segregation and antipathy that many had preferred to ignore:

The team was particularly struck by the depth of polarisation of our towns and cities. The extent to which these physical divisions were compounded by so many other aspects of our daily lives was very evident. Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on a basis of a series of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges. (Cantle, 2001:9)

Ritchie(2001) saw 'parallel lives' as the reality of an ethnically-segregated Oldham, but there is a fierce and ongoing academic debate over whether ethnic (as opposed to class/economic) segregation in housing has actually grown (Robinson, 2005). Kalra (2002) challenges the whole notion of 'segregation' within the community cohesion discourse, seeing British young people of all ethnic backgrounds as sharing a common youth culture, which makes the notion of 'cultural segregation' absurd. However, Lord Herman Ouseley, ex-Chair of the government-sponsored Commission for Racial Equality and a long-term anti-racist campaigner commented in his report on Bradford, commissioned before, but published after the 2001 disturbances there, that he found a:

*Very worrying drift towards **self-segregation**. (Ouseley, 2001: Introduction. My emphasis)*

Here, Ouseley highlights the controversial core of community cohesion: its focus on 'agency' (Greener, 2002); of the responsibility for individual and group choices leading to segregation by both white and ethnic minority communities. Cantle (2001) stressed the need for 'greater use of English' and 'greater commitment to national institutions' – comments that Bagguley and Hussain (2003) see as racialised and partial. Given the clear race equality focus of the Commission for Racial Equality, its own report into the 2001 disturbances might have been expected to echo this latter criticism, but instead accepted the unpalatable reality of 'congregation', or self-segregation by all communities (CRE,2001).

Unsurprisingly, anti-racist campaigners, such as the Institute of Race Relations (Kundnani, 2001), see this as a retreat from anti-racism towards 'assimilation', the requirement that ethnic minorities should 'fit in' with the (white) majority, whilst others (Alexander, 2004)

see the whole community cohesion discourse as a pathologisation of Asian communities. The focus on the need for race equality measures in Cattle (2001) and Denham (2001) makes this charge hard to sustain, although Back et al (2002) identify the Government as 'looking in both directions' on 'race' issues by apparently retreating from a concern with structural racism. In a much more positive assessment, McGhee (2003) sees community cohesion as a 'Putnamesque' problematisation of excessive 'bonding social capital' (Putnam, 2000). To McGhee, 'community cohesion' is acknowledging that previous approaches to 'race relations', in particular the essentialising and privileging of 'race' and ethnicity by both multiculturalism and 'anti-racism' in the face of the reality of racism and racial segregation (Bhavnani, 2001), has supported the development of strong mono-ethnic communities with poorly-developed forms of 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000; Thomas, 2003), so making mutual contact and understanding across ethnic lines very difficult. McGhee (2003) also sees community cohesion's focus on 'agency' as having clear links to Etzioni's notion of 'communitarianism', the idea that individuals and communities should be encouraged to take more responsibility for collectively improving situations around them in an era of welfare approaches that implicitly assume dependency (Etzioni, 1995).

From this perspective, rather than representing a retreat from anti-racism, community cohesion could represent a timely and necessary step forward towards a genuinely hybrid and cosmopolitan society (Hall, 2000), a move that requires robust and genuinely open debate, and the acceptance of multiple, rather than singular identities (Modood and Werbner, 1997). Current debates over the meaning of 'Britishness' and the reclamation of the English flag from the neo-nazi far-right can also be seen in this context.

Youth Work, racism and community cohesion

Pople (1997) analysed youth work's long and changing engagement with racism and racial tension, from the assimilationist assumptions of the Hunt Report (DES, 1967), to the anti-racism of the 1980s (DES, 1982; Chauhan, 1990). The changing approaches identified by Pople partly reflect the reality that, as a form of Welfare State practice, the government-funded Youth Service has always bent and changed to reflect wider policy needs and priorities (Jeffs and Smith, 1988). Indeed, the priorities of youth work specifically (Smith, 2003) and welfare/education interventions with young people generally (Mizen, 2004) can be seen to be increasingly controlled by governmental agendas. Nevertheless, youth work has historically allowed 'space' where issues of race and identity can be addressed, and has shown the ability to engage with young people likely to become involved in racial conflict (Dadzie, 1997; Thomas, 2003).

The community cohesion reports (Cattle, 2001; Denham, 2001) highlighted the poor state of youth work provision in the areas affected by the disturbances, with Cattle calling for a 'statutory base' for the Youth Service, and Denham emphasising the important role of youth work in promoting community cohesion. This can be seen as a direct reflection of the role of young people in the disturbances. Ritchie (2001) highlighted the inadequacy of youth work provision in Oldham prior to the 2001 disturbances as a direct, contributory cause. However, Ritchie also explicitly criticised the approaches taken to that youth work provision by Oldham Local Authority Youth Service. For Ritchie, the (assumed) role of youth work in

providing diversionary activities for young people (meaning young men) on the streets had been replaced with more formal, group-based educational programmes that engaged few of the 'at risk' young people. This downgrading of open access, youth club provision, the mainstay of youth work from the Albemarle report (Ministry for Education, 1960) onwards, in Oldham, as nationally, can be traced to the analysis of the Thompson Report (DES, 1982). Davies (1999) highlights how open access youth clubs have historically been dominated by white young men to the exclusion of young women and ethnic minority young people, the latter point being first highlighted by the Community Relations Council Report (1976). This analysis was finally accepted by Thompson, with his report giving Youth Services the green light to prioritise group work rather than open access and crucially, to remedy the deficit regarding ethnic minority young people by developing ethnic-specific youth provision (Chauhan, 1990; Popple, 1997).

Alongside these developments was a focus on anti-racist policies and programmes, and an acknowledgement that multiculturalism (Chauhan, 1990) had failed to address issues of racism, exclusion and power. There is increasing evidence, however, that much 'anti-racism' in youth work and schools, with its focus on creating 'acceptable' norms of language, behaviour and attitudes, has been problematic, and possibly counter-productive in some cases. Hewitt (1996), in a study commissioned by Greenwich Youth Service, identified a 'white backlash' amongst white working class young people to anti-racist approaches they perceived to be one sided and privileging of ethnic minority needs and experiences at the expense of their own. Hewitt's research followed the racist murders of three ethnic minority young men, including Stephen Lawrence, in the borough in the early 1990s, and represented an admission by Greenwich Youth Service that their anti-racist approaches and assumptions had not worked. Previous research by the University of Huddersfield (CRE, 1999; Thomas, 2002) identified that white-origin youth workers felt unsure and unconfident of their role in relation to anti-racism work with white young people. Workers perceived anti-racism to be about a curtailing and policing of 'wrong' attitudes and behaviour, something that the white-origin workers saw other, 'expert' (normally ethnic minority) workers as better-equipped to deal with than themselves. Underpinning this was a clear lack of confidence in their own ability to operationalise anti-racism, as they understood it.

The above discussions suggest that youth work assumptions and practices around 'race' and ethnic relations were bound to be re-examined in the light of the 2001 disturbances and community cohesion becoming a policy reality. Green and Pinto (2005) carried out research in one Local Authority Youth Service in the South East of England on the impact of community cohesion. Whilst questioning the concept itself, Green and Pinto found that an under-resourced Youth Service was ill-equipped to meet the challenge of what was viewed as an additional work task. Resourcing, though, was only partly the issue, with the concept itself being problematic:

Our findings showed that the youth service did struggle with the conceptual ambiguity and confusion in relation to the concept of community cohesion and the realities of trying to implement policy based on such confusions. Within an under-resourced and badly organised local environment, such problems seem exacerbated. (Green and Pinto, 2005:58)

Researching the impact of community cohesion

How much do the negative conclusions about the concept of community cohesion and its impact on Youth Work reached by Green and Pinto (2005) represent a generalised reality? Oldham was chosen as one of the towns experiencing disturbances in 2001, and yet having received comparatively little academic scrutiny.

At the time of the 2001 disturbances, Oldham was the 38th most deprived of 354 Local Authorities in England, with seven electoral wards within the 10% most deprived nationally (Cantle, 2006). With Oldham's internationally-renowned role in the cotton spinning trade long gone, unemployment is above the national average, although falling recently. Much higher pockets of unemployment exist in some geographical wards, particularly amongst white working class, and Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities of the town. Whilst the ethnic minority population of Oldham is 13%, amongst under 25 year olds of the town this rises to almost 23%. Economically and socially, Oldham cannot afford a tense and racially-segregated future (Cantle, 2006).

The research involved in-depth, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with youth workers in Oldham during 2005 and 2006. Given that Smith (1982) identifies 'conversation' as the key tool for youth workers, this research approach seemed the most appropriate, especially as the focus was on understandings and opinions. Existing professional relationships with statutory and voluntary sector youth work agencies in Oldham were utilised to negotiate access, with the final decision on participation resting with individual workers. Whilst youth work staff at all levels of responsibility were interviewed, ranging from Principal Youth Officer/Chief Executive to part-time workers and trainees, relying on a 'statistical sampling' approach (Kvale, 1996) would have over-represented part-time workers with only limited involvement in developing new work strategies. Instead, full-time professional workers, titled Area Youth Managers by Oldham Youth Service, were prioritised, using a 'theoretical sampling' approach (Flick, 2002), because of their relevance to the issue under investigation. Given the concerns that community cohesion may represent a back-tracking on anti-racism (Kundnani, 2001; Alexander, 2004), ethnic minority staff were also over-represented in the later stage of the research for the same reasons. However, Gunaratnam (2003) highlights the contradictory and problematic nature of researching 'race' and ethnicity; on the one hand giving legitimacy to questionable categorisations of individual identity by discussing it, but also having to engage with the reality of individual's experience and self-identity. Here, researchers have to both work with and against racial categories, reflecting both the racialised and discriminatory realities of society, but also the illusory and dangerous nature of 'race' itself (Gunaratnam, 2003).

All individual respondents agreed to take part before interviews were arranged, following sight of an explanatory brief. In all cases, interviews were negotiated directly with respondents, rather than through line managers. Interviews took place in a private space at their work base, with a pseudonym identified by each respondent for research use. All respondents agreed to the taping and transcription of the interview. My own background as a professionally qualified youth and community worker, and previous professional contact with a significant number of respondents, helped to establish rapport in the interview situation. Robson (2002) posits the view that social research can and should aim to make a

positive contribution to real world problems, and I made a commitment to feedback to the professional field in Oldham and regionally as soon as possible. This paper represents an initial attempt to offer learning and reflections to the field nationally. Rather than a positivist concern with 'truth', I take an interactionist (Flick, 2002) concern with the meanings and understandings of community cohesion held by youth workers in Oldham. For Kvale, the researcher here is not looking for a definitive answer:

What matters is rather to describe the possibly ambiguous and contradictory meanings expressed by the interviewee. (Kvale, 1996:33)

Research findings: A modal shift in youth work practice

The research process outlined above produced clear evidence that community cohesion has led to significant changes in the thinking and practice of youth workers in Oldham over the past five years. In some ways, this is not surprising, given the seriousness of the events of May 2001, and the negative picture of the town painted by Ritchie (2001). A large majority of the youth workers interviewed live in Oldham, with many having grown up there, and it was clear that the 2001 disturbances had been a traumatic event for them. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm and (largely) positive assessment of the work since carried out in the name of community cohesion was both striking and in stark contrast to previous studies of youth workers involved in anti-racist work (CRE, 1999; Thomas, 2002). The key research findings are discussed below, including continuing problems and concerns.

Community cohesion as 'meaningful direct contact'

A very clear consensus quickly emerged amongst respondents around the meaning of community cohesion as being about 'meaningful direct contact'. This clarity is in stark contrast to the findings of Green and Pinto (2005). The emphasis of Cattle (2001) and Ritchie (2001) on the need for contact and dialogue across ethnic divides as a means of developing mutual respect and shared values beyond the cul-de-sac of 'parallel lives' had clear resonance for all the youth workers surveyed. Workers of all ethnic backgrounds accepted the analysis of an ethnically segregated town, and that all communities needed to do more to bridge divides. Workers tended to be critical of their own ethnic 'community' or backgrounds here, rather than of others. This acceptance of 'agency', and its currently negative use by individuals and communities, may be seen as evidence of the liberal assumptions of 'welfarist' youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 1988), but it can also be seen as shedding light on the gap between reality and the evidence-free academic discourse around community cohesion.

For the youth workers surveyed, community cohesion means meaningful direct contact and work between young people of different ethnic backgrounds. Asad, a Bangladeshi-origin full-time Oldham Youth Service (OYS) Area Manager running youth work provision in a mainly Bangladeshi area, defined it as:

Building relationships, friendships and knowing what other cultures, other religions are doing and why, and understanding each other.

Stacey, an African-Caribbean origin OYS part-time worker currently studying for her professional qualification, comments that:

You've got to mix to learn – if you don't mix, you aren't learning anything.

For Johnson, a white-origin full-time OYS Area Manager for a largely Asian area, this direct contact has a clear focus on commonality:

For me, you're bringing young people together, you're highlighting that they've got a common interest, that they're young, they experience the same things as in poverty, crime, whatever... highlighting that the things that happen to them do happen to other people.

Whether this community cohesion 'direct contact' should simply focus on ethnic/racial differences alone, or also on much wider 'social' differences of territory, class and geography provoked much more debate amongst respondents. To some extent these differences support the focus of Worley (2005) on the 'slippages' between 'social' and 'community' cohesion in the national discourse. For respondents supporting a wider, 'social' understanding, this was partly an assertion of the traditional youth work belief that, first and foremost young people are young people, with shared experiences and interests, rather than an amalgam of differing ethnicities, classes and genders (Davies, 2005). It was also a recognition that in Oldham, other forms of difference and divides are equally fraught and problematic. For instance, many respondents commented on the violent, 'territory' based feuding between young people from different geographical neighbourhoods, but of the same ethnic origin. Jennifer, a white origin OYS Area Manager in a white working class area comments that:

There is this perception that community cohesion is about Asians and whites, and them getting on together, and I think, 'well, hang on a minute... I've got young people in X, and the idea of them mixing with young people from Y...!' (both white areas)

Other respondents highlighted the extent to which intergenerational tensions are a major source of complaints about 'anti-social behaviour'. However, there was a collective recognition that, given the events of 2001 and the current situation in the town, direct contact across ethnic and racial lines has to take precedence within community cohesion work in Oldham.

This common understanding of community cohesion as meaningful direct contact between young people of different ethnic backgrounds contained the simultaneous recognition that the term has no meaning or recognition factor for young people. Habib, a Pakistani-origin, qualified full-time OYS worker described a young person defining community cohesion as:

Something you lot go on about!

This lack of understanding of the term itself should not be seen as problematic, providing that young people understand, and agree, the purpose of 'direct contact' work. Smith (1982) sees a key function of youth workers as breaking down complex events into parts that can be worked on, 'translating' into meaningful, everyday language as they do so.

Youth Work promoting 'direct contact'

The challenge for youth work in Oldham of creating this meaningful direct contact has been heightened by the reality that prior to 2001, such contact had not taken place. Alex, the dual-heritage Principal Youth Officer (PYO) of the Local Authority Youth Service took over shortly after the 2001 disturbances, and comments that:

They (youth workers) never even met each other, let alone worked with each other – some of them had never seen each other's areas or buildings.

Such parochialism might be seen as the downside of the community orientation of localised youth work provision. It can also partly be explained by the belief, following the Thompson Report (DES, 1982) that ethnic minority communities needed separate, ethnic-specific provision, staffed by workers from their own communities who alone were capable of meeting their needs. Whilst the case for such provision, in the face of racism and marginalisation (CRC, 1976; Davies, 1999) was strong, it had downsides, as Khan, a Pakistani-origin voluntary sector youth worker, and former OYS worker, comments:

At one time, we didn't have a Afro-Caribbean centre, we didn't have a Pakistani centre, we didn't have a Bangladeshi centre; what we had was a Glodwick Community and Youth Club, and that brought everyone together.

Youth Work in Oldham has developed direct contact community cohesion work post-2001, using a number of distinct vehicles:

- Borough-wide events, such as the annual 'Eid party' to celebrate the Muslim New Year
- Formalised working links between youth centres/units of different ethnic and geographical backgrounds
- The use of residentials, joint programmes and activities to build these relationships and links

These approaches highlight a fundamental principle of the community cohesion youth work being developed, that the direct contact is based on association, fun and experiential activities, rather than formal programmes of learning about 'diversity' or 'anti-racism'. Contained within this is a stepping up of open access provision, including purpose-built mobile units, in direct response to the criticisms of Ritchie (2001). Asad comments:

There was a breakdance competition... we invited Shaw (overwhelmingly white area) young people to come over, and we went to Shaw. The young people did a bit of dancing and we did see some links being made. What really impressed me was the Bangladeshi young people and the white young people took time out, not to come down to the centre, but to get the bus to Shaw and go down to the young person's house. So, that to me was a step towards community cohesion, some links made. I still see a young person from Shaw, and he says, 'how's X? and how's Y?', and I say, 'come down', and he says, 'I will do, it's just dark, I will come down in the summer', so to me that's a step towards community cohesion.

Mark, an African-Caribbean origin OYS part-time worker took a white group to the annual

Eid party, at which every youth centre was represented:

Yes, it was hard getting them out of there. We had to come back for a certain time and they didn't want to leave!

These activities and events are deliberately experiential and fun, but the challenge involved for the young people taking part should not be under-estimated, given the racialised reality of Oldham (Ritchie, 2001; Thomas, 2003). Johnson comments:

We have a triangulation with myself, Limehurst (club based on an urban white estate) and Saddleworth (rural white area), so we're getting the young people out and I think that works because that breaks down the barriers.

Johnson then goes on to describe a recent joint residential weekend involving the groups:

We went for an Indian meal on the first night we took them to Whitby ... and one of the white lads said, 'God, if people on Limeside knew what we were doing now, we'd get leathered', and that was just going to a restaurant.

Planning for the spontaneous

The last quote illustrates the dangers and pressures of bringing young people together across ethnic lines in the name of community cohesion. Such direct contact could be disastrous without careful planning. The importance of planning is illustrated by the example of the annual 'Fusion' residential. Fusion involves young people from every High School in Oldham, including young people with physical and learning disabilities, taking part in a residential experience planned and facilitated by Oldham Youth Service. The residential consists of experiential, fun activities that require young people to build relationships and to work positively together. Alex comments of Fusion that:

Certainly, within the planning it's not up for grabs whether it's successful. It is planned with incredible detail to be successful, to make a difference with every single person in terms of their perceptions of young people from different cultural backgrounds, different genders and different geographical areas within the borough.

Mary, the white/ Irish-origin Assistant Head of OYS in charge of planning Fusion explains how preparation translates into the reality of the residential experience:

It's how the staff managed the group, how the staff got young people interacting, how they bring issues in that young people would look at then or discuss. So, it's not so much the activity, it's the workers, the staff are the key for me.

This careful staff planning and preparation enables 'spontaneous', experiential learning around community cohesion, as Mary goes on to explain:

We sort of set the scene, grow the seeds during the day and through the week, but

once those young people start establishing relationships with each other, that's when a lot of the discussions were happening, and people were asking questions. For instance, one of the (Muslim) young women was praying at night, so the other girls watched her pray, and asked her really interesting questions about it. The fact was that it was done at one o'clock in the morning, and they should really have been in bed, but I didn't stop it because it was a really interesting piece of dialogue that was going on.

This creation of an environment during activities, events and residential where learning can take place can be seen as illustrative of the 'hidden', informal education that is the core purpose of youth work historically (Smith, 1982; Davies, 2005). The fact that such approaches are being prioritised by youth work in Oldham in the name of community cohesion is noteworthy at a time when many perceive government agendas to be forcing youth work down ever-more 'formal' and compulsory modes of contact with young people. A frequent accusation of traditional informal education is that it can manipulate young people, bring in issues without them realising, particularly around 'sensitive' issues such as 'race'. Respondents refute the charge that experiential community cohesion youth work activities are manipulating young people in this way. Rafiq, the Bangladeshi-origin co-ordinator of a voluntary sector youth work agency focussed on cohesion issues, believes in being very clear with young people what their involvement in work programmes is all about:

Up front, in terms of what they're going to get out of it, what are the challenges they'll face once they go back into their own communities with a new understanding of some of these issues.

This perspective is based on previous, painful experiences of a backlash from young people and families who did not realise what anti-racist youth work programmes actually involved. Alex highlights how OYS believe in being entirely up front regarding the nature of community cohesion direct contact work:

For us, quite deliberately, the Eid celebration is called 'Eid Celebration'; we don't just label it as a 'party'... oh yes, they (young people from youth centres across the Service) knew what it was about, and that it was religious and culturally based. The organisers had taken the time to actually pick seven different quotes from the Qu'ran and printed them, so that information was on each chair.

Youth workers as models of community cohesion

This new, post-2001 mode of youth work practice in Oldham is based around meaningful direct contact across ethnic lines, through traditional youth work media of experiential, association-based activity. It has been underpinned by the strategic use of staffing, a deliberate decision to create ethnically mixed staff teams that provide young people with adult role models of different ethnic background. This can be seen as directly challenging to the ethnic essentialism of 'anti-racism' (Bhavnani, 2001), which assumes that the needs of ethnic minority young people can only be met by workers of the same ethnic background. Instead, the new approach in Oldham looks to use individual workers as role models, and as agents of community cohesion, through their relationships and interaction with young

people. Qummar, an experienced Pakistani-origin worker, was asked to take over as OYS Area Manager for a 'notorious' white estate targeted by the British National Party:

It was a big challenge coming to a predominately white community as a black worker, but the experience from youth work training...enabled me to settle down quickly here. I've never had a problem here working as a black worker... yes, people have taken me very well.

Qummar went on to describe how he has expanded junior provision through his community development work with a group of (white) young mothers. Space does not permit a fuller discussion here (see Thomas, forthcoming), but this can be seen as a further, radical modal shift in youth work practice, breaking with (implicit) orthodoxies.

Problems and limitations

Whilst respondents clearly identified new work approaches and their positive impact, developed in the name of community cohesion, they also identified problems and limitations. These problems and limitations focussed on:

- The perceived superficiality, and the apparent 'one-off' nature of some of the 'direct contact' youth work
- The questionable capacity of youth work staff, and of youth work's existing resources, to effectively deliver community cohesion work
- A possible down-playing of concern with racism and 'anti-racism'

The superficiality of 'one-offs'

For a number of the respondents, 'direct contact' work across ethnic boundaries is now happening, but its impact is questionable. Habib has worked in a number of different areas of Oldham Youth Service, and comments:

In the paperwork it could look like it's community cohesion, but in reality it is that they are just doing the normal thing of getting a few Asian kids in a room with white kids and vice versa, and saying, 'this is community cohesion'. It doesn't mean that they talk to each other, that's the difference.

Workers in the voluntary sector, including Michael, a white qualified full-time worker for an environmental-based voluntary youth organisation, have also had negative experiences of 'cohesion' events

In my opinion, it was just cohesion for cohesion's sake. There's a quick response, some money to do some joint activities...if you do that, its like a works 'do', everybody immediately sticks together, and to me not a lot came out of it except for the fact that we were seen to be doing some cohesion work.

Ethnic minority-origin youth workers were noticeably more critical of the perceived 'one-off'

nature of some pieces of work, possibly demonstrating a wider frustration with the pace of change in addressing issues of racism post-2001. Asad organised one of the Youth Service's large set-piece events, the Eid Party:

I wasn't happy it just being a one-off event and calling it a community cohesion event... alright, there might have been a lot of thought gone into it, but I don't think it's touching or achieving what we need to.

Asad did also admit that this party had a big impact, both on the visiting young people and on the Bangladeshi-origin young people using his centre. Other respondents discussed the positive, real impact the same event had made on their young people, prompting wider conversations and a desire for more involvement in direct contact. The concerns of workers such as Asad may well reflect a lack of confidence over what progress and change will look like – more structured, ongoing programmes may provide apparent certainty, so explaining anti-racism's reliance on formal programmes (Hewitt, 1996; Thomas, 2002) but the reality may well be the slow and imperceptible changes that come from experiential youth work. It does, however, demand that direct contact community cohesion youth work is meaningful.

The capacity of youth work staff

A concern here is over capacity; the skills and experience of youth workers to ensure that even one-off events are planned and facilitated well enough to ensure a positive learning experience for young people. This partly raises wider concerns over youth work's continued reliance on unqualified, part-time staff to deliver significant levels of face to face work (Moore, 2005). This was echoed by a number of respondents who pinpointed the extent to which experienced full-time workers/ area managers were caught up with paperwork and meetings. The careful and strategic planning over community cohesion by these workers and their managers can run aground on the reality of the face to face workforce, as illustrated by the example of the focus on community cohesion in the Youth Service's sessional monitoring forms, with Stacey commenting:

Well, I just put the same thing every week.

Many respondents highlighted the large variations in understanding and confidence around the meaning of community cohesion held within the Youth Service. Mark, a part-time worker with a full-time 'day job' reflects this uncertainty:

I don't know... I've been to a lot of meetings, and I think no one ever says what they actually mean by it.

This lack of experience and confidence goes a long way to explain the minority of poorly planned, one-off events, and situations where youth workers seemed unable to prevent direct contact going badly wrong. Several respondents identified examples of direct contact work that had resulted in little interaction, or even tension, with workers unable or unwilling to change things. As an Area Manager, Asad can identify varying levels of understanding and confidence within his own, ethnically mixed, staff team:

I feel some of them know what they are doing, but achieving it is a problem. Others really don't understand it, but just touch it in a surface way, so it's a mix. X (white part-time worker) is really passionate about community cohesion, he'll drive it and push it, but some of the other part-time workers would say, 'Well. It could just be some people from the same area who've never spoken, if we just get them talking, that's fine', and they won't look at the bigger picture.

A downplaying of anti-racism?

Both the problems and limitations discussed above can be seen as representative of wider and more generic issues for youth work delivery nationally. A more serious charge against community cohesion as it is being operationalised in Oldham is that it may represent a downplaying of, or a retreat from anti-racism. As discussed above, the focus on direct contact and informal, experiential activity can be seen as an implicit critique of the assumptions and operations of anti-racism (Hewitt, 1996; CRE, 1999), but where does that leave the continuing need to expose and challenge racial prejudice and discrimination?

Salma, a Pakistani-origin qualified part-time OYS worker, has experienced racist abuse from young people during her work in white areas, and is critical of the unwillingness of some workers to face racism head-on:

I would say that work doesn't tend to touch on anti-racism because there might be a taboo on that, 'Don't talk about that word because it will bring trouble'... I would say that cohesion is an easy option because you can get negatives and positives out of it, but when you talk about racism, you do get a lot of hatred and a lot of negativity out of it, but then it needs to be talked about.

Imran, a qualified Pakistani-origin worker from the voluntary sector feels that:

It's (community cohesion) put race equality on the back burner in this town.

This suggests that community cohesion allows and enables, at least some people to focus on wider social/economic issues, rather than racism and the stark racial/ethnic segregation at the heart of the 2001 Oldham disturbances. Such a concern was also shared by a number of white-origin workers.

For many respondents this concern is rooted in the lack of confidence in the skills and orientation of the (mainly part-time) youth work workforce to ensure anti-racist approaches continue under the broader community cohesion remit. Some qualified and experienced full-time respondents were confident of this continuity, whilst for others the failure to continue use of the language and profile of 'anti-racism' and 'race equality' is a worrying, retrograde step. Deborah, the white-origin qualified, OYS participation co-ordinator, has experience of challenging racism in white areas, and is not convinced that many youth workers have the skills to challenge racism:

I'd say no, especially the part-time workers, because the level of training is not as in-depth, a lot of people have fear of really exploring issues of racism and values, because they are almost frightened to say, 'I don't understand, I don't get it'. For some, this illustrates the need to continue focussing on racism, but it can also be seen as further evidence that the language and assumptions of anti-racism are problematic (Hewitt, 1996; Thomas, 2002)

Positive outcomes: A modal shift in youth work practice

The problems and limitations discussed above are real and continuing, but all respondents agreed that community cohesion has both identified the reality of ethnic segregation in Oldham and enabled a significant shift in the practice and assumptions of youth workers in the town. Despite the concerns over superficial one-offs, the shared understanding of community cohesion as 'meaningful direct contact' has enabled the development of determined and purposeful youth work programmes that bring young people of different backgrounds together. Alex, as Youth Service PYO, praises the way youth work staff have responded to the challenges, and implicit criticism of past professional practice, of community cohesion:

The approach of staff to including community cohesion as a principle of professional practice has been phenomenal, its been the approach of 'we're not going to do it by halves, we're going to do it as well as we can', and I've never worked with a group of people like these before.

The research process has highlighted that this positive response of youth workers is at least in part due to the leadership, a role distinct from that of 'management' as it is traditionally understood in the public sector, of Alex herself. June, an African-Caribbean origin, qualified OYS Officer comments that:

It's probably Alex herself as an individual who's really pushing for this. I think she's got so much drive and energy, and so much positivity, she won't turn up an opportunity, she never misses anything.

Converting this leadership into effective practice at all levels of the Youth Service is inevitably problematic, but it is clear that Alex's leadership has succeeded because the concept of community cohesion resonates positively with youth workers. The focus on association (Ministry of Education, 1960), experiential/informal learning (Smith, 1982) and 'fun' (which has been adopted as an official Principle of Practice by OYS) that are central to community cohesion, plays to the strengths and beliefs of youth workers; in many ways, this work, and the forms of delivery used, such as residential experiences, youth centre-twinning programmes, and 'events' represent traditional forms of youth work practice (Davies, 2005). This is underpinned by the autonomy and agency (Greener, 2002) given to youth workers by the forms of delivery and the approach to them taken by managers such as Alex:

What I try and do here is create a culture that actually requires people to be creative and innovative by not providing them with the step-by-step 'how to do it' guidelines – and that is quite deliberate.

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This focus on agency, the trusting of youth work staff to find ways of achieving agreed Youth Work goals, is central to the approach taken to community cohesion, with the prominence of the concept encouraging responses from workers, as Louise, a white-origin, qualified OYS Area Manager, highlights:

If you've got it (community cohesion) there, then you're thinking about doing joint activities, you're getting people together... we use the word loads now, and I think it does help.

This approach of agency, and the confidence and enthusiasm around community cohesion is in stark contrast to the approach and effects of anti-racism, as it has been understood by youth workers, and other welfare practitioners (CRE, 1999; Thomas, 2002). Michael reflects this:

I think anti-racism...automatically has quite a negative spin-off, because it's anti-something, you're immediately challenging people's views.

Clearly there is a continuing need to identify and challenge racism, particularly in a tense and divided town like Oldham, but there also needs to be recognition that anti-racism as it has been understood by youth workers, has not led to enthused and confident practitioners on this issue. Community cohesion, with its focus on traditional forms of youth work, has clearly engendered confidence and enthusiasm in the Oldham situation, no mean feat after the traumatic events of May 2001, and the resulting criticism of youth work's contribution (Ritchie, 2001). The unresolved challenge now for youth work agencies in the town is how to ensure a clear focus on and challenge to racism by youth workers at all levels, within the broad concept of community cohesion. Deborah uses the example of a successful piece of youth work with white and Asian young women to illustrate the need to integrate anti-racism and community cohesion:

It had to be both. It had to be work within their own community, and the opportunity to integrate and mix with others, like the young women who did the drama project with me who spent three hours talking to the young women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, talking about the same things, but from a different perspective, saying, 'I didn't know you thought that'... really daft things and finding out there was more in common and that even the differences they thought were there, weren't, they were different differences!

Even with the major focus on community cohesion within Oldham Youth Service, there is a recognition of the need to integrate the challenge of anti-racism, with the positive 'direct contact' of community cohesion. Mary, Assistant Head of Service, comments of community cohesion that:

It has worked, so I'm ok with it, but maybe, yes, it is a little bit too twee, too comfortable... But it has worked for us, so I don't know.

Conclusion

In my view, 'community cohesion' has meaning and relevance for youth workers in Oldham, and has 'worked' for their youth work agencies. Within Oldham Youth Service, and within individual voluntary sector agencies, the concept has facilitated a modal shift in the priorities and assumptions of professional youth work practice, enabling agencies to address problems of the town, and the failings and limitations of youth work practice in the past. Community cohesion youth work, as operationalised in Oldham, is bringing about forms of practice that play to the historic strengths of youth work and of youth workers, so explaining the marked enthusiasm and self-confidence of youth workers around this work, something in stark contrast to their views, and those of youth workers nationally, on 'anti-racism'. The notes of caution discussed above are important here, but for the majority of youth workers this is not a rejection of the need to focus on, and clearly challenge racism and all forms of discrimination, but a recognition that the practice formations and assumptions flowing from 'anti-racism' have been limited, and sometimes counter-productive. Much needs to be done to ensure that 'meaningful' direct contact takes place that is grounded on a recognition of racism, but the problems and limitations underpinning this are generic to the staffing and training of the youth work profession.

Youth Work practice focussed on 'meaningful direct contact' across ethnic boundaries, delivered through experiential and association-based methods, may not be immediately possible in monocultural areas (although how about 'twinning' between different Local Authority Youth Services?), but it is possible in many areas, as Rafiq highlights:

In towns like this, and in inner city areas... that positive interaction is possible as soon as you step out of the community that you live in.

Community cohesion has also worked externally for Oldham Youth Service, with the wider Local Authority seeing them as a lead body on this issues in relation to young people, and recognition nationally by OFSTED of their 'good practice' (OFSTED, 2004). Voluntary sector agencies such as Peacemaker have also rightly received recognition (Home Office, 2003; Cattle, 2004). At a time of profound structural and policy changes, this experience suggests the possibility of a distinctive and positive role for youth work providers nationally in promoting cohesion and dialogue amongst young people. In Oldham, this has been made possible in both sectors by 'leadership' on the issues by managers who have kept youth work's historic values in mind, and who have 'mainstreamed' anti-racism and 'community cohesion' together within imaginative youth work programmes. Measuring the impact on young peoples' attitudes and behaviour of youth work interventions has always been problematic, and further research is needed in Oldham to evaluate what has come from these revised youth work approaches, but the professional judgements offered here by youth workers are encouraging.

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