NU-KESS

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Young people, multiculturalism and community cohesion

Peter Hopkins, Robin Finlay, Raksha Pande, Matthew C Benwell, Anoop Nayak and Michael Richardson
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, UK.

Introduction

The political context of the Brexit referendum and concerns about terrorism provide the background for our proposed seminar; our main aim is to share findings from social research about young people, multiculturalism and community cohesion. We focus specifically on ethnic and religious minority young people and their everyday encounters with difference and their experiences of family, relationships and community.

Context

In England and Wales, 86% of the population is white with 7.5% being Asian or Asian British, 3.3% Black African/Caribbean or Black British, 2.2% mixed ethnicity and 1% other. The North East has the highest % of white British in the UK at 93.6% with 2.9% Asian, 0.5% Black, 0.9% mixed, 1.7% white other and 0.4% identifying as other. Within Newcastle upon Tyne itself, 85.5% of the population is white and this includes 2.9% who are 'other white'. Just under 10% of Newcastle residents are Asian, with 1.8% Black, 1.5% other ethnic group and 0.9% Arab. 1.5% of Newcastle residents are mixed race. 6.3% of Newcastle's population identify as Muslim, 1.1% as Hindu with 56% affiliating with Christianity and over 28% having no religion. Although relatively small in number, the ethnic and religious minority population still represents a significant cohort of the North East.

The broader policy and practice context for this briefing includes:

- Integrated communities – the UK Government's Integrated Communities Strategies Green Paper with its focus on meaningful social mixing and the mitigation of residential segregation
- Brexit – we know that the referendum to leave the UK has provided a platform for some people to share their racist and Islamophobic views about immigration and about ethnic and religious minority communities (Burrell et al, 2018)
- Austerity – we know that austerity has hit post-industrial areas in the north of England the hardest (Rhodes, 2017)
- Hate crime – we know that hate crime is a serious issue for ethnic and religious minorities, particularly in public spaces and on transport networks. There was a 30% increase in street-based anti-Muslim incidents of hate crime in 2017 with 70% of these involving either abusive behaviour or physical attack (Tell MAMA, 2018).

Our research

In this briefing, we draw upon two ongoing and one completed research projects about young people, multiculturalism and community cohesion:

Young people, belonging and diversity in a post-Brexit age - research in Sunderland was carried out with young people from white and ethnic minority backgrounds in a number of neighbourhoods. We examined the young people's perceptions about and experiences of diversity, migration, belonging and national identity. Thus far, we have spoken with 53 people, including 49 young people and four adult stakeholders; 33 white people, 20 ethnic minorities; including 24 women and 29 men. This project is ongoing and funded by Newcastle University's Research Excellence Academy.

Storying Relationships: The Stories and Practices of Young British Pakistani Muslims - this project asks how young British Muslims, particularly those with Pakistani heritage, talk and think about their personal relationships. The research project explores the role of stories and storytelling in this, focusing on relationship stories that are told in everyday life (with friends, for example) and media such as fiction, films and radio. It investigates existing stories and also involves participants in making and sharing new stories. Our findings are based on 56 semi-structured interviews with young (16-30) British-Pakistani men and women in Glasgow, Yorkshire and Tyne and Wear, and discourse analysis of novels and young adult fiction produced by Pakistani Muslim authors in Britain. This project is ongoing collaborative project between Sheffield, York and Newcastle University and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Muslim youth and political participation – this project explored the different factors that shape the political participation and interests of Muslim youth (aged 15 through to 27). This included a focus on key concerns of Muslim youth and the different global, national and local events that shape their participation. The barriers and challenges faced when engaging with political issues were also explored. Although this project focused upon Scotland, there are findings that have broader resonance with the North East of England. This project is complete and was funded by Newcastle Institute for Social Renewal.

Why did we do this research?

Each of these projects have slightly different motivations underpinning them but some of the shared reasons for undertaking them are:

- To develop and disseminate better understandings of the everyday lives and practices of young British Muslims;
- To explore the everyday lives of ethnic and religious minority young people on their own terms rather than relying on second-hand insights from community stakeholders or parents;
- To develop better understandings of young people's perceptions and experiences with migration, diversity, racism and belonging in the current Brexit climate.

What did we find?

The key findings from our research point to three important themes related to young people's experience of racism and Islamophobia, their attempts at confronting ethnic and racial stereotypes and growing up in post-Brexit Britain where societal divisions are ever more pronounced along the lines of class, locality and ethnicity. We discuss each of these in turn.

Racism and Islamophobia

Within the context of Brexit, rising numbers of hate crimes and continued austerity, the issue of racism and Islamophobia was evident across all three projects.

In Sunderland, a predominately white city, young people are exposed to racism and racist attitudes on a regular basis, in particular those from disadvantaged areas and/or backgrounds and minority ethnic young people. There was evidence of racist graffiti as well as racist language in person and online. Much of the discussion about racism was Islamophobic or anti-Muslim in nature.

F1 (15 years, white, Marley Pots): Out in Witherwack. The shopkeepers are like from India or something, and today someone has wrote on the shop: 'Fucking Paki cunts!' And put Isis on it. Aye. They have put Isis on it.

F2 (17 years old, white, Marley Pots): That's really bad that. They have put a picture on as well

The presence of far-right protests in Sunderland is a significant factor that exposes young people to racist attitudes and community divisions.

F1 (22 years, white, Grindon): Like something happened. Like have you heard about the Justice for Chelsea campaign. I think since that has happened as well…a lot of the…I don't know like the EDL and stuff, like it seems to be all…

M 1 (22 years, white, Hendon): Everyone is jumping on the bandwagon.

F1 (22 years, white, Grindon): Aye, like everyone is just jumping on the band wagon. Like the Muslims feel like…they are all like blamed for what has happened. And it is like all of this conflict on Facebook. And then it is getting like a bit out of hand now

Interviewer: So do you think things have got worse?

F1 (22 years, white, Grindon): I think it is getting worse. Definitely

Therefore, our findings demonstrate that young people's positive sense of local community cohesion are limited in cities that are targeted by far-right groups. In a sense, the frequent presence of far right groups formalises racism in the city.

Racism and Islamophobia were also evident in our research about the personal relationship practices of young Pakistani Muslims where young people often felt that had to justify continually their relationship practices against media discourses that painted their communities as traditional and backward. Moreover, young people felt that because they were more likely to have an arranged marriage their non-Pakistani peers negatively judged their loyalty and commitment to mainstream British life.

> *Mumtaz (29 years, Glasgow) I think the media's view is definitely different to Muslims because it's like oh Muslims are terrorists and all that stuff and it's not really … I've not really met a Muslim who's a terrorist yet, so yeah. It's all this hatred and like … it's all hatred, I don't really know why. And some people use it as a crutch to blame society's problems but then I'm like if you remove all the Muslims in the world there'll still be problems and …*

Findings from our research demonstrate that Islamophobia is a significant issue in the everyday lives of young Muslims, shaping how they engage and participate in society. For example, Islamophobia was a significant factor in shaping the political participation of Muslim young people in our research in Scotland. For some young people, experiences of Islamophobia led them to feel empowered to engage more directly with political affairs as they saw this as a key route to challenging the everyday racism they experience; however, for others, Islamophobia had a silencing effect making them self-conscious about speaking out and encouraging them to take a less active role in public life.

Challenging stereotypes

Pakistani young people do date - There is a strong stereotype that Pakistani Muslims do not date. However, our research shows they do in a form that is described as 'halal dating'. This is 'permissible' dating which is conducted in religiously acceptable ways, such as without pre-marital intimacy and/or meeting with a chaperone. The hallmarks of halal dating are threefold: a chaperone must be present; there must be no physical intimacy; and, there must be an intention to marry. These issues though are negotiated and the divergence from tradition comes from one or more of the following characteristics: selecting one's own date or marriage partner; being away from parental supervision (the chaperone may be a friend rather than a relative); the venue often being public rather than the family home; and friends or new technologies (computers, smartphones, social media platforms) sometimes facilitating the date rather than relations, 'aunties' or professional matchmakers.

Young people do stand up against racism - In Sunderland, although young people could easily recount racist incidents and racism in the city, many of the participants challenged racism and saw migration to Sunderland as a good thing. Likewise, Muslim youth engaged in politics as a mechanism for challenging racism and making a case for equality. Furthermore, when it comes to relationship practices, young people were quick to challenge racist stereotypes and to engage in alternative relationship stories.

Young Muslims do participate in politics and civic life: There are two stereotypes about Muslim youth that we tend to hear about in relation to politics: the first represents them as political disengaged and apathetic and the second sees them as politically radicalised, extreme and as potential terrorists. However, our research shows that young Muslims tend to conform to neither of these; instead, they frequently engage in mainstream and alternative politics and are interested in formal politics as well as in community engagement, volunteering and activism.

Islamophobia is a real and significant issue in the lives of young people: Islamophobia is often downplayed as a myth with debates focusing on the legitimacy of the term rather the lived experiences of it. Our research clearly demonstrates that young people experience Islamophobia; this includes Muslim young people as well as other young people who 'look Muslim' such as those with a South Asian heritage and migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (Hopkins et al, 2017).

Growing up in challenging times

Across our three projects, there are interesting and important findings about young people's experiences of growing up in challenging times.

Our findings found that for young ethnic minorities in Sunderland, racism and far-right protests have significant impacts on their everyday lives and on their experiences of growing up. These work to: restrict mobility and a sense of freedom in the city; to negatively affect psychological feelings such as

sense of belonging and security; and creates a sense of frustration with local authorities such as the police.

F (17yrs, British-Bangladeshi, Eden Vale): The EDL came down and the police were promoting it, because I got a text like, 'Be Safe!' blah, blah, you know, 'don't go outside. Why do I have to? Why do I feel that in my … I was born and bred in Sunderland, why do I need to be like, I can't go to town because they're there? You shouldn't bring these EDL people down if they are unsafe to the public. Like if the Muslim community feel like unsafe, the police needs to go and think like, 'Oh my God, we can't bring the EDL because it's not safe for the Muslim community'. Because if they are promoting it like, 'Oh don't go outside! Tell your friends and family' … they are allowing it

We have also found that many young people are active in trying to improve their lives, communities and local areas. In a sense, the current challenging times are making young people participate in a range of ways. For example, young Muslims use politics and civic engagement as a mechanism to challenge Islamophobia and marginalisation; young people in Sunderland volunteering and working with community and youth centres; and young British-Pakistanis trying to take control of how they are represented by telling their own stories of being British and Muslim through self-produced video blogs on YouTube and Facebook. Here young people use humour and satire to talk about experiences of racism and Islamophobia along with light-hearted stories of cultural misunderstanding and faux pas.

Our research on the relationship practices of young Pakistani-Muslims shows that a gradual change is taking place in their matchmaking practices. The older way of using family networks of relatives and friends to find a spouse is giving way to newer ways such as 'halal dating' and increasing use of social media such as Facebook groups and matrimonial websites. Since young people tend to be more adept at using these modern forms of communications than their parents, they are able to exercise more agency and control in how their marriages are arranged.

Lessons learnt

Some of the key lessons we would like to emphasise from our research are:

Racism and Islamophobia are damaging young people's sense of self-esteem and need to be challenge both in policy and in practice:

- For some young people, everyday experiences of racism and Islamophobia reduce their sense of community making them feel marginalised and under-valued.
- Others are motivated to make a difference as a result of their negative experiences of dissemination but others feel safer withdrawing from social activities.

Racism and Islamophobia are significant issues in predominately white cities and in diverse areas:

- Issues of racism and Islamophobia were evident in the lives of young people from diverse ethnic and religious (including white and ethnic minority young people) in predominately white cities and in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods.

- Community cohesion policies and academic research need to incorporate experiences and attitudes in areas categorised as 'white' or as 'less diverse'.

Culture is a resource rather than a detriment for young people from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds:

- For young people with Pakistani heritage, relationship practices revolve around overlapping and intersecting axes including community, family, nationality, culture and religion.
- Pakistan (and related terms such as Asian and Kashmiri) and Islam are threaded through each of these. More specifically, Pakistan and Pakistaniness function as key sources of identification for young British-Pakistani Muslims. However, our research has found that rather than one category (Pakistani) supplanting the other (British) these terms get, mobilised and in some cases played off against each other when it comes to choosing who to marry. Consequent, instead of the stereotype of Pakistan culture as being detrimental to young people's agency and freedom, we find that it works both as a resource as well as a detriment in so far as all cultures are a resource and detriment to some extent for any community.

How the innovative use of methods can help us to ask 'difficult' questions and explore challenging topics:

One of our project also pioneered the use of community based interviewees (more traditionally used in public health research). This involved recruiting and training members of the British–Pakistani community in interview methods. The benefit of this approach were three fold:

- It helped co-produce research with our target community through piloting interview questions, updating and changing them such that personal questions related to relationships were framed in culturally sensitive ways.
- The community interviewers recruited some key research participants thorough their personal networks which would not have been easily accessible to us as university researchers.
- The community training events that we ran at university premises also introduced our young research participants to social research and related career opportunities.

Further reading

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