

**British values and identity among young British
Muslims in Tower Hamlets: understandings and
connections**

Abstract

Purpose - *To provide a platform for young British Muslims in Tower Hamlets to share their perspectives on British values and identity, in light of the increased pressure schools are facing to actively promote 'British values'.*

Design/methodology/approach - *Three focus groups were convened of 16 to 18 year olds, two all male (one with five and one with six participants) and one all female (five participants). Discussions were audio-recorded with the data subjected to a form of thematic analysis that divided the raw data into three different categories: individual, group and group interaction data.*

Findings – *All but one of the participants defined themselves as British, largely due to a strong connection with British values. A minority felt this understanding was reflected back to them by society. However, the majority felt that, as ethnically Bengali and as Muslims, the opposite was the case. By judging the strength of an individual's Britishness against the strength of their adherence to British values and ignoring the relational aspects of identity formation, the Government's British values agenda is only serving to reinforce the isolation of those that feel excluded.*

Originality/value – *While the identities of young people, British people and Muslims have been widely explored, there is very little that looks at the intersection of all three.*

Keywords – Identity, British values, Young people, Tower Hamlets, Multiculturalism, Islam, Bangladesh

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Since Autumn 2014, British schools have been required by law to actively promote 'British values'. These include: a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility' and 'respecting and upholding the rule of law (Cameron, 2014). The Department for Education introduced this initiative in response to Birmingham's 'Trojan horse' affair, in which Ofsted (the Government's regulatory body for services that provide care and education for young people) found evidence of an 'organised campaign' by a selection of governors to run several schools in accordance with an Islamist agenda (Clarke, 2014).

The political context

While the Trojan Horse affair was the trigger, the roots of this measure can be found in successive British governments' shift away from multiculturalism and towards civic nationalism in their approach to Britain's cultural and ethnic diversity (Kenny and Lobo, 2014). The driving factors behind this shift include the 2001 race riots in northern England and the 7/7 terrorist attacks on London. Politicians (Blunkett, 2002), political commentators (Steyn, 2005) and sections of the public (Verkuyten, 2007) argued that the emphasis intrinsic to multiculturalism on promoting and celebrating cultural difference had created a society where different cultures live in isolation of one another.

Consequently, communities had been allowed to hold values that

fundamentally contradicted 'our' values - British values. While the Cattle Report (Home Office, 2001) on the Government's inquiry into the 2001 race riots argued that this cultural separation had sparked the unrest, this separation in values was used to explain the fact that the 7/7 bombers were able to carry out the atrocities in the country in which they were born and raised (McGhee, 2008).

In response, the policy approach has shifted to 'civic nationalism' (Ignatieff, 1996, p. 219). Under this model, an individual's degree of 'Britishness' is determined by their adherence to certain civic values. The intent is to combat the moral relativism of multiculturalism with a 'muscular liberalism' that says to citizens: 'to belong here is to believe in these values'. It is this common belief that 'defines us as a society' (Cameron, 2011).

The 'British' in British values

The definition of values adopted here is: 'beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do' (Berlin, 1988, p. 3). British values, then, are beliefs concerning how life should be lived that are specific to a British identity. If we define identity as 'a person's understanding of who they are' (Taylor 1994, p. 25), then British identity is concerned with who the British are and how they are defined.

On first inspection, the Government's conceptualisation of British values appears an uncontroversial list of general, liberal democratic principles. Yet the other identity groups of which people consider themselves members intersect to create unique understandings of British identity and their relationships with it (Anthia and Yuval-Davis, 1992). One such identity is cultural and ethnic background (Parekh, 2000). While white English people tend to see their English and British identities as indistinguishable, many ethnic minorities differentiate between 'the English' and 'the British', the former being completely inaccessible and the latter more open, an exclusionary experience shared with Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh Britons (Maylor, 2010). Others, meanwhile, identify British identity as a predominantly white English domain (ETHNOS, 2005, p. 21-22). Britishness, then, is a multi-layered concept, more accessible to some than others depending on the individual's cultural and ethnic background.

British values and young people

Identity development in young people is unique and unpredictable (MacDonald, 2005). The process varies considerably within a single country, based partly on the structure and relationship between different identity groups. The way we evaluate ourselves and our identity groups in relation to others is instrumental in shaping our understanding of who and what we are

(Tajfel, 1981). How this evaluation happens is a product of an individual's own identity profile and the understandings they develop through their experience of interacting with different groups. For example, while an increased proportion of minority 'out' groups in a community can cause majority 'in' groups to feel threatened, so triggering animosity to new arrivals, if positive intergroup contact ensues – that is, if there is *actual* contact rather than simply the *opportunity* for contact – attitudes towards minority groups can significantly improve (Hewstone and Schmid, 2014; Berry *et al.*, 1987).

This conceptualisation of identity development as a complex and individual-specific process has important implications for formal education policy, which has been placed at the forefront of the British values agenda. The same concerns that surround its promotion on a national level also apply to the Government requirement that schools actively promote British values. But Britain's youth holds wildly divergent views of what British identity is and their place within it (Maylor, 2010). More so than their parents, they possess cosmopolitan, complex and multiple identities (Frosh *et al.*, 2002). In their study of secondary school students in Leicester, Osler and Starkey (2003) encountered a range of national, religious and regional identities, each combined in different ways and with varying degrees of closeness to or tension with British identity.

Britain vs. Islam?

It was not just multiculturalism that was put on trial after the 2001 riots, 9/11 and 7/7; Islam, too, was problematised (Jerome and Clemitshaw, 2009). The Cattle Report blamed the 'self-segregation' of Britain's Muslim communities in particular. They were held responsible for the ethnic and cultural separation that had supposedly allowed 'un-British' values to fester (Mondal, 2008). The political climate surrounding national security reinforces these fears; Islam is repeatedly depicted as a threat to 'our values' and to 'our way of life' (Osler, 2011; Jawad and Benn, 2003). The solution, the Government argues, is to push back and reaffirm a sense of national identity through civic assimilation in order to counter those forces pulling British Muslims in the other direction. This push to instil British values, then, has been framed in opposition to the pull of Islam (McGhee, 2008). Consequently, many Muslims feel that they are being asked to choose between their Muslim and British identities (Abbas 2005, p. 87).

Yet for many young British Muslims, both these identities are crucial to their understandings of themselves. For example, Thomas and Sanderson's (2011) research into the perspectives of young Britons on identity found that British Muslims were far more likely than any other group to rank their religion either first or second in terms of importance, a finding supported by others (Mirza *et al.*, 2007; Roy 2004). Thomas and Sanderson argue that this is largely a response both to the feeling of strength that being part of the global

'Ummah' community provides, as well as a defensive reaction that provides solidarity for young Muslims in the face of growing Islamophobia in Britain. However, the vast majority also identified themselves as British, and proud to be so, a finding also supported in the wider literature (Jivraj, 2013).

Indeed, the list of British values that the Government requires schools to promote was established in 2011 by *Prevent*, the Government's anti-radicalisation strategy. It was the fear of the spread of radical Islam in British schools, which reached a peak after the Trojan Horse affair in 2014, that motivated the Government to place *Prevent's* list of values at the heart of citizenship education in British schools. As Mattei and Broeks (2016) argue, this demonstrates that the Government's efforts to foster a coherent national identity among young Britons are founded in an anti-radicalisation strategy that targets young British Muslims.

Tower Hamlets

The East London borough of Tower Hamlets is one of the capital's densest (THC, 2013), poorest (Hirsch and Valadez, 2014) and most ethnically diverse boroughs; White British is the second largest ethnic group at 31%, behind Bangladeshi at 32%, the vast majority of whom are Muslim (THC, 2012). Many in the area hold a keen sense of their Muslim identity (Dench *et al.*, 2006). It has been singled out as one of the key casualties of self-segregation; several

high-profile Conservative ministers have recently denounced it as an area that harbours homophobia, anti-Semitism, corruption and extremism (May, 2015; Pickles, 2015). There have been several high-profile cases of young people from the area running away to join Islamic State in Syria, the most widely reported being the three 15-year-old girls who left in February 2015. In Autumn 2014, six schools, all educating predominantly Bangladeshi students, saw their ratings downgraded to 'special measures' by Ofsted for failing to promote British values vigorously enough. Thus, research in Tower Hamlets will provide the keenest examination of the Government's approach where politicians feel it is most needed.

Young, British and Muslim

There has been considerable research on British values and identity. Much of it, however, has been predominantly theoretical (Modood, 2013; Parekh, 2000; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). Studies that have engaged British citizens directly have predominantly focused on adults (ETHNOS, 2005; Bhavnani *et al.*, 2005), as has research into the perspectives of British Muslims (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2015; Nandi and Platt 2013). Research on young people around this issue has received the most attention within the citizenship education literature. While there have been some contributions on the identities of young British Muslims (e.g. Thomas and Sanderson, 2011; Hussain and Bagguley, 2005), the focus has been a more general one in two aspects: young

British Muslims' understandings and relationships with British values have tended to be but a part of a wider focus on identities, rights and responsibilities in modern society (McCowan, 2009; Osler and Starkey 2005) and the focus has been on young people in general and not on young British Muslims (Maylor, 2010; Citizenship Foundation, 2003).

There is a space, then, and a need, given the shift in policy context, for research that focuses specifically on the intersection of these three identities – young, Muslim and British – and the perspectives their bearers hold on British values and British identity. The Government's approach to fostering a coherent national identity among all young Britons is fundamentally focussed on guarding against the radicalisation of young British Muslims, yet there is little evidence on the identity formation processes of young British Muslims and little attention has been paid to this evidence. Consequently, the aim of this research is two-fold: first, to contribute to filling this knowledge gap; second, to provide a platform for young British Muslims in Tower Hamlets to share their perspectives on British values and identity.

The study described in this article addressed the following research question: how do young British Muslims in Tower Hamlets understand and connect with British values? It explored both *understandings* (how young British Muslims in Tower Hamlets understand British values and the associated British identity)

and *connections* (how they perceive themselves – their identity and their values - in relation to British values and British identity).

Methodology

The focus groups

Three focus groups were carried out in July 2015 with 16 to 18 year olds: one was an all-male pilot group which held two subsequent meetings, another was an all-male gathering and the third was all-female. They contained five, six and five participants respectively. A minimum age of 16 ensured that parental consent was not required. Furthermore, older adolescents tend to have more developed understandings of their own identity (Arnett, 2006), increasing the chance that they would be able contribute on what can at times be an abstract and ephemeral concept. All groups consisted solely of British Bangladeshi Muslims living in Tower Hamlets. The young British Muslims are not only the specific group of interest, but the cultural and ethnic homogeneity within it also guard against censoring and anxiety, a considerable danger given the sensitive nature of the topic under discussion. The question route (outlined in the appendix) began by drawing out the participants' perspectives on their own identity, values and backgrounds. This included a discussion on role models which allowed participants to consider values in a less abstract context. This was followed by discussion on the participants' perception of British identity and values and their understanding and connection with them.

Access was granted through a gatekeeper, a community organiser in Tower Hamlets, who is himself a young British Muslim. This individual is known and widely respected in the community. Once given the inclusion criteria – young British Muslims in Tower Hamlets – he introduced me to three individuals. Each of these subsequently recruited the rest of the participants in the three focus groups. The discussions were audio recorded but not filmed since this can inhibit what is said.

All participants were of Bangladeshi origin. This was not an explicit aim but a product of the way in which the participants were acquired. While this may restrict the scope of the study, Jacobsen (2006, p. 1) argues that it has some benefits - her sole focus on Pakistani youth lent greater coherence to her study and allowed her to analyse more deeply the link between religious identity and attachment to a specific place of origin.

Data analysis

A useful starting point for analysing focus groups is to divide the raw data into three different categories: individual, group and group interaction data (Harding, 2013). Individual data look at the perspectives shared by each participant and how these develop over the course of focus group discussions. Group data look at commonalities and differences in the understandings and

experiences of participants that emerge as the meetings progress. Group interaction data are less concerned with what is said and more with the social environment of the focus group itself. As well as a concern for non-verbal communication, analysis of group interaction data considers questions such as: were any participants or views silenced or particularly dominant? How did the group resolve any conflict?

Results

Jenkins's (2008) concept of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* portrays identity as 'the product of 'an ongoing and, in practice, simultaneous synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others' (Jenkins, 2008, p. 40). In other words, a person's identity is born out of the way in which he or she negotiates between their own self-perception and how they think others perceive them. This conceptual framework captures the ways in which participants' understandings of and connections with British values and the British identity both diverge from and converge with each another.

Based on this framework, the analysis section will be divided into three parts. The first will explore the (internal) self-definitions of participants. The second will consider their understandings of (external) definitions offered by others. The third will investigate the way in which the participants' understandings of

and connections with British values and identity are shaped by the continual synthesis of these two concepts.

Individual definitions: 'How I see myself'

British values and British identity

The participants in FG 1 found it difficult to articulate British values in the abstract when asked directly. Instead, rather than a value or set of values, the participants offered the view that being British meant being 'moral':

'If you follow what you think is the good path, then I would say that is a more British way of living. Its like just letting your views, your conscience, your morals guide you, because you know what's right and wrong.' (R1 in FG 1)

R3 reiterated this view, that 'choosing' and 'knowing between right and wrong' makes you British twice, while both R2 and R3 agreed that the British identity was characterised by 'decency'. This constitutes a very accessible, positive understanding of British identity, characterised by the British value of morality. Furthermore, it is an endorsement of the liberal principle that individuals should be free to follow their own conception of 'the good path'; the 'British way of living' necessitates being open to difference.

FG 3 raised and discussed several British values, including freedom of speech and expression, democracy, being accepting and the right to a free education:

'College does try and bring in a lot of British values, like how they made us do mock elections ... we know the importance of democracy, we like the freedom of expression, we want to be able to wear the hijab within this country, so we appreciate that.' (R11 in FG 3)

Another participant, R12, cited 'being accepting.' She explicitly stated her personal connection with this value ('everybody comes from loads of different backgrounds, and it's important to understand that'). However, it was also implicit in her attitudes towards homophobia ('it doesn't make sense to be scared of someone that likes the same sex') as well as her desire to visit the site of the Lee Rigby murder because of her own, deep 'sorrow, it's not that I'm justifying Muslims aren't like that.' For R12, it's about equality, 'the fact that you give the same amount of recognition to everything.'

In both FGs 1 and 3, then, an analysis of group level data – that is, of the similarities in the perspectives shared throughout the discussion - revealed a range of British values that they personally connected with, and which were markedly similar to the Government's list. But as was the case in FG 1, FG 2 had some difficulty discussing British values in the abstract. One participant argued that British identity is not based on 'an instruction manual'. Rather, 'you learn about being British by living.' This idea, that British identity is

grounded in action and interaction, in how we *actually* behave rather than how we *think* we *should* behave, emerged in all three groups:

'If you know how to socialise with other people, if you know how to get along well with other people, then I say you're British. Cause that's what you're doing, you're making friends, in Britain.' (R2 in FG 1)

In FG 3, two of the participants, R13 and R11, stressed the importance of being fluent in the language of British culture, to facilitate interaction with other Britons:

'I think it's good the fact that I have to, um ... force myself to at least turn the channel to the queen's speech ... we have something we can talk to someone else about, y'know.' (R11 in FG 3).

This theme of interaction also took on a more dynamic form; participants felt more British when they were interacting with other people because of the feeling of 'taking part', of group belonging and a sense of common purpose:

'I think [I felt most British at] New Years, like when you're in Trafalgar Square ... it's nice, y'know, you're not focused on who you are, your background, you're just there to celebrate one thing, together ... I like that.' (R11 in FG 3)

R6: *'I feel more British in Tower Hamlets [...] getting involved with [voluntary] organisations really brings that to light because, uh, I get to help people like ... British people like me, I get to help them.'*

R7: *'Everyone has the same goal.'*

R6: *'Yeah, everyone has the same goal.'*

R7: *'To help the country, I think that's what makes people British, like, the most. We're helping Britain.'* (FG 2)

On the group level, then, we have established several common understandings of British values that participants personally connected with, many of which are markedly similar to the general liberal democratic principles that make up the Government's list. However, they converge around one principle: tolerance. For them, to be British is to be open to different conceptions of 'the good path' and to not value one path over another. Indeed, the participants went one step further; their conceptualisation of British identity is characterised by an open-plan approach to relationships in British society. Feeling British is a function of interactions that foster a sense of belonging to the national community through establishing shared characteristics with no barriers to entry, including common aims, activities, knowledge and feelings.

British identity versus Bengali identity

An exploration of the relationship between the participants' British and Bengali identities helps to shed light on this understanding of British identity and their connection with it. The juxtaposition of cultures that the participants'

cultural hybridity permits provides critical standpoints from which to view either culture. In other words, being British (and Bengali) allows them to 'step out', providing them with a unique vantage point from which to understand Bengali (and British) culture. This process is evident in two respects. First, the strong bond many participants felt with a British identity, characterised by open-mindedness, was in part the product of a rejection of the constraints of Bengali culture. Second, their perceptions of what this British identity *is* gained clarity and substance because of the way in which they were understood, namely as what Bengali culture *is not*.

This experience was shared by all seven participants who spoke in detail about their personal values and Bengali heritage, while all participants in FGs 1 and 2 complained about the restrictions of Bangladeshi culture. However, the personal and introspective nature of these two patterns call for the use of individual level data to illustrate them – that is, tracing the contributions of an individual throughout the group on a particular issue and analysing how it developed.

R8 had a transient childhood. He had already moved home four times, between places and schools with very high concentrations of Bengalis and mixed areas with very low concentrations. These changes in environment challenged his assumptions. For example, his time in North London, where he

interacted with Jews, challenged the anti-Semitic views he'd been fed, demonstrating to him people's need 'to educate themselves.'

However, perhaps his most transformative experience was his move from an Islamic school, where he was bullied, to a mixed school where he felt completely accepted:

'That's when I learned that actually they take you as family, you're not a different colour, you're not a different person, and it's just amazing. If there's less concentration, there's more ... acceptance. And ... it's just lovely to see that.'

Thus, his experience of diversity taught him two things; first, 'to make sure that I'm thoughtful of other people and what they think'; and second, to challenge personal beliefs, as his discussion about his role model, Malcolm X, reveals:

'He was into stuff about racism and then he realised that Islam didn't mean that. And that teaches you that sometimes your personal values, you know, when you look much deeper maybe you'll find the real truth. You shouldn't just go with what other people say.'

At the same time, it is when he is in diverse environments, surrounded by different ways of thinking, that he feels most British:

'(At university) we are always working with other students from other faiths, other cultures, and we ... we embrace it, I enjoy it [...] especially in school, I definitely feel British.'

The development of these two values – an appreciation for diversity and a dedication to open-mindedness – has shaped the way he now sees Bengali culture among first generation Bengalis in Tower Hamlets, namely as people that nurture a narrow-minded outlook on life and a place that shuns diversity in favour of cultural concentration:

'What I don't like about my culture is that people prefer to be a bit more conservative than others [...] the younger generation are more open to disagreements and looking at what's the best resolution. The older generation, they might not be taking in arguments or anything.'

'Here, everybody knows, ah, he's Bangladeshi Asian, everybody's the same [...] I don't like the high concentration of a given culture in a specific area, there's less acceptance.'

For R8, then, both his understanding of British identity – open-mindedness and diversity – and his personal connection with it gain clarity and strength in opposition to his experience of an isolated and narrow-minded Bengali culture.

Group level analysis

Muslim values and British values

In contrast to this relationship between Bengali and British identity, an analysis of group level data reveals that many participants felt a significant congruence between their British and Muslim values. This was clear in the way R8 discussed the divergence of his path from his family's views:

'But I take my Islamic values because as the Prophet said in his last sermon, whether you're Arab or non-Arab, you still have the same quality and you're supposed to respect that.'

While R8 feels as if his path is veering away from his family, he looks to maintain his Islamic values as they are explicitly aligned with his personal dedication to open-mindedness and tolerance. Likewise, while Islam was not discussed in FG 1, in FGs 2 and 3 all eleven participants (except two who remained silent) argued that Islam promoted empathy, love and understanding.

In FG 3, two out of the five participants, R12 and R11, discussed gender equality in Islam, both citing it as a British value. Both defined themselves as feminists and felt this was not at odds with their understanding of their religion.

For R12, those that feel the two are incompatible misunderstand our responsibilities as men and women:

'Feminists sometimes try and find equality in so many things, but its just like as a feminist I'm saying that men and women are different. They have their responsibilities and women have their responsibilities, but we're equal in rights and everything that we have.'

She illustrates her argument using the following analogy. God gave women child-rearing responsibilities:

'If you put that on a scale, that's 100 grams [...] once men have ten grams, ten grams [performs stacking motion], until they have 100 grams, then they will have achieved equality between men and women [...] (for each ten grams) they need to be there for their wife, they need to look after their family, stuff like that.'

This frames her understanding of gender inequality among Muslims:

'Men think that their responsibilities are actually things that they have over women, so the fact that they go to the mosque and pray, but that's just a responsibility they have been given [...] you need to start telling Muslim men what they are doing wrong, not Islam.'

Furthermore, there is no tension between her understandings of feminism, an important part of her personal understanding of British identity, and Islam:

'The feminism I have is within society, the fact that we don't have equal pay, because in Islam, it's the same thing, women and men should get equal pay, women and men should both be able to have education.'

External definitions: 'How I think others see me'

All participants, with one exception (she did not discuss why) saw themselves as British. However, their understandings of how others saw them were more mixed. In this section, through the use of group level data, the similarity in the perspectives of those who felt their self-definition of Britishness was mirrored back to them by British society will be outlined. Then the shared perspectives of those who felt they were not seen as British by those around them will be analysed. It will be seen that this message was delivered via two channels: media bias and personal experiences of discrimination.

Three participants – R1 in FG 1 and R9 and R7 in FG 2 – felt that society accepted them as members of the British community. Their understandings of how others saw them matched the way they saw themselves – that is, as British. The fact that they all maintained their positions in the face of challenges from other participants demonstrates their depth of feeling. R1 did

not expand on this alignment. R9 felt his Bengali identity had been 'absorbed', based on two key personal experiences:

'When I was small, I went to _____ [...] I remember, my Dad, he encountered racial abuse ... and that was the first time that had ever happened to me. I think that was the only time I never felt British. And last year, we went back again, and this time, everyone was so nice to me, even nicer than Bengali people are here. Really, really nice, they greeted me and everything. So what I'm trying to say is that ... as time passes, people absorb ... I think now, white people who are British think that you can be British, whatever culture you're from.'

The fact that R9 was respected as a Bengali Muslim by White British strangers, particularly when juxtaposed with his earlier experience of discrimination, demonstrated to him that British people had now made room for him and his cultural background within their identity; his understanding of himself as a hybrid British Bengali Muslim was acknowledged, accepted and reflected back to him.

R7 took the fact that 'as Muslims or Bengalis, we've been given the liberty to practice what we believe in' as a sign that 'it's changed now [...] British people, they absorb culture.' When the group was asked who they thought of when thinking of 'the British', R7 was adamant that the British identity and its people had left behind stereotypes: 'to a British person, now, it's not about how

people act, like a stereotypical way, it's more what are *you?*, *you* can do what *you* want.'

For R7, the 'absorption' of his culture describes not only the sense that there is space for his religious and ethnic background within the boundaries of British identity, but also that his understanding of that background is reflected back to him as he sees it, in all its complexity, and not as a reductive stereotype.

However, for the other 10 participants that contributed on the subject, the reverse was the case. While they felt British, this was not recognised by other Britons. Perhaps the most important channel, one that sends out 'this message that keeps coming in and you can't block it' (R8 in FG 2), was the media:

'The other day I was on twitter, and the tweet said 'why Muslims feel out of place in society' and I clicked on it and it showed like ten, fifteen newspaper titles, 'Muslim did this, Muslim did that, causing havoc, what are the Muslims up to now'. Obviously people are gonna feel like ... we're not British citizens, we're Muslims that are doing this and doing that. You shouldn't label us as Muslims 'cos then you're trying to ... you're secluding us from British society. (R12 in FG 3).

'Say a Christian person does something bad, you don't hear this person from this area um, he's Christian he's done this this that. If you literally take a

Muslim man who's killed someone, and you replace Muslim for Christian, it will sound really strange when you read it back, because you're not used to that stuff.' (R11 in FG 3)

By repeatedly describing the crimes of individuals as specifically Muslim ones, they felt the media was implying a causal relationship – Muslims commit atrocities *because* they are Muslim. The first implication is that 'British' and 'Muslim' are entirely distinct entities, the second that Islam is intrinsically corrupt. Yet for many of them, Islam is an important part of who they are. Consequently, they hear the message that, as Muslims, there is no space for them within the boundaries of British identity. Their experience is supported by a range of literature documenting the negative media depiction of Islam and its critical effect on British Muslims' understandings of their British identities (Kabir, 2010; Lewis, 2002).

This idea that there is no space for them within British identity has been reinforced for many of them by personal experience. Participants across all groups described moments that had made them feel excluded. In FG 1, 'the look' emerged as a common discriminatory experience for all five participants:

R4: *'In year 8, I went on a geography trip. We went somewhere at the top of England, and everyone's just looking at us like that (gives disgusted, frightened look). I did not feel British.'*

R3: *'Yeah, when I went to Hadrian's Wall there were a lot of white people, old people as well. Me and my friend, we're just hanging out together, we're talking, and he's white and I'm brown and they're looking at me thinking 'who are you, why is that white person hanging out with that brown person'. They were just looking at me, from all directions, like I'm an alien or something.'*

Convener: *'How did you feel then?'*

R3: *'I didn't feel welcome, I just felt isolated in some aspects.'*

R5: *'In summer I remember I went to Southend-On-Sea, so I remember I was playing with my little brother and there was this like couple, they gave me that look as if ... and I felt scared and I felt ... inferior. So throughout the whole trip, I was like close to my parents, like staying away from people [...] I felt Bengali.'*

'The look' is othering. They receive the message that their ethnicity sets them apart, pushing them beyond the peripheries of British identity.

FG 3's exclusionary experiences revolved around the sixth form college that all five participants attended. Unlike FG 1, these took on a religious dimension and were shaped by their school's response to 'people running off to Syria'. From this three issues emerged. First, they felt discriminated against as Muslims. For example, R12 recounted how 'one of the teachers made a joke about like, "Oh, when are you going off to Syria"'. Second, they felt spied on,

both by one teacher in particular (R11: 'He's everywhere, like whatever we do, he knows!') and by the presence of *Prevent*, which is 'camping out' (R12) in their college. Third, they felt significant pressure to 'secularise'.

R12: *'And a lot of the time they bring secular Muslims to speak, like this secular Muslim organisation, the Quilliam Foundation [...] and our college likes it, because it shows a very secular version of Islam, and they want all of us to be like that [...] because if you're not a Quilliam Muslim, you're an extreme Muslim [...].'*

R11: *'Yeah, yeah.'*

R14: *'I agree.'*

The message they receive from the combined effect of these three pressures is that Islam and British identity are separate and incompatible. Consequently, they struggle to be good Muslims and good Britons:

'I don't think British culture and Islam contradict so much, but I think that they want us to change so much that we're no longer following Islam, we're just following British culture, and then they're assuming that British culture doesn't tie in with Islam. It's just ... it's really complicated.' (R15 in FG 3)

'We have to constantly prove that we do have British values, and then be good Muslims to please ourselves, I think that's what really ... confuses me

sometimes [...] We feel Islam is perfect, a peaceful religion, so we can't completely go to other side, and that's what they want us to do.' (R11 in FG 3)

In contrast to their internal definitions, the understandings that participants held of their external definitions were more varied. While some felt 'absorbed' into British society, most felt that as ethnic Bengalis and as Muslims their position in the eyes of many other Britons was beyond the boundaries of British identity, a message delivered mainly through the media and through their personal experiences of discrimination:

'I think its that we feel British and other people cast their opinions to make us feel less British.' (R10 in FG 2)

The synthesis of internal and external definitions

For those who held up a mirror to their internal definition and saw society reflect back the same understanding, the synthesis of the two was a smooth process. R7, R9 and R2 did not falter; throughout the discussions all three maintained their view that they had been 'absorbed' into British society, openly challenging those who said otherwise. They merged their British, Bengali and Muslim identities with ease. For the majority, however, this was not the case. For these individuals, while they personally felt British, they had received the message that their Bengali and Muslim identities were inherently

'un-British'. As a consequence, they struggled to fuse their hybridity into a coherent whole and to synthesise their internal and external definitions.

R8 in FG 2 illustrated this feeling vividly, both verbally and diagrammatically (Figure 1):

'(Takes piece of paper) We stick ourselves out like Bengali, and then Muslim in the same circle (draws 'Muslim' circle, with 'Bengali' circle inside), and then maybe there's another one, which is British (draws separate, 'British' circle), and I feel like we're struggling to put that (points at British circle) around this one (points at 'Muslim/Bengali' circle). Because [...] here, people see us as Bengali, so we don't know where we are in the system. Because of that, we're losing our identity. It's like everyone else is giving us our identity.'

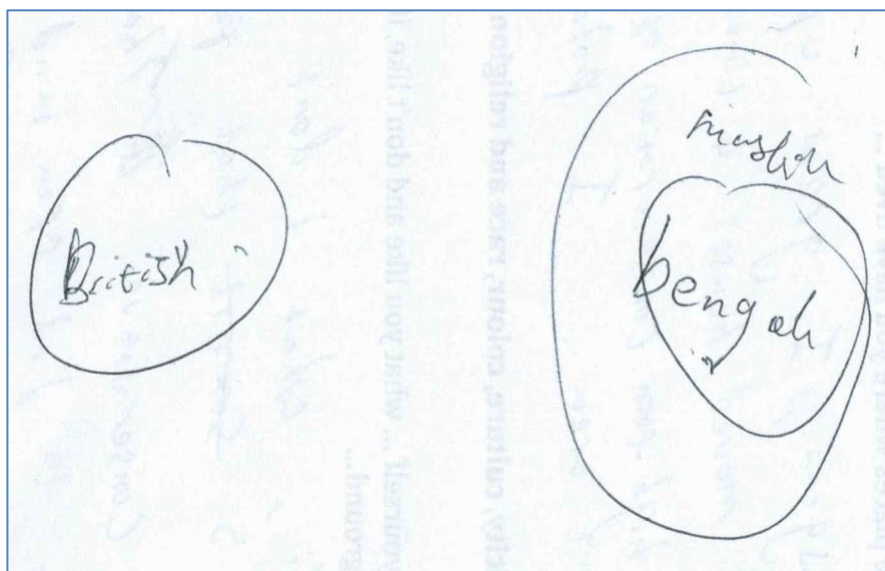


Figure 1

Thus, they are engaged in a continuous struggle for control over their identities and to maintain their understanding of themselves as coherent British-Bengali-Muslim hybrids in the face of messages that directly contradict that understanding. This is evident not only explicitly but also through the analyses of both group interaction data and the participants' role models.

Group interaction data illustrate well the way in which their struggle to synthesise internal and external definitions is an immediate and continuous process. The pressures of dominant views and group conflict pushed participants on several occasions to contradict themselves immediately, as they moved from offering external definitions of British identity that, as Muslims and Bengalis, excluded them, to internal definitions that included them and *vice versa*. This rapid movement between contradictory understandings demonstrates the way in which the scales of identity are finely poised. The way in which a point of disagreement was resolved in FG 1 is particularly revealing:

Convener: *'So how do you think someone can become more British then?'*

R1: *'I don't think you can be more British [...] if you follow more of what you think is the good path, then I would say that is a more British way of living.*

[...]

R2: *'Well, I could see someone being more British than someone else, because in my opinion, like, the British way of living, could be how the people in the past lived, like, the big top hats in that era [...].'*

R1: *'But Britain's a diverse country, everybody thinks differently –'*

R2: *'– But it never used to be! That's why I think those stereotypical, old, bloated guys, that's what they think, and that's just wrong.'*

R2 begins by disagreeing with R1, offering an exclusionary notion of British identity. He argues that being British is connected to British history, a past in which the Bengali community had no place except as a colonial subject.

However, when challenged by R1 to acknowledge Britain's diversity, R2 passes off this opinion as that of 'those stereotypical, old, bloated guys', one that is categorically 'wrong'. At first, then, the external definition enjoys a temporary dominance, monopolising his understanding of 'the British way of living'.

However, when invited to confront Britain's diversity, he acknowledges this understanding as an external and invalid one; his internal understanding of an open and inclusionary British identity rose to the fore.

This is not to say that the exclusionary understanding is no longer influential to R2's identity in an absolute sense. Rather, it demonstrates that these opposing forces – exclusionary external understandings and inclusionary internal ones – exist in tandem beneath the surface, and that minor social

pressure can prompt one understanding to *temporarily* gain ascendancy over the other.

In FG 2, one particular passage demonstrates the way in which some views dominate while others are silenced, which can trigger paradoxical stances:

R8: *'You can't disagree, when you come Whitechapel, you probably feel more Bengali, not British [leaning forward].'*

R10: *'(chuckles) True.'*

R8: *'Cos the fish smell, the people speaking Bengali, it's like Bangladesh –*

'

R6: *'Yeah, the curry.'*

R8: *'Yeah. So I mean you can't, you can't control that.'*

Yet seconds later, R6 directly contradicts this view (Whitechapel is an area which lies within the boundaries of Tower Hamlets):

'I feel more British in Tower Hamlets [...] getting involved with [voluntary] organisations, really brings that to light, because uh, I get to help people like ... British people like me, I get to help them.'

R8 felt that, in Whitechapel, because 'it's like Bangladesh', he feels more Bengali. This means they feel less British, implying there's a zero-sum relationship between these two separate entities. This exclusionary definition

was laid out in earnest. R8 left little room for dissent ('you *can't* disagree), a boldness that was compounded by his body language (leaning forward), encouraging R6 to endorse this position ('Yeah, the curry'). The external definition becomes salient, momentarily dominating R6's understanding of British identity. The scales then tip back the other way, as R6 states that, in fact, he feels more British in this area, because it is where he can put his internal understanding of the British identity, characterised by interaction and common interest, into practice.

This is powerful evidence, unique to the focus group setting, that for many of the members there is no clear winner between their internal and external definitions.

The discussions around role models provide further evidence of the participants' identity struggles. Across all groups, all of the eight who contributed on the subject offered role models, defined as 'someone who lives their life in ways that you feel you should try and live yours', who in their view demonstrated resilience. They were individuals who persevered and maintained their sense of themselves in the face of contradictory external definitions:

'(Muhammad Ali) said that, if you're on the floor, the only way that you won't get up is if you conclude that you won't get up. So in life, whatever pushes

me down, I know that I should still stick up and do what I believe in, you know, so ... let your achievements define you, don't let other people define you.' (R8 in FG 2)

R11 in FG 3, meanwhile, spoke about Emily Bronte, author of Wuthering Heights, whose resilience inspired her to hold strong views against negative external definitions, not just as a Muslim but also as a woman:

'She was out in the countryside, detached from the city, she never married, she never experienced love and she died very young, but she still managed to do what she wanted to do, y'know ... she kept quiet, kept patient, kept humble and produced amazing novels [...] so it doesn't matter how much you pull someone back, they will always find their way ... I dunno, it just gives me hope.'

Other participants chose the Prophet, their brother, their mother and their boxing coach for exactly the same reason. R12 in FG 3, shrewdly summed up the common link between the values these role models demonstrated:

R12: 'Just being good people in a society where you see a lot of negativity. I think it's just important for us to have this, especially as Muslims, because you have constantly stuff being thrown at you, people always telling you what you are, so you always need someone to look up to to show you that

there's more to it and you ... you don't have to necessarily fall under the tag of what people throw at you.'

For those whose personal understanding and connection with British identity was reflected back to them by society, the synthesis of their internal and external definitions, and thus their conceptualisation of British identity, was unproblematic. However, the majority felt that, in many ways, society did not see them as they saw themselves – namely, as British. They struggled to reconcile their internal and external definitions, to figure out, as ethnically Bengali and Muslims, where they stood within the confines of British identity.

Conclusion and policy implications

There are some limitations to consider in this study, in particular its lack of generalisability. Government policy is concerned with the country as a whole, not sixteen young British Muslims from an area in which tensions surrounding the issues examined in the article are particularly high. Even within Tower Hamlets, there is reason to believe that the participants may not have been representative. The gatekeeper was a community organiser and the young people he works with may place more value in building relationships in their communities and strengthening social networks. Consequently, the widely expressed belief among the participants that being British requires actively engaging in difference may not be common among the wider population of

young British Muslims in Tower Hamlets. The conceptual framework developed here could form the basis of a more comprehensive quantitative study.

There were also barriers to analysing discussions within the groups. In all three the participants knew each other, increasing the chance that some of the interaction may have been based on implicit, non-verbal or explicit but privately understood communication that I did not detect. Furthermore, my White British male identity must also be considered. While a mixture of ethnic and cultural backgrounds among participants in qualitative research can lead participants to be less fearful of judgment and more open to the disclosure of sensitive perspectives (Tinker and Armstrong, 2008), views might have been censored or diluted due to my ethnicity and gender. Nevertheless, this study yields some valuable insights for how we can understand identity and values among young British Muslims – the knowledge gap identified at the beginning of this study – and make policy recommendations.

The 16 young British Muslims who contributed did not need formal education policy to teach them about British values. All but one already closely identified with a liberal democratic understanding of British values and believed this to be an important part of their internal connection with British identity.

Moreover, these connections had little to do with formal education. Rather, they were born out of their dual membership of British and Bengali identity.

Indeed, they actually demanded even more from Britons than the Government specifies; while the Government asks Britons to *think* in a certain way, the participants in this study stressed that being British was not only about thinking like a Briton but also *acting* like one – that is adopting an open-plan approach to relationships, whereby interaction overcomes difference, and in the process helping to develop a sense of national belonging grounded in common experience and understanding.

The participants' understandings of how they were viewed by British society were mixed. Their life experiences had sent them signals, through news media, television, personal encounters, significant others and more, that had shaped their understandings of whether others perceived them as British. Three could comfortably align their internal and external definitions – they saw themselves as British and they felt that society felt the same.

But most found hybridity more difficult. These individuals were fighting to maintain their open and accessible understanding of and connection with British identity in the face of external messages undermining this understanding and, therefore, this connection. As Taylor (1994, p. 25)

observes, if society reflects back to a person a 'contemptible picture of themselves', that person 'can suffer real damage, real distortion.' The 'contemptible picture' that many of the participants saw mirrored back to them made them feel that their membership of both their ethnicity and their religion placed them at odds with British identity.

The leading civic nationalist thinker Jürgen Habermas (2002) argues that for civic nationalism to function as a unifying approach to national identity, that identity must be free of any exclusionary cultural baggage. An individual's willingness to adhere to shared civic values must be acknowledged as sufficient proof of national membership by society, such that both the individual's internal and external definitions of that national identity endorse this open and inclusive, value-based approach. British identity does not currently satisfy this requirement. For most of those involved in this study, it is still laden with racialised and cultural meanings that exclude young British Muslims.

Yet the Government's approach focuses exclusively on internal definitions. While shared values may be an important element of the British identity, the Government maintains it is the *only* important element, such that: 'to belong here is to believe in these values' (Cameron, 2011).' Consequently, by ignoring the external half of identity, the Government's approach addresses only half

the problem and, by ignoring it, risks making things worse; whether deliberate or otherwise, the findings both here and elsewhere suggest schools are significant actors in influencing pupils' understandings of how they are perceived by society (Mattei and Broeks, 2016; Modood, 2013).

Again, it is worth emphasising that conclusive findings on how young people are being affected by the active promotion of British values in schools cannot be drawn from the perspectives of 16 young people from Tower Hamlets.

Indeed, only one group, the third all-female group, chose to speak about their experience of this policy explicitly – participants were not directly asked to do so. Nonetheless, they talked about it at length and their experiences help illustrate how young people will receive inclusionary or exclusionary messages from their educational institutions, whether these messages are consciously or unconsciously communicated. In FG 3's eyes, the presence of *Prevent*, 'camped out' on their campus, and the efforts of their school to instil British values and identity through pushing their students to moderate their religious beliefs conveyed a message that their school perceived their religion as a threat, betraying an implicit framing of British identity in opposition to Islam.

A broad literature on citizenship education in Britain offers an alternative: cosmopolitan status. Those, such as Audrey Osler (2011) and Tariq Modood (2013), argue that what is needed is an open discussion in the classroom on

British identity and values, one that looks to build on the local, national and supra-national identities of young Britons, developing within them an understanding that British identity 'may be experienced differently by different people' (Osler and Vincent 2002). Young people cannot belong to the political community until 'it accepts them as belonging to it' (Parekh, 2000,p. 342) which means accepting all facets of their hybridity as complementary to, rather than incompatible with, British identity.

Osler and Starkey's research (2005) in Leicester and South Africa suggests that citizenship lessons based on this principle – for example, through asking young people to report on the places, people and identity groups that are important to them, and what they like about them - articulate an inclusive external definition to pupils in two ways: first, that we all have very different stories and none of these is any more or less British than another; and second, that there are important similarities that emerge with young British people through discussions about our differences – the hopes, dreams and fears shared were often very similar throughout their research. The findings outlined here suggest that further research is needed to explore, develop and refine approaches such as cosmopolitan citizenship education and approaches that focus explicitly on communicating inclusionary external definitions to young people.

Appendix

1. The Question Route (all questions in italics):

1. Introduction (5 mins):

- *Find out your neighbour's name, particular interests and ambitions for the future, then feedback to the group.*

2. Background (10 mins):

(Written exercise, to be completed individually by each participant, then feedback to the group)

- *Where I'm coming from...*
 - *In terms of geography, region, place...*
 - *(Where born and grew up ... parents and grandparents ... what you like and don't like, if anything, about the places where you have lived ...)*
 - *In terms of ethnicity, culture, race...*
 - *(Some words to describe yourself ... what you like and don't like, if anything, about your cultural background...)*
 - *In terms of experience...*
 - *(Things you've done, things that have happened to you, that have had a big impact in shaping how you think and feel)*

3. Role Models and Values (15 mins):

- *Do you have any role models? By role model, I mean someone who lives their life in ways that you feel you should try and live yours.*

4. Values and Identity Groups (15 mins):

- *Where do you think your answers came from? What influences can you identify? Think back to your answers to the written exercise if you can't think of anything.*

5. British Identity (15 mins):

a) *What kind of people do you think of when thinking of 'the British'?*

b) *What makes these people British?*

c) *Are there particular core aspects to British identity that are recognised by everybody?*

d) *What aspects of Britishness do you see in yourself?*

e) *When do you feel British?*

f) *When don't you feel British?*

6. British Values (15 mins):

a) *So we've talked a lot about our personal values, but what about British values? Are there any? Is there a belief in how life should be lived, about what men and women should be or do, that is specific to Britain, or 'the British'?*

b) *Considering that there are so many different cultures and backgrounds in Britain, how do we make it work so that we can all live together?*

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