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# Moving on from ‘Anti-Racism’? Understandings of ‘Community Cohesion’ held by Youth Workers

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## **Abstract**

‘Community Cohesion’, and the apparent lack of it, was rapidly offered as the explanation for the 2001 disturbances across northern England, and has since become a cornerstone of government approaches to race relations policy. This article explores what Community Cohesion means to welfare practitioners in Oldham, one of the affected towns. Academic discussion of Community Cohesion has been largely hostile, focusing on the language and assumptions of the government reports. While highlighting important issues, these debates have been virtually free of empirical evidence on how Community Cohesion is actually being understood and operationalised by welfare practitioners. Drawing on in-depth research with youth workers in Oldham, I argue that the Community Cohesion analysis of the state of race relations is largely accepted, and supported, by those youth workers, and that it has enabled a significant shift in the assumptions and operations of their professional practice. Within this ‘modal shift’ in practice is a moving away from the language and assumptions of ‘anti-racism’, as it has been largely understood and operationalised by youth workers on the ground, towards what I argue can be seen as ‘critical multi-culturalism’.

## **Introduction**

The weekend of 26–29 May 2001 saw serious disturbances in Oldham, Greater Manchester. In an atmosphere clearly fuelled by race and racism, Asian young men clashed with the police and with White men over two nights. These violent events were followed by further disturbances in Burnley in June and Bradford in July. While each town had its specific triggers and causes, the resulting central government reports (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001) saw a clear and consistent underlying cause: the lack of Community Cohesion. Cantle’s Community Cohesion Review Team<sup>1</sup> saw ethnically segregated lives as the root cause of the lack of cohesion, with commitment lacking from all communities regarding shared contact, values and purpose. This analysis was echoed by the local reports into the individual disturbances in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley (Ritchie, 2001; Ouseley, 2001; Clarke, 2001).<sup>2</sup> While not using the term

Community Cohesion, all these reports accepted the analysis of segregated lives and of a lack of popular commitment to alter that reality.

Over the following years Community Cohesion has moved from being the official explanation for the 2001 disturbances to becoming a key pillar of national and local governmental approaches to race relations and race equality (Home Office, 2005). Advice was given to all local authorities (Local Government Association, 2002) on how to both initiate and measure the effectiveness of work around Community Cohesion, while New Labour's mantra of 'what works?' drove the funding of Community Cohesion activities in 14 'Pathfinder' local authorities, linked to 14 (unfunded) 'Shadow' authorities (Home Office, 2003). Community Cohesion has become a key quality indicator for the public sector, for instance through OFSTED inspection of local authority-maintained Youth Services.<sup>3</sup>

The development of this new policy paradigm has attracted fierce criticism. For some (Kundnani, 2002), the whole thrust of Community Cohesion represents the 'death of multi-culturalism', of any acceptance of cultural pluralism, and a lurch back to the assimilationism of the early 1960s, which assumed that immigrants must abandon their distinctive ethnic cultures to become 'British'. Others (Burnett, 2004; Bagguley and Hussain, 2003) identify a romanticised, pre-industrial notion of 'community' being utilised to divert attention from structural issues and causes. To date, the academic focus has been solely on the discourse and language of the Community Cohesion reports, and accompanying ministerial pronouncements. Little or no empirical evidence has been offered as to what Community Cohesion actually means to the many thousands of welfare professionals, teachers, social workers and youth workers among them, who engage with young people of all ethnic backgrounds on a day-to-day basis in Britain's increasingly multi-cultural towns and cities. What understandings of Community Cohesion do welfare professionals hold? What impact has Community Cohesion had on their day-to-day practice approaches and assumptions?

### **Youth work as a focus**

This article aims to explore these important questions through discussion of empirical field research carried out with youth workers from both the statutory and voluntary sectors in Oldham in 2005/06. Data from 30 in-depth, one-to-one interviews with youth work professionals in Oldham is utilised to explore the questions posed.<sup>4</sup> As a White-origin lecturer in youth and community work, with considerable practice experience in anti-racist community and youth work, I wanted to understand what meaning, if any, Community Cohesion had for those at the sharp end of face-to-face welfare practice in multi-racial Britain. In attempting this, I was well aware of the gaps that often exist between the theory

of central government policy and the reality of welfare practice on the ground. This is particularly true of youth work, for reasons outlined below. Therefore, this research was about youth work practitioner understandings, rather than the success or otherwise of central government in pushing forward their policy agenda. I wanted to know what Community Cohesion means to youth workers in Oldham.

Welfare provision for young people in general, and local authority youth work provision in particular, was severely criticised by Ritchie (2001) as a contributor to the 2001 Oldham disturbances. While the Youth Service has always been a minor part of post-war welfare state educational provision, it does have a proven record in working with and diverting at-risk young people (Davies, 1999). Ritchie not only criticised Oldham council's under-investment in youth work, but also specifically questioned the approach taken to that provision. To Ritchie, the (assumed) role of youth work in providing diversionary activities for young men on the streets had been replaced by education-based group work activities that engaged smaller numbers and which were attractive to few of the high-risk young people. Smith (1982, 2003) provides the idealised view of youth work as based around voluntary participation by young people, whereby involvement in activities is negotiated with workers, and learning is informal and experiential rather than formal. Since the state became involved in funding such activity, formalised (albeit vaguely) in the 1944 Education Act, the traditional vehicle for youth work's engagement with young people has been the open access, leisure-based youth club (Davies, 1999), and it was the downgrading of these clubs by Oldham Youth Service in the 1990s that Ritchie pinpointed. However, the historical dominance of open-access youth clubs by White young men to the exclusion of ethnic minorities and young women, and the frequent failure to achieve any real educational impact, should be noted (Davies, 1999).

The questionable worth of open-access youth clubs was acknowledged in the early 1980s, at a time when many young people had too much leisure due to the collapse of the youth labour market (Mizen, 2004), by a watershed government review of the statutory Youth Service known as the Thompson Report (Department for Education and Science, 1982). This report heralded separate gender/ethnic-specific youth provision, and more formal work on political and social educational topics, including 'anti-racism'. Here, it needs to be acknowledged that there is frequently a gap between the theory of national welfare policy changes and the reality of their contingent and situated implementation on the ground. This is particularly true of youth work, with the physically dissipated nature of its practice, a largely part-time workforce, and its peripheral place in policy agendas all contributing to 'space' for youth workers to interpret and use new policy directions in their own ways (Davies, 1999). This suggests a necessary note of caution in relation to lessons from research of this nature. Additionally, the changing ideologies of youth work practice discussed here largely represent

interpretations by the profession itself through internal debate, rather than the imposition of detailed governmental dictat.

Nevertheless, rather than representing a professional review, the fundamental alteration in professional youth work practice from the early 1980s onwards (Department for Education and Science, 1982) might also be seen as an obligation to meet the political demands of the state, with more targeted and formal involvement with 'troublesome' youth who were now increasingly unemployed rather than frequenting youth clubs after paid work (Smith, 2003). There is evidence that various forms of welfare intervention with young people, such as youth work, have since then become increasingly directed by wider political and economic agendas, specifically New Labour's welfare to work focus on socially excluded young people (Mizen, 2004; Coles, 2000).

This reality of changing state agendas, and the consistent attempts of youth workers to create 'space' to subvert and amend them, can be seen in a critical analysis of youth work's responses to issues of race and racial tension throughout the post-war period (Williams, 1988; Popple, 1997), from the assimilationist assumptions of the 1960s that all young people could easily share the same youth clubs (Department for Education and Science, 1967) and the multi-culturalism of the 1970s (Community Relations Council, 1976; Chauhan, 1990), to the anti-racism of the 1980s and 1990s. The belated acknowledgement that youth work had failed ethnic minority young people through their marginalisation and effective exclusion from supposedly open access youth provision (Department for Education and Science, 1982) led to ethnically specific provision, and to anti-racist programmes of education within (White) youth clubs, focusing on norms of language, behaviour and attitudes. There is evidence that much of this anti-racist work, as it has been understood and operationalised by youth workers, has been counter-productive with White working-class young people (Hewitt, 1996), leading to a 'White backlash' whereby White working-class young people felt that they were the neglected victims as anti-racism privileged the needs and experiences of ethnic minorities.<sup>5</sup> Also, many White-origin youth workers felt unsure and unconfident of their role with anti-racist programmes (Commission for Racial Equality, 1999; Thomas, 2002). These White youth workers who confidently engaged in work with young people around other difficult social issues, such as crime and hard drug use, felt ill equipped and unqualified to implement anti-racism, as they understood it, feeling that ethnic minority workers were the 'experts' on this issue. The hesitancy implicit in that understanding suggested that many youth workers saw anti-racist practice as something apart, something different from mainstream professional youth work practice, even though this conception of anti-racism had, at least partially, been internally created through youth work professional training and debate.

Given this, the new race relations paradigm of Community Cohesion might be expected to be seen by youth workers in the same negative and problematic way,

but my research suggests that Community Cohesion is clearly understood and supported by youth workers. Also, the concept and policy reality of Community Cohesion, and the 2001 disturbances that led to it, have seemingly enabled a significant shift in the assumptions and mode of practice of this key group of welfare professionals.

### **Community Cohesion?**

It is beyond dispute that Community Cohesion had no pedigree as a concept or term prior to the 2001 disturbances (Robinson, 2005). Cattle (2001) offered only limited explanation for the term he introduced, drawing on academic work (Forrest and Kearns, 2000) actually concerned with social rather than ethnic cohesion. Worley (2005) highlights the slippages between community (that is, ethnic) and social cohesion within this government discourse, seeing this as symptomatic of a desire to avoid naming certain issues or groups.

Nevertheless, both Cattle (2001) and Denham (2001) clearly saw Community Cohesion as focused on the causes and consequences of ethnic and racial segregation within Britain's towns and cities. Cattle is blunt about the reality rather than the myth of British multi-culturalism:

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 the 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. (Cattle, 2001: 9)

Cattle may well have been emboldened not only by the evidence his team gathered by visits to the towns and cities affected, but also by the strikingly similar language used by Lord Herman Ouseley, the former chair of the government-sponsored Commission for Racial Equality and a long-term race equality campaigner, in his report into the situation in Bradford, commissioned before but published after the 2001 disturbances there:

We have concentrated on our terms of reference and on the very worrying drift towards *self-segregation*. (Ouseley, 2001: Introduction: my emphasis)

This apparent emphasis on agency, of choices by communities and individuals leading to segregation, is the most controversial aspect of the Community Cohesion discourse. Unexpectedly, the Commission for Racial Equality (2001) accepted this analysis, highlighting congregation, or self-segregation. Vociferous critics have seen this as a denial of the reality of structural racism (Kundnani, 2001), and of the role played by neo-Nazi agitators in provoking the disturbances (Bagguley and Hussain, 2003). For some, the whole notion of Community

Cohesion also represents a highly racialised criminalisation of Asian communities (Burnett, 2004) and is part of a wider, culturalist pathologisation of Asian young men (Alexander, 2004).

McGhee (2003), in a much more positive assessment, sees clear echoes in calls for all communities to do more to interact with and understand others (Cantle, 2001), of communitarian thought (Etzioni, 1995), and the idea that individuals and communities should take more responsibility for collectively improving situations around them. This also connects with 'third way' approaches (Giddens, 1999); with McGhee (2003) characterising Community Cohesion as part of the government's wider attempts to strengthen civil society, and individual/community responsibility for it, across the range of social policy (Greener, 2002). Above all, Community Cohesion can be seen as a problematisation of excessive bonding social capital within introverted monocultural communities, and the need for greater bridging social capital across ethnic and racial divides (McGhee, 2003; Putnam, 2000).

How real this segregation is in a society of an increasingly homogenised youth culture (Kalra, 2002)<sup>6</sup> is far from clear, as is whether housing segregation on the basis of ethnicity, rather than income/social class, is actually increasing in British towns and cities (Robinson, 2005). Back *et al.* (2002) see Community Cohesion as a worrying retreat from the acceptance of the reality of structural racism contained in the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act. While an assimilationist charge is clearly wide of the mark,<sup>7</sup> Community Cohesion can be seen as a fundamental re-think on the meaning and implications of multi-culturalism, and of anti-racism. The widespread and vigorous recent debates around multi-culturalism and the nature of Britishness (Goodhart, 2004; Phillips, 2004) seem to support this analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Within these debates, multi-culturalism has been predominantly portrayed as negative, as having meant the acceptance of ethnically separate communities, facilities and lives. This seems to me to be a rewriting of history. Although admittedly liberal and apolitical in relation to the reality of racism (Pople, 1997), the educational multi-culturalism of the 1970s *did* stress the need for mutual contact, dialogue and understanding across ethnic lines (Solomos, 2003). The blame, if any, for the policy acceptance of separate ethnic communities and lives should be put at the door of what was termed anti-racism in the wake of the early 1980s' urban disorders. In reality, this anti-racism meant state funding regimes that privileged ethnically separate and distinct organisations and facilities, as well as a focus on disadvantaged groups on the basis of their specific ethnicity. For left-wing critics, this municipal anti-racism diverted the real, multi-racial struggle against the economy's structural racism into a reifying and essentialising struggle for 'ethnic culture' (Sivanandan, 2004). The recent debates symbolised by Community Cohesion might be seen as, admittedly tentative, attempts to move beyond the impasse of ethnic separateness and absolutism created over the past

20 years. I believe that Community Cohesion at least poses the right questions regarding the open and robust inter-ethnic dialogue needed for the operation of a genuinely multi-cultural society. Such openness and the necessary unwillingness to accept any absolute ethnic boundaries and definitions at face value could be seen as 'critical multi-culturalism' (May, 1999). Hall (2000) anticipated these recent debates as inevitable, given Britain's remorseless move towards greater 'hybridity' and cosmopolitanism, and suggests that negotiation or 'translation' around an individual's experiences of this is becoming a necessary part of life in modern Britain. Here, hybridity can be seen as the positive experiencing and adoption of differing cultures, beliefs and lifestyles arising from the operation of a genuinely multi-cultural society (Modood and Werbner, 1997).

### **Oldham, 'parallel lives' and youth work**

Ideas of cosmopolitan multi-culturalism seem a long way from the reality of Oldham (Ritchie, 2001),<sup>9</sup> where communities live separate and parallel lives on ethnic lines, with high levels of hostility, distrust and tension between them. This seems to support perspectives that view the increased economic uncertainty and sharpened inequalities of globalisation as leading not to a positive 'cultural hybridity' (Modood and Werbner, 1997), but to a retreat into essentialised and singular identities for those who are not 'winners' (May, 1999). At the time of the 2001 disturbances, Oldham was the 38th most deprived of 354 local authorities in England (Cantle, 2006), with three electoral wards among the 1 per cent most deprived in England. Oldham, once the cotton-spinning capital of the world at the start of the twentieth century, is now engaged at the start of the twenty-first century in developing a viable post-industrial economy.

Unemployment rates at more than twice the national average (Cantle, 2006) and low wage rates for many of those in work are a reality. This is particularly acute for the White working-class, and for the Pakistani and Bangladeshi, communities of the town. Modood *et al.* (1997) highlight the centrality of geography to the economic disadvantage of the latter communities nationally. With almost 50 per cent of the town's South Asian population aged 25 or under, the 13 per cent ethnic minority section of Oldham's population overall becomes 23 per cent of the town's under-25 year old population, so emphasising the challenge of the future.

Racial tension between ethnically segregated housing areas of Oldham is a reality, and racial attack statistics for Oldham have consistently been the highest in the Greater Manchester area. The reporting of the 'fact' that Whites formed a (slight) majority of the victims of Oldham's reported incidents is seen a key trigger of the 2001 disturbances (Ray and Smith, 2002; Kalra, 2002).<sup>10</sup> Much racial crime and conflict in Oldham, as nationally, involves young people as both victims and perpetrators, and research with young people in Oldham shortly



after the 2001 disturbances (Thomas, 2003) showed high levels of mutual fear and suspicion, and common experiences of racially aggravated violence.

The above discussions suggest that the assumptions and operations of welfare practice in general, and youth work practice in particular, around issues of race and ethnicity were bound to be re-examined in Oldham following the watershed of the 2001 disturbances. As outlined above, central government has provided the analysis and concept of Community Cohesion, but is this accepted and understood by welfare practitioners on the ground? Has it led to alterations in practice as a result?

### **Community Cohesion: meaningful to youth workers**

While the picture of tense and ethnically segregated life in Oldham painted by Cattle (2001) and Ritchie (2001) is highly contested (Kundnani, 2001, 2002; Kalra, 2002; Alexander, 2004), it is overwhelmingly accepted by the youth workers interviewed for the study. Virtually all respondents live in the Oldham area, and a majority were born and brought up there. They accept not only that there are 'parallel lives' (Ritchie, 2001), but that the issues of choice and 'agency' (McGhee, 2003; Greener, 2002) are relevant to this segregated reality: individuals *are* choosing to live separately. Workers from both Asian and White ethnic backgrounds blamed their 'own' communities for this. Johnson, a White youth worker now managing provision in an Asian area comments:

I do a residential every year with Thorndale [Youth club based on White housing estate], so we have people from here and young people from Thorndale. From my experience, I would say there's more of a fear from the Thorndale people than there is from the young people here.

PT: What are the Thorndale young people scared of?

Johnson: I think there's just a fear of . . . an example is, we went for an Indian meal on the first night we took them [joint youth residential group] to Whitby and one of the White lads said, 'God, if people on Thorndale knew what we were doing now, we'd get leathered!', and that was just going to a restaurant.

Khan, a Pakistani-origin worker in the voluntary sector comments:

There is evidence that there is segregation at the grass-roots level. Bankside [Pakistani area], that's segregated, it's segregated where they don't have engagement with other nationalities, or other communities different to them . . . really, on a day-to-day level, there is segregation.

Youth workers working with all ethnic backgrounds in Oldham reported young people as fearful, ignorant and suspicious of other ethnic groups, with many openly hostile to the idea of contact. This supports previous research on youth ethnic relations in many towns (Hewitt, 1996; Webster, 1995; Thomas, 2003). While accepting the Community Cohesion analysis of segregation and agency, youth workers were under no illusion that the term itself had any meaning to

young people or the public at large. The small minority of young people involved in local democracy and citizenship initiatives through the Youth Service may well recognise the term, as Deborah, a White-origin worker, comments that her group is:

Familiar, over familiar with it, because it's a word they heard after the riots . . . if they hear Community Cohesion, they expect it to be a discussion about race issues and what it means for young people.

A clear feature of New Labour has been its willingness to introduce and 'operationalise' new terms that quickly pass into regular use by welfare professionals through their attachment to funding streams and policies. 'Social exclusion' is the most obvious example, with critics seeing this new term as a form of Weberian closure on the historic but politically problematic concept of 'inequality' (Levitas, 1998). Mary, a White assistant head of the local authority Youth Service, reflects this hegemonic use of language:

I suppose because we use it in our Youth Service language and in our everyday language, young people have picked it up and some young people will understand what we mean . . . but I guess youth workers will be using other language to explore it.

Habib, a Pakistani-origin youth worker, is much more dubious about the term's impact:

I think at the moment [it means] little, very little . . . when you talk to them about it. I've asked young people what it is; I did ask a couple of them, 'What is Community Cohesion?'

PT: What was the answer?

Habib: Something you lot talk about!

To the majority of youth workers interviewed, this lack of popular recognition or understanding for the term itself is not an issue, as breaking complex issues down into parts, and translating concepts into everyday language are core, day-to-day skills for youth workers (Smith, 1982).

Much more important was that there was clarity about, and overwhelming consensus over, the meaning of Community Cohesion among youth workers. To youth workers, it meant planned and meaningful direct contact and dialogue among young people of different ethnic groups, something that was not happening within youth work in Oldham prior to the 2001 disturbances. Asad, a Bangladeshi-origin worker, defined it as:

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

Imran, a Pakistani-origin, voluntary sector worker, adds:

Cohesion to me is about people coming together, the togetherness of people from different backgrounds . . . it's the coming together and doing things collectively.

Rafiq, a Bangladeshi-origin coordinator of a voluntary sector youth work project established to work on cohesion issues years before the 2001 disturbances, comments that:

Community Cohesion as far as we were concerned was actually about understanding between young people from different ethnic backgrounds and the consequences of that understanding is the positive interaction, and that positive interaction is how we define 'cohesion'.

Respondents accepted that, prior to 2001, youth work rarely enabled young people of different ethnic backgrounds to come together. Locally based provision passively accepted the *de facto* ethnic segregation of the town, with workers and young people sticking to their areas. Alex, the female dual-heritage, local authority principal youth officer, appointed shortly after the 2001 disturbances, comments of the pre-2001 Youth Service approaches 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.

This lack of youth work contact across borders of race and territory had been highlighted by earlier research in Oldham (Thomas, 2003). A key tenet of anti-racism, and one operationalised in the Youth Service nationally following the Thompson report (Department for Education and Science, 1982; Davies, 1999), was the belief that ethnic minorities needed separate, ethnic-specific community and youth provision to bolster identity and to provide refuge against undisputed racial discrimination and prejudice. In Oldham, and nationally, this policy direction seems to have ossified into a taken-for-granted assumption that practice across ethnic lines was inappropriate or risky. Khan, a worker who has long experience of youth work in Oldham's voluntary and statutory sectors, observes that this strategy:

segregated those communities. At one time, we didn't have an Afro-Caribbean centre, we didn't have a Pakistani centre, we didn't have a Bangladeshi centre, what we had was a Bankside Community and Youth club, and that brought everyone together.

For Khan, funding and support for separate, ethnic-specific community facilities from the early 1980s onwards helped to cement growing housing segregation and blocked young people moving across ethnic community boundaries in search of leisure as they did until the mid to late 1980s. Reinforcing this, certainly among the majority of White-origin youth workers, was the belief that anti-racism meant the needs of ethnic minority young people best being met by workers from their own communities, while White young people should be 'warned off' racism in their areas (Davies, 1999; Thomas, 2002). This common perception that anti-racism should involve disapproving of, or banning, racist behaviour by (White) young

people was exposed as potentially counter-productive by the Burnage enquiry (Macdonald, 1989), and Alex views anti-racism as:

Not respectful, it's not effective and I actually think it's damaging as well.

Many youth workers interviewed, from all ethnic backgrounds, expressed the concern that anti-racism starts from a negative and assumes a problem, so making positive informal education work with young people much harder. Michael, a White-origin voluntary sector youth worker, comments that:

Anti-racism automatically has quite a negative spin-off because it's anti something – you are immediately challenging people's views.

For Rafiq, who also has experience of both the statutory and voluntary youth work sectors in Oldham, anti-racism, as it was understood and practised in Oldham, was unnecessarily limiting:

It [anti-racist programmes of education delivered in local youth clubs] works if we are living in towns and communities that are for the vast majority mono-ethnic, where you would not come into contact with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Maybe in some rural areas that sort of education is the best we can do, and that's fine, but in towns like this, in inner-city areas, that's nonsense because that positive interaction is possible as soon as you step out of the community that you live in.

Here, Rafiq articulates the view that, in the past, youth workers operating in multi-racial towns and cities have largely accepted the unnecessarily limited option of attempting anti-racist educational work within their own monocultural communities, rather than seizing the, admittedly more risky, possibility of crossing boundaries to actually interact with youth groups of different ethnic backgrounds.

### **Putting Community Cohesion into practice**

The response of youth work agencies in Oldham to the challenge of Community Cohesion has been significantly to alter this previous paradigm of practice. Cohesion has been adopted as a priority, with regular Youth Service events organised to bring young people from every youth club in Oldham together. An example has been the annual Eid party, with White, Asian and Black young people celebrating the Muslim festival. Qummar, a Pakistani-origin worker in charge of a youth centre on an all-White, 'notorious' housing estate, saw attendance by White young people from his centre at the Eid party as a great success:

Excellent, they came back having met other young people from Bankside, from Newton [largely Asian areas] – it's the same music, dance, everything. They all listen to the same pop music, dance like everybody else, so, for them, it's amazing, yes.

Links made at such events have been cemented by twinning arrangements between youth centres serving different ethnic communities. Such connections

ensure that joint activities are held with other centres on a regular basis during the year, so allowing relationships to develop. Much of this contact is mediated through cultural forms such as art, music, sport, and outdoor activities, the staples of traditional, leisure-based youth work practice. Here, youth work is utilising cultural forms as mediating spaces between individual agents engaging with the structural realities of their lives (Gilroy, 2002).

These new youth work approaches in Oldham have been underpinned by a deliberate policy of creating ethnically mixed staff teams, so that young people are exposed to role models from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. This challenges the predominant anti-racist orthodoxy within youth work in particular, and welfare practice in general, that young people, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, are best served by workers from their 'own' ethnic community who can 'naturally' understand and meet their needs. This essentialising and privileging of ethnicity has not only reinforced ethnic segregation but also often pandered to so-called 'community' norms and expectations around young people's aspirations and behaviour (Gunaratnam, 2003). This inherent stress on the professionalism, rather than the ethnicity, of youth workers within Community Cohesion can be seen as a significant break with an (unspoken) assumption of anti-racism.

The post-2001 proposal of building new youth clubs on borders between ethnically segregated areas of Oldham to attract ethnically mixed involvement has proved financially impossible and unrealistic (Ritchie, 2001; Thomas, 2003). However, attractive new mobile youth work buses and detached youth work teams have been used by Oldham Youth Service and by voluntary youth organisations to work across ethnic lines, and to respond flexibly to groups of young people interested in moving out of their traditional areas.

Perhaps the most ambitious response by Oldham Youth Service to Community Cohesion has been the annual Fusion residential experience. This involves ethnically and socially mixed groups of young people – including those with learning and physical disabilities – from every high school in Oldham taking part in a week-long, residential activity holiday organised and led by youth work staff. Experiential activities, such as rock-climbing, white-water rafting and team challenges, and informal bonding and learning, are central to this experience, with the result that the Youth Service is seen as a leading part of Oldham Council's response to the challenges posed by Ritchie (2001) and Cantle (2001). Ironically, this paradigm shift in youth work practice can be seen as a return to the methods and values of traditional, leisure-based youth work, focused on experiential methods, association and voluntary relationships, at a time when government agendas of welfare to work have pushed youth work towards greater involvements in formal education and criminal justice structures (Smith, 2003).

Johnson, who took time out from his increasingly formal and bureaucratic area management responsibilities to take part in the Fusion residential, echoes this perspective:

I was actually a youth worker again, which I haven't been for a long time. On breaking down barriers, you couldn't wish for a more positive project, really.

This enthusiasm, not only for the outcomes of the new Community Cohesion youth work but also for the informal, experiential methods central to the creation of that successful work, was clear from all the youth workers interviewed. This positive enthusiasm and self-confidence expressed by youth workers in Oldham about these changed approaches to practice are in stark contrast to their feelings about the meaning and practice of anti-racism discussed above.

### **Community Cohesion: problems and limitations**

For Kalra (2002), educational approaches such as these to Community Cohesion are popular because something can be achieved, in contrast to the thornier issue of segregated housing and hence schools. However, there is negative evidence from attempts to create compulsory, mixed housing in terms of social class, ethnicity and ownership type (Robinson, 2005). This evidence suggests that the creation of bridging social networks (Putnam, 2000), which enables and encourages voluntary relationship-building between ethnically/socially distinct housing areas, is more likely to succeed, so emphasising choice and agency (McGhee, 2003; Greener, 2002).

However, does such a focus on direct contact in the name of Community Cohesion simply represent a return to the bland and apolitical 'saris, steel bands and samosas' of multi-culturalism (Chauhan, 1990; Popple, 1997)? A number of respondents expressed concerns about the tokenistic, or one-off, nature of some Community Cohesion youth work events. While this may partly reflect a lack of understanding of, and concern with, racism and racial conflict of some workers, they may also reflect deeper shortcomings in the recruitment and training of youth workers within a profession where too much face-to-face youth work is still delivered by unqualified or partially-qualified part-time staff (Moore, 2005). This internal factor is relevant to the patchy nature of youth work professional performance, just as the external factor of locally-determined, and hence varied, resource levels are.

However, for some youth workers of all ethnic backgrounds, any move away from the overt language and formal recognition of racism and anti-racism is a risk at a time when racism is still a reality in day-to-day life in Oldham. Salma, a Pakistani-origin youth worker, comments that:

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 I think that needs to be talked about.

This comment links to the clearest split uncovered by the research: whether Community Cohesion is primarily about ethnic/race relations, or whether it should be concerned with wider issues of social cohesion. Ambivalence over this question is contained within the language of the government's own reports and pronouncements (Worley, 2005). While these 'slippages' of language could be seen as part of wider avoidance around race, they may well represent the government's own uncertainty as to whether the 2001 disturbances in northern towns can truly be understood without a wider economic and social perspective. Respondents mirrored this governmental ambivalence, with no clear consensus over the narrow race/ethnicity focus, or the wider and more holistic social perspective.

Support for the latter among some respondents reflects youth work's historic determination to see young people as a distinct group with shared experiences and concerns, rather than simply as an amalgam of stronger ethnic, social and gender identities (Smith, 2003). This perspective also draws heavily on socioeconomic understandings of experience that cut across ethnic lines (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) and on critiques of 'clumsy' anti-racism (Macdonald, 1989; Hewitt, 1996), and is articulated by June, an African-Caribbean-origin Youth Service officer:

It [Community Cohesion] embraces everything, and in that we're talking about people with disabilities, we talk about just embracing everyone and seeing people as individuals, and respecting them as individuals, and understanding what you can understand about those people. So, it's wider than race, it's not just a race thing.

Support for this wider social perspective was partially based on a view that territory-based violence among young men in Oldham is often at its fiercest where both sets of protagonists are from the same ethnic group. Other respondents highlighted intergenerational work between young people and senior citizens as an important form of Community Cohesion activity, given that such tensions are at the root of many complaints of anti-social behaviour. This perspective has been, at least partially, supported by government, as it has funded intergenerational work and work between settled and traveller communities as part of the Community Cohesion Pathfinder programme (Home Office, 2003).

To other respondents, particularly ethnic minority-background youth workers, this approach represents a dangerous deflection, as both Cattle (2001) and Ritchie (2001) squarely identified ethnic segregation and racial tension as the long-term cause and short-term trigger of the 2001 disturbances. Rafiq comments:

I spoke at a conference [on Community Cohesion] a few months ago and one of the workshops was around the lack of interaction between young people and old people. Of course, it's a Community Cohesion issue, but that isn't what brought us here, what brought us here was the

animosity and hatred and segregation between black and minority ethnic communities and our White working-class communities.

Imran has similar concerns:

I think that it's very easy to kind of mask everything with cohesion, because I think that cohesion is such a loose term and you can easily get lost in it. In Oldham, you cannot ignore race and ethnicity. In a couple of years' time, one in four people in this town are going to be from the Asian or Black community . . . I think we're going back to front. Cohesion obviously plays a part, but you cannot ignore race equality in this town.

This reality, the necessity of race being the prime focus for Community Cohesion, is accepted by Mary, part of the Youth Service's Management Team:

In terms of the majority of work we do, it [Community Cohesion] would be about bringing together young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Frontline workers do not always share that clarity, as Habib comments:

This is where I get confused – is Community Cohesion a community issue or a race issue? Has local and national government gone down the route of saying 'Community Cohesion, this is the issue and race isn't an issue any more?' Asian people sometimes get a hard deal, but so do White deprived young people!

Despite these concerns, workers of all ethnic backgrounds accepted that identifying and countering racist attitudes and behaviour remains a central part of youth work in Oldham, albeit addressed through the changed work approaches and language of Community Cohesion. While recognition of an anti-racist core within Community Cohesion can be assumed of some experienced youth work practitioners, the challenge for employers is to ensure that all practitioners share that understanding and commitment.

### **Planning for 'spontaneous' success**

For the vast majority of respondents there was an awareness that direct contact will not inevitably lead to enhanced Community Cohesion, and that professional planning and preparation is needed to ensure positive outcomes. Such 'planning for spontaneity' is central to understandings of youth work (Smith, 1982), and far from straightforward. Mary, the Youth Service's manager responsible for the Fusion residential initiative comments:

There's a lot of planning and preparation, and processes to go into with staff, and that's very, very clear . . . and it's a very, very structured programme, so, yes, the chances of a negative experience are really minimised, I think, because of the structure of it.

Alex, the Head of Youth Service, supports this, regarding Fusion and Community Cohesion youth work activities in general:



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 young person in terms of their perceptions of young people from different cultural backgrounds, different genders and different geographical areas.

It was clear from respondents at all levels of responsibility that leadership from senior youth work managers in Oldham has been central to the changed professional practice engendered by Community Cohesion. June comments that:

I think its Alex as an individual who is really pushing for this [Community Cohesion]. I think she has got so much drive and so much energy and so much positivity. She won't turn down an opportunity, she never misses anything, she is always there, and I've worked in Youth Services where people don't even know the Head of Service.

Here, leadership should be distinguished from what is increasingly seen as management within the public sector. This has included the clear and personal articulation to staff of the need to make cohesion a work priority through training courses and staff meetings, and the modelling of good practice by senior managers closely involved in the delivery of early Community Cohesion youth work programmes. The delivery and success of these events provided many of the youth workers involved with experiential learning opportunities, with proof that cohesion activity could both succeed and be enjoyable.

When done well, the planning processes described by Alex and Mary make 'direct contact' youth work meaningful, creating the, apparently informal, situations that make the 'translation' and negotiation of hybridity (Hall, 2000) possible for young people. I believe that in carefully planning apparently informal and spontaneous opportunities for young people to interact across ethnic boundaries, this Community Cohesion youth work can be seen as creating the conditions for 'critical multi-culturalism' (May, 1999), a concept that directly addresses issues of race and ethnicity, but avoids reification of culture or the essentialising of ethnic difference through robust and open dialogue. May (1999) sees such practice as a critical pedagogy that avoids reductionism, and which takes account of profound economic changes:

Critical multi-culturalism, as it is broadly articulated here, incorporates post-modern conceptions and analyses of culture and identity, while holding onto the possibility of emancipatory politics. It specifically combines multi-cultural/anti-racist theoretical streams which have, for far too long, 'talked past each other'. (May, 1999: 7–8)

This concept addresses the tension between ethnicity and other factors in personal experience, and here Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' is helpful, with its focus on all the social and cultural experiences that shape us a person (May, 1999). 'Critical multi-culturalism' potentially identifies constructive directions forwards, with its acknowledgement both of the importance of social and cultural conditioning, and the possibility of individual change. It also emphasises how successful integration

or 'cohesion' needs to be based on 'safe' spaces for contact and negotiation. Yuval-Davis (1997) develops the concept of 'transversal politics', of being 'rooted' in your own experience, history and culture, but willing to 'shift' your understandings and perceptions through contact and dialogue with people of other backgrounds. This process of 'shifting' should absolutely not involve converting or homogenising the 'other', and must be based on some 'safety' for those taking part. In short, this concept holds out the possibility of a genuine 'cultural hybridity' (Modood and Werbner, 1997), one gained dialectically through dialogue and contact of a sustained and sincere type.

While the determinedly pragmatic and un-ideological youth workers would not describe it in these terms, the youth work direct contact situations created in Oldham in the name of Community Cohesion, involving prior negotiation with young people and carefully planned but informal opportunities to share and discuss experience, seem to fit this concept well. Their use of experiential, cultural forms is in stark contrast to the formal and structured programmes of anti-racist education previously seen as the norm within youth work (Hewitt, 1996; Thomas, 2002), if race was discussed at all. In response to questions around whether young people really need to meet 'others' directly, face to face, to alter their (prejudiced) attitudes and perceptions, Deborah draws on an example of a successful, drama-based Community Cohesion youth work project involving Asian and White young women. For Deborah, the success of this depended both on preparatory educational work with each group separately and the intensive Community Cohesion direct contact and joint working:

It had to be both. It had to be work within their own community, and the opportunity to integrate and mix with others.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have explored how Community Cohesion is actually understood and practised by youth workers on the ground in Oldham. Academic criticisms (Kundnani, 2002; Bagguley and Hussain, 2003; Worley, 2005) of the government's Community Cohesion reports and discourse are real and important. Nevertheless, Community Cohesion has become the new framework for government policy on race relations (Home Office, 2005) and local government's implementation of that policy (Local Government Association, 2002). To date, little or no empirical evidence has been offered on how welfare practitioners actually understand and implement this concept of Community Cohesion.

In summing up learning from the research, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the situated reality of youth work practice, the gap often found between official theory and day-to-day practice. That said, while the term Community Cohesion has little or no resonance with young people or

the wider public, it has enabled a modal shift in youth work practice in Oldham. The (largely) shared professional understanding of Community Cohesion as meaningful direct contact among young people of different ethnic backgrounds supports the analysis of Community Cohesion as a Putnamesque critique of excessive 'bonding social capital' (McGhee, 2003; Putnam, 2000), and the need for bridging social capital. Youth work's creation and use of informal but managed spaces for bridging contact between young people, through events, residentials and arts/sports activities is clearly connected to notions of agency (Gilroy, 2002; Greener, 2002) and to communitarian thought (Etzioni, 1995; McGhee, 2003). While some of this work is arguably superficial and unsatisfactory, the existence of inter-ethnic work provides an implicit critique of the way past anti-racist youth work practice accepted, and so reinforced, ethnic physical segregation. Above all, this modal shift in the assumptions and organisation of youth work in Oldham post-2001 represents, not a rejection of the need to recognise and counter racism, but a move away from the practice assumptions and language of anti-racism, as it has been understood by youth workers (Commission for Racial Equality, 1999). The era of simply accepting ethnically-specific and separate community and youth facilities, supported by the anti-racist analysis of 'oppressors' and 'victims', may well have been a necessary stage in the struggle for a genuinely multi-cultural society, but those practice implications and assumptions (Hewitt, 1996; Commission for Racial Equality, 1999) can now be seen as blocks to future progress, as evidenced by the enthusiasm of (most) youth workers of all ethnic backgrounds for the modal shift represented by Community Cohesion. Youth workers in Oldham largely believe that they can use their core professional skills of facilitating experiential and enjoyable informal education within Community Cohesion, whereas they felt constrained and deskilled by the prescriptive and didactic formal educational approaches they perceive to be central to anti-racism.

When it is done well, bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) is being developed by Community Cohesion youth work programmes in Oldham within (carefully planned and managed) informal spaces where race is addressed by not being overtly addressed. Here, young people of different ethnic backgrounds are being brought together and given opportunities to develop dialogue and understanding across boundaries in a manner, and at a pace, over which they have control. While the danger of this practice lapsing into bland and apolitical 'multi-culturalism' (Chauhan, 1990) of the old sort is real and ever present, the (necessary) phase of anti-racism (Popple, 1997) has left many youth workers well aware of the continuing reality of racial discrimination and prejudice underneath the mutual ethnic wariness. Indeed, the greatest concerns around Community Cohesion among youth workers in Oldham centre on whether it might represent a (negative) downplaying of the focus against racial prejudice and discrimination. The nature of the meaningful direct contact among young people, and the healthy and open debate, discussed above, over the correct balance between race/ethnicity

and wider social/economic/territory issues in these Cohesion programmes, makes possible what I would term 'critical multi-culturalism' (May, 1999) within youth work in Oldham.

Such educational approaches obviously cannot have an immediate effect on the physical ethnic segregation in housing and schools in Oldham, and Cantle (2006),<sup>11</sup> in his review of Oldham's progress over the five years since the disturbances, highlights how much there is still to be achieved. Above all, a sense of proportion has to be maintained around the limited resources and scope of youth work. Also, further research is needed into current attitudes of young people in Oldham and what impact, if any, Community Cohesion youth work programmes have had on them. That said, this article suggests that youth work's development of dialogue and greater mutual respect and understanding across ethnic lines can offer a positive way forward. Community Cohesion is enabling youth work in Oldham to make a significant contribution to this process through a shift in its practice assumptions and priorities.

### Notes

- 1 The Community Cohesion Review Team was an independent Inquiry Team, chaired by Ted Cantle, an experienced local government figure, and reporting to the Home Secretary.
- 2 Other disturbances occurred in 2001 involving Asian youth and the police in Leeds, Stoke-on-Trent and Aylesbury, but were viewed as copy-cat incidents.
- 3 In an OFSTED Inspection in 2004, Oldham Youth Service won praise for its work around Community Cohesion.
- 4 To date, 30 one-to-one semi-structured interviews have been conducted with youth workers at all levels of responsibility. Sixteen respondents were male and fourteen female. Ten were of Asian origin, fourteen White origin, five African-Caribbean origin and one dual heritage origin. A large majority of respondents held the Youth and Community Work professional qualification.
- 5 Hewitt's (1996) research in Greenwich, south-east London, was partially sponsored by the local authority Youth Service there in recognition that their anti-racist educational work with White young people had not been successful. Stephen Lawrence was one of three ethnic minority young people murdered in racial attacks by White young people in Greenwich in the early 1990s.
- 6 Virtually all the Asian men arrested following the 2001 disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford were under the age of 25, and had been through the British education system, raising questions over the emphasis of Cantle (2001) on the need for 'a greater use of English'.
- 7 The blunt identification of the problem of racism, and of the need to counter it, in both Cantle (2001) and Denham (2001) makes this charge impossible to sustain, in my view.
- 8 CRE Chair Trevor Phillips called for 'an end to multi-culturalism'.
- 9 Ritchie, an experienced local government figure, chaired an Inquiry Panel made up of individuals with criminal justice and local government backgrounds from the north-west of England.
- 10 Critiques of McPherson's (1999) stress on the victim's perceptions of intent as being central to the definition of what constituted a 'racial incident' are relevant here.
- 11 Cantle was invited to review Oldham's progress towards Community Cohesion, and presented his findings in May 2006 on the fifth anniversary of the disturbances.

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