

The evidence shows that multiculturalism in the UK has succeeded in fostering a sense of belonging among minorities, but it has paid too little attention to how to sustain support among parts of the white population

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David Cameron's [speech on immigration today](#) warns of a 'discomfort and disjointedness' in communities with large immigrant populations. This speech, along with his earlier comments in February that "State multiculturalism" has been a failure, signal a new hardening of policy towards immigration and migrant communities by government. However, recent research by [Alan Manning](#) has found that separation between communities does not in fact create a feeling of alienation amongst migrant groups. The greatest failing of multiculturalism, is not that it has failed to create a sense of belonging among

minorities, it is that the multicultural project has paid too little attention to how to sustain support among the white population.

Not long ago Angela Merkel expressed the view that multiculturalism in Germany has been an "utter failure". As recently as last December, an Iraqi-born Swede with links to Luton in the UK blew himself up in Stockholm in a failed attempt to kill others, and articles in the British press [opined](#) that his journey to extremism was aided in part by "multiculturalism". A certain smug satisfaction that the UK had been relatively successful in building a multicultural society has turned to dismay expressed from all parts of the political spectrum as some young Britons turn suicide bombers. But is this assessment correct? My research suggests it is not.

First, let us try to understand the most important features of multiculturalism. I think it is fair to say that the essence of multiculturalism is the idea that, if one makes immigrants feel welcome by allowing them to retain their culture and by seeking to address discrimination against them, immigrants will reciprocate by embracing a British identity and the values needed for a harmonious society. In 1966, the then home secretary, Roy Jenkins, said:

I do not regard [integration] as meaning the loss, by immigrants, of their own national characteristics and culture. I do not think that we need in this country a 'melting pot', which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman... I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.

(It is a quote that, while showing respect for other cultures, also shows its age by its neglect of women, the Scottish, Welsh and Irish.)

Why did anyone ever think multiculturalism was a good strategy? Often now, it is thought to be the product of cultural relativism, a reluctance to claim that some value systems are superior to others, so it would be wrong to insist on immigrants changing their values. But, there was another, more muscular argument for multiculturalism, namely that the values underpinning liberal democracies are very appealing to all people from whatever background. In this way, immigrants from different cultures will come to adhere of their own volition to the values that matter for the smooth functioning of society, while perhaps choosing to keep their particular cultural practices relevant only in private. From this perspective, forcing immigrants to change their behaviour risks being counter-productive – better a society of volunteers than conscripts.

One interpretation of what has happened in Britain and other countries is that there has been a

failure of confidence in the universal appeal of liberal democratic values. This confidence has been replaced by the feeling that some immigrant groups (and their British-born descendants) either have no intention to integrate or that the process is happening too slowly. It is inevitable that events like the 2005 London bombings attract attention, but are the extremists behind them representative of the population as a whole? In spite of the fact that many commentators have very strong views on the subject, we have remarkably little large-scale quantitative evidence on the factors associated with feeling a part of society. Our research uses data from the [England and Wales 2007 Citizenship Survey](#) to shed more light on the identity and values of different communities in the UK.

Identity and ethnicity

A lot of concern about multiculturalism is related to the belief that some ethnic and religious minorities do not think of themselves as British, subscribing to some other identity. But much of this seems to be exaggerated.

Table 1: Percentages reporting a British National Identity by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	All	UK-born	Foreign-born
White British	100%	100%	92%
Indian	73%	97%	64%
Pakistani	81%	95%	71%
Bangladeshi	80%	92%	77%
Black Caribbean	88%	97%	79%
Black African	51%	86%	45%

The first column of Table 1 shows the fraction of different ethnic groups who report that their national identity is British. Essentially, all the “white British” do, but the percentages are lower for those from ethnic minorities. However, most of this difference has a simple explanation: the foreign-born are much less likely than the UK-born to report a British national identity and ethnic minorities are more likely to be foreign-born. The second column of Table 1 shows very modest differences between whites and non-whites for the UK-born. And it is also worth noting that the pattern of variation across the minority communities is perhaps not what one might expect e.g., the overwhelmingly Muslim Pakistanis and

Bangladeshis do not stand out as having much lower levels of British national identity.

Responses to questions about national identity may be very legalistic, with many respondents saying they are British simply because they have a British passport. But the Citizenship Survey also asks more subjective questions about whether one feels that one belongs to Britain. Table 2 contains responses to some of these questions.

Table 2: Sense of belonging by ethnicity

Ethnicity	Fairly or very strongly feeling they belong to Britain	Fairly or very strongly feeling they belong to the local area	Agreeing one can belong to Britain and maintain a separate/religious identity
White British	85%	72%	66%
Indian	89%	75%	84%
Pakistani	89%	81%	89%
Bangladeshi	87%	78%	86%
Black Caribbean	84%	75%	77%
Black African	84%	66%	82%

Perhaps the most striking feature of the first two columns is that ethnic minorities show very similar levels of belonging, both to Britain and their local area, as do the white British. One could interpret this as saying that Britain has been relatively successful in making ethnic minorities feel a part of

society, or that Britain has failed to sustain a high sense of belonging among the majority white community. There could also be elements of truth in both of these statements. For the ethnic minorities it is fairly clear that one reason they feel they belong to Britain is that they feel no conflict between their cultural and religious identity and being a full part of British society – the third column shows that 80 to 90 per cent of ethnic minorities perceive no such conflict. Again, there is no evidence that the Muslim communities perceive more of a conflict than others. But the third column also shows that one-third of the white British do not accept one can belong to Britain while having a minority religious or cultural identity.

Although Table 2 shows a generally high sense of belonging, there are clearly some people who do not feel they belong and our research investigated the factors which seem to be associated with a sense of belonging.

Belonging and segregation

Concern is often expressed about residential segregation, about communities becoming isolated when living apart from others. Table 3 shows the sense of belonging for those who live in areas where more or less than half are of the same ethnicity as the respondent.

The first two columns of Table 3 show that the ethnic composition of the local area seems to make little difference to the sense of belonging to Britain. The last two columns show it seems to have more effect on the sense of belonging to the local area, although only for some ethnic groups, notably the white British. Overall residential segregation seems to play little role in affecting the sense of belonging.

Table 3: The effect of residential segregation and sense of belonging

Ethnicity	Fairly or very strongly feeling they belong to Britain		Fairly or very strongly feeling they belong to the local area	
	Local area more than half of same ethnicity	Local area less than half of same ethnicity	Local area more than half of same ethnicity	Local area less than half of same ethnicity
White British	85%	79%	74%	58%
Indian	91%	88%	79%	71%
Pakistani	90%	87%	84%	80%
Bangladeshi	84%	90%	81%	76%
Black Caribbean	83%	84%	80%	73%
Black African	84%	84%	79%	63%

Belonging and respect

One factor that is very important is being treated fairly and with respect. People of all ethnicities are much more likely to report feeling that they belong if they feel treated fairly and with respect. The Citizenship Survey asks respondents whether they feel they would be treated better or worse than people of other races by 15 public services, covering health, education, criminal justice, local government and housing. Table 4 shows that those who think they would be treated worse by at least one of these services are much less likely to feel they belong either to Britain or to their local area.

Table 4: The effect of perceived discrimination on the sense of belonging

Ethnicity	Fairly or very strongly feeling they belong to Britain		Fairly or very strongly feeling they belong to the local area	
	Do not think	Think treated	Do not think	Think treated

	treated worse than those of other races by any of 15 services	worse than those of other races by any of 15 services	treated worse than those of other races by any of 15 services	worse than those of other races by any of 15 services
White British	89%	81%	77%	69%
Indian	91%	87%	79%	66%
Pakistani	93%	83%	82%	81%
Bangladeshi	94%	79%	85%	70%
Black Caribbean	94%	77%	84%	70%
Black African	89%	78%	67%	66%

Conclusion

We interpret these findings as lending support to the key ideas behind multiculturalism – that making immigrants and their cultures feel welcome and respected and fighting discrimination, without worrying too much about where minorities choose to live, will result in those minorities coming to feel part of Britain. Our other research also shows that these same factors are associated with having more pro-social values. The fear that the separation between communities might be creating alienation does not appear well-founded.

But there is one important aspect in which multiculturalism has failed. While the multicultural project may be the right way to make minorities feel a part of the wider society, it pays little or no attention to white natives, taking their identity and values for granted. But our findings indicate that segments of the white population have come to feel that they are neglected and discriminated against, and do not feel a part of British society. It is not too much of a leap to imagine that this is the segment of the population from which the BNP draws its support.

So, the biggest failure of multiculturalism is not that it has failed to create a sense of belonging among minorities but that it has paid too little attention to how to sustain support among parts of the white population, who are sceptical about the ability to retain a minority ethnic or religious identity while being British and who perceive conflict over resources (especially access to social housing) with immigrants and ethnic minorities. Addressing these concerns is what needs to be done if Roy Jenkins' ambitions for equal opportunity and cultural diversity to thrive in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance are to become anything like reality

This article first appeared in the [Spring 2011 issue of LSE Research Magazine](#).