Passing the Baton
Inter-generational Conceptions of Race and Racism in Birmingham

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Foreword

Communities change. Racisms change. For those who seek to live in a society where race, ethnicity, or background does not constrain life chances, it is of critical importance to be aware of the directions of these changes so that we are fighting today’s battles rather than those of yesterday. As we watch far right organisations focus their ire on Muslim communities, or the ongoing impact of institutional racism on Gypsy Traveller groups, and Eastern European migrants attacked in their homes or workplace, we can only marvel at the persistence of this false ideology of racism that has driven human atrocities of the largest scale and shaped our histories. As noted in the Commission on the Future of Multi Ethnic Britain ten years ago;

Racism is a subtle and complex phenomenon. It may be based on colour and physical features or on culture, nationality and way of life; it may affirm equality of human worth but implicitly deny this by insisting on the absolute superiority of a particular culture; it may admit equality up to a point but impose a glass ceiling higher up. Whatever it’s subtle disguises and forms, it is deeply divisive, intolerant of differences, a source of much human suffering and inimical to the common sense of belonging lying at the basis of every stable political community. It can have no place in a decent society.

Persistent, complex, changing and subtle in its forms, racism is a stain on our society that is difficult to shift. That does not mean that the battle is not worth fighting or that we cannot make progress in ridding our society of its most egregious forms. Yet, when faced with the complexity of tackling contemporary forms of racism, it can be tempting to file in the ‘too difficult’ box, leading to inaction, persistence of inequality, and the ongoing exclusion of minority ethnic groups. Like a deer caught in the headlights, the citizen can abhor racism yet be confused about what to do about it. I’ve asked various audiences, from sixth formers, to trade unionists, to activists and academics, over recent months whether they think we might be able to end racism in the UK within the next generation. Mostly, this suggestion has been met with bemusement – what would a society without racism look like, what actions would we need to take to achieve it, can racism really come to an end? My response has been that if we as a society wanted it badly enough we could do it through making our legislation work, understanding the dynamics of racism, understanding what works to change racist attitudes and behaviour, and developing the leadership required at all levels to finally put racism to an end. If we as a society created (and re-create) racism, then we as a society can destroy it.

It is with this challenge in mind that Runnymede has embarked on an ambitious series of projects to reflect on what it would mean to eradicate racism within a generation. Entitled Generation 3.0, the projects will seek to find out what has worked so far in changing racist attitudes and behaviour, map the different conceptions of race and racisms across generations, and support race equality organisations in building the activists of the future to lead the push to end racism in our society.

This report outlines the findings of a research project where we worked with community and voluntary organisations in Birmingham to understand how different conceptions of race and racisms across generations act as a potential barrier to or fillip for activism. By engaging with young people and older people who are committed to tackling racisms we hope to be able to illuminate the different approaches across generations and encourage dialogue that can build a shared agenda for change.

Runnymede is interested in building this programme further so that the call for the elimination of racism within a generation is met with enthusiasm for change rather than confusion. Any organisation committed to tackling a social evil such as racism should look forward to the day when it no longer needs to exist. Runnymede is no exception. We hope that Generation 3.0 will make a significant contribution to our demise.

Rob Berkeley
Director
Runnymede
January 2011
Executive Summary

There have been huge strides made in addressing racial discrimination in the UK. Nonetheless, racism remains a blight on communities and the lives of individuals. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people still suffer discrimination at an institutional level in education and employment and on a personal level in their interactions with others in daily life. We believe the idea of race changes through time and that it can be affected by social actions. If it is possible to affect the idea of race, we believe it should be possible to affect and undermine racism too.

The aim of this report is to examine how attitudes towards race and racism have changed over generations. Using insights gained from the three generations that have grown up since mass migration started in the UK we can effectively tackle prejudice experienced by the fourth. The programme of which this report forms part is called Generation 3.0, as its key focus is young people three generations on from the major wave of post-war migration typified by those who disembarked from the SS Empire Windrush in 1948. Generation 3.0 also refers to the new styles of campaigning and political engagement that are now required to create societal change, and leadership by young people in creating new responses to persistent challenges.

We conducted focus groups with people of different ages and from a variety of different backgrounds across Birmingham. We asked participants to tell us what they felt race meant in Birmingham today, how they felt racism operated and the ways it could be challenged. Participants for our research were taken from community groups, youth centres and projects for young people. These included The Carpenters Arms, a church group from the predominantly white suburb of Sutton Coldfield, The Afro-Caribbean Millennium Centre, a community centre for the African-Caribbean community on Soho Road, and the Indian Workers’ Association, one of the oldest community groups in the city. Young participants were drawn from the Bangladeshi Youth Forum, a youth centre predominantly for the Bangladeshi and Pakistani community in Lozells, members of the British Youth Parliament, a youth action project organized by Birmingham City Council, and a mixed group from the Small Heath community centre.

The responses we received revealed important similarities in the way people of all different ages and backgrounds conceive ‘race’ and racism. However it also found important, though sometimes subtle, differences.

The main issues raised by all the groups we talked to were the nature of race and racism, the way in which people’s identities seemed to change across generations and finally the relationships between different communities.

Key Issues

- No participant expressed approval of racism or discrimination;
- All expressed the desire that people in Birmingham should be able to live together peaceably;
- Nonetheless, racism caused significant concerns in Birmingham.

Race, Racism and Discrimination

- Young people in Birmingham have a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how race and racism could determine their life chances and place in society.
- In particular they expressed concern over the potential for racism to affect their job prospects.
- Older participants were often keen to stress the difference between structural racism and individual prejudice though they were highly critical of both.
- While members of the Sutton Coldfield group were less engaged with race issues they were equally condemning of prejudice at a structural and a personal level.

Identity

- Young people’s concept of identity was shaped by the super diverse environment in which they grew up.
- While many initially argued that race was unimportant, further discussion soon revealed that it played a vital role in defining their identities. Muslim participants’ discussions
tended to be dominated by the Islamophobia they perceived around them. Black participants made frequent reference to stereotypes of Black criminals.

- Older activists also had a flexible conception of identity but often seemed to be rooted by a census category understanding of diversity.
- Terms like ‘Black’, ‘English’, ‘Asian’ and ‘British’ shifted meaning depending on the context, including or excluding groups like the Asian / Muslim / BME community at different times.

**Community Relations**

- Young people’s perception of community relations were also defined by super diversity. While opinions differed, most offered an image of a rough acceptance of the various communities amongst their peers.
- They argued that communal tensions tended to be more problematic amongst older generations.
- Older participants also provided a tenser image of community relations. Members of the Asian and African-Caribbean communities referred to specific causes of disagreement between them, though discussion of the white population was notably absent.
- Despite this all groups expressed sympathy for the struggles facing others in Birmingham, and the desire to see greater community harmony.

**Conclusions**

- The report challenges the idea that young people are unmotivated or politically apathetic.
- Young people display frustration that they do not see many avenues that they can follow in order to effect change.
- Older generations hold valuable experience and knowledge but there is often a disconnect between them and the younger generations of activists.
- What is required is a set of neutral forums and spaces where younger and older people can meet and exchange ideas, knowledge and experience.
- This would reconnect the different generations, meaning that Generation 3.0 would benefit from a greater wealth of wisdom in tackling racism.
- This is not a solution to racism per se; however it is a blueprint for the generation of such solutions.
1. Introduction

The Generation 3.0 project was conceived as a road map to eliminate racism. It has now been three generations since large scale migration came to the UK with the SS Empire Windrush. Runnymede's aim is to ensure that the fourth generation would see dramatically less racial discrimination than their forebears. In the 62 years that have elapsed since Windrush docked at Tilbury, there has been considerable progress in eliminating racism and discrimination of all forms. Nonetheless, racism remains a blight upon communities and the nation.

Race is socially constructed, dynamic and changeable. Community action is similarly dynamic. Generation 3.0 aimed to engage younger and older community leaders and activists to discover how ideas about race and racism differ and what tactics are most successful across generations.

Ideas on the salience of race, its meaning and its operation in society, change over time. Polling has shown a consistent increase in tolerance among younger generations. Our research indicates the important role played by contact between younger people from different ethnic backgrounds in urban Britain. However, the challenges of racism persist, with some minority ethnic groups experiencing worse outcomes (even when class background is taken into account) in education, health, employment and the criminal justice system. Young black and minority ethnic people are often characterized as victims of racism without the tools to challenge these seemingly embedded patterns of disadvantage – in spite of the legacy of the struggle against racism which has been a feature of the post war years. Discrimination on the basis of race also persists with some white young people drawn to far right rhetoric and action on the basis of racism. If racism is to be eliminated within a generation, a central task is to activate young people to move from voicing an experience to engage in social action to challenge injustice where it is found. There is a serious challenge to be met in opening a dialogue between activists spanning different generations, so that they can exchange the ideas and offer advice based on their different experiences.

We take our cue from the Carnegie's Young People Initiative (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008: p. 30) which concluded:

There is also a new emerging phenomenon – that of adults and young people being in competition … for power and influence over public decision-making. The nature of challenges in society – community cohesion, environmental concerns, and responsive public services, amongst others – requires co-operative relations between generations and communities, made up of dialogue, tolerance, awareness and understanding including a realisation of the assets, talent and potential of young people within and across different groups in communities including religious and ethnic dialogue.

It is our hope that this report – which gathers together the views and opinions of a diverse range of Birmingham's population – can provide insights into how racism is experienced today, how it has been resisted in the past, and how it should be resisted in the future.

Our report shows there are important similarities in generational attitudes to racism. However, there are equally important, though often more subtle, differences. The social realities of many young people growing up in Britain's cities today are in many ways more complicated than they used to be. For example, many cities – including parts of Birmingham – can now be described as 'super-diverse'. As Steven Vertovec (2006) points out, this has implications both for race equality policy as well as anti-racist practice:

Current understandings of multiculturalism and diversity are largely influenced by people who arrived in the UK from former British colonies between the 1950s and 1970s. However, these now established groups have been superseded by new, less organised, 'non-citizen' immigrant groups who have changed the UK's social landscape.

Similarly, and related to the development of a super-diverse inner Birmingham, young people need to navigate several social spaces, which requires them to develop multiple identities and different codes of conduct for their peer group, family and school for instance. These realities mean young people tend to be more fluid in their definitions.

Everyone involved in the study, regardless of how active or inactive they were in community politics, expressed clear condemnation of racism and prejudice. However, this did not mask serious
tensions between groups and discomfort about issues like distribution of resources and relations with new migrants. Even when participants expressed such views they were accompanied by discussion of the historical context and awareness that this discomfort was inconsistent with opposition to racism. Participants of all generations were at pains to stress that such reactions themselves caused them discomfort and often emphasized a lack of antipathy towards the new communities, objecting instead to the manner of their arrival.

More complex were inter-communal relations between the more established communities. Among older participants there were signs of considerable tension between African-Caribbean and Asian – often Muslim – communities. This is perhaps not surprising given that only five years have passed since the civil disturbance erupted on Lozells Road, which runs in close proximity to several of the locations of our study. The causes and effects of these tensions are broad with long antecedents. However, even those who were clear and vehement in their complaints expressed sympathy, solidarity and understanding with other communities and the challenges they were facing.

Simple answers are inappropriate. There are significant risks but also very good reasons for optimism. The resolution to fight racism and commitment to principles of race equality remains strong. The title of our report is taken from a comment made by Noël Martin during one of the discussions we had: “I want to pass the baton on to the younger generation. All this knowledge and experience I have, I want to pass it on”. Similarly, the younger participants showed a deep appreciation of the anti-racist struggles of previous generations. We hope that this report will promote the kinds of dialogue necessary to access the wide range of opinion and experience available in Birmingham. It will be necessary to negotiate the challenges ahead.

2. Methodology

The research for this project was conducted in Birmingham between June and August of 2010. The aim of the project was to comprehend the way that race and racism are understood across the three generations that have grown up since mass migration came to Britain with the Empire Windrush in 1948. We selected Birmingham because it has one of the highest populations of ethnic minorities in the country, because it has a history of race based protest and because it was the subject of Runnymede’s first report – Professor Gus John’s influential *Race in the Inner City*, published in 1970.

In order to understand the context of the city we conducted desk based background research. This helped us to formulate the questions we would then put to the participants of seven focus groups. As far as possible we asked these groups the same questions about race, racism and activism in Birmingham so as to be able to triangulate their views. These groups included participants from the African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani, Indian, Somali and White British communities and covered ages from 18 to 90+. In addition we conducted participant observation in a comprehensive school and a number of youth clubs in the Handsworth and Lozells area; this allowed us to contextualize the responses we received from young people within the focus groups. It also gave us a better perspective on how young people from different communities interacted in school and informal environments, broadening our understanding of how they interacted both with each other and older generations. Prior to conducting several of the focus groups, representatives escorted us on a tour of the neighbourhoods of Lozells, Handsworth, Handsworth Wood and into central Birmingham, explaining some of the socio-dynamics and the history of the area. These tours also placed the focus groups within the geographical context, in relation to the surrounding area; deprivation in Handsworth compared to considerable affluence in nearby Handsworth Wood, for example. The historical insights gained were also extremely useful as the ‘back-story’ to community tensions that remain vital and pressing, particularly to older participants.

We recruited the groups through a variety of methods; desk research enabled us to identify community centres and organizations that would be suitable for our research. In addition,
contacts that we made with the council, or with organizations involved with an associated project helped us to identify and contact participants. The majority of participants were engaged in some way in community activism or anti-racist politics but there were some who simply participated at their local community centre and it was revealing to hear their views as well.

The groups were divided into older and younger participants. The younger set included people aged 16-25 from the Bangladeshi Youth Forum, the Small Heath Community Centre and the Birmingham Youth Parliament. As well as being ethnically and religiously diverse these groups included young activists as well as members of local community centres.

The Bangladeshi Youth Forum (BYF) is a youth centre, primarily for Bangladeshi and Pakistani teenagers in the Lozells area of the city. Lozells was location for the notorious 2005 riots and the BYF is situated minutes away from Lozells Road, the centre-point of the violence. The area is therefore a very interesting one in which to engage in debates about race and race relations in Birmingham as we discovered during a focus group with 17 males of Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent aged from 18 to 27.

The Small Heath Community Centre youth group is situated on Muntz street in the Small Heath area of Birmingham. The young people we spoke to, four males and five females, ranged from age 18 to 21 and were ethnically mixed. Small Heath is a relatively diverse area in Birmingham – where communities tend to live in enclaves – with a predominantly Somali and Asian population.

The Birmingham Youth Parliament (BYP) is a group of young activists who had been elected from amongst their peers to take part in the project run by Birmingham Council’s participation unit. The group we spoke to had elected to focus on the issue of racism in Birmingham and they participated in the focus group as part of that project. The group was evenly split between two males and two females ranging from 16 to 18, and diverse ethnic backgrounds including Pakistani and Somali heritage young people.

The older participants – defined here as those involved in activism in the latter half of the 20th century – were similarly diverse. We talked to members of the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) both in the Handsworth ward – and the Carpenter's Arms community centre in Sutton Coldfield.

The IWA is one of the oldest BME organizations in the country, having been started in nearby Coventry in 1938. Founded prior to Indian independence, its members have been active in the independence struggle (the building they meet in is named after nationalist hero Udham Singh) as well as campaigns for equal rights and anti-racist activism in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Five participants were of Indian decent, and one member was of white British origin.

The ACMC was founded in the 1970s as the Afro-Caribbean Resource Centre. The centre was intended as a focus point for community activism and anti-racist campaigning. It has since developed a local radio service, a research department – The Frantz Fanon Institute – and provides social welfare and health outreach to the community. The mixed gender group of 10 people we spoke to were all of African-Caribbean descent. All of the members had a history of community action, and two had even sat on the city council in the past.

The Carpenter’s Arms is a church based community group in Sutton Coldfield. Though not defined as such, the makeup of the constituency means that the members are overwhelmingly of white British or white Irish decent. The six participants included significantly older residents, the oldest being 93.

Finally, one of the focus groups included four young people and three older activists from two organizations. Continental Star FC is a social enterprise that seeks to help marginalized and ‘hard to reach’ individuals and groups. The club centres around sports activities, but also delivers an after-school homework club for disadvantaged young people and a women’s help group providing support and advice to the unemployed and lone parents. The Noël and Jacqueline Martin Foundation brings together young people from Brandenburg, Germany, and England in order to work and learn together and thus foster mutual understanding between youngsters of different races and nationalities.
Birmingham is considered to be Britain’s second city. It has a population estimated at 1,016,800 rising to 3,683,000 if surrounding commuter towns are taken into account (ESPON, 2007). Birmingham is also one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country and by 2011 Barrow Cadbury predicts it will become a ‘majority minority’ community – wherein no one ethnic group has an absolute majority within the population (Benjamin, 2006).

Until the 1990s, Birmingham was a major industrial centre. Particularly important were car manufacture and metal beating workshops. At one point heavy industry accounted for 50 per cent of all employment in the city. Between 1998 and 2007 manufacturing declined dramatically, 30,000 jobs were lost and the sector came to account for only 11 per cent of the total employment in the city. Over the same period the public sector expanded rapidly creating 40,000 jobs. The public sector now accounts for just over 31 per cent of Birmingham’s total employment (Dale, 2010).

Unemployment is a chronic problem in Birmingham. The city contains five of the worst wards in the country for unemployment including the three worst: Ladywood, Hodge Hill and Hall Green. While unemployment has long been a problem in Birmingham – by 2010 it had reached over 12 per cent; more than double the national average – its distribution has been far from equal (NOMIS, 2010). The youth unemployment rate is double that of the city average at 24 per cent (NOMIS, 2010). In the lead up to the 2010 General Election the Birmingham Post reported that Muslim men were on average three times more likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts (Dale, 2010). African-Caribbean, Asian and Irish men and women are all more likely to be unemployed than the white British Population.

These issues have sparked conflict in the past and continue to cause tension. Often residents level the accusation that resources are unfairly distributed between the various communities and that this is the cause of significant disadvantage and economic hardship for one group or another. Despite these expressions of communal misunderstanding, nostalgia for solidarity seen in past struggles are far from rare even among the most vociferous advocates of communal advancement.
4. Conceptions of Race and Racism

4.1 Young People

‘Race’, Racism and Discrimination

The first thing that should be highlighted is the rich and nuanced understanding young people have of race, and how racism operates in society. For the young people we interviewed, the idea that race is a social construct came naturally. They voiced strong opinions that there is nothing biological or natural about racial inequalities, no inherent genetic qualities that make one group superior to another. At the same time, however, they demonstrated a deep awareness that ‘race’ is real in society and shapes how we see ourselves and others, and that the ways in which racial boundaries are drawn can impact greatly on the lives of individuals and groups. When asked the question ‘What is race?’, all groups discussed different forms of race and racism, including discrimination based on religion, culture, identity and ethnicity. Although skin colour was ascribed an important role, it was deemed to be only one factor amongst many. The following exchange from Small Heath illustrates this point well:

**Researcher:** I guess the first question then is: what do you understand race to be?

**Male 1:** Colour of your skin.

**Researcher:** It’s the colour of your skin. Is there anything more to it than that?

**Male 1:** Well you could be like, Caucasian, Asian, Black how you like, identify that, what kind of category you’re put in.

**Male 2:** It could be about religion as well, race.

**Male 3:** Identity, race is, it’s your identity.

**Researcher:** So it’s more than just the colour of your skin, it’s also other things then…

**Male 3:** It’s mostly your roots, your roots like where you’re from. If you Black, White, where your parents are from, grandparents…

Female 1: It’s all about where you’re from basically.

Female 2: I dunno, I think race is hard to define. Sometimes people get culture and race mixed up it’s ah… gets all confused. Someone can be racist to you, they don’t even know what race you are and they’re getting it wrong anyway.

As a social construct, race and racism can take many different forms, be mobilized in various ways, and change rapidly, a fact that many interviewees commented on. In spite of this fluid and complicated nature of race, the young people nevertheless had a strong sense of racism and how it operates. When asked whether race is important today, many responded along these lines:

I think it is but it shouldn’t be. Because, I go back to when you’re a kid, when do you actually find out you’re Black? When do you find out you’re White? Who actually tells you? That person is trying to define who you are, why can’t you define who you are? Why is it race? (Black male, BYP)

I think that when you say someone’s Bengali Indian, Caucasian, anything like that, it’s like a label. But even then I don’t think people should, what’s that word, discriminate against that label, in the same way I shouldn’t judge him because his Pakistani, or I shouldn’t judge him because he’s Bengali or whatever, you know what I mean? (Asian male, BYF, emphasis added)

It is clear from the discussion groups that the young people thought that race is important. Indeed, central to their explanations of how racism operates is the idea of hierarchy and unequal power-relations. This inequality could manifest itself in various different ways, whether personally, locally or nationally. On an inter-personal level – that is to say direct experiences they had of being subjected to racism – many spoke about the subtleties of everyday racism. Most were of the opinion that overt and aggressive racist behaviour has decreased and that their parents or grandparents would have suffered this to a far greater extent. Nonetheless, casual racism was still said to exist, but in more indirect ways and often drawing on cultural stereotypes:
It's like people, instead of using racism they use stereotypes. Instead of saying 'Is he Black?' They'll say 'Does he wear his trousers low?' or 'Does he wear a hoody? Does he live in New Town?' They'll ask them kind of questions instead of just asking 'Is he black?' so they'll just know. So they think 'Oh I'm not being racist, I'm not saying he's black. I'm not saying he's white. I'm not saying he's Asian'. (Black male, BYP)

This is not to say that aggressive racist behaviour was unfamiliar to the interviewees; many shared stories of being harassed in the streets, pinpointing predominantly white areas of Birmingham as the most likely for this to occur. One female Muslim interviewee from Small Heath related her experiences of racial abuse:

Like boys still drive past in cars and like spit at girls in scarves and that. Because I think they're brought up with that. You know the culture that they've got, they're all brought up with it. It's 'cos of the older generation, if they don't give it up it's not gonna ever stop. If you're teaching someone something they're not gonna learn, you know it goes down generations or something if they're teaching their kids that.

It would be a mistake to pay no attention to the racist abuse young BME people continue to suffer, or to minimize the impact it still has on communities. However, the young people suggested that their experiences are very different from those of their parents, who they said suffered routine everyday racist abuse. In some ways, this corresponds with the slightly passive acceptance of far-right movements such as the British National Party or the English Defence League. These kinds of organizations, they argued, are impossible to completely get rid of. There will always be a hard core of racists; levels of racism can be managed, but racism cannot be eradicated. In some ways, therefore, the young people seemed to accept that racism is a part of society:

Researcher: So, say for example if a group like the English Defence League were to march through the area, would you take part in demonstrations to tell them they're not welcome? Or would you just choose to ignore it?

Female 3: I think that, people aren't going to want to go there to talk to them they'll want a fight. So it's going to be a bit pointless, you know it's not going to get you anywhere.

Female 4: What people have got to understand is, is how we express our views, they express their views and they're doing it in a very democratic way.

More important than fighting far-right extremist groups is to ensure that racism is unacceptable for the majority of the population. Thus, the young people seemed more concerned about wider racial discrimination in society than racist violence by far-right groups, partly because they felt that it has become socially taboo to be overtly and aggressively racist:

I think it's more of like, racism is a bigger issue nowadays. Like people bring it up wherever you go, so it's not like normal to be racist. Maybe in then it was normal but it's not like that anymore. Like bigger issues are arising like if you're racist at work… I think there's certain laws if you're racist at work. It's like that so, it's bigger even if people want to be racist I don't think they can really, unless they're on the streets. On the streets nobody can say to you 'Oh you can't say this' or 'You can't say that' it's like that I think. (Asian female, Small Heath)

Again, interviewees presented exceptionally nuanced views on how these wider – often hidden and unspoken – forms of racism and discrimination operate and the effects they have on BME groups and individuals. They were generally very aware of how structural discrimination shapes their life chances, and the role both local and national government and their policies play in either abetting or impeding ethnic inequalities.

Interviewees talked about structural discrimination and inequalities ranging from the public to the private, but discussions went into more depth when talking about national structures than local. On a local level, the young people referred to some statutory agencies – most notably the police – as engaging in racist practices, but generally had little to say about the practices of the local council or schools. Nationally, however, interviewees identified a number of institutions and agencies that serve to reinforce discrimination and gave various examples of how BME groups are at a disadvantage in their life chances. A compelling example – on which many interviewees voiced strong and passionate opinions – is how BME groups are portrayed in the national media. This, they said, has an effect both on how the majority population perceive ethnic minorities – particularly young BME people – as well as how young people see themselves and their racialized place in society. Many interviewees commented on the negative stereotypes about young black people being thugs and criminals. When asked where these social assumptions come from, participants of the BYP said:
Male 1: The media. That’s how they portray groups of young people of any ethnic background, so that gets portrayed on us. Everything that we hear, that we see, can make us think ‘I don’t want to talk to them’.

Male 2: I like telling the stereotypes but I do it deliberately. I go out to meetings and everything and people are like ‘Oh, are you going to wear a suit?’ but then you’re doing it because you want to feel like you’re one of these people. But no, I want to be able to go out, dress how I want to dress, speak how I want to speak. ‘Cos I know when I go to those places they’re thinking ‘Oh gosh, another Black person, what’s he going to talk about today? Is he going to talk about gun crime? Going to talk about his experience on the block?’ But when I talk like I’m talking now they think ‘Oh wow’. I like that. I know that when I meet people they wanna ask ‘Oh what area do you live in? What’s your mum do? What school do you go to? What’s your predicted grades?’ all of that but when I talk how I’m talking they go ‘Oh, I didn’t expect that from you’.

The young people were not only concerned about stereotypes and the negative image of BME young people. They also described how they feel marginalized and disadvantaged in very real and concrete ways due to their race or ethnic identity, and explained their awareness that this impacts negatively on their life chances. For example, they discussed in depth how they are disadvantaged in the job market. Put simply, the young people argued that they face an ‘ethnic penalty’ in the labour market, where they are less likely to get a decent job than their white peers. They connected this to hierarchies in society, where BME groups are less likely to find employment higher up the social ladder:

In my personal experience, I think the higher up the job is the more likely it is to be racist. So like security guards, you see them and they’re often Black or Asian but when you get higher up the people you hardly see, the bosses they’re more going to be White. (Black male, BYP)

At the same time, however, they were unwilling to become passive victims of discrimination. There was scepticism that anti-discrimination legislation and policies actually work, that discrimination still happens despite the law, and that BME people have to be that much tougher to survive and succeed. When discussing the implications of the ‘ethnic penalty’, the participants of the Small Heath discussion group aired a variety of views:

Male 3: That’s the hegemony and that; it’s like the ownership of society is white middle class.

Female 4: Personally, I wouldn’t let that be a barrier. If I’m gonna go to a job interview I’m not gonna go ‘Oh, he doesn’t want to employ me because I’m not white’. Eventually someone, ‘cos people do do this, they’re going to not have any job and they’re going to live up to the expectation of what society thinks about them. So if you’re going to just keep, like, however many times you have that happen to you, if you just keep thinking ‘Oh they won’t give me a job because I’m Asian’, then you’re going to end up sitting home, you’re going to end up hating all the white people.

Female 3: There’s only so many times you can have that happen to you though.

Female 4: Just because you had one white person be discriminate against you doesn’t mean you hate all white people and there you go, the racism just starts again. That’s why I mentioned at the start, its like this continuing thing that just seems like it isn’t going to stop. It’s been initiated from years ago and all these legislations and laws, I mean, they’re not really here to prevent discrimination, they’re just here to punish the people who do discriminate racially. It’s not really a form of preventing discrimination.

Female 3: It kinda is in a way, because if you know about it then you wouldn’t do it blatantly.

Male 3: Yeah but laws are there to be broken, seriously.

The main point is that the young people had very deep, perceptive and nuanced understandings of hierarchies in society, and how their place in Britain – in terms of social and economic standing – is largely determined by race and racism. Furthermore, the discrimination and disadvantage they face could, according to some interviewees, explain why some groups do badly in other areas of life as well:

Why is that the most affluent areas are mostly populated by White people, and why is it that the poorer areas, the most deprived I should say are the Black and Asian areas? The most gun crime? Black and Asian. The most knife crime? Occurs in Black and Asian areas. The most stop and searches as well. Why is it not other kinds of people? If you’re all one people? That’s what I think anyway. (Black male, BYP)
Identity

Birmingham can in many ways be described as a super-diverse city, with a multitude of different groups living side-by-side within the city limits. The city has a long history of migration, a trend that has continued to this day. New groups – including Somalis, Kurds, Eastern Europeans and many others – have recently arrived adding to the more established African Caribbean and Asian communities. In many areas – such as Handsworth, Lozells and Small Heath – it is no longer appropriate to think of ethnic diversity in terms of black, Asian and white. The reality is more complicated than this, a fact that the young people were acutely aware of.

It has been noted that ethnic identities are necessarily contextual and change over time. Therefore, it is more important to investigate the context within which individuals and groups identify themselves and others, rather than focusing on the ‘cultural stuff’ of each ethnic group. Bearing this in mind, it should come as no surprise that the young interviewees described their identities in complex terms, in many ways reflecting the complexity of the social worlds they inhabit. They live in a world of constant flux – social realities change very quickly and they have to adapt to these changes instantly. In this sense, it could be useful to talk of super-diverse identities, where young people engage in code-switching according to the social environment:

Well I’ve experienced it growing up in school. We had an Asian community in school but then there was Pakistani community, Bengali community and consequently there used to be kick-offs all the time between one group and another. Over the years people learnt how to get on with each other. But then you had this divide between the top side of Aston and the bottom. And then, whenever they was a group from the other side of the roundabout which is Lozells they’d get together and meet up by the roundabout. So it’s always, alright maybe I’m wrong but street culture. Its always, you know out of 50 guys who are there, right, two of them really want to fight and the rest of them they’re just bored they just want something to do. And it’s just street culture, it’s just another identity that they hold onto the streets, but when they’re home they have another identity and when they’re at school they have another identity. (Asian male, BYF; emphasis added)

Central to the young people’s narratives was a strong sense of competing expectations. The interviewees described how they have to balance demands from different parts of their social lives – like family, peer group, school, church or mosque, and agencies such as the police and youth workers – who all have a certain set of expectations of the young people, not only how they should behave, but also how they should define themselves in relation to wider society. These demands can often stand in direct conflict with each other and are not easily reconcilable. When asked about whether the older generation understand how young people now mix with each other, Small Heath participants answered:

Female 5: It’s kind of more encouraged innit?
Researcher: It’s encouraged, OK…

Female 4: But then again it’s not because, for example my mum; because she and her parents have experienced so much serious racial discrimination and if I was to, when I first went to college, because I went to an all-girls Asian school. When I went to college it was hard for me as well, because I’ve, you know, found some amazing friends who were not even Asian but ah, to tell my mum that I have a white friend, when I first said to her ‘My friend, so and so, blah blah’. She didn’t attack it, she just kind of, you know ‘But why are you going out with white people? They’ll just hate you and …’. I think that ‘cos of what they’d experienced ‘cos of, kind of to protect us they’re telling us not to do it. But also, as [she] just said there are some who understand that our generation has mixed and mingled and that we find it easier to get on with people who are not from your same culture and whatnot. So there is still that barrier, but as I say for my mum to say that, it’s ‘cos of lack of knowledge.

Female 3: Yeah, because if you have that thought you can’t ever mix with other people.

Importantly, many interviewees were of the opinion that neither their own community nor wider society appreciated the meaning of the super-diverse social lives of young people. The Small Heath group argued:

Female 2: I think I’m actually the only non-Asian one here. My mum’s white and my dad’s black, my boyfriend’s Asian and I’ve got a half-Asian brother, so I’m all mixed up.
Researcher: Alright…

Female 2: But I don’t really like, just chill with mixed race people, just black people or white people, a lot of my friends are Asian. Not because I wanna be with the Asians, it’s where I grew up, the people you grow up around, the friends that you make.
Researcher: Do other people feel like that as well?

Female 4: It’s kind of sad really because erm, you wouldn’t believe it but I’m mixed race also. And when I get white people or black people coming to me making racist comments I’m thinking ‘Well, my nan’s white so you’re just making a fool out of yourself, because you’re White’ but obviously they don’t know that. But like [she] mentioned earlier on it’s hard to establish one’s race, culture and identity on the basis of their colour because evidently they didn’t realize that I had white in me whereas I do, and it’s just not made any difference because they’ve just continued to make the same racist comments.

Largely due to super-diversity and the degree of mixing that goes on in their peer groups, many interviewees voiced the opinion that race does not matter. However, as we outlined in the previous section, it quickly became clear that race has a strong impact on how the young people see their place in the world. In a sense, the parts of their identities that they chose to highlight in the focus groups were those on the basis of which they feel discriminated against. For example, Muslim interviewees would emphasize their religion in relation to Islamophobia, and black interviewees would emphasize their blackness in relation to ‘black criminals’ stereotypes. The point is that discrimination and racism appears to have a profound impact on the identity formation of young people.

Community Relations

In the previous section, we explained how the young people expressed complex identities, and how these were reflective of a social reality that is full of twists and turns. Young people have to navigate different social spaces and norms – often conflicting – which require them to adopt code-switching strategies. These strategies were in large part a response to the super-diversity of the areas in which they live.

The areas of Birmingham that are the subject of this research experienced civil disturbances in 2005. These events had a great impact on the young people interviewed for this study, many of whom were children when the disturbances took place:

Firstly, firstly it was something that we’ve never ever really experienced, like the first time in our generation to witness a riot. Full scale, in our faces, we’ve never experienced that in our lives and it’s something to get our heads round. And a couple of days afterwards there were like racist things, like if a Black person were out an, or if a Black person were walking along the other side of the road they probably would have shouted something, or looked at me in a different way. This happened for like a couple of weeks, and then, soon after that after all the hype and everything died down then everything went back to normal. (Asian male, BYF)

Some interviewees were of the opinion that the civil disturbances could happen again – that there are still tensions between communities that could erupt, and that community relations are fragile. This view, however, was contradicted by the opinion expressed by many interviewees that young people mix fairly well together, and that the picture painted of segregated communities are an exaggeration. There are problems with community cohesion, they argued, but there is still mixing going on, especially amongst younger people. The participants of the Small Heath discussion deliberated that although community relations are often tense, young people are increasingly mixing with people of different backgrounds:

Researcher: But why do you think there’s more mixing going on? Do you know why that’s changing?

Male 4: It’s time, innit?

Female 3: I think it’s ‘cos you meet new people when you move out of a certain place. Like you leave school, you go to college, that’s out of the area and multicultural places, you start to learn what different people are about. You learn their values even if there are differences you learn to accept them, you’ve got to live with them ‘cos you can’t change them. So I think that’s what kind of opens your eyes to it all.

Male 3: You learn the similarities as well that different cultures have. They do similar...

Male 1: When you’re at school you’re sort of forced to mix. So people are just like ‘I thought that culture was bad before, but now that I’ve met someone’:

Male 3: It’s like work, everywhere now you’ve got to work with people from different backgrounds than you. It’s equality and everything you’ve got to work with people from different backgrounds than you...

It is difficult to determine whether these are sentiments the young people expressed because this is something they know they should say, especially to researchers. The young people’s
accounts are paradoxical; they describe how race relations in their areas are fraught with tension, while simultaneously stating that race no longer matters. Given the complex social world the young people live in, and how they receive different signals and messages from parents, school, peer group and so on, this is perhaps not unexpected. Importantly, however, the fact that some groups still have a strong and stable sense of community was not necessarily seen as a problem or a threat to cohesion. Indeed, some participants argued that a strong sense of community can be an important anchor in an otherwise unstable social world. A Small Heath participant said: ‘There’s a lot of places where, if there’s a lot of you moving to one place then I don’t think they can be racist because there’s more of you to stand up against it. If you know what I mean?’ Furthermore, a strong and cohesive community can serve as an effective safeguard against racism:

I come from an area in Birmingham where most of the people in that area are Asian. So there’s not much, and because we go to a local school, about 80 per cent of that school is Asian. I would say I don’t think I experience racism on a daily basis because I am so used to the people around me that there’s no point in having that racism there. (Asian male, BYP)

It should also be noted that the young people also articulated the limits of inclusive super-diversity. They acknowledged that new immigrant groups can suffer racist abuse and social exclusion from more established BME groups. When asked how recent arrivals get on in their areas, the participants of BYF argued:

Male 3: I personally have no problem with the Somali people but I know people who do. What it is, is that since the 1990s, there have been loads of Somalis coming to this area since what, 2006 something like that. And because they’re new to this area people just pick on them and call them names. But now the Somali community is growing in this area and slowly we’re becoming used to them and the racism they’re suffering from is decreasing every day.

Researcher: Do you know who they’re suffering racism from? Is it mostly white people or is it anyone?

Male 3: Any people. I think white people just mistake them for black people, they think they’re just the same because of skin colour, they think they’re black.

Discussion

It is clear from discussions with the young people that race still matters to their lives. It is equally clear that they are very aware of this and have a nuanced understanding of how racism and discrimination has an impact on their life chances. Interestingly, however, they seemed less concerned about overt everyday and/or violent expressions of racism, and generally had more to say about the structural discrimination they face. In many ways, this may be a fair reflection on how many areas of inner Birmingham have changed since their parents and grandparents first arrived there. The young people we interviewed have grown up in areas where ethnic minorities are a majority, and many suggested that this provided them with safety in numbers.

Although it is undeniably a good thing that racist abuse does not form an everyday part of the lives of the young people we interviewed, there is another element to this situation which is more problematic. The areas we visited for this study are some of the poorest and most deprived in the UK, and if young people growing up in these areas want to increase their chances of a better education, occupation and income, this would almost certainly mean moving out of these areas, at least temporarily or intermittently. As one of the youth workers we spoke to pointed out, there is a danger that young people do not want to move out of the areas where they feel secure, comfortable and in control. This is consistent with what the young people told us, as most of the participants talked about racist abuse happening elsewhere, in mostly white areas, and therefore not necessarily of any great consequence to them. This becomes a problem in that upward social mobility might demand that they venture out of the comfort zone. Staying in areas with a high proportion of ethnic minorities may very well confine people to a certain type of education and a limited range of job. In this sense, their apathy about the racism that happens elsewhere is harmful, as they may not develop the necessary knowledge and courage to challenge racist behaviour.
4.2 Older Activists

Older activists’ views were also divisible into the themes of racism and discrimination, issues of identity and issues of community relations. There were significant differences in how the group formulated these concerns. Perspectives were dominated by contemporary politics on the one hand and the political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s – when participants became activists – on the other. The establishment of a multiculturalist discourse and its implications for administration and funding of community groups by the local authority was especially influential. Concerns within the groups often operated at two levels. On a wider structural level, many blamed the council for mismanagement or discrimination towards one or another community. However, on a more personal day to day level, significant antagonism was directed towards those communities they felt received preferential treatment of the council. Themes of daily interaction and structural relations are therefore not easily divisible. Much discussion focused on domination of the council by one ethnic group or another. While participants frequently expressed strident views these were often accompanied by more nuanced interpretations of the issue at hand.

Members of the older, predominantly white community centre displayed only tangential connection to many of these issues. While they had opinions on relations between various communities, these could be somewhat abstract and generalized rather than focused on specific issues. They became aware of them when they surfaced in the news but lacked the personal connection that those from the Asian and African-Caribbean communities did. Similarly, neither the Asian nor African-Caribbean groups discussed the relations with the white British community in any depth. On the one hand, Sutton Coldfield is geographically and socially separated from inner-city areas like Handsworth or Soho Road where our discussion with members of the African-Caribbean and Asian communities took place. Nevertheless, they do constitute an important proportion of the ethnic makeup of Birmingham and it is significant that the communities impinge so little upon each other’s lives and views.

‘Race’, Racism and Discrimination

Among Birmingham’s older activists, there is a widespread concern for the structural forces that underlie the realities of racism and discrimination. They were keen to emphasize the importance of structural factors. Among both the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) and the Afro-Caribbean Millennium Centre (ACMC), race and racism had differing meanings for different communities. One participant at the ACMC focus group stated:

To my mind the definition of racism is a power relationship. I believe black man can be racist in Africa, maybe in Jamaica but not in Britain. For the simple fact that black people are not … not in the power structure and they haven’t got the power. That… the white people have. So they’re not in the position themselves to discriminate. So the relationship in Britain is the white man have the power, and therefore, can be racist, can discriminate, can prevent black people from gaining position in the society by using… that power.

Another participant cited the Marxist theorist Walter Rodney to argue: ‘…these things are historical. These things are not abstract. So racism among the Greeks would not be the same as racism in the 19th century’.

Members of the IWA engaged in discussion of the historical contingency of race: environmental factors; availability of crops and livestock and so on, but there was also a feeling that racial distinctions were largely a construct as ‘actually there is only one race and that is (the) human race’. In Sutton Coldfield, participants expressed slightly greater concern for the impact of large scale migration and the ability of the migrant groups to adapt to life in the UK, nonetheless they still emphasized that ‘They’re just people, we’re all just people’.

Race was also widely considered to be the subject of political manipulation by the unscrupulous and in particular by politicians. The members of the IWA were clear that politicians in the area engaged in ‘dirty politics’, stoking distrust and tension between different communities. Within the ACMC much of the acrimony was based upon the perception that the council was pursuing a highly damaging policy in the way it distributed and administered its funding and that this was typical of council behaviour. This tended to operate on both communal and institutional levels: distrust of the council and resentment towards communities seen to be the beneficiaries of council inequality. Accusations were made of deliberate imbalance in the distribution of funding intended to tackle
social degeneration in the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson, 1999). One participant reasoned:

*I think... that the government accepted the Labour group's claim that they should tackle packs of deprivation at the wards [as opposed to at borough level]. I think [participant 5] is right that was an unfair decision trying to placate certain people politically.*

One participant complained that the council was unaware or unconcerned by the realities of the situation on the ground. They felt that, even if the council distributed funding to communities equally, such funding failed to take account of the different levels of economic development – for example ownership of businesses – between the groups. This would necessitate ring fencing of certain funds to allow the more economically deprived communities to begin to compete on a level playing field. They had been vocal in expressing this view in the past as they felt it was an important reality to recognize, even at the cost of heightened communal tension. This view encapsulates the complex mix of communal, economic and institutional issues that came into play within Birmingham.

In terms of the issues that brought activists into the race equality struggle, the prevailing discourse was of personal experience of discrimination which then broadened out to political consciousness. Members of the IWA and the ACMC group discussed the struggles they had in employment or education on their arrival in the country and how this awakened in them a passion for redressing social wrongs. One attendee of the ACMC group discussed the first time he had been aware of experiencing racism from school. It was from early experiences that the participant began to develop a political consciousness in the atmosphere of engagement, protest and struggle of the 1960s: ‘The point about all this is that the 1960s was a very active time … lots of activism so I would say I got into activism from the environment I inhabited’. Among the IWA, many of the members also mentioned being brought in by the desire to challenge specific issues affecting them, such as ‘housing issues, job issues you know, going into pubs, going into social places’. Members of the Sutton Coldfield group also discussed these struggles though for them they were a far more distant and abstract memory. One mentioned the signs saying “No blacks, no Irish, no dogs” in houses and businesses around the area to demonstrate that things have improved now, and that migrants from Ireland faced similar discrimination to those from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean on arrival.

Members of the ACMC and the IWA expressed antagonism towards other communities within Birmingham though they were explicit in differentiating this antagonism from ‘racism’. Meanwhile, the participants from Sutton Coldfield expressed less concern for specific community antagonisms and more concern for racism as a generalized problem that could affect any individual or community.

**Identity**

One prominent feature of the discussions in Birmingham was the shifting way that members of various communities conceptualized their identity and that of others. Among older activists, the issue of religion was seen as problematic even among members who professed a religious faith. During the ACMC focus group, one participant expressed the opinion that the community was hamstrung by religious divisions and felt that this disadvantaged them compared to the Asian community:

*From the black perspective we’re diverse, we have different factions and everybody’s got different views on what you believe or what you don’t believe. From an Asian perspective it’s either you’re a Sikh, a Hindu or a Muslim. Now within the Muslims you’re either a believer or an infidel. I know I speak to quite a few Muslims who would rather not be Muslims but because of their family or whatever they feel that have to stay. And they help each other. But our community, we’re in factions. And not only that but we can’t agree on spiritual things, on political things. We only seem to come together for all the wrong things, at a funeral, or some form of, to use the term, riot.*

The IWA participants expressed almost the opposite view. Several of the participants stated that religion was a divisive and damaging force in their communities:

*I mean they can’t work together … and if black man does something they will help each other and you won’t find [it] if you want [people] to help you…that is the difference because we are divided caste-wise and you can’t see through religious differences … Brahmin … these are the things that are going on in the community and you should be going above that if you want to fight racism.*

Another crystallized this point with a simple question: ‘How many Sikhs employ Muslims into their shops?’ Members of the IWA considered relations within the Asian community to be hopelessly riven by communal tension. As the quotes above demonstrate, Asian community politics are subject to similar economic and social...
divisions as those believed to separate them from the African-Caribbean community.

It was notable that none of the participants from any of the ethnic minority groups seemed to define themselves as British, or certainly did not mention doing so. Meanwhile, the members of the Sutton Coldfield group defined themselves as English (and occasionally Irish), a phrase which at times did not include minority groups – particularly those who did not speak the language – and at other times excluded only the recently arrived who had not yet integrated themselves into mainstream society.

Definitions of identity are complex and shifting and this was reflected in the way that the terms participants used changed depending on the context. One of the most significant changes was the use of the term ‘black’. For instance, in both the Asian and African-Caribbean groups the term was often used in the political sense as referring to minority groups with a shared political agenda. In Birmingham, this generally means both the African-Caribbean and South Asian communities, and is a reference to a definition that was predominant during the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was obviously also used to refer solely to members of the African-Caribbean community (usually men). When participants were employing the former definition, they often felt the need to make this explicit but when employing the latter one it was assumed to be self-evident:

…if I’m in a crowd of black men and somebody kills somebody; they grab them as a group. They’re all criminalized together and they’re all implicated. So even if you didn’t shoot the gun or you didn’t stab the knife you’re all guilty by association. If I’m with the Asian community and they’re a group or group attacks it was individualized down to the individual level and people who was there by association got off.

Similarly, the IWA focus group members discussed violence they had received at the hands of ‘black’ men, and it was understood that this referred specifically to the African-Caribbean community.

Compare this to two later comments in both the ACMC and IWA groups: “…using the broad ‘Black’ political term” one participant at the ACMC said. Similarly in the IWA a participant stated “…look at all the areas, you know, say where Black people live, and when I say ‘Black people’ (I mean) in a political context, say Asians … ‘Black’ is a political thing”.

Each of the groups had a shifting conception of their own identity and that of other groups. Terms like ‘Black’ and ‘English’ carried very different meanings depending on the community being discussed and their relations to the speaker.

Community Relations

The topic of relations between the various communities was one of the most prominent to arise during the discussions. There was considerable debate about tensions between the communities and references to the unity that previously characterized racial politics in Birmingham. Both African-Caribbean and Indian groups told us of considerable inter-communal tension for which they often held the council responsible. Within the ACMC there was considerable discussion of the preferential treatment that the Asian community received and accusations of collusion between the community and the council in inhibiting the progress of African-Caribbean groups in Birmingham. This group most prominently spanned the divide between communal antipathy and institutional distrust.

The discussion of policing methods in the aftermath of the 2005 riot is a good example of this. The explanation the participant gave for the relatively lenient treatment handed out to Asian youths was that ‘It had to have been controlled from the top and it was probably done for political reasons’.

Among the white group from Sutton Coldfield the primary concern was the lack of everyday interaction. This was often conceptualized as reciprocal social interaction: ‘They come over to our house for a barbeque and we do the same’. However it also incorporated more rough and ready interaction and good natured mockery. One participant repeatedly stressed that in his youth, while working with Irish migrants, ‘I called them everything, and they called me the same’. He gave the impression that this robust social intercourse was something lacking in the modern day.

A participant at the IWA seemed a little uncomfortable addressing this issue:

I don’t know how you’ll take this, but [I have been] living in Birmingham for 30 years and in that time I’ve been called ‘Paki bastard’ four times by [an] Afro-Caribbean person … and only once in my life I have been called ‘Paki bastard’ from a white man.

The same participant also mentioned that the majority of violent incidents he had experienced involved men from the African-Caribbean community.

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The same participant also mentioned that the majority of violent incidents he had experienced involved men from the African-Caribbean community.
In terms of the causes of this tension, there was discussion of an earlier time when ethnic minority groups were united in anti-racist struggle but that this earlier unity had broken down. One of the participants at the ACMC recalled: ‘There was a time when the Asian and African-Caribbean community used to fight together, because they used to have common purpose’.

Participants at the ACMC attributed this decline in solidarity primarily to financial causes. In particular, they argued that serious financial inequalities existed between the various groups and that the council had failed to properly address this issue. Some members argued that this failure went further, that the council actively colluded with some communities against others: “We’ve had black people who want to set up businesses and stuff like that being blocked by communities using their political clout to stop them leasing properties and stuff”. Various other members of the group expressed similar resentment about the unfair treatment they felt they received and tied it to access to the council and its resources. It was clear in the discussion that the ‘communities’ referred to Asian groups. This represents a version of a common story told about the decline of community solidarity and the corrosive effects of simplistic multiculturalist box ticking. Tying funding to narrowly-defined ethnic or religious identities is seen as inherently divisive and results in inter-communal tension. Wider social trends are likely to have played their part. During the last two decades, wages in Birmingham have stagnated and unemployment has been relatively high following the disappearance of traditional heavy industry taking with it an important space for social and political interaction among members of differing communities. As has been pointed out elsewhere, when people stopped associating as workers, they began associating as Muslims, Asians, African-Caribbeans, etc.

The IWA participants referred to this. However, they also indicated that there had been elements of conflict between the groups for many years. One referred to a feeling of superiority they sensed among the African-Caribbean community as a group that had arrived before the Asian migrants: ‘The West Indians or Africans, they got the language before us, because our people can’t speak English ... and they think ‘We are superior to the Indians’’. However, the group felt that this attitude was the result of a wider process of division engendered by the government which engaged in ‘dirty politics’.

The Sutton Coldfield participants also expressed concern for communities that segregate themselves: the Chinese community, the Asians, the ‘West Indians’, etc and that this was a concern for racial relations in the city.

It should be noted that in both Asian and African-Caribbean communities there is considerable variety in the views expressed, and those outlined here are not necessarily representative. One member of the ACMC said: “I think there’s a lot that we have to be looking at in-house. I personally don’t blame the Asians for going out and doing what they do”. Both groups were also aware that such tensions were often the result of wider social forces and that both communities suffered from serious issues. At the ACMC, one of the participants asked: “Could it be that racism is even greater against the Asian community or certain sections of the Asian community with Islamophobia for example?” Later another participant stated: “when we talk about Muslims and racism, or Asians and racism that community is suffering racism to the full.” Similarly, members of the IWA expressed awareness of economic barriers facing the African-Caribbean community. They even expressed concern for the lack of solidarity that Asians in Birmingham often displayed towards the African-Caribbean community.

Discussion

Trying to draw firm conclusions about a group so disparate is unwise. A number of general observations can be made, but the exceptions to these conclusions are also illuminating. There was a widespread feeling that racial divisions are artificial rather than inherent. This did not mean that they were considered unimportant. Tensions were discussed between Asian and African-Caribbean communities, and even among the more socially distant Coldfield community concern was expressed about the detrimental impact of communities that never interact. While members of the Sutton Coldfield group expressed greater reservations about the impact of large scale ethnic diversity on community cohesion, they also expressed greater faith in the ability of everyday interaction to resolve tensions. However, it was significant how little the white British community featured in the IWA and ACMC discussions. Similarly, the members of the white British group had an abstract impression of the issues that were vital to BME groups in Birmingham, indicating that relationships with minority ethnic communities play a relatively small part of their everyday interactions. Both the African-Caribbean and Asian groups focused far more on the need for institutional or structural interventions to address these issues.
5. Inter-generational Continuities and Divergencies

‘Race’, Racism and Discrimination

It is reassuring, though not surprising, that no participant expressed a positive view of racism and it was vocally deplored by almost all participants engaged in the study. Both older and younger participants engaged in discussions about the artificiality of race as a category. However, there were significant variations between the generations, particularly in the ways that they conceived of race and its operations and in the degree of fluidity that characterizes these conceptions in practice. These variations impact upon their conception of how racism originates, operates and can be countered.

The idea of race as something that is used by others to label and often manipulate individuals and communities was expressed across the generations, as the following extract from the IWA focus group demonstrates:

Male 1: I think race itself is important, if you look across environment or across European countries, if you look at elections and all the … media. Particularly when capitalism is in crisis as we know, it depends.

Researcher: Yeah.

Male 2: It depends … they use race, religion, race card and stuff like that to promote its policies, blaming everything on immigrants….

Younger participants were also disparaging about the uses to which race is put in society. In the BYP discussion this was made very clear:

Researcher: So do you think race is something that other people define for you? Do you get the chance to define yourself racially?

Male 1: Other people put on to us… if a young person goes home and says to their mum and dad ‘Oh I met a new person’ sometimes well mostly, all the time their mum and dad will say ‘What colour are they? What do they look like?’ They deliberately, well they might not do it deliberately but they go straight to that first. It’s almost like they’re building an idea of how they look.

The reference to parents in this extract provides a useful indication of a key but subtle difference in generational thinking about race and identity to which we will return later.

In terms of racism, while all participants expressed disapproval, there were subtle variations in the way they felt it operated. Older activists revealed a far more structural conception of racism. Their views were often influenced by Marxist theory and by 1960s ideas of race as a political identity. One ACMC participant offered this definition:

I think the first thing that we have to recognize is there’s confusion about racism. ‘Cos I’ve heard people say ‘black man is just as racist as white man’. And I think that’s a nonsense, it’s a confusion of the term. To my mind, the definition of racism is a power relationship. I believe black man can be racist in Africa, maybe in Jamaica but not in Britain. For the simple fact that black people are not … in the power structure and they haven’t got the power.

The concern expressed by younger participants focused upon structural racism. They talked about being abused on the streets but more often they worried that racism would prevent them from being able to find a job:

If you’re going to apply for a (job in a) small shop, like a corner shop type thing and it’s in a white area they’re most probably not going to employ Asian people. In a way maybe it’s better for Asian people not to apply there because if you know the area’s surrounded by racism why would you want to work there? (Asian female, Small Heath)

Female 1: Can you be racist to your colour though?

Male 1: I think you can. You can go on saying ‘Oh, my colour’s this, my colour’s that’. Not only are you being racist to yourself, you’re being it to other people as well.

Male 2: I’ve noticed that the worst policemen are the black ones. Maybe it’s just me, but when I see a black police officer I always think ‘Oh it’s alright, he’s a black man, he’s going to be cool with me’ but it’s the complete opposite. Normally the white officer’s being so nice to me and the black officer’s being so rude to me.
This is not a definition of racism that many of the older activists would accept. This version is not simply a description of a power relationship. Instead it takes into account the effects of daily interaction between individuals and defines as racist any discrimination based on ethnicity, race, skin colour, religion or cultural background. It reveals a broader, more flexible idea of racism; the impact of the diverse and fluid nature of their conceptions of identity.

Identity

Identity was an area where discontinuities between older and younger activists were pronounced. This gap was the focus of some complaint by the younger members of the study, though it was not much discussed by older members.

Although both groups acknowledged that racial identity is a social construct, older groups still talked about communities in Birmingham in quite static terms. At times they discussed identities like Black – as being a political identity – but often their conception seemed to be rooted by a census category understanding of identities. For example, discussions of funding to the ‘Asian’ as opposed to the ‘African-Caribbean’ or ‘black’ communities often gave the impression that these were more solid and defined identities than conversations with younger activists.

These differences did not go unnoticed by younger people. Their conversations were accentuated with references to the multiple identities they felt compelled to juggle. Often they talked about the problems they experienced with older generations assuming that because they associated with one community they would lose the traditions of their own.

Personally the thing that, like, the older generation don’t understand, in terms of what I want to say to them is that, no matter who I mix with it won’t change my family values, my religion, you know my religious values, my traditional values. You know I’m not going to change just ‘cos my white friend drinks alcohol. You know, me and my white friend we get on like, well I was going to say Tom and Jerry but they don’t get on [laughter]. But we get on basically and that doesn’t mean I’m gonna … She’s not going to get influenced by me basically and say ‘I’m going to start wearing a scarf 24/7’ and I’m not going to get influenced by her and start saying ‘Well I’m going to start drinking alcohol because you’re drinking it’. (Asian female, Small Heath)

Similarly, the BYF participants noted the rigidity of older generations’ conception of identity and community:

Male 6: You know when you get married, not to someone from your culture. Someone from a different culture, other people judge against the race.

Researcher: Other people? Who would they be in that sort of situation?

Male 2: People from our culture, parents, community….

Researcher: Friends?

Male 2: Family friends.

Researcher: But your peer group, the young people the same age, would that be a problem?

Male 5: No, I think that’s more of the older generation and even for myself growing up misconceptions that I had within my own culture. But when you’re able to question things and research for yourself then you’re able to find out answers for yourself. But before it’s just like, OK, your parents said this and your elders said this and you go OK and take it for what it is. But once you question things and research for yourself then you can find out….

It is difficult to identify exactly why this disconnect has taken place. During the older generations’ experiences of protest during the 1970s and 1980s, ‘Black’ was a political term. However, it was also a term for a community that was largely and involuntarily segregated from the white mainstream. Composite communities subsequently splintered from each other inferences made during focus groups and meetings with a variety of older Birmingham activists placed responsibility for this division upon clumsy application of multiculturalist policies that divide older political groups along ethnic and religious lines. Younger people in Birmingham still regularly interact with contemporaries from several different communities, predominantly at school. Their ideas on the characteristics of various communities and on the shifting nature of identity are influenced by the varied social circle that school and college impose.

Community Relations

Similarly to issues of identity, conceptions of community relations amongst older activists differ
in important ways from that of young people. Older generations tended to portray far greater division between the communities. Younger participants discussed considerably more mixing. It should be noted that this was ambiguous and there were points of tension when the subject of inter-communal relations was raised with both groups. At Small Heath, one participant discussed the reasons behind their more relaxed attitude:

I think it’s ‘cos you meet new people when you move out of a certain place. Like you leave school, you go to college that’s out of the area and multicultural places you start to learn what different people are about. You learn their values even if there are differences you learn to accept them, you’ve got to live with them ‘cos you can’t change them. So I think that’s what kind of opens your eyes to it. (Asian female, Small Heath)

That said, it is important not to overstate the divergences here. Older members from all communities often expressed awareness and solidarity with the other communities in Birmingham:

Could it be that racism is even greater against the Asian community, or certain sections of the Asian community with Islamophobia for example? And is that confidence that you spoke about within the Asian community a result of the fact that a number of people in the Asian community have had to fight racism in a more direct way probably even than African and Caribbean people? Because they’ve really been targeted, the fascists for example, what they’ll often say is that ‘We really don’t have too much against the African and Caribbean people’. Really, they love our culture, they love the music, they’re Christians, they’re this and that. But really it’s these Muslims who are clearly outside, that we’re against. (Male participant, ACMC)

We need to really have to look at what our prejudices [are] like [towards] Afro-Caribbeans, [many people] wouldn’t employ them in a shop. (Male participant, IWA)

Similarly, younger participants also expressed concerns over the state of community relations in the city, and occasional discomfort with the extent of new migration:

With regards to new migrants, in a sense I kind of understand how white people felt when our grandparents came to England. To them it probably felt like ‘outsiders’ were invading their territory and so their negative behaviour may have been a form of defence. Similarly, I know a lot of Asian people that are not happy about new migrants. On a personal note, I have had unpleasant encounters with some Somali people that live in the same community. Somalis are Muslims like myself and I was more angry and frustrated rather than offended as to why these individuals were being racially discriminative. If people who share the same values as you can be aggressive and discriminative against you then I feel like I should totally expect it from others (Asian female, Small Heath)

Discussion

Community relations in Birmingham, as in other urban centres across the UK, remain a complex and often loaded issue. Across generations there are tensions between some communities and a worrying scarcity of interaction between others. Nonetheless, there is considerable scope for optimism. Older generations expressed awareness and concern over the issues facing members of other communities, even communities with which they have a history of antagonism. Despite some tensions, younger generations display a sensitive and nuanced understanding of community relations in Birmingham. They often mix freely with members of other communities, even when older members of their families express concern or disapproval of their doing so. They are also adept at placing contemporary problems in their historical contexts and use their experiences to help them understand and accept the opinions and even prejudices of others.

As we discuss above, older activists recounted how they got involved in political activism. They compared this to young people today, which some argued were more politically apathetic than their own generation, and were keen to bestow their knowledge and experiences upon a new generation of activists. Within the IWA, the received opinion was that the forms of organization and protest adopted in the past remained relevant for the struggles of today:

How we tried to tackle [them], our techniques were to organize ourselves … and we tried to organize in Trade Unions, we tried to organize with other black groups, everything … and now I think it’s most important in Birmingham … the same tactic, same techniques we are trying to use.

Members of the ACMC group placed a similar emphasis on passing on the techniques they had developed to the next generation. In particular,
emphasis was placed on the importance of the social or community centre as a locus of political organization. A number of participants were somewhat despondent as far as the political activism of young people is concerned. As one participant put it:

…it appears to me that the experience I’ve got from political activity, community activity and so on, that I want to pass on to the younger generation from my experience … I’ve run my leg of the relay and the time has come for me to pass on the baton to the younger generation but I don’t see the younger generation running behind me. I don’t see them running to pass the baton.

However, one member questioned the continued importance of such methods and even whether the younger generation had anything to learn from their forbears. He argued that younger generations had a better idea of social networking and organization utilizing modern technology than any of the participants in the focus group and that the methods used by the older generation were no longer relevant:

Let’s take the talk that we’ve been having about centres, and no one has been more involved in developing centres than myself. I think they’re important. But the question for young people is the fact that centres of this kind are profoundly irrelevant to young people. Possibly, I’m putting it out, they feel like communicating through Facebook or one of the other more social media sites is a far more meaningful way of organizing.

Amongst the young people, in contrast, there was a strong sense that there are no forums or platforms for them to have their voices heard. As we outline above, the younger participants were not short of opinions, but struggled when asked about how they get their views across to those in power. The Small Heath participants made this point powerfully:

Female 4: As she mentioned before, in discussions such as this we are listened to. But if we, us lot were to go outside and I don’t know, demonstrate or take it to government officials they would just stamp all over us.

Male 3: I think it’s like, if we go there they probably would listen, but would we ever have the opportunity to go there? I’ve been down at school, like debate with a few people but it’s like how can we, really and truly get ourselves in there to speak to them?

Female 3: Have something worth saying.

Male 3: But how can we get there in the first place to speak to them? We ain’t got the chance to get there. Like this, if you read some people they say they can get you there and this and that, but really truly if you want to get your voice heard you gotta get somewhere in life before you even get to speak to someone else.

Similarly, one participant complained that the tools, support and resources were not there for young people to tap into:

I think the Government they think, they’ve set the guidelines, set the law, there you go, job done. I think they don’t really care about anything else, I think they only care about job done. Black people are achieving this amount; Asian people are achieving this amount, tick boxes. But at the same time, I don’t think they really care about what else is going on, on a small scale. We’re only four people, we can change but there’s only so much we can change. If we had more support, more resources we could get more done. (Black male, BYP, emphasis added)

Conclusions

Generation 3.0 was intended to provide a guide to the elimination of racism within a generation. This was always an ambitious project and our conclusions are correspondingly complex. There are a great variety of factors that affect how communal relations play out in Birmingham. There is a long history of industrial decline, traditions of radical protest, especially within the BME community, a history of mass migration dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, local government implementation of multiculturalist policies, and sharp and sometimes violent inter-communal conflict most recently between the Asian and African-Caribbean communities in 2005.

The findings of our research pose a serious challenge to the old cliché of politically apathetic youth. Participants were politically aware and engaged with the issues of the day. Their ideas about race, identity, racism and how discrimination impacts on their life chances were remarkably sophisticated and nuanced, particularly in regard to structural inequality.

Older activists in Birmingham remain politically engaged and active. They expressed awareness of the pressing issues of the day, and not simply those of their own community. While they evinced
a willingness to continue ‘the struggle’, many also indicated that they felt their future contributions would be limited and that it now fell to young people to lead the way. They were committed to passing the anti-racist baton to young people, but some said that they could not see a new generation of anti-racist activists running behind them. Perhaps one of the most important conclusions of our report is that this is not because the younger generation are not running, but that they seem to be running a different race.

While older activists are well informed as to political issues of the day, their conceptions of race and identity does not necessarily match the super-diversity that informs that of younger generations. Discussions of identity, particularly of racial and religious identity, centred on conceptions that are fixed and constant, whereas those of younger people are marked by fluidity. For them, identities – and especially racial identities – are in constant flux and dependent on the social environment, requiring continuous negotiation and very difficult for others to accurately pin down.

There is a concomitant disconnect between ideas of activism between the generations. Older activists have very clear and often strident views about the need for determined political action. However, their perceptions of what this constitutes were clearly defined by the tactics of their political heyday. Social centres, trade unions and campaign for political office featured prominently in their discussions. Many of these forms of organization – particularly the trades unions and other political campaigns – were already established when this older group came into political maturity and began to engage. The structures were already in place and they engaged with them in order to achieve their ends. By contrast, young people often expressed frustration, feeling that they had few avenues of influence open to them. Trade unions are not the force they once were, the decline of youth engagement with local and national ‘big P politics’, to borrow a phrase from the Carnegie report, is well documented (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008). They felt that they were often not listened to, and that they lacked the techniques required to address this.

The challenge is to find a way of connecting younger people to their forebears. This requires forums and social spaces, online and actual where younger and older activists can share knowledge and experiences. To some extent this is the role that older generations envisaged for social centres and there is some scope for these centres to play that role. However, these are closely tied to the struggles and tactics from which they emerged and may not always speak to the challenges faced by younger generations. Young people do not seem to feel that they represent them or their issues. Given the near ubiquity of online social networking in the past six years it would seem perverse to ignore the potential for this tool, but it would also be an error to place too much emphasis upon it. While it has the capacity to unite disparate individuals, it also has the capacity to alienate those who are unfamiliar with its conventions.

Neutral spaces must therefore be found in which younger and older generations can meet on equal terms with neither feeling they are the guest of the other. These spaces could combine the various and often disparate actors involved in anti-racism, youth participation, protest and social action. They would actively seek to engage young people on the issues which concern them. The nature of these interactions should be determined by the nature of the group itself. It may be that activists wish to run sessions providing guidance on specific aspects of protest and organization or that the area will simply be an organizational space that both groups of activist can use as a resource for collaborating on projects, sharing ideas and techniques and spreading information.

Young people have the drive and the skills to effect change, but often lack the knowledge and the networks to put this into action. In this way they can feel both empowered to take action now, and inspired by the example of the successes of the past. These centres will not eradicate racism of themselves, of course. But they can energize and inform a new generation, one that will benefit from the collected experience of three previous generations of activism in a manner that their predecessors have not. The specific methods and techniques that will be applied will have to emerge from these interactions and will be driven by the activist of all ages.
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