Identities and Social Action: Connecting Communities for a Change

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Preface

In many ways, concepts such as ‘identity’ and ‘community’ seem intuitively simple. They are part of everyday life – how we see the world, how we see ourselves in the world and how the world sees us. The findings from the ESRC Identities and Social Action research programme on which this report is based have been fascinating – each study providing new evidence of how people connect and how they move through life, constructing ways of living that make sense and feel safe in today’s society.

And yet writing this report has proved extraordinarily complicated. On the one hand, identity feels quite solid. Most of us know who we are and how to behave in different situations. At an individual level we have a sense of ‘self’, and can also claim to be part of at least one community. A closer examination of the evidence, combined with a few minutes reflection, suggests, however, that our identities and communities are more fluid and hybrid. The complexity of society is mirrored in the complexity of identity – the shifting performance of how we present ourselves to others and the range of people that we regard as ‘one of us’.

Community can be seen here as a collective version of identity, emerging from the interactions, conversations and observations among people we know directly and from images available through the media and hearsay. It is often associated with feelings of warmth, nostalgia and ‘belonging’. Identity, likewise, is usually a source of esteem, of solidarity and comfort. But someone else’s identity may be viewed as threatening or strange perhaps because they defy local conventions, demand equal respect or challenge existing social norms. A semantic enigma attaches to the word ‘community’: why is it that the noun ‘community’ indicates exclusive membership (e.g. the Traveller community) while the same word used as an adjective implies openness and accessibility (community school, community website)? Maybe identity concepts are the key to this?

The recently elected coalition government has committed itself to delivering the ‘Big Society’, where active citizens, community organisers and neighbourhood groups are given power and responsibility to take on public services, to shape the places where they live and to set up a variety of self-help and philanthropic organisations. According to government statements, the Big Society will be created and driven by enterprise, compassion, mutuality and fairness. Individuals will take up volunteering opportunities and communities will band together to run services and pursue their common interests. The previous government followed a similar path, wanting ever higher levels of civic engagement, social cohesion and citizen participation, while creating an array of programmes and procedures to support collective empowerment.

Such aspirations sound inspiring and democratic in the rhetoric, but as many politicians, policymakers and practitioners have discovered, they are often much harder to put into practice. In our more fragmented and diverse society, what motivates people to seek ‘community’ as a means of achieving what they want for themselves and their families? And what shapes their choices about which communities they belong to and which are seen as ‘other’. Locality is only one aspect of the modern sense of community, and for many people, by no means the most significant one. Familiarity, convenience, ancestry are all factors to consider.
Identity is not a happenstance aspect of our lives – it is something we actively perform and negotiate to construct and adapt to suit changing circumstances and choices. Taken together, the research studies illustrated that several factors foster connections between people within a community. Circumstances and social expectations affect how people chose to identify in different situations and also sometimes the labels that are put upon them.

There are well-recognised benefits to having a shared identity associated with mutual support and loyalty, but there are also downsides. Community as a form of collective identity is especially pertinent when people feel threatened or excluded, for example by redundancy, imprisonment or discrimination.

In order to effectively mobilise citizens and activate whole communities, it is crucial that we have a good understanding of how identities ‘work’: for individuals and at a collective level. What role does identity play in civil society, in political engagement, in bringing communities together, in managing life’s transitions and in helping newcomers to integrate? These are all major challenges facing us in the UK today.

Discussions about identity are complicated and fraught with hidden tensions about cultural differences, divergent loyalties and old enmities. There are fears of offending long-held customs or violating ‘political correctness’ but if we are concerned to understand who’s who in our communities, and decide how we want to live together, then we need to have some proper conversations based on clear evidence, some practical experience and a sound framework of human rights and shared values.

This report draws out the key findings from the ESRC Identities and Social Action research programme, and applies them to what has been learnt from community development about working with communities. Policymakers and practitioners alike will find it useful. It will help readers to ask the right questions, devise interventions, interpret what is happening and respond positively to the kaleidoscopic diversity of the ‘Big Society’.

About the Research

This report draws on the findings from an extensive five-year programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), called Identities and Social Action (ISA). The ISA programme was designed to gather evidence on contemporary identity trends and their implications. Consisting of 25 research projects with over 12,000 participants, the ISA programme aimed to deepen our understanding of identity in the UK by answering these questions:

• How do people construct a sense of identity these days?
• What are the consequences of the identity paths chosen?
• How do identity choices intensify or ease social conflict?
• What is it like to build an identity in situations of social exclusion?

Researchers worked in a wide range of communities from South Wales to Belfast, Sheffield to London, and including both urban, and more rural and provincial settings. The majority of the studies adopted a psycho-social approach to explore what people think and feel about their identities and how these contribute to their ideas of community as a form of ‘collective identity’. By psychosocial we mean simply paying attention both to the psychological and personal factors involved in developing a sense of identity and also the social factors like social class, migration experiences, and so on.
The people studied included school pupils, new mothers, redundant workers and their families, refugee children, young offenders, transsexuals, people with learning disabilities, London lesbians and a cross-section of middle and working class adults drawn from different ethnic origins, professional backgrounds and generations. The findings from the studies shed light on these people's identities, and how they relate to challenges facing UK communities, particularly issues around citizenship, collective action, cohesion, integration, regeneration, caring, survival, learning, nationalism, gender transitions and neighbourly disputes.

Many of the research projects in the ESRC Identities and Social Action programme support the belief that the values of community and solidarity are still important in people's lives, especially in times of crisis. Participants were encouraged to report on their attitudes, their emotions, their perceptions and expectations of others. In interviews and group discussions, they reflected on their experiences – their treatment by others and the decisions they make about how to operate in the world. Conversations and interactions were analysed in minute detail to detect nuances and discrepancies in behaviour and thinking; not to catch people out but to reveal the uncertainties and contradictions in how we assert or contest identities within the dynamics of group relations and wider social interactions.

Details of the ISA studies referred to in this report can be found in the Appendix. The references given in this report generally come from two collections of programme findings, edited by Professor Margaret Wetherell: *Identity in the 21st Century: New Trends in Changing Times* and *Theorizing Identities and Social Action* both published by Palgrave in 2009. Readers, who would like to follow up the technical details of the studies, might like to consult these volumes. Alternatively, summaries of the main findings from each project and a list of all the publications from the ISA programme can be found on [www.identities.org.uk](http://www.identities.org.uk)

Taken as a whole, the ISA studies were a reminder that notions of community are formed and expressed through shared ideas around expectations, entitlement, engagement and equity. We have drawn in this report on those studies that examined how people found or asserted identities in shared circumstances, and, as we will see in the next three chapters, people used these to create a sense of security and a modicum of control over their lives.
Chapter One

Introduction: Why Consider Identity?

**Key Questions**
- What is identity?
- Why is it relevant to policy and practice?
- How does identity relate to communities?

**Relevant Concepts**
- Social capital.
- Intersectionality.
- Identity structure.

**Main Messages**
- Our identities are multi-faceted and flexible.
- We use identities strategically to develop 'liveable lives' in changing circumstances.
- Different aspects of identity intersect in complex ways.

**Practice Implications**
- People prioritise and present different aspects of their identity in relation to different people, different issues and in relation to differences in power and status.
- Successful community practice understands and enables this; it doesn’t judge people as inconsistent or inauthentic.
- Participatory working methods open up common ground between people with different identities.
- Recognising that identity is sometimes associated with discrimination and differentials prevents the concentration of power around one view or voice.

“A tree, whatever the circumstances, does not become a legume, a vine or a cow...Identity must make some kind of sense. And for it to make sense, it must be an identity constructed in response to facts outside oneself, things that are beyond one’s own choices.”


**How is Identity Shaped?**

Identities and our sense of self emerge from our earliest experiences and are based initially on what others do to us and for us. This in turn is affected by social context and cultural mores. Some aspects of our identities are determined at birth, such as sex and aspects of our physical appearance. Others, such as class or faith, we might inherit or adopt from family and culture. In other respects, our identities have a legal basis, like nationality or immigration status. We also have choices. We can actively decide to re-assign things like faith, nationality and even gender later in life, depending on changes in circumstance or personal preference. As we grow older and interact with a wider range of people, cultures and institutions, we become aware that we have a number of
possible identities and are able to combine or emphasise these depending on what seems to be expected of us and how we are treated. The balance of power in society is reflected in identities, just as we can use identity to influence the behaviour of others. Identities provide safety, solidarity and shelter. But they can also threaten or jeopardise our well-being. By understanding the fluid and strategic nature of identities, we can recognise how individuals come together in communities and use connections to protect and promote their shared interests.

The Evolving Nature of Identities

Identities are malleable, complex and multiple. They evolve and are expressed according to the changing needs and opportunities facing individuals and communities. Our identities and affiliations at any particular moment may reflect family or local loyalties, or wider structural inequalities. As we journey through life, our place in the family changes, as does our status in society. Some of these stages are marked explicitly with rites of passage, others simply happen as we acquire new responsibilities and age-related rights. In some cases, people's identities are rooted deep in historical divisions, such as in Northern Ireland or the Balkans. We express our identities differently in different settings, drawing on the most useful, comfortable or least risky dimensions of our identities for a given situation. This might be an automatic adjustment, or a highly self-conscious and deliberate manoeuvre, but either way depends on a subtle awareness of prevailing expectations and power differentials.

Intersectionality

The flexibility and multiplicity of our identities is due to the fact that different aspects of our identities intersect, combining and modifying each other in the process. For example, if we are Scottish or Welsh, how we relate to our national identity is affected by whether we are male or female, young or old, Muslim or Christian. However, this pliability has its limits. Certain identities are less negotiable, depending on the person and the situation. This in turn affects how that person, and those around them, act and react to challenges.

Understanding identity means considering how things like genetics, shared affiliations and migration shape who we are. However, we cannot ignore the fact that people actively construct their own sense of self and perform identities that enable them to lead ‘liveable lives’. What makes a life ‘liveable’? From a social point of view, it should be free from threat and suspicion, with easy and plentiful opportunities for positive, meaningful interactions. Overall, identity is crucial to people’s well being and aspirations. It influences what individuals do, how they position themselves and how they make sense of the world. It shapes their habits, attitudes, what they take for granted and how they relate to others – all features that are central to community life.

Why is Identity Important to Community?

Community is a vital aspect of a person’s sense of self. Just like identities, communities are complex and fluid. Traditional views of community have tended to emphasise belonging and locality, suggesting common purpose, continuity and unity. Communities were regarded as homogenous, with overlapping networks of shared interests and close-knit relationships. The notion of intersectionality challenges this nostalgic image. As the following chapters will demonstrate, most people’s identities are not fixed or one-dimensional. They are multi-faceted and spread across different levels of community – from families, friendship networks, villages, estates and neighbourhoods, to towns, cities, sub-regions and nations. Some communities are trans-national. Others are based on common interests and experiences, such as work, hobbies, shared memories of oppression, life stage or social status. People still refer to familiarity, continuity and shared moral frameworks in defining their communities, but they also appear to value change and diversity as a source of creativity and learning.
A convergence of interests manifests itself in what are often known as communities of ‘identity’ or ‘interest’ to distinguish them from the more familiar association with locality. They operate in different spheres of society, from the extended family to global campaigns, for example around climate change. Successful collaboration relies on people having a common vision and a sense of mutuality. This might take the form of an emergent or constructed identity that enables people to share ideas, resources, information and support. Pressure groups lobbying for equality and justice have often used ‘identity politics’ to forge alliances amongst disparate groups experiencing similar forms of oppression, such as racial discrimination. Community identity and social action belong together in our political traditions and have been an enduring theme of policy.

Despite its well-documented semantic slipperiness, the notion of community has maintained significance in our personal lives as well, often couched in terms of social capital. Social capital can be seen as a collective resource, comprising trust, norms and social networks (Putnam, 2000; Halpern, 2006). It enables communities to co-operate and co-ordinate their diverse activities using informal relationships and connections within civil society.

Governments of all political leanings have seen communities and community development as important. What kind of society do we want to live in and how can we work together to create the conditions in which individuals are fulfilled and communities are both resilient and inclusive? Over the last 40 years or so, the UK has seen a plethora of area-based programmes for neighbourhood renewal, community cohesion, active citizenship and empowerment. Many of these have been centrally driven, with their pace and direction set by national targets and priorities. Since the May 2010 election, government has been endeavouring to reduce the role of the state through a radical devolution of power and responsibility. The present policy context aims to create the ‘Big Society’ in which people come forward voluntarily to run neighbourhood organisations and local services on the basis of community needs and preferences. For the coalition government this means replacing “big government” with “the small state”:

**The Big Society**

In a speech given on 10 November 2009, David Cameron set out his vision of the Big Society. Big government, he argued, had centralised power and control, leaving individuals and communities atomised, demoralised and dependent.

“Our alternative to big government is the Big Society. But we understand that the Big Society is not just going to spring to life on its own: we need strong and concerted government action to make it happen.”

“Galvanising, catalysing, prompting, encouraging and agitating for community engagement and social renewal. It must help families, individuals, charities and communities come together to solve problems. We must use the state to remake society. We must use the state to help stimulate social action.”
Since coming to power in May 2010, the Coalition government has itemised a number of policy actions it will bring forward under the Big Society banner. These include:

- Establish a new **Big Society Bank**, using money from unclaimed bank accounts to leverage hundreds of millions of pounds of extra finance for neighbourhood groups, charities and social enterprises;
- Introduce a **National Citizen Service**, a new volunteering programme to help 16 year olds develop their skills, mix with people from different backgrounds and get involved in improving their communities;
- Promote the delivery of public services by **social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups**, encouraging them to get involved in running things like Sure Start;
- Fund the training of a **new generation of independent community organisers** to help people establish and run neighbourhood groups;
- Launch an annual **Big Society Day** to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and encourage more people to take part in social action;
- There is also the **Big Society Network**, which is independent of government. This is a practical resource and aims to campaign for social change. See: [www.bigsociety.co.uk](http://www.bigsociety.co.uk)

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has reaffirmed the coalition’s commitment to the Big Society concept.

> “We want to make sure people can take control and take responsibility in their street, their estate, their town. Solving problems and taking action for themselves. With neighbourhoods, people working together, as the basis for the Big Society.”

**Why is Identity Important to Policy?**

At the heart of many social policy interventions lie questions of identity, and as we shall see, the answers are not so straightforward. Communities are full of contradictory and diverse identities that are neither harmoniously aligned, nor do they have neat boundaries. Sometimes the problem is seen to be ‘too much’ identity, when neighbourhoods see each other as rivals for scarce resources or the differences between groups become more significant than the similarities, causing social fracture and violent clashes. At other times, the problem seems to be ‘not enough’ identity, where people’s sense of belonging and identification may have weakened to the point where well being, mutual support and resilience are eroded. Whatever the case, interventions and practice must acknowledge the nature of ties between people, taking nothing for granted and seeking wherever possible to support connections that enable people to fulfil their potential and pursue ‘liveable lives’.

In general, policy is concerned with revealing, explaining and implementing ways of tackling problems and achieving goals for society as a whole. Recognising how people define, resist or adapt their identities is important in understanding how they engage with their fellow citizens, and with government. When dealing with a concept as complex and nebulous as identity, an approach is needed that stimulates productive discussion and encourages cooperation between different people. So what exactly does attention to identity add to the broad policy scene?

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1 Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, speaking at the Queen’s speech forum on June 11th 2010.
The current emphasis in government thinking is on issues of fairness and social responsibility. ‘Fairness’ is an important value for communities and society as a whole. It has acquired increasing significance within government policy. Principles of mutuality and reciprocity feature strongly in people’s informal networks. These operate through relationships, exchanges and interactions, signifying boundaries of belonging and obligation, and therefore affect social identities.

Developing policy and practice in the area of identity and community is easier said than done. It is obviously not right or feasible for government to regulate something as personal and free-floating as someone’s identity. Simple labels or social categories are also not the answer – they can pigeonhole people and limit their potential to grow and connect. What is possible is to change the social environment, removing the barriers that restrict choice and prevent self-actualisation. Policy and practice should be based on the myriad ways people actually relate to one another, and should use strategies that respect the reality of different identities co-existing in time and space.

There is a widespread misconception that some identity groups, usually recent migrants, are benefitting at the expense of others. Most often, disaffection is keenest among people who believe they are unfairly treated by the ‘rules’ for allocating resources, such as housing or benefits. Tensions between the elusive ‘us’ and ‘them’ are exacerbated by myths of how these decisions are made. In the worst cases, we are seeing far-right politicians preying on people’s dissatisfaction by perpetuating such rumours, only to fan the flames of racism and xenophobia. People become further alienated and integration ever more problematic. Notions of identity are therefore relevant to policies aiming to promote community cohesion, engagement and entitlement as we will see in the following chapters. For example, by understanding how people form and express their identities, policymakers and practitioners can design policy and programmes that speak directly to local communities, their lifestyles, aspirations and needs. For crucial government agendas like community cohesion and citizen engagement, the nuances of identity play a key role in success.

**Community as an Expression of Collective Identity**

People get involved in communities in many different ways: for example, as parents, as campaigners, as residents of a particular neighbourhood or members of a faith group. Interactions with others shape how identities are performed, and different dimensions of people’s lives intersect to produce different experiences in performance and perception. We see ourselves differently and are treated differently by others according to many different aspects of our identities. Power and status often have negative impacts on how people are able to negotiate or assert their preferred identities, and in determining the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Community interactions can work to break down some of these divisions, helping people to use an array of identities to make links and discover common purpose so that society can run more communally.

Community development offers a way of working with communities that involves people with very different needs and aspirations recognising what they have in common and helping them to develop a strong, shared identity that can make things happen. As we will discuss in Chapters Five and Six, community development contributes to cohesion and empowerment by building capacity and creating supportive environments so that people can work together to make connections, break down barriers, and achieve social change.
With its commitment to social justice and collaboration, community development is also concerned with expanding and shaping identity structures – how people see themselves in relation to others. People actively build and express their identities and the intersections between different aspects of their lives. The term *identity structure* refers to the way in which the overlapping, hyphenated and multi-dimensional aspects of people’s lives are organised as a single model of self.

Power differentials, dominant cultures, legal status, economic position and discriminatory practices may all affect chosen, perceived and imposed identities. They draw people together in common cause or thrust wedges of privilege and prejudice between communities, perpetuating historical divisions or generating new schisms. This pattern of tensions and allegiances is neither static nor simple. It challenges both policy and practice to recognise and respect the diversity and dynamism of communities, as well as the dynamism of people’s identities.

**The Organisation of the Report**

This report takes a detailed look at the nature and performance of identity in community settings. We will learn that identity is good for:

- describing and understanding social change in society and thinking about how change affects communities
- understanding how people connect with one another and the diverse bases on which people form networks
- thinking about collective organising and the dynamics of building effective coalitions
- approaching questions of citizen empowerment and civic engagement
- ensuring representative and accountable leadership
- developing realistic perspectives on difference and on the possibilities of contact between groups

Following this brief discussion of how identity is formed and its relation to community, the chapters cover key policy areas relating to cohesion, integration, empowerment, citizenship, civic engagement and community organising. Chapter Two looks at how identities set boundaries between people, simultaneously creating protection and threat between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Chapter Three examines the evidence for how identities are entangled in the processes of empowerment and participatory democracy. Chapter Four considers the findings that underpin strategies for integration and inclusion using identity to make connections across apparent boundaries. Chapter Five presents the case for community development as a way of working with people that enables them to use their identities as a basis for collective esteem and empowerment. Chapter Six draws the lessons together by thinking about identity as a source of individual and social capital, and concludes with a series of recommendations for policy and practice.

**Who is this Report for?**

This report is for anyone interested in questions of identity and social action. It is hoped that the broad themes of this report – shared identities, democracy, and integration – will provide some useful starting points for those whose work with communities raises similar complex issues. The recommendations at the end of this report draw on the findings of this ESRC ISA research and are designed to support practitioners in the field.
Chapter Two

Shared Identities: Creating Safety, Setting Boundaries

Key Questions
- What determines ‘us’ and ‘them’?
- What aspects of our lives matter most in different circumstances?
- How does identity form the contours of community?
- How do we use identity to manage uncertainty and embrace diversity?

Main Messages
- People use their identity to create a sense of safety and solidarity.
- Collective identity can be both a source of protection and perceived as a threat.
- Liveable lives are based on a strategic and flexible use of identity.
- Community identity helps people to manage uncertainty.
- During times of transition, identities also change.
- Diversity is generally welcomed by people as a social resource.

Practice Implications
- Locality remains a strong base for shared identities.
- Practice which supports local groups and clubs to establish and develop can help to restore identity and confidence in fragile communities.
- Locality also influences the extent to which people feel safe to reveal certain identities.
- Successful practice creates the conditions and opportunities within communities for people to express their identities in safety.

The Relevant Studies
- Norwich (Rogaly and Taylor)
- Plymouth and Bristol (Clarke, Garner and Gilmour)
- South Wales redundancies (Walkerdine, Fairbrother and Jiminez)
- Schools – diversity as an asset (Reay, Crozier, James, Williamson, Hollingworth, Beedell and Jamieson)
- Women in London (Jackson, Cox, Kiwan, Narayan and Khatwa)
- Northern Ireland (Connolly, Bryan, McIntosh and Nagle)
- Segregated and mixed neighbourhoods in Belfast (Cairns, Hewstone, Hughes, Jenkins, Campbell, Schmid and Tausch)

Making Connections through Shared Place and Position

An emerging theme from the research studies concerned identities that promote a sense of safety, based on actual and perceived similarities. A shared identity, whether based on residence, religion, common outlook or even an overlapping experience of oppression, appears to offer a haven – a psychological space where an individual feels secure and can ‘be themselves’ without fear of ridicule, misunderstanding or hostility. It is a way of demarcating ‘us’ and ‘them’, and, unfortunately, in our increasing complex and diverse society, this can be a source of division and discrimination, as well as a means of managing uncertainty.
Contested or stigmatised identities are challenged, resisted and disguised through the pragmatic adoption of multiple belongings and versions of ‘self’. This issue will be further explored in Chapter Four looking at how identity is used to forge connections across apparent community boundaries and enable newcomers to integrate more easily.

Common sense suggests that people’s attachment to locality is what matters when it comes to getting involved in village or neighbourhood activities. Home is an important source of identity for many. Places and occasions for interaction are crucial to how people see themselves in relation to others. Locality and culture are therefore key components of identity. However, other factors also come into play, including roles, prospects and security. Understanding more about how identity and locality interrelate for particular people at particular moments in their lives will help us to meet some of the key challenges in community policy and practice. Despite the assumptions in current political rhetoric around ‘localism’, the places where people live are not the only basis on which they connect. They may choose to get involved in voluntary activities or joint decision-making because of a host of other interests or issues.

**Familiarity Breeds Content**

As might be expected, places of origin or residence (and the journeys of migration undertaken between these) figure strongly in people’s sense of identity. Personal biographies establish territorial pride while patriotic loyalties are used to construct and mobilise communities. Across several of the studies, participants indicated that their sense of belonging, of community identity, is tied up in a desire for safety and trust. Two studies focused particularly on locality as the basis for an explicit shared identity – these were carried out in Norwich, Bristol and Plymouth.

Life history research among the populations of three housing estates in Norwich (Rogaly and Taylor, 2007; 2009) showed that people’s ties to spatial locations represent an important source of strength, recognition and stability. The sense of ‘community’ described by residents on three predominantly white working class estates in Norwich was derived mainly from people’s “length of residence, family history, skin colour, nationality and relations with neighbours” (Rogaly and Taylor, 2007, p. 73). In many residents’ minds it was also closely associated with quite specific neighbourhoods, each enjoying different degrees of respectability or notoriety:

> “It’s interesting how again if you have a ...community that is...very protective of itself, perhaps, but it doesn’t have experience of the outside world, [it] becomes very inward looking and the more inward looking you become the more fragmented that community can become, and ... it sort of asserts its identity in smaller and smaller areas.”

This can lead to insularity but must be acknowledged as a significant aspect of people’s experience of an ever-changing society. For the Norwich residents ‘community’ represents a ‘homeland’, peopled by familiar faces who interact with respect and empathy.

> “As soon as you walked on the road, in my day when I was a kid, it was like going into someone’s house. You kind of go through the door and the doors shut, you felt secure all the way along the road; you knew all the neighbours, by ‘auntie’ and ‘uncle’...we used to think they were nosey but they were all looking after you all”.

Roger Fry, Norwich resident

This is a typical, if nostalgic, image of ‘community’ acting as a comfortable refuge to shelter people from the risks, hostilities and prejudices of the public realm. It is an important
dimension of people’s sense of identity, whether they have lived in one place all their lives, or whether they have been constantly on the move as asylum seekers or economic migrants.

Parts of the area studied in Norwich had been designated over many years as particularly deprived, attracting government funding in the late 1990s through the New Deal for Communities programme. Patterns of migration and employment combined to create a sense of ‘us locals’ and ‘them outsiders’. Despite the actual diversity and mobility of the resident population (contrary to local and official stereotyping), class and locality were seen as crucial aspects of identity, and were used by community leaders to mobilise people for collective action, to obtain funding for projects or to resist the patronage of middle class officials. In this case the perceived threat was from interfering external agencies trying to impose programmatic ‘solutions’ that were deemed unsuitable or not priorities by people who identified with the locality.

Whatever people’s circumstances, community identity remains important as a source of solutions to the problems they experience. It indicates who can be called on for help in times of adversity and provides the rationale for joint activities and decision-making. Under New Labour rebuilding fragile community identity became cast as a policy goal in itself within regeneration, capacity building, cohesion and empowerment programmes. Area based initiatives were designed to tackle long-standing disadvantage, at least in part, by seeking to restore the self-confidence and trust lost through industrial decline, unemployment and other forms of social and economic marginalisation.

**Englishness – An Identity under Threat?**

A similar research project to the Norwich study explored the identities and issues of white middle and working class people living in mainly white areas of two cities in the south-west (Bristol and Plymouth). Many residents felt their identity as English to be under threat - from Europe, from immigration and from a vague fear of ‘political correctness’ prohibiting the expression of English customs and culture (Clarke, Garner and Gilmour, 2009). Most people in the study derived their identity from where they lived and their class background. Great store was set on the local experience of community but many were worried that a sense of community was diminishing in people’s lives due to the disappearance of local institutions such as social clubs, societies and the church, as well as what they saw as encroaching multiculturalism. For many of those interviewed their local community felt safe and familiar, and they both feared and resented the arrival of people with other identities (usually defined by ‘race’ and religion) who did not seem to share the same traditions and values. This outlook became entangled in issues of entitlement and citizenship, especially in relation to the presence of migrant workers.

**Cross-Community Links in Northern Ireland**

In both Norwich and in the cities of South-West England a shared sense of identity sustained the feeling that there might be a safe haven of ‘people like us’ who could work together. The feeling of being part of a safe bounded community, however, depends on familiarity but it often also arises because a group of ‘people not like us’ who don’t belong can be identified as a contrast. In these circumstances, the very thing that creates a boundary around a community also creates tension and conflict between communities. The dynamics of identity and community, belonging and exclusion, safety and threat, can be seen very vividly in research comparing mixed and segregated neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland.
In Northern Ireland, where the sectarian conflicts have been persistent and violent, the boundaries of community are often marked out by religious identities. These religious identities are associated with a highly visible repertoire of political icons and territorial stakes. Within the segregated neighbourhoods of Belfast, residence and religious/political affiliations are often co-located, with the peace walls providing a perhaps spurious sense of safety. This aspect of identity is performed symbolically and collectively through places (murals, kerb colourings, parades, for example), education and recreational activities such as sports. However, some neighbourhoods are more mixed and, interestingly, although there are some losses in terms of a weaker sense of belonging to a local community, their inhabitants seem less inclined to consider people of the opposite religion as ‘other’. This raises the question whether senses of safety which come from strong divisions between people like us and people not like us might actually increase tensions and level of threat in the long-term?

Recent research (Schmid and others, 2009) found that while most residents in all types of areas identified with their locality, those living in mixed neighbourhoods expressed more complex and nuanced identities, including a tentative willingness to identify as ‘Northern Irish’, creating a new sense of belonging which has the potential to link (but not merge) the Catholic and Protestant communities. This trend is associated with better cross-community relations as it does not require religious affiliations to be subsumed but nurtures a feeling of shared destiny in an on-going political process. The research project found that greater levels of contact between members of the two communities resulted in more positive attitudes towards the other group and a reduction in perceived threat. Through carefully controlling for different variables and examining trends over time, the researchers were able to attribute these tolerance effects to the more complex and fluid ‘identity structures’ available to people whose experience had included encounters and co-operative interactions with individuals from ‘other’ communities.

A team of researchers from Queens University Belfast (Bryan and Connolly, 2009) looked beyond what have sometimes been assumed as fixed identities to ascertain how identities in Northern Ireland are becoming more contingent on political developments and consequently more amenable to shared interests. Their observations and interviews focused on the use of public space and involvement in cross-community civic activities. Earlier traditions of organising separate rituals have gradually, but not exclusively, been countered by joint events organised around other dimensions of identity which cut across community divisions, such as the Gay Pride march or the Lord Mayor’s carnival. Even St Patrick’s Day has been successfully re-presented as a neutral opportunity for multicultural celebration enjoyed by all communities. The differing nationalist or unionist political issues are still being resolved but the developments arising from the peace processes indicate possibilities for forging and strengthening transcendent identities that have the potential to encompass the cultures of minority ethnicities settled in Belfast and elsewhere. This is an important trend that could counter rising levels of racism towards black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and migrant workers.

Sometimes identity keeps people separate, acting as a buffer to change and cultural collision, resisting inevitable progress but also cushioning against loss of status. It can help with other kinds of transition too, for example, acquiring different roles within community and family settings. The relationships of attachment and affiliation that are associated with identity are especially important during periods of crisis.
Welsh Steel Workers in a Time of Transition

Many people identify strongly with their work and workplaces, so losing a job can have a major impact on self esteem and health. Walkerdine and colleagues (2009) studied the impact of enforced redundancy on steel workers in South Wales. Shutting down the Steeltown works resulted in mass unemployment in the local population and generated a considerable sense of identity loss as well as devastating reductions in income and job security.

The research team listened carefully to how people described their community. For the steel workers and their families, community life played an important role in managing their sense of loss and moving towards new forms of identity through collective action to restore a sense of pride and comfort in the town. In the past, community had been focused on the steel works and the home environment of terraced housing and yards:

“So the back road was like where everyone congregated... You'd go up the garden to peg your washing out and what have you, you'd see next door or two doors down. “Oh hi ya” and then you'd have a natter with them.”

Community acted as quasi-family providing emotional support and collective solidarity, mainly mediated through union membership and associated activities. Once the main focus for this had gone, people needed to find alternative means of connection and shared purpose. For many this was expressed through a campaign for Christmas lights to be put up in the town. These had symbolic value in bringing joy and light to gloomy streets while also creating opportunities for interaction through the need to fundraise. Decorating the locality literally highlighted a nostalgic commitment to community of place, where identity was very much tied into where and how you lived. This is not the case for everyone though.

Collective Identity as Protection and Liberation

Over the past several decades the link between inequality, campaigning and advocacy has been acknowledged as a legitimate focus for organising and empowerment. Identity-based social movements (against racism, disability discrimination, ageism and so on) have achieved much progress in UK legislation and services, culminating in the recent Single Equality Act (April 2010). In many ways, the references to ‘protected characteristics’ in this new integrated approach explicitly recognises that people's experiences and opportunities are affected by aspects of their identity over which they have limited control. The pan-equalities model, enshrined in the single Equality Acts (2006, 2010), replaces the old ‘separate strands’ approach by emphasising how the ‘whole person’ may be disadvantaged at different times in their lives because their identity makes them more vulnerable, for example, to sexist assumptions about parenting or exclusion due to society’s failure to accommodate their impairments. Circumstances and culture create obstacles that deter people from participating in activities on an equal basis and prevent people from fulfilling their potential.

In everyday life, the ISA studies reveal how different identities are adopted so as to shape ‘liveable lives’, where oppression is minimised or subverted.
Social Identity for the Women of London

A study of women’s socialising across London illustrated how both space and activities are used to define identities in ways that intersect with different dimensions of their lives, such as gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity (Cox and others, 2009). Contemporary London can be conceptualised as a city comprising multiple localities (neighbourhoods, public spaces, landmarks) which are used to support different kinds of social identity through gatherings and face-to-face social networking. The reputations and levels of security offered by different localities afford the women in the study multiple ‘belongings’, including to places where they have connections but have never lived or would not generally feel comfortable.

“It’s interesting because [the queer knitting club] happens in a straight bar but there’s so many of us that it’s like we create our own queer space within, and that’s a political act as well, kind of creating that safe queer space within the kind of wider straight space”.
White British Jewish lesbian, 30s

The women’s relationships are complex and constructed according to a number of factors: practical (e.g. distance or cost of travel), personal (feelings of recognition and security) and political (challenging prejudices and asserting rights). The friendship networks through which the women socialised were multi-faceted and sometimes utilitarian. They reflected needs and choices at different stages of the life course and ensured access to mutual care, intimacy and shared activities. For many of the women, their communities of belonging were not confined to a single locality but were distributed across the capital and supportive of their chosen identity. Thus one woman stated:

“OK, so part of my socialising choices are also to do with being in an environment that I create for myself. I’m in a white majority culture which is straight. Every day, like work and stuff. So when I socialise I tend to choose things that are not white majority culture.”
East African Asian lesbian, 30s

The women in the study of social spaces in London were themselves part of diverse and dynamic friendship groups. Their networks wove across a series of inter-connected ‘homelands’ with different aspects of their identities being either hidden or highlighted in different spaces. For example, one woman felt unable to express her sexual orientation in predominantly Asian neighbourhoods.

“[Southall is] the kind of area that you feel trapped in and ... there’s ... this high presence of Asian boys there that ... walk past, and I was never quite at ease with that either. So it’s like a little tiny microcosm of Asian culture that’s quite sort of claustrophobic in a way. If you walk down the street you’re bound to see someone who knew your auntie”.
British Mauritian lesbian, 40s

In particular, women sought out places and networks where they would feel safe – free from harassment or physical threat. This enabled different aspects of their identity to be recognised without prejudice and for the women to ‘be themselves’ without the risk of discrimination or embarrassment. They moved between these spaces, carving out a sense of belonging in relation to others but with an awareness of the risks and pressures which lurk in different situations. The study found that these related variously to class, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Complicated, intersected identities were being mobilised to negotiate lives that were liveable in the range of settings available in the super-diversity of London.
Diversity in Modern Britain

Britain is becoming increasingly diverse. Previously marginalised identities are to be found in the mainstream. People with disabilities are increasingly visible and active. Many gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people are ‘out’ in public; and people from ethnic minority backgrounds live and work throughout a far more cosmopolitan society, often holding prominent positions.

Stereotypes are fading and diversity has come to be seen as a resource, something to be valued within organisations and society as a whole. Some commentators, notably Gilroy (2004) point to an increasing non-racialised conviviality, especially among young people. Diversity can also be called on to provide the camouflage needed to live authentically according to actual rather than assumed identities. For example in the study of London women, one explained:

“I do like Edmonton. […] I really actually enjoy living in a diverse community, because I would not be happy to live in a monocultural one. That much I know. I need to be able to live somewhere where I feel I fit in, where I have a place. And so I like that about being here. And I like the fact that I have neighbours, er, who come from all over the place”.
British Mauritian lesbian, 40s.

Although positive attitudes were somewhat muted and theoretical, the white English people living in virtually monocultural areas of Plymouth and Bristol appeared to value diversity. Cultural diversity offers a cornucopia of styles, tastes, music and festivals, which enrich life, especially for young people who are more prone to sampling and ‘fusing’ new experiences.

Children in Schools

We are learning to live with difference, even to value it. One of the research studies investigated the educational choices of middle-class parents for their children’s secondary schooling (James and others, 2009). They found that some white, urban and left-leaning parents preferred to send their children to socially diverse comprehensives even when these had poor exam results. Their decisions seemed to go against the norm of wanting the best opportunities for one’s off-spring but when interviewed, the parents justified their choices in terms of their own educational experiences (as middle-class pupils in selective state or private schools) and an explicit desire for their children to have a broader outlook on life by learning alongside people with different backgrounds.

Identities as Social Capital

In this chapter, we have seen how identities are shaped by personal and cultural expectations and vice versa. These can be negative – damaging confidence, life chances and social cohesion – but they can also be hugely positive – sustaining informal networks of mutual support and communal belonging. The evidence presented above demonstrates that identities are not one-dimensional or fixed. They are fluid and multi-faceted – reflecting changing circumstances and social pressures. People use different aspects of their identities to connect with others, to create safe space, to ward off threats and to categorise fellow citizens or residents as ‘other’. Recognising this opens up possibilities for policy and practice to discover new forms of social capital that can pro-actively tackle inequalities and build solidarity across diversity.
We are already beginning to see how understanding identity creates a better foundation for collective solutions to social problems. In the following chapters we will explore some of the particular policy and practice challenges inherent in promoting community-based solutions to enduring problems. Chapter Three explores the implications of the ISA research findings for community engagement and representation. Chapter Four analyses the evidence on identity, cohesion and integration. It builds on the findings highlighted in this chapter that locality influences the extent to which people feel safe to reveal certain aspects of their identities. Both chapters give examples of the kinds of community development practice which creates the conditions and opportunities within communities for people to express their identities in safety and in solidarity.
Chapter Three

Democracy: Participation, Representation and Collective Engagement

**Key Questions**
- How do identities reflect and affect power relations?
- How do community representatives manage their own identities?
- What does representation mean for communities of identity?
- How do identities support empowerment and collective action?

**Main Messages**
- Collective action starts from the basis of people’s identities and enables them to organise with others for social change.
- Identities can be both oppressive and empowering.
- Communities of identity are important vehicles for campaigning and engagement.

**Practice Implications**
- Be aware of power differentials that flow from labelling people with particular identities.
- Community representatives and leaders may find it difficult to broaden their perspectives and take on a ‘higher’ identity.

**The Relevant Studies**
- Care work with people with disabilities (Antaki, Finlay, Walton and Stribling)
- London Citizens (Wills, 2009)
- Changing Workplaces (Strangleman, Jefferys, Martin, Kirk and Wall)

Identities are not just related to individual characteristics or circumstances. For communities, identity must be forged in relation to ‘the authorities’, often representatives of local government or other agencies of the state, such as the police or health trusts. These identities often lead to community action, which builds social capital among people, at the same time fostering a sense of collective efficacy: a shared belief that things can be achieved when people work together. Usually through community action people further develop their shared identities, transcending differences, and divergent needs, views and interests. Successful collaboration allows people to eventually rise above divisions to tackle disputes jointly.

Collective organising enables people to co-operate in order to achieve individual and shared goals. Identities can supply links between people, emphasising what they have in common. This might be some kind of joint aspiration or need, or it might be an impending threat or opportunity that can only be dealt with through group action.

**Oppressive Roles and Labels**

Community action, then, can be empowering but what happens when a group is stigmatised or marginalised and when the experience of shared identity is oppressive? For some groups, before there can be a process of community development and collective action, attention
needs to be paid to more basic forms of empowerment. Forms of practice might be needed which actively tackle those biases, barriers and forms of discrimination which prevent people from participating fully in decision-making as citizens or as community members.

Identity research shows that sometimes the barriers are extraordinarily subtle and even when it looks as though people are being empowered and offered choices this is not actually the case. This is especially true for those with disabilities such as learning impairments who have a high level of dependence on professionals, people with paid roles or expertise, who are able to exercise authority to affect the quality of their lives. Some people with disabilities experience widespread and disempowering labels such that their self-identity (perhaps as an active, independent person with particular and occasional support needs) is contradicted by the attitudes of their carers or care managers.

Important evidence of this came from a research team who spent several months in residential homes and an assessment centre for people with learning disabilities, videotaping episodes involving interactions between staff and residents (Antaki and others, 2009). Despite the prevailing ethos and official mission of the care staff being to promote friendship and empowerment, the study gathered numerous examples where staff unintentionally restricted or channelled residents’ options, thereby reinforcing respective identities of care giver and recipient. In particular, the research team noticed that staff often tried to persuade residents to choose a certain course of action by associating it with another resident, hoping that this purported social relationship would be a key factor in the decision-making. It is likely that the label ‘service user with disabilities’ was regarded as sufficient basis for a common interest, even friendship.

Another tactic observed among care staff working among people with limited verbal communication was to elicit the desired response by systematically overlooking (ignoring) body language that suggested the resident wanted to make a different choice. Thus the people with learning disabilities studied were being denied (perhaps disingenuously) opportunities to act out identities beyond that of being a disabled person. Their social rights were limited by the social category (and associated practices) that predominated in this setting and professional discourse. The research team recognised that it is not simply staff presumptions that are distorting the residents’ lives, but that the exigencies of institutional living also provide constraints such as set times for shared meals, transport requirements for organised trips and activities, as well as the set of official policies governing health, safety and safeguarding issues. Nevertheless, this work exposes the subtle ways in which the enactment of personal identities can be undermined in situations of unacknowledged and differential power. There is a growing tendency within the caring professions to restrict the ways in which people can relate to one another outside of their ‘roles’, as if only one identity is possible for the client-carer relationship. For example, social work staff in some authorities are expected to report instances of informal interaction when they come across or meet with clients with mental health problems outside of the work situation (Bates, 2010).

For other groups with stigmatised identities, social movements and equality campaigns have been vital in affirming pride in different dimensions of identity and creating the momentum for increased integration and acceptance. Over the past few decades identity politics, based on collective self-organisation, have built both self-esteem and community empowerment for many people experiencing disadvantage and oppression. Awareness of this, perhaps through what was once termed ‘consciousness-raising’, shapes people’s sense of themselves as a victim of oppression and supplies a means for challenging it in solidarity with others who identify in the same way. Thus, communities of identity develop as pressure groups and social movements, campaigning against different forms of discrimination and offering mutual support. Claiming the relevant identity in order to be part of these networks allows people to enjoy positive affirmation of their experience, contribute to collective action and may open up new insights into how to gain opportunities in an unfair world. Problems can
arise, however, when equality perspectives become confused with ethnicity or with other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality or age. Given rising competition for public resources and influence, this can label and divide communities, setting them up as rivals for funding or undermining alternative forms of collectivity that might coalesce around campaigning goals or longer-term solidarity.

**Collective Action**

Generally, people become involved in a campaign or other forms of social action because they feel strongly about an issue that directly affects their lives or the lives of those they care about. Understanding the different motives and identities involved is a prerequisite to finding the common denominator which will galvanise a community of purpose. Appeals to abstract opportunities for empowerment do not tend to mobilise citizens unless there is something specific at stake, such as funding or an immediate quality of life concern. Helping people to identify and collaborate around a shared problem or aspiration requires skills in listening, networking and organising. Strategies for involving people who might otherwise be overlooked or marginalised from decision-making are particularly important, especially as their experience may directly inform the outcome.

**London Citizens: Mixed Identities, Common Goals**

The London Citizens organising movement uses a radical approach, based on identifying key issues facing specific populations and analysing the power relations among stakeholders (see Alinsky, 1989). The present coalition government has embraced community organising as a method of mobilising citizens though neighbourhood groups to run local services and solve problems in their localities. It is an essential component of their strategy for establishing the Big Society. The government's interest derives particularly from the achievements of a high profile London body, formerly known as TELCO, which has been particularly successful in bringing together disparate communities and congregations in a coalition now called London Citizens. London Citizens is essentially a semi-formal alliance of over one hundred organisations that have certain goals in common but with divergent interests and governance arrangements. It describes itself as 'a grassroots charity' and campaigns for over-arching goals relating to the welfare of marginalised people in the capital city, for example around homelessness, a 'living wage', the treatment of immigrants and community safety.

A close examination of its form of city-wide collective organising demonstrates how the social movement approach has enabled people to achieve change by adopting more risky and confrontational strategies (Wills, 2009). The research project used a questionnaire survey, individual and group interviews, dataset analysis and participant observation conducted over many months. It focused on the living wage campaign as an example of a common goal around which members spun a web of city-wide relationships, including with agencies that were the target of the campaign and local politicians. To be effective and sustainable, this requires a foundation of good connectivity, communication and co-operation that encourages people to develop a shared political identity. Their tactics and ethos suggest that the effectiveness of the organisation is based on *identity-making*, the alignment of complementary aspects of members’ identities. People are engaged through personal affiliations arising from their faith, work, education, locality or other aspects of their lives. They join relevant groups and as members of these organisations, they are offered training and support to become involved in the wider work of London Citizens. This provides an over-arching identity, as London citizen activist, which empowers them to act together for change.
The strategy embraces power brokerage on the one hand and network building on the other. The key to its success appears to be the leadership’s ability to concentrate on issues that bind a campaign together while avoiding discussions that would exacerbate possible differences of opinion or belief. Thus clashing values (usually relating to family, sexuality or gender roles) were eliminated from the over-arching identity of being a citizen (i.e. resident) of London. This is a quite different model of organising from traditional labour movement or party politics where members subscribed to a set of principles and hotly debated manifesto commitments.

The much looser and transient aims of London Citizens allow its affiliates to participate more or less on their own terms. Although this has led to some tensions with the trade unions involved, these have been navigated by enabling class politics to become relevant to the everyday concerns of the other constituent bodies. Internal relations and public pronouncements are deliberately kept relatively superficial with unity of purpose emerging from conversations at leadership level in response to issues brought by the network of member organisations spread across London. Connections are not based on any specific shared identity or friendships, but through signing up to a fairly open agenda of improving life and prospects for people currently living in the city.

“There is a lot of commonality....And if we are looking to improve the quality of life in Stratford, that’s what we have in common: a neighbourhood....That’s one thing we share in common, because we want our environments to be a better place...The quality of life you lead is also necessarily dependent on the quality of life of the people around you... so we’re all in it together.” Tony Ogunnyi, Bryant Street Methodist Church, Stratford.

Community development creates the conditions for effective community organising by helping the smaller groups to form and to connect their goals with the broader, overarching alliance.

Common Values

Shared ethics can also be a source of identity through work, motivating people to take up certain careers. Professional status and the workplace give us both a set of responsibilities and an identity that is shared with colleagues. Martin and others (2009) carried out interviews with current and former railway workers, bank staff and teachers. Despite recent changes in roles and ownership, an enduring work ethos and loyalty remain within these workforces based on notions of public service and in some cases political commitment to social justice. As well as endeavouring to protect terms and conditions, trade unions and professional associations commonly assert their value base and standards as the basis for membership.

Empowerment is often achieved through independent collective action – people coming together in a concerted effort to press for change or to protect their interests. Listening to people’s concerns, learning about their different perspectives and levelling the ground a bit are fundamental to community development. Community forums and political alliances are excellent ways of enabling people with different cultures and priorities to share ideas and to co-ordinate their activities. This happens more easily if the different identities that people inhabit are acknowledged, and yet ways are found of weaving these into a new, ‘higher-order’ identity that operates alongside the others and encourages people to work together. In the example below, very practical initiatives allowed people to make supportive connections with one another that re-configured local identities and enabled long-term residents to find ways of relating to each other and to newcomers, enabling the community to become stronger and more integrated.
Morton and Northfield Estates

Work on an estate renowned for abandonment, crime and drugs began with a residents’ survey. It identified highly practical and relatively inexpensive suggestions for improving quality of life on the estate, such as locks, lighting and information. These were implemented as ‘quick wins’ proving that residents had been listened to. But it didn’t stop there. The residents’ association was supported to develop a key role engaging on public service issues, and forging a partnership with the council, the housing association and the police. Trust between the community and authorities grew, residents reported hate crimes to the police, via the residents’ association, and the council involved the residents’ association in its plans to open the empty homes to house asylum seekers and refugees. The residents’ association was pivotal in welcoming new residents, and explaining to the existing community the role of the housing association in providing help.

An advice centre was established and was well used as a result of word of mouth communication and community backing. The area is now home to thriving communities of new arrivals. The result is a shared sense of belonging for those living on the estate, with the residents’ association spearheading work to meet people’s needs. The focus of their activity has moved from addressing crime and drugs to providing homework clubs, a food share project and social events that bring people together and celebrate diversity. The residents association believes that the key to their success was ensuring residents’ views were central to the solutions. In addition the partnership arrangement remains focused and proactive so that momentum is maintained due to the high level of community engagement.

Public Participation in Decision-Making

For several decades, it has been government policy to increase the levels of citizen participation in decision-making. Efforts were radically accelerated under New Labour, with programmes to empower communities and foster active citizenship (see, for example, the Communities in Control white paper, CLG, 2008). At the same time, politicians have been concerned with improving cohesion in our communities and addressing inequalities. Surveys indicate that trust in political processes is declining, and many are resentful of how resources and opportunities are distributed, suspecting favouritism under the banner of what they call ‘political correctness’.

None of this occurs in isolation. It is subject to the pressures, comparisons and constraints of different contexts and life circumstances. In the last years of the Labour government, policy was particularly concerned with addressing social exclusion and engaging what have become known as ‘hard to reach’ groups to involve them in mainstream services and participatory forms of democracy. A set of categories and acronyms was devised for ‘equalities communities’ based on those aspects of people’s identity that were associated with discrimination or disadvantage. Thus, policy was developed to address the needs of ‘the homeless’, of ‘BME’ (black and minority ethnic) and ‘LGBT’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) communities. Strategies were targeted at young people, older people and ‘the disabled’, indeed anyone who is acknowledged to be, or claims to be, oppressed and/or excluded. While different forms of positive action and anti-discriminatory practice are necessary to tackle barriers and assumptions about how people access resources and opportunities, the danger of this kind of approach is that it tends to label people according to only one dimension of their lives. It can overlook the creative and dynamic ways in which people adapt and negotiate different aspects of their identity in order to fit in, to survive and to thrive.
Identities for Engagement

From an identities perspective, this trend in policy can be complicated and somewhat contradictory. Governments often adopt a locality-based model of community, seeking involvement from residents of specific zones or neighbourhoods. In many cases, representatives are selected because they are articulate, confident and live in a particular area. To some extent, it is assumed by other stakeholders and community engagement officers that this in itself bestows democratic legitimacy and accountability to the broader population. On the other hand, inequalities in service delivery and outcomes are best addressed through engaging with, and channelling resources directly to, disadvantaged communities, the under-served and seldom heard. When specific groups are targeted, people are required to present a single aspect of their identity in order to be involved in civic or community activities. This in itself can generate tensions and downplay the rounded, multi-faceted nature of people’s lives.

Partnership arrangements often ignore the complexity of people’s identities – the fact that most people belong to several communities and that layers of community attachment cannot easily be shrugged off by simple mechanisms of engagement or election. Community engagement strategies to encourage participation in civic roles and decision-making tend to select ‘representatives’ defined by just one of these attributes. For example, a disabled person may be expected to advocate on behalf of all disabled people, even though they do not subscribe to the social model of disability and have experience of only one form of impairment. Ways need to be found for individuals to participate that enable them to use their whole identity, complete with its network of allegiances and insights, rather than requiring people to compartmentalise or suppress particular aspects of their lives.

Community Representatives

In the current Big Society era of active citizenship, neighbourhood democracy and community-run enterprise, ordinary people have become commissioners, planners and stakeholders. For this to work effectively, they need to select (or at least acknowledge) individuals as organisers and representatives. Community leaders, such as the Chair of a tenants’ association, often have divided loyalties which will affect their contributions to partnership or board discussions. They may think they have been selected to champion the interests of ‘their’ estate, but find themselves being asked to decide on issues where gender or ethnicity are the significant factors.

Similarly, the representatives of what have become known as ‘equalities communities’ are not just round the table as women, older people, or Black people. Their identity is derived through multiple allegiances and priorities, some of which may be in conflict around specific decisions. In order to properly accommodate the kaleidoscopic nature of communities and the ‘active citizens’ that represent them, skilled and knowledgeable practitioners are needed with adequate time and resources to facilitate effective dialogue and to manage the inevitably divergent perspectives. Networks that link different groups and sections of the community provide valuable opportunities for discussion and reporting back. They enable representatives to learn from others and possibly expand their sense of collective identity and accountability. In practice, this requires investment in forums where differing views can be gathered and debated.

For civic engagement to be truly democratic it must also be inclusive and enabling for people with diverse identities, needs and interests. Equalities policies, combined with anti-discriminatory practices, should be used to ensure that everyone who chooses to participate as an active citizen is properly included and integrated into mainstream decision-making processes.
This means thinking carefully about what is understood by community leadership and representation. Individuals should be supported to understand and articulate diverse interests, so that their legitimacy in this role is fully acknowledged and accountable. They should not just be expected to engage with the authorities or partnership on the basis of a single ascribed identity. In order to ensure that the more marginalised or less confident voices are heard, particular support may be needed to encourage them to speak up, and more powerful majorities may need to learn how to listen and respect alternative experiences in their midst. As we will see in Chapter Five, community development can help with these forms of self-organising, positive action and capacity building, finding ways to honour rather than eliminate diversity.

**Managing Community Complexity**

Communities are never homogenous and rarely united. They form on the basis of identities but are suffused with a range of views, interests and cross-cutting identities as well. In order to reach consensus or negotiate an agreed compromise, they may need considerable support over time to discuss issues. As previously mentioned, power differentials are likely to figure in how opinions are voiced and this also needs to be dealt with, possibly through opportunities for separate conversations.
Chapter Four
Integration - Equalities and Entitlement

Key Questions
• How does diversity affect identities?
• How do communities use identity to integrate?
• What does citizenship mean for people?

Main Messages
• People who are confident in their community identity have a strong basis for integration.
• Individuals are able to use identity strategically to adapt to different situations.
• Class remains an important aspect of people’s identity.
• ‘Britishness’ is a problematic identity that is often used in hyphenated forms.
• Perceived identity is not the same as chosen identity, especially in relation to issues of entitlement and citizenship.

Practice Implications
• Encourage cultural activities that reinforce community identity for incomers and minorities, whilst also creating opportunities for interaction between different communities.
• Help people to learn about each other’s lives and to find the areas of overlap in their interests and experiences.
• Acknowledge grievances and disadvantage within and between communities by promoting fair treatment and equal opportunities wherever possible.

The Relevant Studies
• Bristol and Plymouth estates (Clarke, Garner and Gilmour)
• Muslim refugees using participatory theatre (Yuval-Davis and Kaptani)
• Young men in prison (Phillips and Earle)
• Citizenship survey – class and national identities (Heath, Curtice and Elgenius)
• Children in schools (Brown, Rutland, Watters, Cameron, Nigbur, Hossain and Landau)
• Young Somali refugees (Sporton, Valentine and Nielsen)
• Welsh language and nationalism (Spears, Manstead, Livingstone and Bruder)

It has been conjectured that diversity works against social trust and cohesion, making friendly encounters more difficult and more unlikely (Putnam, 2007), but the evidence from the UK and Europe suggests a different trend. There is substantial evidence from the ISA studies that when people feel emotionally anchored in their ‘home identity’ and believe that their way of life is respected, they are more, not less, willing to integrate. It is as if they have a safe platform from which to reach out and a solid core of confidence to support interactions with members of ‘other’ communities. This has implications for both equalities and cohesion work, as well as strategies for inclusive community empowerment and civic engagement.
Integration or Assimilation?

Minorities are faced with a fundamental dilemma. Should they accept the norms of the dominant culture and attempt to fit in in order to integrate? Or should they continue with significant cultural practices in order to maintain a sense of ethnic identity that can be a source of pride and community belonging? Ideally, people shouldn’t have to make this either/or choice and many have tried to do both, asserting a public conforming identity, while sustaining a ‘home’ orientation domestically for family and close friends. This strategy can strain relations, especially between generations, but can be seen as a necessary compromise between conflicting sets of expectations.

Prejudices and ignorance within the majority population can discourage integration, even when people want to be friendly. Genuine incompatibilities (in language, food or lifestyles) also cause friction, resulting in mutual hostility or social distancing. Clearly the ease with which new identities can be earned, adopted or assigned depends on context as well as individual attributes and actions. Emotions, such as anger, fear, envy and compassion, inevitably colour relationships for better or worse, and result in widely different levels of engagement and participation in community activities. Politics also plays a part and questions of nationality loom large in people’s sense of civic identity and entitlement. Britishness is a complicated concept, hotly debated and yet curiously elusive in people’s lives, with many young people defining themselves with no reference to legal citizenship.

Issues of equity and entitlement are found to be key components in perceptions of belonging. The white working class participants in the Clarke study were adamant that people should earn their membership of the ‘community of citizens’ through either social or financial contributions. That is by working and paying taxes or joining in with the prevailing culture. Although, people’s views (assumptions) were often contradictory and confused regarding the consequences of immigration and ethnic diversity, the idea of shared values offers a potential means of creating and reinforcing community as a kind of reference group of ‘people like us’ with informal systems of support, surveillance and sanctions.

Xenophobia towards non-white or migrant communities is often couched in terms of incomers intruding on ‘our’ territory, with their ‘alien’ ways disrupting normal patterns of existence. The white working class communities in Bristol and Plymouth expressed a strong sense of who belonged to their estate-based communities, and demanded a degree of reciprocity and assimilation from those who didn’t ‘naturally’ fit in, even if they were British citizens.

Well, if you’re a British citizen, as a British citizen, yeah, if you are a British citizen, then you should ... I’m sorry ... At the end of the day, if you’re coming over from another country, you’ve got to understand how our country works, do you know what I mean, so you know, you should respect and understand what our law … you know what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. You can’t come into another country and then get everything handed to you on a plate. I’m sorry, I just don’t agree with that.

‘Nick’ - white working class man, 20s

Single versus Shared Identities

Evidence and experience suggests that people shouldn’t have to choose between different identities. Instead, as a society we could be creating the conditions in which differences are valued and respected, but do not detract from people living, playing or working together as equal citizens or residents. This cannot be achieved through legislation alone, but must be forged through interaction, collaboration and negotiation.
Communities can be encouraged to take pride in their roots, their customs and heritage without becoming ‘islands of tradition’ being corralled into ghettos or following parallel lives. Black and minority ethnic communities have recognised this for many years: organising history projects, supplementary classes and festivals to reinforce and celebrate their origins and cultures. White communities have generally been welcomed to these activities, learning about different aspects of their own stories and enjoying the hospitality laid on.

As these events have become established, participation has broadened so that they have become mainstream opportunities for learning and enjoyment. In 2009, for example, the Bradford Mela celebrated its 21st anniversary and around 200,000 people attended the weekend festivities. However, some communities, drawn mainly from the white working class, have felt marginalised by this approach, arguing that (English) traditions are being neglected in favour of ‘multiculturalism’ and preferential treatment for minority and ‘new’ communities.

Support for Single Identity Groups

Interventions targeting ‘single identity’ groups such as an Afghan community association, a telephone crisis line run by and for mental health survivors, an Asian girls youth club or a gay rights information service, have become a hot topic in policy debates. These initiatives have a restricted membership defined by at least one dimension of identity because they recognise that the people targeted have particular requirements for support or specialist advice that are not available in the mainstream. Projects are established to address these different cultures and inequalities, but they often struggle to survive purely on voluntary effort. Policy acknowledges that these services can be vital in reaching some groups, but argues that they should not become an obstacle to integration or allow mainstream agencies to avoid issues around social exclusion. In fact, as already noted, experience and the evidence provided by many of the studies on the ESRC ISA programme demonstrate that people with confidence in their most salient ‘home’ identity are more likely to integrate, especially if given support and opportunity to do so. These kinds of measures can sometimes be seen as special treatment and are often resented by the wider community. They are seen as instances of favouritism or ‘political correctness’ rather than legitimate practical ways of breaking down barriers to reach beyond the usual set of community members. Practitioners need to be more confident in using such strategies and explaining why they are necessary. It is often tempting to ‘treat everyone the same’ and to keep everyone happy, but this fails to address historical or systemic disadvantage for some groups. Practical barriers, for example, to do with cultural preferences, caring duties or physical disabilities, must also be overcome in order to create a level playing field for participation and equality in outcomes.

Recent recommendations that there should be a presumption against funding ‘single identity’ groups on the grounds that this would be a form of ‘separate development’ that encourages segregation have been hotly contested with many examples of Black and minority ethnic organisations offering vital specialist support across a range of communities. Guidance from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (www.equalitieshumanrights.com) has made it clear that if equality can only be achieved for certain groups through targeted provision via ‘single identity’ organisations, then this is not only a legal but a required allocation of resources.

Faith schools offer an interesting example of the ‘single identity’ approach, though they are not necessarily mono-ethnic or even mono-religious. They do appear to provide pupils with a supportive environment for learning and obviously nourish children’s spiritual identity.
However, the findings from Northern Ireland tend to suggest that restricting the school experience to one denomination (and thereby reinforcing just that one aspect of ‘belonging’) could reduce the children’s outlook and hinder them from developing the more complex overarching identities that seem to promote integration. This is another of those paradoxes in which attempts to bolster cultural esteem may be good for the individuals but damaging for a cohesive society. As is the case with ‘single identity’ groups, their existence needs to be embedded in a political and social environment that facilitates interaction with other communities, and encourages people to embrace a range of simultaneous and layered identities.

** Delivering Cohesion **

After the 2001 disturbances in the northern towns of England, government devised a succession of initiatives to promote better inclusion and integration for minority communities, alongside programmes for reducing tensions within the wider population. Several of these cohesion strategies encouraged different communities to separately explore their own identities, while others encouraged sharing and interaction between different groups. In many contexts, interaction happens naturally, without anyone thinking about identity or cohesion. But in situations where there are tensions and disputes, practice interventions may need to support ‘single identity’ groups to build voice and confidence, whilst also facilitating contact and relations between different groups. This requires good cultural knowledge, an ability to understand different perspectives and political dimensions, as well as skills in mediation.

The term cohesion refers to the extent to which people connect with one another and are able to co-ordinate their actions to reduce friction and encourage co-operation. Sociologists have defined it as the glue which holds people together through relationships and interaction. It is seen as a measure of social stability, tolerance and fairness. The related term, community cohesion, has come to mean a sense of shared belonging, common values and meaningful interaction. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion\(^2\) considered a whole range of evidence from academics, policymakers and community members to assess the current situation in the UK regarding the experiences of minority communities and the quality of relationships between different ethnic populations. It recommended that we need to be building a nation based on a shared future, rather than divided legacies.

As can be seen from the definition below, the Commission placed great emphasis on locality, recognising that interactions based on civility and respect happen in real space and real time. It argued, and government policy has broadly followed this line, that cohesion is generated through co-existence, provided there are opportunities for people to develop relationships through their shared residence, employment, education or whatever brings them into contact on a regular basis. It is anticipated that such encounters will wear down suspicion and xenophobia over time, replacing resentment with respect and a culture of hospitality.

\(^2\) The Commission on Integration and Cohesion was announced on 28 June 2006, by then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly. The Commission, a fixed term advisory body, was set up to consider how local areas could make the most of the benefits delivered by increasing diversity and also to consider how they could respond to the tensions it can sometimes cause. It was tasked with developing practical approaches to building communities’ own capacity to prevent and manage tensions. The Commission was chaired by Darra Singh, Chief Executive of Ealing Council and the Commission’s final report – *Our Shared Future* – was published on 14 June 2007.
A definition of community cohesion

An integrated and cohesive community is one where:

- There is a clearly defined and widely shared sense of the contribution of different individuals and different communities to a future vision for a neighbourhood, city, region or country.
- There is a strong sense of an individual's rights and responsibilities when living in a particular place – people know what everyone expects of them, and what they can expect in turn.
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities, access to services and treatment.
- There is a strong sense of trust in institutions locally to act fairly in arbitrating between different interests and for their role and justifications to be subject to public scrutiny.
- There is a strong recognition of the contribution of both those who have newly arrived and those who already have deep attachments to a particular place, with a focus on what they have in common.
- There are strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and other institutions within neighbourhoods.


Equality and Inclusion

Equality, integration and good relations are core principles in most definitions of cohesion, acknowledging that cultural differences and power differentials can make it more difficult for people to interact and maintain a sense of community, especially when there is high population ‘churn’ and strong feelings of resentment or suspicion.

The research findings point up the difficulty for citizens in complaining about perceived marginalisation and unfairness in words that are not heard as racist. Politicians have begun to acknowledge this and want to address directly this disaffection. This requires sensitive and skilled practice, enabling people to articulate their concerns, understand the economic and political context and propose feasible solutions that are equitable and affordable. The challenge will be finding practical ways of responding to local problems without causing further resentment or raising expectations unrealistically. Involving people in social action can be empowering, especially when it provides opportunities to link across a range of communities who share similar concerns or who have already achieved their aspirations.

Performing Identity: Refugee Theatre

Identity practice can be considered as a form of rehearsal and performance and this sense of drama can be especially necessary for people in transition or in ambiguous roles. One research project literally encouraged refugees to examine their identities using participatory theatre techniques (Yuval-Davis and Kaptani, 2009). The refugees, all Muslims, are now based in East London but are of Somali, Kosovan and Kurd origins. Perhaps the most important thing to note from this study is that the category ‘refugee’ covers a hugely diverse group of people in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and so on, all with varied reasons for seeking asylum in this country.
These differences sometimes generated tensions between refugees from the same homeland, even when they shared a common religion, Islam. Once granted leave to stay, many of the refugees (especially those who were fluent in English) adopted a hyphenated identity which included their British citizenship, but discovered that this could be disputed (by officers in some branches of officialdom) and subverted in certain situations. An Islamic identity was more important to some of the refugees than others, with Somali women setting great store by maintaining Muslim ways of life, which remained largely tangential to the Kurd and Kosovan young people, except in demarcating nationalities ‘back home’ in Turkey or the Balkans.

The theatre performances and subsequent discussions revealed the complexity of people’s multiple and tangled identities, bringing out the emotional and political processes that being a refugee in multicultural Britain entails. The participants showed how they used different aspects of their identity to grasp opportunities to settle into local life, especially in relation to negotiating acceptable roles with new peer groups and their ‘origin’ communities. Refugees often struggle to fit in and the study highlighted how the burden of integration was borne by migrants rather than host communities. Once again, the project confirmed that the work involved in ‘performing identity’ in order to find ways through the maze of social expectations and bureaucratic regulations is mainly carried out by those with less power and security. Those working with such communities should be aware of this important insight, and seek ways of enabling individuals to operate beyond the ‘label’ to contribute a wider range of experiences and expectations to the situation.

**Place and Ethnicity in Prison**

The complex interaction of culture and origin can be seen in the friendship networks and style choices of younger generations, especially when their movements are restricted. The behaviour of young people in two prisons was examined through informal observation and interviews over a period of several months (Earle and Phillips, 2009). The offender populations of both institutions were ethnically diverse and this was seen as normal by most prisoners. Friendship groups tended to be based around shared ethnicity but mostly inmates felt that ‘racial’ aspects of identity were largely irrelevant to their informal interactions and cultural proclivities (such as hair style, tattoos or clothing).

However, the research did reveal ways in which identity processes influenced patterns of social relations among the inmates. Many of the British born Black prisoners adopted street slang as a means of communicating amongst themselves (and effectively excluding others), but white youths who were familiar with ‘rude boy’ culture could join in, discovering the shared connection of ‘hood’. Cross-over styles such as going ‘backsy’ by wearing trousers as low slung as possible over the hips, offered another means of transmitting urban identity that was easily performed and recognised. Most prisoners seemed to understand ethnicity as an aspect of culture when it related to Black and minority ethnic populations whereas ‘whiteness’ tended to be associated with nationality (English or Irish) or was regarded as incidental:

“No, I don’t feel white, I don’t feel white, you know. I know I’m white and all that, but the thing is, though, I’m still the same person as a Black and Asian, Chinese people, you know, I’m still, they’re still the same person as me. You know, we all grewed up from the apes and everything you know”.

Contrary to expectations, racism as such seems to feature little in the discourse of prisoner relations, and was swiftly challenged when it did appear in public arenas. The enforced conviviality of the jail environment seemed to discourage overt displays of racialised power and prejudice.
Instead, prisoners found that they could get along, and were prepared to suppress or avoid antagonisms. For some Muslim prisoners, their faith offered significant opportunities to practise an Islamic identity and provided an alternative set of routines to those imposed by prison regulations. Performing the daily observances and studying the Qur’an created a sense of community which transcended prison walls and was envied by other prisoners.

Shared experience and gang-type loyalties from life on the outside were seen as having greater significance, with ‘postcode pride’ forming a particularly strong sense of belonging among the younger inmates. This was the norm for both white and ethnic minority prisoners, with identities overtly anchored to specific neighbourhoods or estates. Solidarity and allegiances within the prison were closely aligned with different localities in the outside world, and this territorialism often trumped ethnic dimensions in providing security through group belonging. Similar findings appear in relation to the gang lives of young people in the external world. This is not to say, however, that racism was not an underlying current in some interactions amongst prisoners and staff. Tensions and familiar anxieties did arise along religious and racial lines, for example in the shared self-cooking areas where cultural prohibitions regarding the mixing of food surfaced as disputes around the storage and eating of, for example, different meats. On a more positive note, these occasions were also opportunities for learning and inter-cultural exchanges. Mostly prisoners preferred to survive by “focus[ing] on their common humanity” in the prison setting. As an Asian Muslim prisoner remarked:

“Ethnicity is not really a big thing. Obviously it is a big thing but nobody takes it as a main mark. It’s more on the lines of who you are personally. Not your race as an individual, exactly”.

Even under the confined pressures of prison life, it is encouraging to see this belief expressed; it is further evidence that there are many ways in which to connect while maintaining confidence in one’s own identity. Clearly identities are by no means fixed and changed circumstances can have a big impact on how we see ourselves.

**Britishness – The Path to Integration?**

There are two recurring themes in modern policy discussions about community involvement in democracy and service provision. Both are concerned with the nature and responsibilities of citizenship and civic identities. The debate around ‘Britishness’ tends to revolve around allegiance to the nation state, while interest in community involvement in public decision-making continues to struggle with issues around representation, accountability and leadership. In recent years, these agendas have become snared on thorny questions of entitlement and allocation, especially regarding access to public services, such as social housing, health and education.

In the face of global migration and settlement, English nationalism has become increasingly problematic as an aspect of British identity. Englishness has traditionally been associated with a white ethnicity, performed through folk customs or Christian festivals. It has been counter-posed with 20th century multiculturalism and positioned by far right political movements as something that needs defending from ‘political correctness’. One of the research projects conducted extensive in-depth interviews with white people living in predominantly white residential areas, who had relatively few opportunities to mix socially with people from other ethnicities (Clarke and others). Not surprisingly they found an uneasy ambivalence about increasing cultural diversity. Many people expressed positive views on diversity but they felt that they wanted to be confident in their own identity (English/white working class) as well. This is a common theme throughout the research programme and has important implications for policy.
Class

It has been argued that class, having been an over-riding aspect of identity and strong determinant of life chances, is now in decline, perhaps even ‘in crisis’. However, an examination of the data gathered in successive citizenship surveys (Heath, Curtice and Elgenius, 2009) indicates that people in Britain are generally still prepared to assign themselves to a class category but are less likely to associate this with particular attitudes or behaviours, such as voting preferences. Heath and his colleagues found that the proportion of people claiming, unprompted, a class-based identity (derived primarily from own occupation) hovered at just under 50%, though with increasing numbers calling themselves middle class. The same study showed there has been a gradual reduction over the past few decades in people’s sense of being British as their primary source of national identity, with many preferring hybrid or hyphenated identities such as British Asian that simultaneously reflect ethnic origins as well as citizenship status.

Clearly, people living in this country have a right to be treated fairly and to be given opportunities to have their views heard in all kinds of decision-making. Political structures and dynamics must change to reflect this, which will require some radical shifts in power and influence. Our sense of national identity and belonging may also benefit from re-engineering to take into account modern ambivalences.

Citizenship: Shared Values or Shared Cultures?

There have been numerous attempts in recent years to define ‘Britishness’, usually in the context of problems around cohesion and integration. Appeals to an overarching, or inclusive, ‘Britishness’ generally have little traction in these situations. Especially when couched in terms of multicultural citizenship, this model of nationality overlooks the evident discrimination and disgruntlement experienced by many communities.

Definitions of ‘Britishness’ have often consisted of lists of supposed shared values, such as tolerance, fairness, stoicism and respect for the rule of law. Other dimensions are also cited as relevant include holding a British passport, or enjoying cultural aspects of life in Britain (queuing, fish and chips, cricket and so on). Our reputation overseas is more unsavoury, with binge drinking, football hooliganism and ex-pat exclusivity characterising the behaviour of many Britons abroad. Strategies for fitting in clearly depend on which identity is most pervasive or useful in a given situation.

The Impact of Devolution and Migration

For many of us, British identity tends to be taken for granted and its salience may have been declining gradually over the past half century, probably due to the increased significance of devolved nationalities: Welsh, Scottish and Englishness. (As we have seen, the situation in Northern Ireland is more complicated.) In an analysis of various population and attitude surveys over a period between 1964 to 2005, Heath and colleagues looked at people’s attachment to Britishness and found that this has diminished slightly over the last few decades, but with many people subscribing to dual or hyphenated identities, such as Welsh Muslim, black British or Scots British. Around one in ten people in their study rejected a British identity altogether, with younger people less willing to identify as British, especially second generation people of Caribbean origin. Unsurprisingly, migrants born overseas in a non-commonwealth country have a lower sense of attachment, as do relatively new arrivals. Apart from this, ethnic minorities demonstrated similar attachments to Britain as white people.
British identification was associated with a greater propensity for social trust, civic duty (voting rates) and support for the current political order. However, there was little evidence of a relationship between national attachment or pride, and willingness to volunteer or participate in community life. The Heath project found no discernable relationship between pride in British identity and overt racism or xenophobia, which seems to act at a more local level of estate or neighbourhood.

While Heath’s study showed that the ‘British’ aspect of citizenship still has currency for most people living on the mainland, the struggles for devolution in the UK have adopted various kinds of symbols of national identity for mobilising political action and mediating group emotions. However, there is not always agreement on which ingredients of national identity are essential, and which are optional. One of the ISA studies (Livingstone and others, 2009), for instance, found that ability to speak Welsh was a contested aspect of ‘Welshness’ with strong arguments on both sides. There is a fuzzy logic to identity concepts, and the selection of different features is often driven by political imperatives as much as personal choice.

The research projects involving refugees (Valentine and Sporton, 2009; Yuval-Davis and Kaptani, 2009) discovered complex, dynamic and sometimes incongruous identifications. These shifted with context and in response to the preconceptions of others. Thus, young Somalis, found that their legitimate claims to Britishness (as passport holders) were rejected by people who saw them as ‘black’ and therefore ‘other’. However, the Somalis themselves saw black as another identity entirely (as hailing from the Caribbean or sub-Saharan Africa), and therefore irrelevant to their internal sense of who they are.

“Although I’m black, that’s my skin colour there’s not a lot of black people that are Muslims…I grew up in South London and especially Brixton …90% are black… and what I found is that within that community there was so much different black cultures and yourself you had to think about what kind of black you are…then the English will say you’re not English you’re black, how can you be English? I feel I’ve got an identity being Somali so I always know where I’m from…My skin is black and that’s what colour I am…but I see myself as Somali black. A white person will just see you as black…They see a black is black. Sometimes they think I’m Jamaican. I’m not Jamaican; I’m Somali.”

Hassan: male, 17, migrated direct to UK from Somalia

The extract above illustrates some of the ambivalence that many of the research participants tried to settle through asserting both a Muslim and a Somali identity. This in itself is complicated by the clan system and conflict situation endemic in Somalia. In addition, the young people’s actual experience of their original homeland is vague or disconcerting. Visits to relatives in Somalia were important but the reactions of local people could make them feel uncomfortable due to differences in language, dress or cultural attitudes, for example about the role of female family members. Muslim identity was less problematic, allowing them to belong to a worldwide umma with a more or less common set of beliefs, habits and rituals that transcend national borders.

**Adjusting to a New School: Immigrant Children**

While it is essential for newly arrived immigrants to understand norms of behaviour in order to integrate, they often face racial prejudice. Many attempt to avoid confrontation by conforming to prevailing custom and practice trying to adopt the ‘host’ cultures and identity, a practice known as assimilation or acculturation. This process may also be accompanied by experiments in identity formation and adjustment.
A team of researchers (Watters and others, 2009) examined the identity strategies of young children (aged 5 to 11 years) over a period of 12 months. One study focused on children from southern Asian backgrounds while the other worked with refugee children. They found that even the youngest children tried to assimilate but found this could be both difficult and damaging. Sometimes they reported experiencing rejection from the white children and on occasion found it hard to understand the rules or purpose of playground games. They lacked the necessary cultural knowledge but also appeared to be rebuffed or forced out of their comfort zones.

I know in England loads of people play but in India everyone knows you and then they can even… like if they’re playing they would like um like go somewhere that they know that you know probably not somewhere that you don’t know and in England if you had friends um they would probably go somewhere like you have never been like sometimes you could be scared of that place and you didn’t tell them.

Eight year old girl, British Indian

Nevertheless, over the year of the investigation the children were accepted as part of the school community with consequent boosts to their self-esteem and pro-sociality. Two factors were associated with successful integration: firstly, highly valued ethnic diversity within the school ethos, and secondly, the children having a strong sense of their home culture, or in other words being confident and safe in their ethnic identity as families of Punjabi, Sri Lankan or whatever origin. However, some children did encounter racial discrimination, bullying and prejudice from teachers and fellow pupils which had negative impacts on their educational development, peer relations and mental well-being.
Chapter Five

Identities and Community Development

Key Questions
- What is needed for identities to be recognised and strengthened in positive ways?
- How can communities be encouraged to develop meaningful forms of interaction that support cohesion and integration?
- What does it mean to develop ‘community’?

Main Messages
- Community development offers a useful set of values and methods for working with communities on identity issues.
- Organisations and occasions that bring communities together encourage meaningful interaction and can lead to mutual understanding, even a sense of shared identity.
- New collective identities emerge from joint activities and co-operation.

Practice Implications
- Be aware of power imbalances between and within different communities.
- Building the capacity of disadvantaged groups should include work to boost their identities.
- Be creative about the range of activities and interests that can be used to bring people together.
- Think about how your own identity affects your relationships with others and how you are perceived.
- Learn as much as you can about the communities you are working with and be sensitive to different cultural requirements.

Defining Community Development

Community development has been defined in a number of ways in the years since it emerged as an occupation. It is based on a clear set of values and methods which result in the development and strengthening of communities or community activity. Community development “releases the potential communities [by, firstly] bringing people together to address issues of common concern and to develop the skills, confidence and resources to address those problems... [Secondly,] it works... to change the relationship between people in communities and the institutions that shape their lives. It enables people acting together to be partners in development rather than objects of decision and policies made by others”. (Taylor, 2001, p.3). Community development is based on core values of social justice, learning, co-operation, equality, participation and environmental justice.

A fundamental aspect of community development is therefore about helping people to make connections and engage with others beyond their immediate networks to reach wider communities using different aspects of their identity (Gilchrist, 2009). Community groups and networks form around common interests, such as parents wanting to develop...
play facilities for their children, but identities can sometimes get in the way of mutual support and collaboration. Help may be required for people to broaden their focus and make links with others who may appear to be dissimilar or threatening.

**What Does a Community Development Approach Offer?**

Community development offers a set of skills and values that support people to make connections and organise for collective action in order to achieve social change and bring about greater equality for individuals and communities.

As we have seen from the ISA research programme, attempts to integrate across community boundaries, however irregular and blurred they may be, are fraught with tensions, misunderstandings and risks of conflict. Community development practice can help people to manage controversy and disputes, fostering communities that are simultaneously diverse, fair and cohesive (Gilchrist, 2004, p7). Community development works to create opportunities and safe environments which can support self-actualisation for individuals and encourage relationships across identity boundaries, whether these are demarcated by age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, faith, residence, gang, or fan membership. Strategies for ensuring equality and cohesion employ interventions at several levels but all are geared to developing relationships based on equity, trust and respect. Community development has extensive experience of achieving this by working with individuals, groups and institutions in a wide variety of conditions.

Every individual is unique. They will have preferred overt and covert identities in their repertoire and perform these at different times and settings. One form of intervention is to support individuals to develop greater self-esteem and confidence in their chosen identity. Strategies that support children and young people from ethnic minorities to know their history and take pride in their ‘roots’ and culture can strengthen this aspect of their identity. Similarly, gay pride festivals or groups for new mothers can help people gain confidence in a new role and identity.

Cohesion strategies have tended to concentrate on cross-community activities of the kinds indicated above. Their purpose has been to encourage interaction and better awareness of what people have in common. Socialising that involves food, fun and informal conversation seems to work well, as in the case of street parties or sports activities.

However, these kinds of initiatives may need additional support in order to encourage meaningful interaction and to prevent conflicts erupting. Expert facilitation and mediation skills may be necessary such as can be provided by experienced community development workers. More structured encounters, for example inter-faith forums, can help people to engage with the networking processes of exchange, learning and negotiation.

Hosting strategies (welcoming, making introductions, smoothing awkward moments and ensuring comfort) are also useful in helping people to meet and make conversation. The existence of informal public and communal places allows people to mingle without commitment and this is enhanced if the space is perceived as neutral, safe and positive about diversity. Creating and maintaining this kind of reputation is not straightforward, as anyone responsible for running a village hall or community centre will know. It requires sensitivity and respect for different needs, skills in conflict mediation and an awareness of the equality and access issues facing all potential users and visitors. Community development methods and strategies are central to creating the conditions and facilitating activities that ensure that these approaches can complement rather than contradict one another.
The Role of Umbrella Bodies

Organisations that encourage networking and co-operation across identity boundaries provide vital opportunities for bridging activities. Umbrella bodies are particularly effective for bringing together people who share a common interest but come from different communities. Forums, federations and alliances enable people to collaborate without having to suppress their prime identity. Multi-organisational consortia can be fragile temporary arrangements, brought together around a specific cause or they can be robust and enduring unions sustained through decades of growing trust and successful joint activities. In practice, these networks will need support so that they can adapt to changing personnel and circumstances without drawing disproportionately on the resources of the member organisations. Community development workers often play a ‘behind the scenes’ role in helping to maintain the relationships and mutual commitment of these bodies, by facilitating events, mediating conflicts and ensuring that communication happens smoothly and regularly.

This approach is often about aligning disparate interests rather than merging communities together around a lowest common denominator issue. It can take great skill to identify and facilitate potential opportunities for co-operation without jeopardising independent identities or submerging important differences. The diversity itself lends strength to the cause, while meetings and events are the occasions for further discussion and the discovery of mutuality, if not unity. The way meetings and events are facilitated can build (or undermine) cohesion. A skilled development worker can propose a format for meetings and events which evens out power imbalances (small group activities instead of large plenary or panel sessions), and can work creatively with dissent and challenge by preparing service providers (for example) to receive criticism and to practise dealing with it. Diplomatic skills in negotiation, compromise and mediation are often necessary when working with communities with different identities and possibly competing interests.

How Community Development Ensures Meaningful Interaction

Contact theory suggests that where individuals are in contact with people from ‘other’ communities, their attitudes and behaviour becomes more accepting. The boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ begin to dissolve, while the likelihood of further interaction and co-operation increases. However, experience (and research) suggests that contact of itself is by no means sufficient to guarantee harmony. Indeed there is evidence that adjacent, but passive, diversity can lead to the erosion of social trust or worse, generate conflict and suspicion. Stereotypes are not necessarily confronted in these situations and people’s different customs and expectations can cause friction. We have also learned that when people feel beleaguered, marginalised and abandoned, they may lack the confidence to assert an identity that they associate with oppression and exclusion. As a positive force for progress and collective action, certain dimensions of community belonging cannot be promoted at the expense of others; rather it needs to emerge in a context of confident diverse identities, perceived fairness and mutual respect.

How Community Development Supports Community Action

We are all different in different ways, but unfortunately we are not all treated as equals. As we saw in earlier chapters, discrimination is often bound up in identity. Consequently identity has become the rationale for different forms of positive action and community representation. In a just society, differences are to be valued and cannot be tolerated as the basis for prejudice or structural inequalities of any kind. Equalities legislation requires public bodies to assess whether there might be an uneven impact of their policies on different sections of the population, and many communities themselves organise to address disadvantage and injustice.
There are many ways in which these kinds of change can be supported or driven, often by people mobilising collectively to challenge the ways that their identities are distorted or restricted. The ISA studies contain numerous illustrations of this through trade unions, community organisations, pressure groups and so on. Interventions from outside also play their part, deliberately or unwittingly. Government concern with promoting community cohesion has used a variety of approaches to build the capacity of minority communities, including faith-based bodies. Other strategies have included support to initiatives that facilitate inter-community activities, for example, sports, inter-faith dialogue, school twinning arrangements and organising events or publicity that build local or civic togetherness.

**“I am Bradford”**

A two-week billboard campaign was launched in 2007 featuring eight men and women from the district highlighting the area’s diversity and residents’ different ways of identifying with and belonging to Bradford. A second campaign in 2008 emphasised togetherness.

**Leicestershire, Clergy and Imams’ cricket matches**

Christian and Muslim faith leaders have taken to the cricket field every year since 2006 to promote links between the two communities. The matches are organised by groups including St Philip’s Centre, in Highfields and Leicestershire Federation of Muslim Organisations. The two teams are made up of serving imams and clergy from churches and mosques across the city and county. The matches, hosted by Leicestershire County Council, are open to the public ‘to promote ties between the two faiths and challenge the stereotypes rampant in the present climate’ (Reverend Canon Dr Andrew Wingate, director of St Philip’s Centre). Imams and clergy also meet on the football pitch for events that have received media coverage across Europe.

**Southampton Women’s Forum**

Southampton Women’s Forum was set up in 2007 to bring women together from different communities in Southampton to build mutual understanding, share ideas and learn from one another, and to bring together existing women’s groups to address and take action on shared issues. Southampton Women’s Forum membership is open to individuals, community group representatives and agencies. It has around sixty members and holds regular monthly meetings.

**Community Conversations**

Since 2006, Conflict and Change, based in the London Borough of Newham, have run over 80 community conversations in partnership with community centres, community forums, primary schools, officers and councillors, faith groups, youth groups, neighbourhood watch groups etc. A community conversation is a meeting facilitated by a skilled practitioner that aims to give people who would not normally meet an experience of positive and meaningful interaction. Everyone participates and each contribution is valued and accepted.

It is more than an informal chance to get to know neighbours as it aims to get people talking about local issues that matter to them, and includes the opportunity to express different experiences and views.

The facilitator creates a space in which differences of opinion and normally unspoken feelings and resentments can be safely voiced and, at the same time, draws out hopes and dreams that people have in common.

Conflict and change run two types of event. An informal ‘getting to know you’ workshop is used for breaking the ice and broker ing introductions. For difficult topics, times of crisis and high emotion, a more formal, structured dialogue on difference has been developed and used. Community conversations create a setting for interaction and a platform for longer-term group activity.
Challenges for Community Development

Community development workers themselves face challenges dealing with their own identities, as well as the identities of others. Within community development, there has been a long-standing debate about whether workers should be members of the communities they work with (for example by living and socialising in the job area), and if so, how they manage the ‘slippages’ between their personal lives and professional identities. Since good community development work depends crucially on the quality of the relationships between worker and community members, it is tempting, sometimes indeed helpful, for professional identities to become blurred. However, this can also lead to ‘burn-out’ and misplaced expectations. Similar issues face people taking on roles as advocates or community leaders on a voluntary basis.

As we have learned in previous chapters, policy-making is placing an increasing emphasis on public participation in decision-making and a commitment to involve the most marginalised sections of society through various forms of community engagement. Much of this complexity has to do with issues of identity. Arguably, in the past, questions of identity were less problematic than now. Communities were more fixed and tied to geographical areas where there was some coherence between places of work and domestic routines, while sources of identity were straightforward, relatively unchanging and singular. Current trends, at least in the UK, indicate in contrast that the impacts of information technology (especially communication via the internet), economic globalisation and social mobility have produced communities that are more diverse and more dynamic than hitherto imagined. It has become more obvious, too, how even the best intended community practice can be tripped up by the psychosocial dynamics of identity as people’s perceptions of fairness and entitlement clash with those around them and with government policies.

For community development practitioners, background knowledge is vital to understanding the causes of hostilities and to appreciate different perspectives. Sensitivity is also required so as to anticipate how tensions might flare and to avoid particularly painful or embarrassing assumptions. However, sometimes it can be useful to have common sense opinions out in the open so that they can be properly addressed or countered. In these situations, an outsider can challenge or question ‘facts’, for example about the supposed benefits received by migrant workers, or they can offer their own views and experiences as an alternative perspective. Of course, to do this, they must be confident in their own knowledge base and identity.

Myth-busting is one aspect of this approach in which local and national media can play an important role. In many areas, the local newspaper has been co-opted as a partner in tackling popular, but misplaced negative images of migrant and BME communities. The Leicester Mercury’s scrupulous anti-inflammatory reporting has played a major role with its positive coverage of the city’s diversity.

Ugandan Asians arriving in Britain in 1972 – many of whom settled in Leicester.
Photograph: Refugee Council
Chapter Six

Conclusions: Identity Capital – Connecting for Community

Key Questions
• How do identities enhance community life?
• Are some people more flexible than others in using their identities?
• What does this mean for well-being and cohesion?

Main Messages
• Diverse social networks are beneficial to individuals and communities making them more resilient and healthy.
• For individuals having a range of connections (identity capital) is helpful and empowering.
• The complexity of identities means that communities consist of multiple intersecting networks and interests.

Practice Implications
• Understand and work with the emotions and psychological processes associated with people’s identities when working with communities.
• Support community representatives to feel comfortable with their own identities and to be interested in other people’s.
• Question and change dominant social norms connected to privileged identities in situations where different identities are present.

As we have seen from this brief review of the ESRC’s Identities and Social Action research programme, the social identities that people present in their everyday lives are fuzzy, variable and multi-dimensional. Different aspects of identity are more prominent in some contexts than others, and some identities may seem more ‘safe’ because of established forms of oppression or misconceptions. If these are to be challenged, individuals need to feel secure and supported, either through collective solidarity, or on the basis of clear policies (or preferably both).

The previous chapters have demonstrated how different facets of people’s identities affect how we see ourselves, how we are seen by others and how we relate to people with overlapping characteristics or interests. Social identities are complex and fluid, as are communities. Multiple identities mean that each of us can be involved in different ways in groups and collective activities. This has relevance for policies and practices concerned with promoting integration, empowerment and resilience, as well as individual well-being and self-help.

Policy and practice need to be more comfortable with the complexity and fluidity of people’s lives and less inclined to impose homogenous labels on sets of people. These reflect only one aspect of their existence while masking their actual multiplexity. At the heart of the evidence on identities and integration lies the paradox of ‘community’.
A sense of belonging is enhanced by emphasising certain characteristics that distinguishes some people from other members of the human race. An identity label is claimed or conferred that marks a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘non-us’. The set of identities that delineates an individual simultaneously defines their probable allegiances and community belonging. This ambivalence has caused problems in policy discussions as the term ‘community’ is used at different levels and times to mean wildly different sets of people or to conjure up the ‘warm glow’ of social fellowship that masks real tensions in public discourse.

Finding Common Cause

Cohesion and collective action strategies are constantly seeking out the commonalities that reach across group differences to construct a higher order identity, such as neighbourhood (for different age groups) or nationality (for different ethnicities). Community development operates with this Janus-like dilemma; on the one hand building local community spirit and supporting people to become active citizens, representatives or leaders, while on the other hand identifying potential links with others who may have similar underlying grievances or aspirations and could therefore be allies and partners in common cause. Helping people to acknowledge difference but to overcome division is perhaps the core business for practitioners working to develop integrated and inclusive communities.

The research on social identities described in this report indicates that policy needs to acknowledge the complexity and intersectionality of people’s social identity, and enable programmes and projects to develop that are based on the multi-faceted nature of people’s lives and an ever-changing kaleidoscope of community relations. It is clear that traditional models of community are no longer useful in today’s society. Connectivity is what makes individuals and communities influential, resilient and adaptable. An understanding of the multiple, contingent and strategic nature of social identities enables both policymakers and practitioners to fashion interventions and opportunities that engage with the reality of community life and encourage people to participate in all kinds of civic and collective action.

The findings and issues revealed by the various projects in the Identities and Social Action programme have confirmed important knowledge about the links between people’s identities and how these underpin relationships between different sections of society. Communities cohere, connect and compete through different aspects of people’s bodies, beliefs and everyday lives. The studies illustrate how identities reflect ambivalence, antagonisms and a shifting set of attachments. Experience and the evidence outlined in this report demonstrate how policy and practice interventions can simultaneously boost community confidence while facilitating integration and co-operation across apparent identity disjunctures. Community cohesion and community development practice have much to contribute to building a society that values diversity, ensures equality and promotes collaboration.
Recommendations

To finish, we have pulled together some implications of the findings on social identity for policy and practice.

For practitioners working with diverse, sometimes fragmented, communities we have provided pointers on tuning in to identity issues which impact on individual and community empowerment and community relations. We suggest some approaches to ensure that practitioners challenge, and don’t replicate, assumptions about people on the basis of identity.

• Attune yourself and your practice to the different factors at work in shaping identities. Note how their relative importance changes at different times and in different contexts.
• Be aware that adjustments and threats to our identities do arise from other people’s perceptions of us, or our perceptions of others, but not exclusively. Life stages and economic change or decline also necessitate powerful adjustments and pose strong threats to identity.
• Take time to introduce people and facilitate conversations that open up new possibilities of connection and encourage joint working.
• Attune yourself and your practice to people’s everyday experiences and quality of life concerns. Are their issues likely to be shared at the neighbourhood level, or across a wider coalition?
• Seek ways to help common concerns turn into collective action with cohesion effects.
• Understand that the ‘burden of integration’ is typically borne by those with less power and security. Seek ways to spread the burden, for example by preparing ‘receiving communities’ for new arrivals
• Be prepared to challenge prejudices and discrimination concerning all aspects of identity and learn about cultures or perspectives that you are not familiar with yet.
• Understand the impact of discrimination in blocking integration. Refresh your anti-discriminatory practice and build your confidence in implementing it.

For Heads of Service, and other policy-makers at local and national level, the following evidence-based recommendations have implications for the reform of public services, and a range of policy agendas.

• Understand that the ‘burden of integration’ is typically borne by those with less power and security. Seek ways to spread the burden, for example by reconfiguring services to reduce barriers and bureaucracy.
• Recognise that confidence in one’s ‘home’ identity helps young refugees and migrants with integration processes.
• Understand the impact of discrimination in blocking integration. Implement, review and improve the anti-discriminatory proofing of policies.
• Recognise that while Britishness is relevant within the notion of dual identities, attempts to impose Britishness will not work for most of the population.
• Supporting people to share and take joint action on everyday experiences and quality of life concerns, at the neighbourhood level, or across a wider coalition, is an effective way of generating cohesion effects. The practice pointers, above, demonstrate however that there is no short cut to achieving these outcomes.
References


Department for Communities and Local Government (2008) Communities in Control. White paper


Appendix

More information on the research projects discussed in this report can be found on the web site www.identities.org.uk including downloads of the key findings for each study, details of their methodology and list of publications. The projects included in this report are listed below.

Charles Antaki (Loughborough University) and Mick Finlay (University of Surrey) Identity Conflicts of Persons with a Learning Disability, and their Carers. Research Fellows: Penny Stribling and Chris Walton.

Rupert Brown (University of Sussex), Adam Rutland (University of Kent) and Charles Watters (University of Kent) Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children. Research Fellows: Lindsey Cameron, Rosa Hossain, Anick Landau and Denis Nigbur.

Ed Cairns (University of Ulster), Miles Hewstone (University of Oxford), Joanne Hughes (Queen’s University Belfast) and Richard Jenkins (University of Sheffield) Social Identity and Tolerance in Mixed and Segregated Areas of Northern Ireland. Research Fellows: Andrea Campbell, Katharina Schmid and Nicole Tausch.

Simon Clarke (University of the West of England) and Steve Garner (Aston University) Mobility and Unsettlement: New Identity Construction in Contemporary Britain. Research Fellow: Rosie Gilmour.

Sean Connolly and Dominic Bryan (Queen’s University Belfast) Imagining Belfast: Political Ritual, Symbols and Crowds. Research Fellows: John Nagle and Gillian McIntosh.

Anthony Heath (University of Oxford), John Curtice (University of Strathclyde), Miranda Phillips (NatCen) and Robert Andersen (McMaster University, Canada) Are Traditional Identities in Decline? Research Fellow: Gabriella Eigenius.


Diane Reay (Cambridge University), Gill Crozier (Roehampton University) and David James (University of the West of England) Identities, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle-Classes. Research Fellows: Phoebe Beedell, Sumi Hollingworth, Fiona Jamieson and Katya Williams.

Ben Rogaly (University of Sussex) and Becky Taylor (Birkbeck, University of London) ‘Deprived White Community?’ Social Action in Three Norwich Estates, 1940-2005.


Deborah Sporton (University of Sheffield) and Gill Valentine (University of Leeds) Post-Conflict Identities: Practices and Affiliations of Somali Refugee Children. Research Fellow: Katrine Nielsen.

Tim Strangleman (Kent University), Steve Jefferys (London Metropolitan University) and Jane Martin (Institute of Education) Does Work still Shape Social Identities and Action? Research Fellows: John Kirk and Christine Wall.

Valerie Walkerdine and Peter Fairbrother (Cardiff University) Regeneration Identities: Subjectivity in Transition in a South Wales Workforce. Research Fellow: Luis Jiminez.

Jane Wills (Queen Mary, University of London) Work, Identity and New Forms of Political Mobilisation.

Nira Yuval-Davis and Erene Kaptani (University of East London) Identity, Performance and Social Action: Community Theatre among Refugees.