

# Enclavisation and Identity in Refugee Youth Work

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## Abstract

*Publication of the government's strategy on integration for new communities poses questions about the nature of 'Englishness' and how to do what amounts to top-down integration work. This article looks back to the pioneering refugee youth work study of Norton and Cohen and at the critical questions that identity work poses for young refugees and what kind of youth work practice we need to develop in the future. In order to overcome isolation and enclavisation of communities, it argues we need to support integration strategies from below, from NGOs but importantly from the lived experience of the young people themselves and their participation in project design and politics.*

**Key words:** Identity, enclavisation, integration

THE LAUNCH IN 2012 of the UK Coalition government's most recent integration strategy may mark the end of a debate about integration that began with the development of the original support package for asylum seekers in 1999. Whilst this strategy is not purely refugee-focused, much of the debate contained within it is about the emergence of new communities and ways in which they can be supported into integration and subsequently into more formal citizenship. At the same time this strategy has been complemented by the emergence of a much more punitive asylum model which is more 'returns – or deportation-focused' than it was during the previous Labour administration.

The integration debate itself has largely been shaped by a two-fold process. On the one hand there was a recognition that for communities to feel safe and enfranchised there had to be some form of induction into society and the wider community. On the other there was a fear that violent extremism could find a foothold in new and emerging communities if they felt disenfranchised or dispossessed. Linked to this, there was a more generalised fear that new communities, separated into 'enclaves' often did not understand either the values or the laws of their new country. This was seen as a significant problem in terms of issues such as honour crime and gender-based violence accompanied by an unwillingness to learn English or expected rules of conduct beyond the question of legality.

The eruption of social difficulties in British towns and cities through the last decade and the rise of violent extremism on the Right has been seen as a response to a militant Islamism being transported

into the UK by many of those seeking asylum. This understanding is largely based on a fiction promoted by the media. In many ways it has been the affluent and the enfranchised individual rather than the opposite, who has been recruited to the cause of extremist narratives (Fekete et al, 2010:3, Kundnani, 2012). Moreover, many of those entering the UK as asylum seekers have been themselves fleeing violent, misogynist and incipiently totalitarian Islamic regimes in places such as Iran, Yemen and Somalia. If anything, they often displayed more of a commitment to UK values and society than the average UK subject within the host community (see the Cantle Report, 2002). Yet the question of enclaves and how to overcome their problematic nature has become a significant part of the debate, both from those who want to impose integration from above and others who want to examine integration from below (Hudson, 2013).

One of the critical conditions of integration is the overcoming of the ‘enclavisation’ process by which communities self-enclave or are forcibly enclaved from above – physically and socially in terms of housing and social spaces and fundamentally in identity itself. In other parts of Europe such as the district of Rosengard in Sweden, whole areas are almost entirely comprised of refugees and migrant workers, often highly welfare-dependent as a consequence of Swedish migration policies. At the same time, for security and physical safety many people want to live alongside and with others with similar identities and often this can imply little active engagement with other communities. Clearly, the historical fate of many enclaves and ghettos demonstrates that creating meaningful, integrated relationships amongst communities is important. However, there are different levels and types of integration and a difference between a forced code of Englishness or Britishness imposed from above and an explication of already integrating, meaningful relationships which can take place without the intervention of the state (Smyth, Stewart and Da Lomba, 2010; Strang and Ager, 2010).

Young people have been central to the debate about integration. The discursive construction of the young person as rioter, scrounger or extremist militant have been central to many of the debates about what integration is and how we should do it. At the heart of this debate about young people is what kind of integration and whose integration we are talking about. As Sivanandan notes in Fekete’s study of the integration problematic in Europe, ‘the problem of integration lies in the interpretation of integration itself’ (Fekete et al, 2010:1). Certainly the integration programmatically outlined in the recent government report is profoundly at odds with much of the integration work on the ground. Whilst at times it seems programmatically similar it is clear that imposed integration has very different implications from integration by choice. This raises the critical question of what kind of youth work practice is possible within this integration framework – one shaped by the divisions (and the fictional monsters) of the last decade. As Fekete argues, for both asylum seekers and more settled Muslim communities – Europe and the UK seem:

*impervious to the high social cost of excluding young second-and-third generation black and Muslim Europeans from poorer backgrounds from the debates that concern them. It is surely*

*time to consider the lasting impact of policies that marginalise, exclude, criminalise and, ultimately, alienate youngsters.* (2010:3).

This question of youth work for refugees and asylum seekers was comprehensively reviewed by Norton and Cohen at the very beginning of the National Asylum Support Scheme launched in 2000 (Norton and Cohen, 2000). Their work has significantly influenced the way practitioners have hitherto engaged in youth work around the issue. It has ‘accompanied’ youth work through informed debates about the question of integration in the last decade. Norton and Cohen raise key questions about practice and how this can be linked with a social justice (if not emancipatory) approach to working with young people in communities. Yet reviewing the historical territory of asylum seeker and refugee integration over the last decade would support a rethinking of the premises upon which that original work was formulated, and a questioning of how integration works for young people and how it might work in a future largely shaped by the current government’s recommendations about the nature of Englishness and the question of new identities.

It is necessary to problematise the question of identity theoretically and practically with reference to the ways in which young people themselves have engaged with and thought about identity. It is in that relationship between integration, identity and new communities and the enforcement of particular governmental visions of integration against those counterposed amongst young people in communities, living their life and thinking their own lives and routes through it, that we can begin to map a new programme for youth work and youth activism with and for young asylum seekers.

## Creating conditions for integration?

The vision of current governmental integration initiatives set out in *Creating the conditions for integration* (2012) reprises much that was central to the cohesion policies of the previous administration and in many ways summarises clearly the failures of previous initiatives whilst seeking to consolidate a new programme. Central to the new vision is the concept of an England which has always been a haven of migration and tolerance (2012:3). The central thrust of the document describes the problematic status of new or ‘outsider’ communities and their inability to conform to this vision of Englishness. Linked to this is the social cost of integration failure, specifically in terms of the narratives of violent extremism that can be taken up by young people in new communities as a result of political disenfranchisement and economic dispossession. As Fekete and the Institute of Race Relations argue, however important the integration issue, the debate around it has often been used as a way of attacking new communities for their failures. An approach that diverts attention from the failures of the government:

*Over the last few years, the debate on integration has ceased to be a two-way process based*

*on dialogue, consultation and mutual respect. The daily diet served up by many politicians and much of our media is one that stigmatises minorities and blames them for failing to integrate. The media are most likely to portray minorities as holding on to alien customs that threaten Europe's Enlightenment values, and depict 'immigrants' as choosing to self-segregate in parallel societies. If you listen only to the politicians and the press, you may even come to believe that the biggest threat to the EU today – as well as to the 'national identity' of its member states – lies in immigration and cultural diversity. But what happens if we throw away the newspapers and stop attending to the politicians? What happens if we listen to other voices, particularly the voices of those who are the butt of the 'blame game' in the integration debate (Fekete et al, 2010:2).*

Within the new government agenda the status of 'Englishness' is best recognised as one of 'common-sense' and crucially, through the concept of 'common-ground' – the space or place in which England offers itself to a new community and the specific gift to the new community of 'a clear sense of shared aspirations and values, which focuses on what we have in common rather than our differences' (2012:5). This common-ground becomes the meeting place in which extremism and intolerance are tackled and a sense of participation, responsibility and social mobility are expressed. But this sense of common-ground is not simply a space wherein differences become fused and equal in a new culture but one in which there is clearly enforcement from above. For it is a specific version of an English culture and an English mainstream; one to which new communities must conform: for as it explains 'there are too many people still left outside, or choosing to remain outside, mainstream society' (2012: 6). These community discourses of difference and resistance retain their enclaves, enclaves where the 'mainstream' has no constituency or power – separate, segregated and self-disenfranchised. For the authors of the *Creating the Conditions for Integration* there has also historically been undue focus on integration projects and activities without sustaining integrated day-to-day activities and a moral enforcement of English culture and to which new communities should aspire.

There are three broad issues that make this governmental programme problematic. First there is the question of the definition of integration. Whose idea of integration is it? In this sense the government perspective is integration from above, a view little different from some of the old assimilationist narratives of the 1970s (Hudson, 2013). Against this can be counterposed a real, living integration that is symptomatic of the best of youth work practice, and the 'lived experience' of migrants in emerging communities who are 'doing' integration for themselves without an interventionist programme from above.

Second there is a demonisation rhetoric, often Islamophobic, in the debate that is set out within the government agenda. In this the most disadvantaged become the enemy. The aim of preventing violent extremism in new communities which previously had little experience of any kind of extremism has led to prevention agendas which focus on difference. However, some communities'

lack of integration is more the consequence of UK and US Imperialist ambitions in their lands of origin, the lack of access to ESOL classes, and the absence of economic well-being, or in the case of asylum seekers themselves a ban on work and often on the right to study in schools and colleges. All of which can be viewed as a consequence of governmental policies rather than an absence of any will to integrate on behalf of young people from those communities.

Third the focus on some constructed core sense of English identity is counterposed to the established and emergent identities in new communities. This creates a discursive territory in which disenfranchisement can take the shape of a reversion to older ethnic and faith identities which are not compatible with the master-narrative of the government agenda. The consequence is a recourse to some sense of unshared, monolithic (potentially extremist) identity which self-enclaves in the face of a government agenda which cannot accept multiple and hyphenated identity, let alone approach it in any sense of equality, which can lead to feelings of frustration and powerlessness. It is also worth pointing out that many of the things perceived as 'foreign' or non-English or non-European have actually been central to the growth of English and European culture such as Islamic traditions of science, literature and architecture, South Asian food and musical culture, African dress and so on and without which young people's sense (if not the government's) of Englishness would be hugely diminished.

In this context the territory of identity becomes the battleground over which rival dogmatisms and orthodoxies wage war – against others in foreign territories, against others in English territory and most crucially against the other within – an 'other' with which we struggle inside our identities and make conversation with at every moment of existence (see Hudson (2012) for a historical study of this). It has the potential to create what Fekete has called a 'parallel society' at odds with the 'mainstream'. It is this question of the parallel society and its dangers that has been one of the major spurs to governmental ideas of integration. It has become a bogeyman argues Fekete (2010:34) but the demonisation of enclaves does not mean that they are less real. Certainly a focus on identity and self-narrative and how they can overcome enclavisation is profoundly different from the kind of assimilation from above doctrine perpetuated by the present administration.

## Subjectivities, structures and youth work

Identity is the story we tell ourselves and others about us, what we share with others and what our differences are. It can be exclusive or inclusive, it can be fairly stable, static and unchanging as well as dynamic and ever changing. It can contain multiple elements which are shaped by social structures, place and migration across territories. Fundamentally it is a narrative about ourselves and who we are. As O'Neill notes:

*Recovering and re-telling people's subjectivities, lives and experiences are central to better understand our social worlds with a view to transforming those worlds... Biographical work represented poetically, visually as well as textually, can help illuminate the necessary mediation of autonomous individuality and collective responsibility. Biographies help us to understand social relations, the processes, structures and lived experiences of citizenship and lack of citizenship and the experiences of humiliation, vulnerability and loss (dominant experiences for some asylum seekers/refugees). They highlight the importance of engaging with the subaltern other, creating spaces for voices and narratives to make sense of lived experience, trauma, loss, but also the productive, creative, generative dimension of forging identities and belonging in the new situation, as an 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee' (pp. 22-23).*

Those narratives structures, about our journeys, and about who we are shape young people's politics and their routes into the future. It is clear that serious levels of disenfranchisement and self-enclavisation are often the consequence of an unjust asylum system, trauma in lands of origin and racialisation and isolation in the UK and elsewhere (Auerbach, 2010; Beirens et al, 2007; Fekete et al, 2010). This abdication of active citizenship as a consequence of dispossession can mean the retreat to older narratives of identity which can sit uncomfortably with the values and mores of wider UK society. This process can be exacerbated amongst young women from newer communities who can be at once too integrated into patriarchal structures in their communities and too socially isolated at the same time – issues which can be exploited by community leaders to ensure the continued denigration and dispossession of women's narratives about themselves and their ideas for their future leading to new forms of segregation (Cressey, 2006, 2007). Certainly narratives about children and children's experiences have to be understood in a wider context of crimes against young people and the silencing of their narratives about themselves – particularly around building social bonds and friendships (Hek, 2005:37). As Hek (2005: 25) notes there are often profound contradictions between ideas of past, present and future in refugee children's lives particularly those who have undergone experiences of trauma.

The origination and persistence of social networks which allow for the hybridity, dynamism and extension of new kinds of identities, freedom of expression and identity experimentation is crucial to thinking about youth work with young refugees. But structurally this can be extremely problematic where civil society, citizenship, leave to remain, and lack of access to education and language facilities are so restrictive and molecular and where the only sources of social support can be the very ethnic and faith enclaves that young people can find so restrictive. Language and identity can be the most challenging aspect of building new social networks in the UK for creating social networks and making friendships are about modes of identity and belonging. Kilbride et al in their study of young refugee experiences in Ontario have argued that the very multi-dimensionality of young people's needs create complex networks of dependence and social isolation which often only enclaves can support – certainly professional youth work has to understand the process of identity formation and be 'reflective of the integration they seek, not the marginalization they

neither want nor deserve,' (2000:17). So in the context of the multiple needs of young refugees and asylum seekers what should refugee youth work look like?

The best explication of what refugee youth work should look like today is to look at how it was best expressed at the beginning of the national dispersal scheme throughout the UK and the start of what might perhaps already be seen as the golden age of asylum seeking in the UK. Norton and Cohen's (2000) was an attempt to understand the challenges faced in the integration of young refugees and to look at the kinds of youth work practice, committed to social justice, that might aid that integration and support. There was a clear recognition in their interviews with young people and youth work practitioners that:

*Many want to integrate with dignity into British culture and society while at the same time being free to value and cherish their own particular culture and identity.* (2000: vii).

Indeed they argue that the dialectic of integration and difference was often central to their lives as they faced the challenge of a new life in the UK. The Asylum and Immigration Bill of January/February 1999 provided the spur for and the context of the book. The message remains central to contemporary practice – namely that far from new communities being defined as a problem 'for whom and to whom things should be done' – those very communities, and young people specifically, were creating hugely positive futures for themselves, making friendships and so on often in contradiction to official 'integration', structural racism, and an unjust asylum process (Norton and Cohen, 2010:2). As Norton and Cohen state, the pivotal question for refugee youth work is that of self-determination (2010:9-10). The book is both a document of what refugee youth work looked like in 2000 and a manifesto for what good practice could be developed. The work Norton and Cohen document in London during the 1990s and their research into practice still holds up well and large parts of the text should be required reading for practitioners. However in some ways there is a focus on what might be called bonding rather than bridging experiences that not only stands in opposition to the current strands of government thinking but also to the kinds of work that subsequently developed around integration projects in non-governmental organisations, refugee community organisations and in local authority youth work. The question of how to build bridges between communities and to bond within communities is a central debate in the practice of community development. Ideas developed by Putnam in his studies of Italian and American communities have reasserted the centrality of bonding/bridging and it is certainly a resonant motif in recent government debates both in the United States and the United Kingdom (Putnam, 2000). A critical focus of the text was upon the support that youth work had to give to bonding and self-enclavisation which reflected a clear response from the respondents in the research. This argued that only community enclaves could provide the kinds of social capital that young people require:

*All stressed how important it was to be able to meet and be with others who spoke their language and with whom they could share their experiences. Most found early advice and*

uprisings, perhaps best exemplified by Gaza Youth Breaks Out. The sheer connectivity between a young person on an estate in Northern England and a young person in a prison cellar in Iran for honour crimes illustrates well that sense of potential global solidarity and identity.

Second Norton and Cohen raise the critical question of participation and active citizenship by young people in communities. It is clear though that far from that citizenship being directed for a 'monolithic' sense of community or a citizenship for enfranchisement in the UK state's version of civil society it is often directed against them and youth work has a pivotal role to play in this, particularly if youth work is rooted in non-governmental organisations and achieves some sense of independence from local authority control (see Newman, 2005). Fekete points to the case of 13 year old Asiya Hassan who organised a forum on the detention of asylum seeking children – as Asiya says 'Young people need to speak up for themselves if they want their voices heard, which is what I'm doing right now. In order to get our point across we need to organise many more events like this. And we will be heard, no matter what it takes,' (Fekete et al, 2010:67). This active engagement with forces outside exclusivist faith and ethnic communities signify not only that anti-racism has to be central to the integration problematic but that young people's passions, creativities, and struggles have to be the molecular basis upon which any integration project is grounded – a basis which, it should be noted can be profoundly hostile to the kind of integration agenda being developed by the government. It also signifies that social bridging experience is absolutely essential in ensuring enfranchisement, social struggles against deportation and against economic dispossession and destitution.

Third the question Norton and Cohen raise about who does refugee youth work has also changed significantly in the intervening period. As they noted most refugee youth work was situated within RCO structures and this was clearly then the case in the North East. By 2012 however in North East England out of the 63 documented RCOs in the region only a minority employed sessional youth workers and some of these were committed to inner-directed activities such as teaching Farsi to children. There was effective participatory and campaigning work done through Youth Voices through the Regional Refugee Forum but by far the largest employer of youth workers was the wider voluntary sector comprised of national, regional and local organisations who had links to RCOs but had their own agenda around issues such as preventing violent extremism in new communities, refugee health and sports integration. Organisations such as the Children's Society were committed to support work with unaccompanied minors but the largest set of youth workers undertaking work with refugees was located within the North of England Refugee Service, which was linked to the national Refugee Council. All of these projects were very much situated within a participative, outer-directed framework committed to an integration agenda which was anti-racist and explicitly counter-posed itself in relation to government agendas on integration (see Wootten and Hudson, 2012; Hudson and Ganassin, 2010). Certainly refugee youth work within local authorities has diminished substantially over the decade with very little dedicated detached or community work with refugees now in existence.



## Creating new narratives

The new context of refugee youth work and the initiation of a new integration agenda on enforced ‘Englishness’ then elevates specific questions about the kinds of identity work we can do in contemporary refugee communities. If we are to take seriously the challenges of refugee youth work since the publication in 2000 of Norton and Cohen’s study, practitioners, policymakers and funders have to think about implementing a programme based on the following themes:

- First we have to do refugee youth work in white, working class communities. This may seem contradictory but it is clear that much political hostility towards refugees from the nationalist far-right finds its audience in parts of these communities – often linked to a rhetoric that sees ‘Our’ troops fighting Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan and relating this to ‘Muslim bombers off our streets’ in the UK – as if the streets are ‘Ours’ and belong to the ‘English’. Tackling extremism and racism means ensuring that conversations and projects that look at refugee experiences are part of ‘mainstream’ youth work.
- Second we should support any projects based around heritage, geography, and history work that challenge exclusivist identities by making the concept and practice of identity problematic. One project supported by the North of England Refugee Service and Tees Valley Museums looked at uncovering the migrant histories, through art and photography, of local children who had no concept of themselves as having any kind of migrant history. In fact many of them subsequently uncovered Cornish, German, Irish and Huguenot heritages – making empathy and solidarity all the easier towards contemporary migrants and refugees.
- Third any meaningful anti-racist integration project has to take seriously the question of racist narratives. This is impossible without having some form of understanding of, and dialogue with, these narratives in terms of their context and specifically how to dismantle them and present counter-narratives. Condemning racism and no-platforming it in youth projects is often counter-productive and refugee youth work is best served by trained staff with expertise in how to dismantle extremist narratives.
- Fourth we have to understand and examine the narratives of identity that young people present. We need to listen to their stories, support them in exploring identity and facing the challenges of living in a multicultural society. It means defending any explorations of their identity against those who want to reassert monolithic, exclusivist and oppressive identities against sexual freedoms, freedom of dress, and so on, often, it should be stressed, against self-appointed community leaders. Linked to this is the question, already raised over a decade ago by Norton and Cohen, and Hek more recently, that youth work practice needs to support young refugees in thinking through the relationship between their past, their present and their future and to map transitions and routes for themselves which are based on their own fluid and multiple conceptions of themselves.

- Finally, the complexities of identity do not sit in a vacuum – the social and political context of migration, warfare, human rights abuses, racism and so on demand recognition and the kinds of political ventures made possible by migration (Hudson, 2002). Thinking through these structures means looking at the hierarchy of need which young people present, understanding that even before they can think about their narratives they need to be clothed and fed, offered advice, supported, made welcome and safe – in fact offered both physical and crucially existential safety by projects and practitioners. All the better if their experiences can then become part of campaigning work to challenge the structural difficulties that refugees face and also to point to the problems of disenfranchisement and dispossession in white, working class communities that can be such breeding grounds of racism and extremism.

Central to the life and routes of young refugees is still that pivotal question of self-determination. Fundamental to that sense of determination and the trajectory of young people's lives is that of self-expression and self-definition – determinations, expressions and definitions that are the province of young people themselves and not states, communities, and authorities that seek to subdue and oppress and it is the task of youth work with refugees to support young people into that future.

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