



# 'You Can't Put Me In A Box'

## Super-diversity and the end of identity politics in Britain

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## Foreword

This paper was written in 2009 as the Equality Bill<sup>1</sup> was taking shape. It aims to be a constructive contribution to the consultation around the Bill as well as a provocative contribution to the debate around equalities. We are keen that those who wish to work for a more equal Britain, celebrate the diversity of our countries more positively and fight discrimination, continue to pursue the agendas that have achieved a great deal over the last decade. But we want them to work differently.

We emphasise that there needs to be some concerted effort to counter persistent bias as it affects some groups in society, symbolised by what have come to be referred to as the 'protected strands'. However, we now have an opportunity to reframe our thinking about the significance of the 'strands' and thus to reshape the delivery of services by public bodies. This paper calls for a new analysis of social problems and thus the ways we try to solve them. It does not suggest the end of our focus on group identity, but it does seek to banish the tick-box.

The new Equality Bill seeks to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations. And it states the need for public authorities to have 'due regard' to the needs of particular equalities strands or groups, while adding gender reassignment, marriage/civil partnerships and pregnancy/maternity to the six strands currently enshrined in law. While these are sensible steps in the journey towards better equalities policy, we question whether this strand-based framework is as effective as we need it to be. For example, by demonstrating due regard across nine strands, a public authority can only show broad compliance. It will not, through such a mechanism, demonstrate real responsiveness to the particular composition and dynamic of any local population, nor the nuanced need of the individuals within it.

This paper argues that we need to sharpen our analysis, think harder about representation of those people we are trying to help, get better at fostering aspiration rather than condemning people to the tyranny of low aspirations, and get smarter at treating people as individuals and not just as part of a group. We seek to reinforce the need for this work but to dismantle the current limitations in the way that work is executed.

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1. The Equality Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 24 April 2009.

## 1. Introduction

This paper attempts to map out just how diverse Britain is, both in terms of who lives in Britain and how they identify themselves. We explore how discrimination and disadvantage do not map easily onto orthodox 'strand-based' frameworks (see below) and assess the shortcomings of current approaches to understanding and tackling discrimination and disadvantage. While we aim for this to be a paper that provokes rather than answers questions, we conclude with some implications we see for policymakers, data collectors and others.

Britain is not only more diverse than ever before but that diversity itself is growing more diverse. Today, identities are more complex and fluid than they used to be, reflecting shifting interests and allegiances. For those of us interested in equality, this new situation presents some difficult challenges. While inequality and discrimination manifest themselves along all-too-familiar lines (for example, racial or sexuality minorities remain targets of much discrimination), identity-based campaigns seem dated.

In an age of super-diversity, where people do not identify around single identities and feel conflicted allegiance (if any allegiance at all) to pre-defined groups, activism around particular 'strands' seems irrelevant to many people and may not even be that effective in addressing the true causes of inequality. Even the very categorisations that we often rely on (for example 'black', 'Asian', 'gay' or 'disabled') no longer seem to be able to tell us much about who people are, what lives they lead, who they identify with or what services they need from government and society. And the tick-box approach to identity seems to be missing out on growing numbers of people who fall outside or across standard classifications, as some of our interviewees told us.

This paper explores these issues and challenges, in order to provoke a useful discussion about how policies and practice around equalities can better respond to our contemporary super-diversity and the new politics of identity that it brings.

### Background

The two of us met on the Diversity Board of Places for People, a large and innovative housing association and property-developer. The task of that Board is to debate what the organisation's mission, 'Creating neighbourhoods of choice', means in relation to the diversity of the organisation's actual and potential customers. It clearly did not mean, to caricature it wildly as one of us was provoked to do early in the debates, 'putting a mosque here for the Muslims and a disco over there for the gays'.

It became clear that to deliver a public service that will be taken up, be popular and will meet an individual's needs requires a combination of cultural and sub-cultural sensitivity (not assuming everyone is straight or married, for instance) combined with a recognition of an individual's particular needs (not assuming that someone with learning difficulties would not want or be able to drive). Diversity and equality also mean that we needed to look across *all* groups of residents, not just those within the 'strands', and ask questions about service quality.

In conversations on the fringes of Board meetings, we discovered that, in addition to our shared distaste for simplistic responses to diversity, we had both developed similar observations about equality and diversity in the UK. We shared a growing concern that many of the issues and campaigns that we saw within our own areas of expertise and experience

(gay issues for Simon and race and immigration issues for Danny) seemed a little dated and out of touch. We both sensed that young people were identifying with different issues and mobilising in different ways than those who led social movements around race, sexuality, gender and so on were aware of. We were both also frustrated by the fact that, despite the creation of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, we still saw a lot of flag-waving by various 'strands' calling for greater attention to their own issue.

As one expert we interviewed told us:

*I think one of the outcomes of the way that local politics has been played...and to a certain extent national politics...is to encourage special interest groups to sort of pit against each other in a way, even in terms of competing for funding from local authorities. So if you're looking for funding you can do that through being a Sikh organisation or a Muslim organisation... in some ways those lines have become much more rigid and delineated than previously.*

Finally, we also sensed an important moment in bringing about a 'post-strand' principle and framework that could guide equality policies and practice in the 21st century. All this was brought home when we realised how frustrating it was that despite all this progress in understanding and promoting diversity, Keeran, Danny's son (born in Britain to a Sri Lankan-born Australian father and a Afro-Trinidadian mother) does not have a box to tick in the Census (see Box 1) or any other administrative forms. Keeran and the 6000 or so other people of mixed Asian and Black heritage in the UK have to tick the 'Other' box, a dispassionate rejection flowing from the rather bizarre recognition of only a set number of ethnic categories.

Above all, our conversations led us to a shared frustration of how the 'tick-box' approach to categorising people is unwieldy, because it is too generalised, and often meaningless. It has no finger on the pulse of how life is actually lived, whether it is about sexuality, ethnicity or any other form of capturing diversity.

### Box 1. Boxed in: how the 2001 Census captured ethnicity

What is your ethnic group?

Choose ONE section from A to E, then tick the appropriate box to indicate your cultural background.

**A White**

British       Irish       Any other White background (please write in)

**B Mixed**

White and Black Caribbean       White and Black African       White and Asian  
 Any other Mixed background (please write in)

**C Asian or Asian British**

Indian       Pakistani       Bangladeshi       Any other Asian background (please write in)

**D Black or Black British**

Caribbean       African       Any other Black background (please write in)

**E Chinese or other ethnic group**

Chinese       Any other (please write in)

Source: Census 2001 – Office for National Statistics

This paper is our attempt to think through some of these issues and help policymakers (and data collectors) to understand contemporary identity and identity politics in the UK.

### **The strand-based approach**

Britain has been having a long liberal moment since that weedy but highly significant character in the story, the first Race Relations Act in 1965, signified our aspiration to dismantle prejudice against minorities. The law and the framework for the arguments against prejudice and discrimination ever since have been based on what we now call the six 'strands':

- Gender
- Race
- Disability
- Sexuality
- Faith and belief
- Age.

Group identity has been at the core of this approach. Attempts have been made to tackle disadvantage in ways based on the notion that the members of these groups are all disadvantaged, that their life chances and opportunities are overwhelmingly affected by their race, age, sexuality and so on.

This paper comes from the standpoint that this is clearly not true any more. Discrimination might be an everyday event, but it is no longer an all-day event. We can celebrate progress. And building on it, there should be three wider aims for the future: to recognise and harness diversity, create equality and challenge discrimination. So the question will be whether Britain can now go forward with an approach that more closely matches the experience of people's day-to-day lives and achievements and responds to their more complex feelings of identity as well as dealing with their experience of prejudice. This approach will also enable government, local authorities and others to focus on where there is real disadvantage and not just fire money via the strands in the general direction of issues in the hope that some of it finds its target and solves the problem.

In all spheres of public and private life in the last decade there have been scores of examples where opportunities have opened up and there are very significant achievements by what South Africans would call Previously Disadvantaged Individuals. Systematic political blackmail has given way to gay cabinet Ministers, people with disabilities and learning difficulties are living independent lives in a way that would have been unimaginable just 10 or 15 years ago, and there are significant numbers of black and Asian actors, peers and people in business, at all levels.

### **Identity**

So how homogeneous (and *equally* disadvantaged) are the members of those groups now after so many years of palpable progress in certain areas? We have chosen to ask this question through the prism of identity. Plainly put, how much does it tell you about somebody to know they are 'black', 'disabled', 'gay' and so on? How much does it help in tailoring public services to their individual need? How much does it tell a private sector company designing a product about their consumer habits? How much will the bald Census data tell us about the reality of our population? Perhaps only that (setting aside the Jedi) we have millions of people who are simply designated 'other' because they do not fit the bureaucratic categories of identity.

And do people feel enthralled by their group description or limited by it? Is there a difference when they use it themselves and when it is used by public bodies to label them?

An expert we interviewed asked:

*Can a person on a welfare-to-work scheme be both disabled and old? Or disabled and from a minority ethnic community? Or are they forced to choose between these administrative categories, thereby denying critically important aspects of their identity which are influencing their employment prospects?*

In this paper, we ask to what extent an analysis based on groups is now adequate for the task. We want to suggest that they are an insufficient tool in the context of a society characterised by super-diversity and much more complex personal identities that are also more publicly expressed.

We believe that a more sophisticated approach will (a) more accurately promote diversity, (b) help to achieve equality and (c) counter discrimination. We need to understand when and in what circumstances it makes sense to consider someone as part of a group; when their individual identity and needs and aspirations transcend that; and thirdly we need to look at the data from any community or organisation and ask, 'who is really disadvantaged here?'

There are moments when group experience and identity are indeed the dominant forces in people's lives. When we are discriminated against, whatever the multi-layered experience we may have of our own identity in life, we know we are part of that group. This is the fist-in-the-face moment. Prejudice is so unintelligent that it sees us as all the same. And we respond in kind. As Hannah Arendt (2003: 47) wrote:

*One truth that is unfamiliar to the Jewish people... is that you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as. A person attacked as a Jew cannot defend himself as an Englishman or a Frenchman. The world would only conclude that he is simply not defending himself at all.*

So at the outset we would want to reaffirm that inequality clearly remains a blot on our society and that certain groups of people appear to suffer more greatly from inequality than others in certain contexts. There is clearly persistent bias. This paper simply asks whether we are being as clever as we should be in identifying and tackling the inequality and discrimination that exists in British society.

Prejudice is almost always based on cruel reductionism; human beings are squeezed into rigid stereotypes. Though well intentioned, the orthodox tick-box approach to equalities also risks reductionism. In its crudest applications, diversity and equality policies stop seeing people for who they are and start seeing them instead as categories or, worse still, contributors to quotas.

We must not let the notion of group disadvantage blind us to people's potential and condemn them to a tyranny of low expectations. In 1990 in East London a group of concerned parents opened the Keen Students School because they were concerned about the underachievement of children in schools in their Borough. Curiously, it became clear that the very same kids who were disruptive and would not learn at school then volunteered to come after school and learn. One of the founders argues that 'it's pretty much down to expectation': the teachers appeared to be making assumptions from their background about the level of the students' potential, particularly the black and Asian children.

*[In KSS] they are expected to learn. In some of the local schools teachers have expectations of the kids they wouldn't dream of having*



*of their own children. They mean well. They think they've had a hard time and it's difficult for them to learn. But if you think about it, it's racist. Not directly. But if you analyse it, the end result is that the child is failing.*

Recognising individual identity is felt to be a significant factor in people realising their own potential. One disability activist we interviewed said:

*So – on the one hand I still say 'I am disabled' as a sort of political identifying statement to the world. In other words – you'd better treat me equally, with respect and have my needs accessed in an equal and fair way – but on the other hand that's awful and I just want to be a person with a diverse experience of the world.*

When designing and delivering public services this duality becomes crucial and was one of the main impetuses for writing this paper. And identity became our lens because it reflects the complex reality of British society. It recognises both the shared identity of the group and the felt identity of the individual.

The complexity of what is going on in terms of identity in contemporary Britain is staggering. If we take, for example, one of the most important but least well-understood aspects of identity at the moment – what it means to be Muslim in this country – it seems we run a serious risk of simplifying things.

Making simplistic assumptions about who identifies as a Muslim or why they do so is dangerous. One recent report on engaging with Muslim youth highlights the complexity of identity formation and expression within specific communities of young Muslims (Forward Thinking 2008). Not only are most young Muslims preoccupied with the same concerns as other British youth (for example getting on the property ladder, job stability, educational attainment) and are worried by universal concerns about parental expectations, but they also have 'a strong desire to define their own distinct sense of belonging and identity which accepts multiple identities and engages with being part of British society'.

A young Muslim woman we interviewed at a recent conference gives a glimpse of how complex contemporary identity is among hijab-wearing young Muslim women, a group about which many people would have some firm assumptions. She was wearing a pink hijab, a white jacket, matching pink skirt and ruby slippers, and Simon said to her, 'If I was interviewing you on the radio and told the audience you were wearing a hijab, they wouldn't see what I am seeing.' She responded:

*Yes, me and my mates called ourselves the 'hijabi-Barbies'. I think I have more hijabs than knickers. Sometimes I think that's going against what I am saying. But I don't claim to be a perfect Muslim. I rationalise that I am living in a western country, so do in Rome and all that. It's my way of bridging the gap. This kind of melding has been going on for centuries with Muslims.*

Our aim in this paper is to provoke a discussion about whether the orthodox approach to identity and equalities is sufficient to address the real inequality that exists in British society. It plugs into the moods and modes of young Britons. Although we do not try to come up with detailed policy prescriptions, our thoughts are designed to help public bodies in the UK recognise and harness diversity, create equality and challenge discrimination in a way based on the new reality of Britain and in a form that will be more effective than relying on old understandings.

## Research methodology

This is not a paper informed by extensive research: it is based on years of our own experiences as activists and students of identity politics, and our observations about the changes we see around us. Nevertheless, to ground some of these experiences and observations, we reviewed recent academic literature on, and journalistic coverage of, the issues that interested us, and we also conducted some primary research.

We ran discussion groups with young people of different backgrounds to explore how identity is constructed and expressed. Two groups were held in London and one in Hove, East Sussex, in March 2009. All of the groups were made up of members of the public who were 'politically engaged' – for example, those who are interested in politics or take part in some form of political activity. Screener questions drawn from the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society 2008) were used to ensure that all participants were at least moderately politically engaged. It was thus expected that all participants in our group would have some basic level of awareness of politics and had a good chance of having some form of political identity.

Groups were mixed sex, mostly aged under 35 and included ethnic minorities, people from different regional and social backgrounds, and gay and lesbian people. It was not our intention to represent each and all of the identity 'strands' in such a small piece of qualitative research. Rather we aimed to explore identity-related issues with a range of politically-engaged young Britons.

By using innovative methods to 'map' important aspects of identity, we were able to explore how young Britons express and construct their own identity and others' identities in today's society. We were also able to interrogate how identity politics is evolving among the younger generation, especially in reaction to contemporary forms of perceived prejudice and discrimination.

We also conducted interviews with 15 key people who have been involved with equalities campaigns in recent decades. A full list of interviewees can be found at the end of this paper. By asking each of them to reflect on how things have changed (or not) with regard to their issues of concern and how they mobilise around them, we hoped to understand how the politics of identity is evolving.

## 2. Super-diverse Britain

Britain is more diverse than ever before. We say this not because we want to quote some glib statistic about how many languages are spoken in London (300-plus at last count, by the way), but because increasing diversity calls into question some of the orthodox assumptions that our equalities frameworks build on. We believe that Britain is 'super-diverse' not only because of the increasingly diverse make-up of the population (as a result, for example, of increasingly diverse immigrant flows; see Vertovec 2006) but also because all Britons, especially younger ones, are expressing their identities more and more ways.

We believe that this super-diversity presents a fundamental challenge to the way we categorise people. And if the groupings that we often use (black, Christian, gay, and so on) to identify people who are disadvantaged or being discriminated against are not sound, then the whole process of promoting equality is undermined.

### **Ethnic groups**

A good place to start is with the categorisation of ethnic groups. There are, of course, valid reasons why we should collect information on ethnicity but we believe that categorising the entire population in just 16 or so groupings hides more than it reveals.

Ethnic categories such as 'black African' hide such huge differences that it begs the question of why the grouping is even useful even at the most basic level. If you divide this group by country of birth, you see that the differences between constituent groups are staggering. For example, overall some 66 per cent of black African-born people in the UK were employed in 2005/06 but Ghanaian-born and Nigerian-born people had an employment rate of 80 and 76 per cent respectively while Somalia-born people had a rate of around 20 per cent (Sriskandarajah *et al* 2007). Knowing the overall black African employment rate would tell one very little about what was going on in Somali-born or Ghanaian-born communities.

This is not to say that using a person's country of birth is a good or better way of categorising people. Where they came from may also not tell us very much. Within any particular group from a given country, there are likely to be distinctions around ethnicity, religious affiliation and practice, language, regional and local identities in places of origin, kinship, clan affiliation, political affiliations, and other criteria of collective belonging (Vertovec 2006). Indeed, it would seem foolish to, say, treat all Sri Lankan-born people as if they were a meaningful whole given the importance of ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional differences to that nationality.

Even if we take the ethnic groupings at face value, we still find that there are important trends that will mean that more and more people will fall between the crude classifications. The question of how to classify people of 'mixed' ethnic heritage has nagged data collectors for decades. Only in 1991 was 'mixed' even introduced as a Census category (before this it was assumed that people would tick a box relating to one of their parents' or ancestors' category) and only in 2001 was it broadened out to include different types of mixing. Yet, given the growth in the numbers of mixed people, particularly among the younger generation, we will see a substantial growth in the proportion of Britons who are 'mixed' (see Table 1 below).

As at the last Census around 9 per cent of children were living in families that contained mixed or multiple ethnic heritages (Platt 2009). Yet society seems to treat ethnic identities as if they are clearly bounded, static and meaningful, and public bodies insist on a tick-box classification of ethnicity.

**Table 1. Britain’s growing ethnic diversity, various years (%)**

	1991 (all pop.)	2001 (all pop.)	2008 (all pop.)	2008 (under 16)	2020 (under 16)
White	94.1	91.3	89.9	80.9	84.4
Mixed	n/a	1.3	1.1	2.8	5.0
Asian	3.3	4.4	4.9	7.2	7.8
Black	1.9	2.2	2.3	3.6	2.9
Chinese	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.3	1.4
Other	0.6	0.4	1.4	1.7	

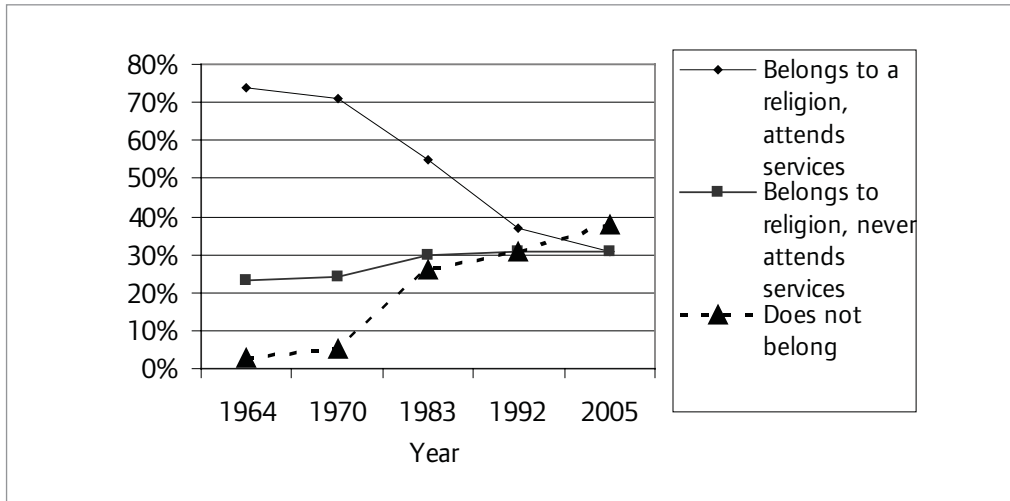
Source: 1991 and 2001 data are for England and Wales and from Censuses; 2008 data are for England, Wales and Scotland from Platt (2009); 2020 projections are for UK and from Rees (2006)

**Religion**

If we take religion, the tick-box approach seems even more flawed. While someone specifying their ethnic background on a form is likely to have good reason behind their choice, the link between someone ticking a box about which religion they belong to and actual practice is far more tenuous. Part of this is because of the significant decline in the proportion of people who actually practise a religion today. Only 20 per cent of people in England and Wales said they belonged to no religion or did not state one on their Census forms in 2001. Yet we know that roughly a third of people in Britain attend religious services, a third say they belong to a religion but never attend services and a third do not belong to any religion (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Religious affiliation, 1964–2005**

Source: British Election Studies, reproduced from Heath et al 2007: 9



Just like ethnic categorisation, religious groupings are complicated further if we start looking at the origins of each community. British Muslims for example are probably one of the most heterogeneous body of believers in terms of ethnicity and country of origin. According to the 2001 Census, the 1.6 million Muslims in Britain are divided into Pakistani (43 per cent), Bangladeshi (17 per cent), Indian (9 per cent), White (11 per cent), and Black (6 per cent) descent (leaving significant ‘other’ and ‘mixed’ categories). Given how important the differences are between for example Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, it seems incredible that people talk of ‘the Muslim community’ in Britain.

Things get even more complicated if we look at religious ‘mixing’. Around one in eight couples in Britain includes two people of different religious affiliation. Among men, this rate of religious mixing varies from 5 per cent of Christian men, to around 10 per cent of Hindu,

Sikh and Muslim men, to a third of Jewish men and over 40 per cent of men with no religion and Buddhist men. Among women this rate ranges from 3 per cent of Muslim women, to Sikh, Hindu and Christian women at around seven to nine per cent, to 24 per cent for those with no religious affiliation, 30 per cent of Jewish women, and nearly two-thirds of Buddhist women (Platt 2009).

### **Recent immigration**

One of the main drivers of increasing diversity has been recent immigration. The arrival of relatively large numbers of people from parts of the world that had not hitherto sent large numbers of immigrants to Britain has made the picture much more complex.

While Britain has always attracted immigrants from a range of countries (Winder 2004), the last decade has seen increasing diversity among newcomers. In 2007, there were an estimated 35 country-of-origin groups that had more than 40,000 people living in the UK, five more than in 2002 and 12 more than in 1997. It is also interesting that some country-of-origin groups, notably the Polish-born, have seen large increases in the last five years. Poles went from being the 13th biggest foreign-born group in early 2004, before Poland became a member of the European Union and Poles were allowed to travel to and work freely in the UK, to the biggest foreign-born group four years later (Pollard et al 2008).

One significant consequence for the argument here is that, with such rapid changes in the patterns of population change, we need to recognise in this century more than ever before that what diversity looks like in – for example – Leicester is very different from what it looks like in Brighton or Norwich or Newcastle. In Leicester diversity might flow more from ethnicity and faith, in Brighton it would have to embrace the very visible lesbian and gay population. The need for careful analysis of exactly what the diverse population is like in any town, city or rural area becomes more acute in the pursuit of effective social policy.

Furthermore from an equalities perspective, the arrival of such large numbers of white European Christian immigrants in recent years has also challenged some of the usual assumptions around discrimination in the UK. On paper, these are people who should have little trouble fitting into British society. Yet, despite not falling squarely into any one of the strands, we know that many recent immigrants are being discriminated against (see, for example, Spencer et al 2007).

Recent increases in immigration have also had an impact on the proportion of people in the UK who have been here for relatively short periods of time. It is estimated that about a third of all foreign-born people currently in the UK – around 2 million people – have been here for five years or less. Around half have been here for 10 years or less. While a fifth of immigrants in 1997 had arrived within the previous five year period, this proportion had increased to a quarter in 2002 and stands currently at a third. At the other end of the spectrum, the proportion of immigrants who had been in the UK for 20 years or more fell from around a half in 1997 to a third in 2007.

This rising super-mobility also has important implications for how easy it will be to count people who are here, let alone taking into account what their presence means for the equalities challenge (Rutter et al 2008). Immigration and super-mobility add a layer of complexity to that challenge, the impact of which has yet to be grasped fully. Many immigrants are among the most discriminated against and vulnerable in society but, often by dint of their immigration status, they may be beneath the radar and therefore afforded few of the equalities protections that citizens have.

### **Implications for other kinds of diversity – disability and sexuality**

What is now called 'disability' has widened in concept considerably in recent years. There has been a growing awareness of the diversity of disabled people, reflected in the now very broad definition of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act. The act embraces not just those areas historically associated with disability, but now also includes long-term health conditions such as cancer and HIV.

What had been separate, sidelined movements of people with learning disabilities, mental health conditions, and more recently with neurological conditions, are now joined in the mainstream disability movement, where all demand better recognition.

This diversity of people living with disabilities distances them even more from the value of solutions to do with ramps and rails. Their recognition demands a world that will automatically include people with the whole range of physical and mental abilities.

When it comes to sexuality, you only have to look at how society is reflected in television dramas, programmes like *Skins*, to realise that, albeit at this stage only marginally, young people are extending, and experimenting with, their sexuality without necessarily feeling the need to identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian'.

The 2000 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes found a significant increase in the proportions of British men and women claiming to have ever had a homosexual partner in the decade since the first survey in 1990. Among men this proportion increased from 3.6 per cent in 1990 to 5.4 per cent in 2000. Among women it increased from 1.8 per cent to 4.9 per cent (see Porter 2007: 141). Something is shifting.

### 3. New identities

Not only is Britain super-diverse in the ways described above but it is also increasingly diverse because people seem more willing and able than ever before to express that diversity. Part of the reason for this is that some of the traditional ways in which people coalesced are no longer as relevant. As Lucy Stone and Rick Muir stated in an ippr paper on identity, 'As most British people have become wealthier and gained access to higher levels of formal education, their collective identities have weakened' (Stone and Muir 2007).

This weakening seems to have occurred around identification with social class, political party and even national identity (ibid). A 2006 study found that 53 per cent of Britons describe themselves as working class, and 43 per cent as middle class. But this research found that there may be as many as half a million people earning over £100,000 a year who say they are working class. It also found that almost a third of employees doing professional, managerial and technical jobs define themselves as working class. Only 1 per cent of people said they were upper class. The coherence of the notions 'working class' and 'middle class' are being fatally stretched.

Similarly, affiliations with national identities have fallen in recent decades. Most individuals in the UK identify most strongly with their immediate locality or town in preference to a regional, national or global identity.

Finally, it seems that the days of lifelong support for one political party are also coming to an end. As the major political parties lose their distinctiveness and social class itself gets diluted, more and more people are prepared to (and do) change their party affiliation over particular policies.

Perhaps the most important observation from our discussion groups involving young people is that the propensity for swing-voting is part of a wider blurring of identification. For a start, when given the chance, our participants did not always conform to the sorts of descriptors that we are used to hearing in official contexts. So, rather than 'male, 32, Scottish', people told us they were 'warm, bright, funny'; less Census category, more personal ad (see Box 2).

One of the reasons that some people chose not to use the former type of identification was because they said this was *not personal* to them. These categories were so broad and impersonal as to preclude or hinder any sense of who they thought they were as a unique individual. Interestingly, when we asked them at the start of the group to describe

#### Box 2. The diversity of self-identification

At the start of our discussion groups we asked participants to summarise who they are in no more than three words. Here's what some of participants chose to write down:

- Adolescent, female, environmentalist
- Mum. British, young-middle aged
- Warm, bright, funny
- Female, English, 28
- Hopeful, helpful, fortunate
- Freelancer, north-Londoner, 40-something
- Black, male and 30
- Young, British, male
- Daughter, friend, open
- Independent, artistic, abrasive
- Northern Irish, male, 31
- Creative, independent, female
- Teenage, independent, confused
- Mother, ambitious, chatty, Indian
- Moralistic, quirky, loyal

**Box 3. Self-identification before and after our discussion groups**

Before...

"FEMALE  
SINGLE  
BRITISH"



"BLACK  
MALE"



After...

"OXFORD EDUCATED  
FRENCH SPEAKING  
FOOD LOVING  
WARM  
FUNNY"

"HUMAN BEING  
OPEN TO ALL"

themselves and did so again at the end, the end product was even less likely to resemble official categories (see Box 3).

There was broad agreement that some aspects of one's identity were inherited, or *given*, and other aspects were *chosen*. The chosen aspects of identity were important but often overlooked. It was very important to our participants that their identity was something in which they *had a choice* and that that choice was a free choice.

*Some elements of your identity are fixed, for example where you are from, things that are passed down to you but your opinions or your beliefs can very quickly change depending on your experiences.*

(Discussion group participant)

*My attributes are my attributes, whereas millions of other people fit within other identity categories.* (Discussion group participant)

When people talked about 'who they are', it was often as someone with certain beliefs or values. This slant on their identity is maybe more about *how* they are in the world, how they operate, how they interact with people, what they believe in. In other words, it was more about *who they are being*, rather than *who they are*.

*We're generally quite comfortable about our identities. It's never been an issue for me, about 'who I am'. I'm comfortable saying that I'm mixed race, this is my heritage, and this is who I am. I identify myself not just from a racial side, but in terms of what I do and what I've achieved.* (Expert interview)

So it was often more important for our participants to identify themselves in terms of their roles and values, including political stance, rather than in terms of, say, the country they were from.

Another version of this was to say that one's identity was (literally) what identified the person, as distinct from who the person (really) was. So, identity as defined by the usual categories or 'boxes' was *opposed to* personal identity. Our discussion group participants simply did not like being put into boxes, even boxes of their own choosing – it was as if they were saying, 'I am more than and bigger than any one category'; 'I am not a number, I am a human being'.



*I find these forms very impersonal. White British, Black British – what does that mean about the person? (Discussion group participant)*

*I don't like being in big groups. I don't need to be defined by it. It does my head in. (Discussion group participant)*

Personality characteristics or values may have been given as components of identity partly because people chose to define themselves as having these characteristics, as opposed to being confined to inherited or given characteristics. Several discussion group participants told us that it is possible to 'be' several things at once and that, while there may be internal tensions between these categories, it is possible to negotiate between competing components of one's identity.

Many of our group participants resented 'strong' identifications. It was often noted that the question of identity, especially when identifying oneself with a group, was essentially divisive, about separation and different-ness, which encouraged discrimination and prejudice.

Similarly, while many participants said that visible external characteristics were important to how people are identified, they were mainly keen to move beyond that kind of defining.

*I just think identity is things that you can be identified by, blond hair, your height and that ... maybe that's just because of my police job. Identity is that you can say you're white, from this age group etc [whereas] a lot of the things that you're talking about, life experience etc, is personality. (Discussion group participant)*

*I do judge people by first impressions, how people carry themselves how they talk and dress ... then you get to know them and distinguish them differently. (Discussion group participant)*

Our research suggests that young Britons in particular seem not to care much for tick-box approaches to identity. The idea of having a set number of fixed, broad categories for 'who they are' seems foreign to the Facebook generation, who are used to choosing and changing 'who they are being'.

*I think the whole bringing young people together around an issue via the Internet, Facebook and all that stuff is absolutely huge now and the potential for it is enormous. Now you don't have to belong to anything, you can surf the net ... So it's very much more fragmented and loose. (Expert interview)*

*People have more than one identity, they have multiple identities and multiple interests. With modern technology that's easy to forge because you can belong to different communities in a non-physical way through the miracles of technology. And young people are very happy to do that. (Expert interview)*

It is also important to note that the existence of categories on forms does not necessarily mean that communities that match those categories exist or should be taken as being important. Our research suggests that younger people may be less willing to accept that the former are justified and/or that the latter are relevant to their lives.

## 4. New types of political mobilisation

A second set of observations from our discussion groups was around the greater potential nowadays to express and mobilise around different identities or indeed issues. There was some agreement that contemporary politics is less focused on identity issues and more about causes that cut across population groups. Issue-based political activism (for example marching against the Iraq War or campaigning on environment issues) was seen to be the most important form of mobilisation.

*The current younger generation coalesces around its youth, not identity. Whereas the legacy of 70s and 80s civil rights movement campaigned for sexual equality against the homophobic laws, for women's rights, they were all predicated on identity. Now the mass movements are about ecology, anti-war... they are about issues, not identity. (Expert interview)*

Furthermore, a rise in the use of the internet, e-mail and social media has opened up new ways of accessing other people and making alliances with them.

It is interesting to consider how social media will affect the way in which the next generation express themselves and their identity and whether this in turn will affect how they engage in political and community issues.

For example, users of sites like Facebook – who include their photo (or one of something or someone else) to identify themselves – can join or create groups and take part in online petitions and campaigns. Online activity can translate into 'offline action', particularly as mobile social media use becomes more widespread.

*You've got the blogs, the Twitters, you start to share your opinions and people start to come into your [reach] so the whole idea grows. You can have more of an impact from so many different sources. (Discussion group participant)*

In one discussion group, the following exchange happened:

First participant: *Do you think we can have more input, more impact now sat at our PCs than we could going out on marches?*

Second participant: *Maybe not but you can get more people doing it because it is so much easier ... new media is having a huge impact in how people can coordinate themselves.*

### 'Microtrends'

These arguments are akin to those made by Mark Penn, the PR guru, whose work on 'microtrends' has revolutionised the way that marketers and politicians see the world (Penn 2007). Realising that the 'one-size-fits-all approach to the world is dead', Penn set about demonstrating how smaller groups of people, coalescing around idiosyncratic characteristics or interests were shaping the contemporary world in ways that megatrends were not. He wrote:

*Today, changing lifestyles, the Internet, the balkanization of communications, and the global economy are all coming together to create a new sense of individualism that is powerfully transforming our society. ... No matter how offbeat their choices, they can now find 100,000 people or more who share their taste for deep fried yak on a*

*stick. In fact, by the time a trend hits 1 per cent, it is ready to spawn a hit movie, best-selling book, or new political movement. ...With the rise in freedom of choice has come a rise in individuality. And with the rise of individuality has come a rise in the power of choice. The more choices people have, the more they segregate themselves into smaller and smaller niches in society. (Penn 2007)*

In making this comparison, we do not mean to trivialise the more fundamental forms of discrimination and disadvantage. There is undeniably something more important in mobilising against racism than forming a Facebook group devoted to yak on a stick. Our point is that it is easier than ever before to identify and then mobilise around ever-smaller issues, commonalities and causes.

Another comparison with the microtrends argument is the call for more nuanced understandings. Just as Penn has pioneered more sophisticated trend-spotting through his polling, we too need more sophisticated ways of understanding identity and discrimination.

*I talk to younger people and the identity thing is huge. When I grew up, we were black, white, Asian and we all mixed. But now I talk to my cousins or to young people and they've broken it down, granulated so much, it is now postcode Britain and that is sad, and if you've got younger people talking, you'd get a completely different description of how we see our identities. (Discussion group participant)*

Social movements based around identity politics arose in the 1960s because women and minorities were marginalised voices or ignored in mainstream media, politics, and key social institutions such as trades unions. While we have clearly not got to a point where all the concerns of all the marginalised groups have been adequately addressed, our argument is that action on discrimination and disadvantage needs to be move beyond 1960s-style mobilisation. Our research suggests that any attempt to elevate a particular characteristic or aspect of identity to the fore to stay there forever will feel alien to a younger generation of people who are unused to this form of mobilisation.

### **Lessons from Obama?**

There have been many things said about Barack Obama's victory in the American Presidential race and what it means for race politics in that country. We do not want to wade too deeply into those discussions but do think there is at least one important implication of his victory for the points we are trying to make. We believe that Obama's victory signals a moving on from the post-war identity politics in Western democracies. By successfully questioning the fundamental assumptions around identity politics – that our ethnic, gender, sexuality or religious identity should be our most important qualification, and that our identity predicts what our policies will be – Obama has opened the door to a new form of political mobilisation. Whatever the mobilisation by the Right since, during his campaign he skilfully managed to avoid being pushed into a racial box, saying, 'Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens... we built a powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans'. Even when challenged about the views of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama refused to play up his race, particularly in his 'A More Perfect Union' speech delivered on 18 March 2008:

*...[W]e've heard my former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation; that rightly offend white and black alike.*

*As such, Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems – two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.*

Obama also refused to countenance the idea that women should vote for Hilary Clinton or Sarah Palin just because they were women. We suggest that Obama's victory is a victory against the idea that primary appeal of a political leader arises from who they are in terms of race or gender. Obama has done for American identity politics what New Labour did for the British left: move from angry and divisive politics to a more conciliatory, centrist place.

There are echoes of what Obama has tried to do in the United States in what we are saying needs to happen in the UK. For example, Obama's constant attempts to appeal to issues rather than identity contrast dramatically with what seemed rather old-fashioned calls during the London Mayoral Election for gay men and women to support Brian Paddick because he is gay. Paddick was running as a Liberal Democrat. Why should Tory and Labour voting gay people have any reason for supporting him other than old-fashioned identity politics?

## 5. Disadvantage and discrimination

As described above, identities overlap and groups are more porous and flexible than ever before. As Anthony Giddens (1991) and others have argued, we now live in a culture of greater reflexivity. We have more room to choose who we are in a world where tradition and homogeneity have been eroded by globalisation, mass consumption and a greater public diversity of lifestyles. And there is a far less reliable and automatic connection between group identity and disadvantage.

When Ken Livingstone was campaigning for re-election as Mayor of London in 2008, he tramped the streets trying to re-engage the support of the minorities for whom his policies at the Greater London Council had been such a breakthrough in the 1980s. Back in the days of rainbow coalitions it had made sense for him and many others to focus on building alliances between groups who, in those days, felt so well defined by the prejudice directed at them. But 20 years on, AA Gill, the *Sunday Times* journalist, was moved to kind regret in describing a speech Livingstone made in a gay pub in Soho:

*...he looks wistful and talks about the good old days when homophobia was there to be slain along with racism. ...The gay man next to me whispers that he's fed up with being patronised and patted on the head. 'We're not a put-upon minority,' he says, fiercely voting out gender politics. 'We care about all the same things all other Londoners care about: buses and drains and policemen.'* (Gill 2008)

The 'great heroic fights' are sadly not behind us yet. Children are thrown out of their homes, men are beaten and even killed for being gay. When the Catholic Church confidently excludes you from adopting or fostering a child through one of their agencies solely on the basis that you are homosexual or when you miss out on promotion, then you know that prejudice is still alive. But as the whispering gay man attests, that is not the whole story either in terms of how we feel about our lives, nor the objective reality of our life chances. Being black, gay, disabled or a woman no longer automatically blights our ambition or our chances of success. The variations within these groups are enormous. And the assumption of disadvantage and the blanket application of those groups to the understanding of issues do not give us an accurate guide to who is really at disadvantage in society.

### Variations in the Muslim community

In 2006, Professor Shamit Saggar gave a lecture for the University of Sussex in which he sought to understand the myths of Muslim religious extremism. The rhetoric of grievance plays a considerable part in the justification of more extreme attitudes. So he examined the often made assertion that 'British Muslims experience such high levels of social disadvantage that their plight goes beyond that of other excluded groups', a plea frequently heard from the so-called 'radical' preachers. His conclusions are clear:

*The economics of British Muslims are a mixed picture. On one hand, by concentrating purely on Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin Muslim communities, the position of other Muslim groups gets relegated to the periphery. Most data has been collected on these two groups, who together only account for two-thirds of British Muslims. Indian Muslims, for instance, perform significantly better in the labour market than Pakistanis or Bangladeshis. Equally, the generally impressive story of the Ismaili community, or those with an East African dimension, points*

*in the other direction. Likewise in relation to British Muslims of Arab or Turkish background. This implies a country of origin effect, rather than a religious effect. (Saggar 2006)*

There are considerable variations across the group. For instance only 4 per cent of first-generation Pakistani women in Oldham are economically active as against 84 per cent of second-generation Indian men in London. There are wide variations between the aspirations, achievements and career progression between different Muslim people. For example, 5 per cent of men of Indian origin are in medicine whereas 12 per cent of men of Pakistani origin are taxi drivers. As Saggar further explains: 'One in three Bangladeshi men is a waiter or a chef. Meanwhile, Indian and Chinese men now are more likely than whites to hold jobs at professional or higher managerial levels.' Professor Ceri Peach, of the University of Oxford (quoted in Saggar 2006) in an allied piece of research, concluded that, 'taking into account schooling, settlement, mobility and employment, there is little to sustain the charge of systematic exclusion of British Muslims.'

We say this not to stop Muslims from asking the frequently justified questions about their treatment when there is prejudice or disadvantage, but rather to challenge the automatic link too often made between the 'strands' and economic or social disadvantage in the lives of individuals. Many Muslims are doing very well. It is lazy and unproductive to equate being Muslim with disadvantage. In fact, following Professor Saggar's analysis, it may even be dangerous as it will effectively bolster the politics of grievance, which nourishes recruitment to extremism.

### **Disadvantage among other groups**

In a study for the New Local Government Network, Anna Turley (2009) makes the point that women do rise to senior positions in local government although they tend to be restricted to social care. In the National Health Service in 2007, 25 per cent of doctors at consultant level and 47 per cent of registrars were from black or minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds (NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement 2009). A success story and a considerable improvement over previous years.

Yet, in contrast to successes at the middle levels of the NHS and local government, there are very few chief executives in both sectors who are either black or women. And we also know that while there are a high percentage of women and people from BME groups who work in the public service, they are strongly represented in lower grades. But the presence of so many female and black middle managers drives us to ask more complex questions about the effect of race and gender on achievement than the one-dimensional assumption that the two groups simply overlay and explain disadvantage. We might for instance need to examine the assumptions that lie behind the appointment of chief executives in the NHS, as it may be that doctors and nurses are not regarded as the right pipeline towards senior management, so that in effect it is medical staff who are experiencing the glass ceiling and not women or people from BME backgrounds.

When we look at the disadvantage experienced by gay people, we know that an unacceptable level of people are bullied at school and discriminated against at work. Head teachers can start to tackle this by giving a lead, which can reduce bullying by as much as 60 per cent (Hunt and Jensen 2007). Stonewall, the lesbian and gay equality lobby, has a Diversity Champions programme, 'Britain's good practice forum in which employers can work with Stonewall, and each other, to promote lesbian, gay and bisexual equality in the workplace'. Three-hundred-and-fifty or so large organisations have signed up, including many of Britain's most significant employers, taking a lead in creating positive attitudes in

their companies. Therefore it seems unhelpful to claim (extrapolating from the bullying statistics) that all gay people experience wholesale discrimination. We need a focused understanding of exactly where this kind of discrimination, and the disadvantage that derives from it, is experienced.

If it is assumed that group experience is somehow uniform and that prejudice against the group is the default cause that we accept for failure to achieve potential, then we will fail to reflect the variation between individuals. We risk limiting the life chances of the very people we are trying to support. In a landmark lecture, Baroness Jane Campbell (2008), the disability campaigner, spoke of the dangers of not being alert to 'the diversity of the characteristics and experiences of disabled people, and to the causes of the barriers which prevent equality'. She talked of the risk presented by the 'overly narrow representation of disabled people ... which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications, and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. The rich diversity of disabled people has too often been reduced to the wheelchair symbol.'

Many of us have an understandable affection for our group affiliation, which is borne of political experience, habit in fighting the often-wearying battles against discrimination together and a fear that in recognising change we might somehow dilute our strength.

*Because there wasn't satisfactory political and social understanding of disability in place, artists used their art to be political, so we became an army of crippled Billy Braggs, if you like. (Expert interview)*

There is even a certain comfort in being together with people who we might assume understand our lives. But however much the battles have been fought together against prejudice and in favour of extending opportunities for previously marginalised groups, it does not acknowledge any success or progress to continue to repeat old mantras. The evidence suggests that not only is there considerable variation within groups but that also many people are annoyed at being lumped in with a set of group assumptions and experiences. Our focus groups were quite clear that people do not like to be pigeon-holed. There was a strong feeling that in the case of public services, people prefer to be treated as an individual with a set of personal needs rather than as a member of a pre-determined social group.

As one black activist we interviewed said:

*I couldn't put my hand up and say I think I've been discriminated against. I think I've had quite a good life. Doors have opened for me within the financial sector, and doors are now opening for me...elsewhere. So personally I don't see it. And actually maybe that's because I don't play the race card in a sense and I try not to walk into a room and automatically think I'm the only black man and they're all against me. I just walk into a room and think I'm X, ambitious, want to achieve something, get something done.*

## 6. What is wrong with current approaches?

Local authorities are herded into the identity trap. They become handmaidens to the 'strands' as if it gives them comfort that inequality is being challenged and poverty and discrimination tackled. For perfectly good reasons, conditions have been attached to public money that require organisations to consider how they widen access to their services and grants and how they both engage the widest range of people and also focus on those most in need. It forces them to think. This is a good thing.

However, the way they think is habitually too simplistic to understand the situation and too blunt to create effective remedies. They frequently resort to process. And, albeit with the best of motives, they embrace the tick-box.

To question the tick-box is not to accuse local authorities of 'political correctness gone mad'. It may well make those of us who care about equality and fighting discrimination a little anxious (or even embarrassed) when we read that 80-year-old residents of a care home in Brighton are regularly asked about their sexuality in order to 'meet Council guidelines' (*Evening Argus*, 9 February 2009). But it should not make us other than delighted that there is an intention to make sure that the staff in old people's homes are equipped to make elderly gay people feel comfortable and included.

The notion of political correctness, usually deployed by people with a malignant rejection of attempts to encourage equality, is simply a way to try to get people to consider that which they do not normally consider; to encourage us to be explicit about changing our attitudes and policies in relation to those who have been traditionally discriminated against. But the tick-box approach that treats people as if they are a member of a predetermined social group, with needs and interests that are assumed to flow from it, does not achieve that.

*I used to work for [X] as a social worker, and there were always loads of boxes to tick for people. I got really frustrated because there was white British, but not 'black British', 'Indian British', any other... you couldn't put anything other than white and it was really discriminatory and quite offensive to a lot of people. (Discussion group participant)*

*I know a writer who in the last five years has found herself being described as a 'Muslim writer'. She is a Muslim and she's a writer but she's not a Muslim writer now and she never was before. (Expert interview)*

To take an example, one of us, sitting on the Arts Council in the South East, was asked to endorse as a strategic priority the creation of two BME theatre companies in the region. An obvious question came to mind: what problem was this designed to tackle? And then: what does a BME theatre company mean? Is it led by BME people; does it cast only black and other non-white actors; does it produce and commission only writing by black or Asian or, even, Polish authors? What in this context did BME itself mean? Refugees and asylum seekers; first-generation immigrants; Black British people whose families had lived in the South East for many generations; migrant workers from Eastern Europe?

Whose problem were we trying to solve? Was the aim to create a more diverse audience for theatre, better career opportunities for BME actors and directors? The proposal may have been a perfectly genuine attempt to put some flesh on the creation of greater diversity in the arts in the South East. But it was inarticulate in both its analysis and its solution. It was



an automatic response, based on an untested notion that all BME people somehow have less access to the arts, both as consumers and producers.

We are not criticising the Arts Council, which has done much to invest in the engagement of new audiences for art, but we want to highlight the need to be accurate about exactly the nature of the discrimination, disadvantage or lack of access being tackled and not to work from blanket assumptions about certain social groups. This is not a point about ethnicity. This approach by the Arts Council would have been as faulty in relation to people with disabilities or gay people or any of the traditional strands. Granted, moving beyond strands is more complicated and the effect is harder to count – and public agencies often prefer the paperclip approach, by which you can tot up the totals. It is also less comforting to those who insist that identity is not just one key factor in disadvantage, but the sole factor.

The Common Purpose network and the recruitment consultants Odgers Ray & Berndtson run a campaign called 'About Time'. It is a 'targeted campaign seeking to encourage and support talent from diverse communities to take on non-executive opportunities on public boards nationally, regionally and locally'. But at a recent seminar a senior civil servant said the following to a room of wry smiles, 'If you think that adding me to your Board creates diversity, you'd be wrong. I am middle aged, in senior management and Oxbridge educated. The fact that I am Asian does not make any difference. On a charity Board I am just more of the same.'

We live with the scourges of prejudice and disadvantage in Britain. But we have a duty to people in devising effective solutions to their problems and supporting their attempts to fulfil their ambitions and realise their potential, to be clear about exactly where that discrimination affects them and in what way.

In a presentation at a recent Board meeting we attended, an experienced health professional included a slide that noted the high incidence of 'oral cancer among Pakistani and Bangladeshi men'. But to what extent is this a problem of ethnicity and to what extent is it about lifestyle habits? In fact, the highest incidence of oral cancer in Britain is among Scottish men. A recent study (Conway et al 2007) reached the conclusion that, 'Oral cancer risk appears highly correlated with socio-economic factors, both in Scotland and in the UK [as a whole]'. In Scotland, oral cancer was most common in the most deprived regions. Broadly speaking the conclusions imply that the major causes of oral cancer are tobacco, poverty and possibly alcohol. It may be associated with the extreme stress that accompanies deprivation. Ash (Action on Smoking and Health) concluded in 2006 that, not only was there an issue about the consumption of non-smoking (chewing) tobacco, but also 'Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities tend to eat fewer fruit and vegetables than other minority groups and also take less physical exercise'. The connection is about lifestyle and circumstance, not ethnicity.

We have a duty not to make assumptions about people when we make social policy decisions that affect their lives. To take a very different example, Alison Shea, the Assistant Director for Housing & Support services at Mencap, recounted recently a story about a vicar who would not marry a couple who both had Down's syndrome because, he said, 'they wouldn't understand the implications of getting married, what the consequences of it were'. Shea said to him, 'Well, when it comes to marriage, which of us does? We just fall in love and do it!' What really is the difference in the experience of love between a man or woman with Down's and a couple without?

We know that you cannot ascribe homogeneous characteristics to groups of people who

have historically suffered disadvantage, nor infer monochrome conclusions about their experience. Many of us have spent the best part of our lives fighting against that kind of stereotyping. And yet we appear to submit readily to the tick-box in social policy and action without distinguishing between the moment of disadvantage and the moment of potential. We blithely apply the categories without asking, 'What problem are we trying to solve?' And we give insufficient weight to the differences in people's experiences.

Our interviewees were almost unanimous on this. One of the key issues about the use of tick-boxes or labels was that it depersonalised or in some other way compromised the person involved. The point was made that, in fact, a group of friends may use labels or categorisations within the groups, but this was done with the knowledge and (presumably) tacit consent of the individual involved.

*They know who I am within the group. We have the lazy person, the fat one, the one who's a bit dizzy, we all have our labels within the group, but we're comfortable with that.* (Discussion group participant)

This provided a clue towards the kind of treatment that people wanted from public and private sector organisations: service that treated them as an individual, as a person, rather than as a number or some kind of unit of measurement.

*I was made redundant last year ... and now I'm in a situation where I'm trying to find anything, and with Jobcentres I feel like I'm being put into this group of people who don't want to work and just sit around drinking their benefit all day.* (Discussion group participant)

*We are all 'others'. You can't put me in a box. I was fostered by a Ghanaian family. My father was Jewish. What box do I tick?* (Expert interview)

We owe people the duty of accuracy in solving social problems and not the default of assumption.

## 7. Race versus class: an example of why we need better analysis

A telling example of how badly we fail to understand the complexity of disadvantage and discrimination is around the relative importance of ethnicity in explaining the socio-economic status of ethnic minorities. The so-called 'race versus class' debate has been running for decades and, while we do not want to revisit all of its intricacies, a few recent examples bring to life the kinds of the points we are trying to make in this paper.

### Performance at school

The controversies around the educational attainment of ethnic minority school children in the UK shows how the politics of ethnicity can sometimes trump the economics of reality. It is often reported that white working-class boys are doing badly at school, despite their non-white peers allegedly having access to extra attention and resources (for example: 'White boys 'are being left behind' by education system', *Daily Mail*, 22 June 2007; 'White working-class boys are the worst performers in school', *The Independent*, 22 June 2007). The reality is that the differences between ethnic groups are much less significant than those between richer and poorer groups.

Schools data that distinguishes between those students who, because of their poor background, receive free school meals and those who do not suggest that affluence is a much more important indicator of educational attainment than ethnicity. For example, the gap between white students in poverty (receiving free school meals ['FSM']) and more affluent white students (not receiving free school meals ['non-FSM']) is more than three times bigger than the gaps between different ethnic groups who are equally disadvantaged (Gillborn in Sveinsson 2009). There is a 32 percentage point gap between non-FSM and FSM white boys, compared with a 9.7 percentage point gap between FSM white boys and the most successful of the black FSM boys (categorised as Black African).

In this example, the focus on ethnicity is doubly dangerous: those who want to address educational inequality could end up focusing on the wrong causal factors (ethnicity, not class) and, in the process, those who want to fuel ethnic rivalries have greater fodder. Conversely, such essentialising of ethnicity may also explain recent debates about the 'white working class'. There is no denying the disadvantage faced by some poor white communities in the UK. However, there is very little evidence to suggest that their disadvantage is the result of discrimination on the basis of their being white (see Sveinsson 2009). Again, just as for non-white children, parental income, occupations and educational qualifications are likely to have far more to do with socio-economic status than the colour of someone's skin.

The head of the EHRC, Trevor Phillips, recently dealt with this issue from a slightly different angle, coming to the same conclusion. He took what 'we think of as a series of racial disadvantages that affect three groups' and sought to reinterpret the evidence in a different light. Taking success at GCSE as an indicator he argued that the problem of underachievement that was often described as being demonstrated by 'African Caribbean boys, Pakistani girls and boys, and some white boys' may in fact have a different root. Rather than race, he argued that there was another dimension. He determined one underlying significant factor: that while in most British families far more women now work than 40 years ago, increasing their households' wealth, this is not the case for these three groups. In African Caribbean families more than half of the children grow up in homes with just one adult, the equivalent of one earner; in Pakistani families fewer than one quarter of the women are likely to work; and in some white families there are two parents but they are

young and not working and there may be no one who has worked steadily for a generation (Phillips 2008). What linked these groups was that they came from single-income families. Phillips thus concluded that the issue was not about race but about poverty.

### **Gang culture**

In his fascinating study on youth gangs, carried out in Waltham Forest, John Pitts, the Vauxhall Professor of Socio-legal Studies at the University of Bedfordshire, set out to understand the formation, operation and effect of youth gangs in this London Borough (Pitts 2007). Delving deep and examining the nature of the conflicts between gangs, he made the startling discovery that the formation of gangs is primarily about location and poverty, not ethnicity. Although the 'pan-London gang profile indicates that 48 per cent of the gangs surveyed were "African Caribbean" and 21 per cent "Asian"', in Waltham Forest, 'gangs are estate based and their ethnic make-up reflects the ethnic make-up of their estates.' Thus, '[w]hile Black and Mixed Heritage young people are over-represented in youth gangs, White and Asian young people sharing a similar social and economic profile and living on the same estates, and in the same neighbourhoods, are also more likely to become involved.'

There are many cultural factors that can be attributed to the behaviour of Waltham Forest's gangs, especially the 'black gang culture' of the US, but the essential issue here is to do with life chances and prospects. It is not associated with being black.

### **What's in a name?**

A final illustration of the complexities we are exploring involves the debate about whether and why someone's name can lead to prejudice against them. It has been long suggested (including by some of our discussion group participants) that names that clearly indicate a person's ethnic or religious background can lead to discrimination in the education and labour markets. But exactly how this discrimination works is a matter of considerable debate. Often the default reaction is to reach for race as the explainer.

*My daughter had a lot of problems looking for a job; she actually changed her name because she had to. Everywhere she applied for a job she didn't get it because she was Indian. She's got all the right qualifications. (Discussion group participant)*

*I won't write my full name anywhere. If I do, I know I'm going to be not included. (Discussion group participant)*

However, one prominent piece of American research that examined birth certificate data for every child born in California found that there was no negative relationship between having a distinctively black name and later life outcomes after controlling for a child's circumstances at birth (taking into account the socio-economic circumstances of the child's family's situation) (Fryer and Levitt 2004). Reviewing that research three years later, Levitt and Dubner said:

*The data show that, on average, a person with a distinctively black name – whether it is a woman named Imani or a man named DeShawn – does have a worse life outcome than a woman named Molly or a man named Jake. But it isn't the fault of his or her name. If two black boys, Jake Williams and DeShawn Williams, are born in the same neighborhood and into the same familial and economic circumstances, they would likely have similar life outcomes. But the kind of parents who name their son Jake don't tend to live in the same neighborhoods*

*or share economic circumstances with the kind of parents who name their son DeShawn. And that's why, on average, a boy named Jake will tend to earn more money and get more education than a boy named DeShawn. DeShawn's name is an indicator – but not a cause – of his life path. (Levitt and Dubner 2007)*

Another piece of American research, this one based on a large and detailed dataset from Florida schools, suggests something more complicated going on that may explain discrimination.

*Children with names associated with low socio-economic status, and to a limited degree, with 'Blackness' per se, tend to score lower on their reading and mathematics tests, relative to their siblings with less race or class-identifiable names... [but] 'Blackness' per se apparently matters considerably less than does the perceived socio-economic status of a name. (Figlio 2005)*

This second study suggests that teachers may use a child's name as a signal of unobserved parental contributions to that child's education, and expect less from children with names that 'sound' like they were given by uneducated parents. Interestingly, the author finds that teachers treat students within a race, and even within a family, differently depending on their name. The hypothesis is also bolstered by the finding that the opposite set of results are observed in the instance of Asian families, for whom a racially-identifiable name may signal attributes that are perceived to be associated with success.

What is interesting about this issue for our purpose is that it raises some challenging questions for traditional approaches to discrimination. For a start, discrimination on the basis of someone's name does not fall easily into strands. Secondly, where there is evidence of discrimination on the basis of race, it can only be explained by the intersection of race and class rather than by race alone. And, perhaps most pertinently to the concerns of this paper, whatever is going on can only be understood by a sophisticated analysis (in this case econometric regressions) that is not only aware of, but blind to, any presumptions about what may be causing discrimination, if any exists.

In the above two cases, it has taken some number-crunching economists and their regression analyses to unpack an issue that would otherwise be taken for granted by most equality activists. More of this sort of work is needed across the equalities agenda in the UK.

Experts have and will continue to pore over the nuances and subtleties of whether and how race or class matter more. Our point is that both will matter to some degree, depending on the context and often depending on the individual. Grouping people according to, say, 'ethnicity' in such broad categories seems neither to work particularly well as an analytical tool nor indeed as an expression of felt identity. We need to do better than this, especially if we are to have any chance of addressing the problems identified by those who have campaigned on race issues over the last few decades. Ironically, getting off the race soap-box may be the first step in actually addressing the grievances of ethnic minorities. And the same, we argue, could be said of any other single-identity-based movement.

## 8. Conclusion

It may seem strange to begin a conclusion by quoting others but the argument we are making draws on insights from a number of different perspectives. Feminists and others, for example, have long talked about 'intersectionality'. They argue that you cannot understand the situation of women without delving deeper into other factors that affect their lives and life chances. Some sociologists have argued that categories are arbitrary products of history and language and contribute little to understanding the ways in which people experience society (see, for example, McCall 2005). You cannot liberate people unless you liberate the language in which you talk about them.

Kenan Malik (2008) has recently pointed out the trouble with our collective understanding and use of race: racism and anti-racism are both plagued by the same myths around the essentialist and apparently scientific basis of racial categories. Our collective challenge is to take advantage of the pragmatic opportunities that categories such as race offer us in terms of understanding society and its problems, but not be bound by those categories.

Iqbal Sacranie, the long-standing Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, used his retirement speech to reflect on some of the successes of Muslim political mobilisation in the UK but also signalled a need for some changes.

*While identity politics has been psychologically satisfying, and allowed socio-economic inequalities to be addressed, it also nurtures community self-interest. ... It seems that one strategic choice is for Muslims to be doing much more for the moral and social upliftment of society as a whole, rather than just for their own communities. It will mean replacing an inward-looking approach with greater engagement as individuals in the civil society around us. It will mean the age of identity politics is over. (Sacranie 2006)*

Samir Shah, the successful and pioneering media executive, showed his frustration at the lack of diversity in British media in his 2008 Royal Television Society Lecture:

*The plain fact is that this tick-box approach to equal opportunities has led to an inauthentic representation of who we are: a world of deracinated, coloured people flickering across our screens – to the irritation of many viewers and the embarrassment of the very people such actions are meant to appease. (Shah 2008)*

Our point is that despite these and other theoretical arguments, political concerns and empirical observations, public authorities have largely stuck to an orthodox approach over the last decades in trying to tackle inequality and create diversity. The aim of our paper has been to question this orthodoxy.

An emphasis on identity has, as we have been arguing, got us a long way in creating visibility and respect for groups of people who have previously experienced wholesale prejudice. It has considerably transformed the ways that they are seen by the rest of society. It has created change. But we are now under an obligation to take that very change into account.

We have seen that British society has been radically altered in its visible diversity – not just its colour, but with the presence of people with disabilities out there living ordinary lives; in the changed face of romance and who now holds hand with whom walking down the street;

who marries whom; how many women work and what status they now have; and just how much prejudice is frowned upon. But it still pervades the attitudes of some individuals and of too many of the organisations we have to deal with every day. All is not yet right.

There are still battles to be fought and problems to be solved. And in this increasingly liberal context, there is an ironic truth about tolerance – which we take to mean not a patronising state to be in, but one where people have and practise respect for each other. Widespread tolerance does not breed tolerance in the intolerant. In fact, surrounded by tolerance they become more intolerant, more threatened and more extreme. And, when they are not being violent, they exploit the actions of those working to achieve equality by stirring up resentment and creating a backlash, especially when they can claim that resources are being taken from one group and given to another.

In a counterintuitive way one might argue that the rise of the British National Party, the incidence of homophobic and racist violence and extreme prejudice against minorities, are in part reactions to our success in making a more liberal Britain. It is also a sign that to some extent we have left the majority behind, which makes them feel uncomfortable about efforts to achieve equality.

*Because of equality laws, people have to fill their quotas. They're using these parts on the forms to make sure that they're not employing all the same people. But by doing that, it's not equal, is it? (Discussion group participant)*

*You see something in a newspaper where someone is identified by their religion – 'so-and-so, Muslim', but they wouldn't put, 'John Smith, Christian'. (Discussion group participant)*

In this context, the tick-box approach, unintelligently applied, gives the bigoted the kind of ammunition they need – stoking their own unpleasant prejudice. It even makes the unsure uneasy about what is trying to be achieved. It can give the strong sense that this does not include them.

*There's a big emphasis on diversity at an organisational level, which is a little bit abstract at times. But putting it into practice is another matter. We do a lot of training, where you become aware of the issues. (Discussion group participant)*

*We do need to have diversity training, but if it goes over the top and becomes too PC then there's backlash against it. (Discussion group participant)*

As long as we devise social policy and allocate resources only along the lines of the traditionally discriminated-against groups (that is, the 'strands') without delving deeper for more evidence about exactly who is in need, then we are in danger of giving succour to the grievance of the bigoted. Unless we argue for equality and diversity as a political position – derived from what you think and do, rather than what you are – which develops society to the greatest good, we are in danger of sacrificing some of the gains.

*If Group X wants something, they've got to demonstrate that it's actually in the public interest rather than in the interests of just members of that group. (Expert interview)*

Government, local authorities and other public agencies must take real care to be able to substantiate claims about disadvantage. They cannot base them on assumptions about

groups. Accuracy in solving problems (to the benefit of everyone) is needed to counter misinformation and create effective interventions. If systems and processes for tackling social exclusion are seen as favouring one minority or another, those who do not see themselves as 'minorities' will draw the conclusion that they are not being listened or responded to. They will feel alienated. We risk fermenting a backlash unless we get to the real causes of social disadvantage.

### **Areas for action**

To be able to rise to the challenges of this new super-diversity we believe there needs to be discussion and action in three key areas:

- Better data collection
- More robust, open-minded analysis
- More effective interventions.

#### **Capturing data**

As we said at the outset, categorising people can be a useful way of identifying groups that are at a disadvantage or may be being discriminated against. However, the way in which public authorities classify people is cumbersome at best, and outdated and irrelevant at worst. We need a more fluid and flexible understanding of an evolving social reality around identity and the differences that matter.

Capturing growing complexity will not be easy, but the alternative of falling for simplistic reductionism will no longer stand us in good stead. And new technologies allow for far more sophisticated ways of capturing data. The next Census (due in 2011), for example, offers an important opportunity to allow people to self-define their ethnicity or religion instead of forcing them to tick pre-determined boxes. More work to map just how diverse each community of concern is would be very useful. There is emerging work on the diversity within ethnic minority communities (some of which we have quoted above) but more is needed about the diversity of experience and situations of gay people, people living with disabilities, women, faith communities and so on.

#### **Open-minded analysis**

Secondly, as we have tried to show with the example of the interaction between race and class, doing truly open-minded research into the causal factors that drive disadvantage and discrimination can reveal sometimes startling but almost always useful information. We believe that an essential step towards promoting equality is fresh analysis, based on better data, of the real drivers and dynamics of disadvantage and discrimination. We need more analyses that start with the problem and not with a presumption about the type of solution. We need research that seeks to examine all the factors that lead to a problem, so that the most important ones can be addressed, not just the sort of research that seeks to understand how institutionally racist an organisation is or whether more rights are needed for this or that group.

More robust regressions, not tired assertions, are what the equalities world needs. We need to be prepared for the fact that, for instance, the most effective way of addressing gun crime among young black kids in London may be to extend a Tube line to improve people's access to work, not through dishing out patronising pocket monies to black youth groups.

#### **Better interventions**

One of the biggest challenges of all is to how to design policy interventions that can take into account the complexity but be manageable enough to be put into practice. After all, one of



the most appealing features of the tick-box approach is that it presents a relatively easy way for over-worked, under-paid officials to check how well they are doing on equalities.

Our key message is that we need to devise new interventions that do not simply apply outdated or irrelevant categorisations and assume all those people who tick certain boxes have the same characteristics or need the same approach. Drawing on wider discussions about public service delivery, we need a flexible, individualised approach to meet individual needs. If we can personalise public services, then we can personalise our approach to equality.

For example, in healthcare, there are good arguments for, and some early experiences of, abandoning the idea of providing health practitioners training in 'cultural knowledge' about one or more (or every) minority group. Instead, equipping professionals with generic skills to respond flexibly to all encounters is more appropriate. This means responding to each patient as an individual, with individual needs, and to variations in patients' culture in its broadest sense (Joe Kai cited in Vertovec 2006).

### Final thoughts

We are not entirely without pragmatism in our recommendations. We do recognise that there is a big leap here. To get to the position where we are formulating policy and acting on this more sophisticated approach to people's identity will nonetheless sometimes still involve us using some old levers. We should not be shy about this, just self-conscious. For instance there is a value in visible diversity. One Board that one of us chairs had eight existing members, all white, including three women. In a one-off recruitment, the Board agreed to an approach to the selection of three new members from a shortlist of only women and black people who met the skills requirements. This form of positive action resulted in the recruitment of two BME members and a woman. It was a symbol of intent by the Board and recognised by them that it was not a substantive solution to achieving a Board of true diversity, which in the context would most controversially have a number of people who were neither university-educated nor middle-class. But it was a way of emphasising that if you do not make a determined effort to look in different places for recruits, you never alter the mix.

This was a tactic in relation to representation but the longer-term strategy has to be about broader change in relation to policy. We are urging a judicious combination of pragmatism and wholesale re-evaluation of the use of identity-groups in bringing about change. If we use them from time to time it is imperative that we are not hostage to them.

*There's always going to be a bit of a clash in the end between life in which people are 'gay and black' for instance, and the world of identity politics, particularly the campaigning groups and pressure groups who not only are one dimensional but in their defence they do need to be one dimensional in the way in which they present their case to the world. They need to say things like, 'better rights for...'* (Expert interview)

This is also the case with language. We need a new way of talking about diversity in the UK. Overzealous pursuit of crude equalities measures, coupled with a vociferous 'PC gone mad' brigade, have created a lot of awkwardness about the language we use when talking about identity, diversity and equality. Many people seem to lack the linguistic tools to express themselves in what is considered an appropriate way or find it difficult to talk about these issues for fear of causing offence. We believe that if you liberate the language of some its restrictive assumptions around these issues, we have a better chance of having a more inclusive conversation about equality.

*What is it about the words 'equal opportunities'? It's somehow become tainted, that phrase, with a dour and joyless and PC-ness. It needs reinvigorating or reinventing. (Expert interview)*

On of our interviewees succinctly made the point when he said that the most important thing he had done in his job was to try to get to a position in the organisation where 'everyone felt they had a legitimate view on the subject of equality and diversity. ... It wasn't just left to the women and the gays, it was something everyone felt they had a stake in.' In taking the equalities agenda forward we believe that we must abandon our nervousness about language, allow, even encourage, 'mistakes' and work to a position where what we do in this area is as vital and important to a 55-year-old white factory worker in Macclesfield as it is to a 18-year-old African Caribbean woman in central London.

*Unless we see it as an issue for everyone... not just a skin colour issue or whatever issue, the whole thing's flawed. If we can't collectively buy into it then we'll never get respect. It will only be respect for the few by the few. (Expert interview)*

In all this, we also need new ways of engaging people who are active on these issues. Well-organised, established social movements may be particularly good at grabbing policymakers' attention but this does not mean that the cause they represent is the most urgent or important. 'Gay people', 'Muslims', 'Black people' cannot by any stretch of the imagination be said to share the same issues and the same concerns of all others in their group. These groups are now so diverse and so different in their needs that politicians, policymakers and those in business need to feel empowered to challenge the assumptions behind the claims made on behalf of groups. In particular the way that British authorities structure and liaise with community organisations tends to give voice to the largest or best-established few. In super-diverse Britain, it is not sufficient to do business only with a few peak bodies in each key 'strand'; something more organic and flexible is needed.

We realise that all this is a mammoth task. There are important opportunities that can be seized to ensure that the next few decades of action on equalities are as important as the last few decades. The emerging discussions about a Single Equality Duty, a new equality principle and the concept of 'fairness' provide us with a chance to build on the successes of previous struggles but not be bound by them.

In summary, we have raised questions about the value of just using formal 'strands' in establishing diversity, equality and fighting discrimination. Strand-based or identity-based thinking and mobilisation has played an important role in relation to discrimination and been an important factor in promoting equalities in recent decades in the UK. But this sort of approach alone will not allow us to capture or respond to the diversity of people's lifestyles and aspirations in the 21st century. We have to find a balance in social policy between the individual and the group, and understand when we are answering the needs of each.

Put simply, 'You can't put me in a box'.

## Appendix: List of interviewees

Below is a list of the people we spoke to during the course of this research. Many of them have done and are doing wonderful things in the world of equalities. In the spirit of not wanting to pigeon-hole people and because they spoke to us in a personal capacity, we have not listed details of who they are and their institutional affiliations, but just their names. We are grateful for their time and their help. Of course the conclusions that we have drawn from their thoughts and ideas are the authors' responsibility alone.

- Monica Ali
- Zenna Atkins
- Baroness Jane Campbell
- Mat Fraser
- Sharron Hall
- Lee Jasper
- Nathan John
- Kamaljeet Jandu
- Andrew Kane
- Kate Mosse
- Jon Prashar
- Baroness Margaret Prosser
- Professor Shamit Saggar
- Sarah Veale
- Anne Watts

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