

Understanding Concerns about Community Relations

Paul Thomas, School of Education and Professional Development, University of Huddersfield, Joel Busher, University of Coventry, Graham Macklin, formerly University of Huddersfield, Michelle Rogerson and Kris Christmann (both Applied Criminology Centre, University of Huddersfield)

Abstract

Academic and political concern has increasingly focussed on the attitudes and dispositions of economically-marginalised, mainly white communities towards ethnic diversity and community cohesion. In particular, to what extent do extreme anti-minority protest groups, such as the English Defence League with their claims of increasing 'Islamification' within British society, speak for such broader white communities? This article presents and discusses headline findings from recent mixed methods case study research into such community attitudes and dispositions in two areas of West Yorkshire in northern England. The key findings indicate that whilst there is very little support for groups such as the EDL, their themes have significant resonance within wider white communities in the context of very weak local civil society structures. Attitudes towards ethnic diversity reflect the significant levels of ethnic segregation in some of the survey areas but also indicate a desire for improved ethnic relations and greater cross-community contact, albeit not through processes that are 'forced'.

Key words: multiculturalism; diversity; extremism; cohesion; white communities

The attitudes and dispositions of white majority communities towards immigration and growing ethnic diversity generally, and towards Muslim communities in particular, seems to be a growing challenge across western Europe, as the recent Pegida marches in Germany and the strong polling support for the Front Nationale in France seem to indicate. Such fears may only grow in the wake of the Paris shootings. This sense of resentment amongst sections of mainly white communities, particularly economically marginalised ones, has been a concern in Britain for some time, and this article offers an introduction to the headline findings from recent University of Huddersfield research in to attitudes within such communities. The research project 'Understandings Concerns about Community Relations' was developed by the University in partnership with two West Yorkshire local authorities. It has now led to separate research reports for [Kirklees](#) and [Calderdale](#). This article outlines the main conclusions and how we might understand them. It first discusses the political and theoretical context of the research before briefly outlining the research methodology. It then goes on to summarise key findings, particularly around the central issues of attitudes towards ethnic diversity and

cohesion, and towards anti-minority political protest groups such as the English Defence League.

Background to the Research

The research project was the latest development within the University's long-term research engagement with issues of multiculturalist policy and practice in the north of England. This has included how the post-2001 riots policy shift towards 'community cohesion' has been understood and implemented (Thomas, 2007; 2011a), how young people of different ethnic backgrounds in such racially-tense towns understand their ethnic identifications and how they experience 'cohesion' (Thomas and Sanderson, 2011; 2013), how we might understand groups like the EDL (Busher, 2013 a and b; 2015) and how the counter-terrorism policy of Prevent has impacted both on young Muslims and on wider programmes of community cohesion (Thomas, 2009, 2010, 2012). This research engagement has been built on dialogue and partnership with local authorities and other bodies responsible for implementing such policy agendas, and has often utilised the skills and experiences of front-line practitioners in gathering research data. The aim here has been research 'impact' – that research findings can contribute to better and more effective policy and practice around key social justice policy agendas. In this way, the research process discussed here, and the external funding from the local authorities that supported it, emerged naturally out of continued partnership discussions.

A key focus for this research was a longstanding sense that some predominantly white communities locally and nationally have expressed a sense of "unfairness" alongside ambivalence both to greater ethnic diversity and to policy measures designed to ensure greater equality and cohesion (Beider 2011; Open Society Foundations 2014). Such a sense of white unfairness is not unique to the UK, with similar dispositions identified in other European states, such as the Netherlands (Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2009). At its heart is a perception that multiculturalist policy measures have meant preferential treatment for minority ethnic communities at the expense of marginalised white communities, with such racialised grievance central to the 2001 northern riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford (Cantle, 2001; Thomas, 2003; 2011b). In conjunction with this there has been a "white backlash" (Hewitt, 2005) amongst some white young people, often from poor economic backgrounds, in response to anti-racist educational initiatives in schools and youth work. These measures have had positive impacts amongst many white young people but it must be acknowledged that they have not worked with some young people (Thomas, 2002). The post-2001 riots policy response of "community cohesion", based on the Cantle report (2001), acknowledged the reality of this sense of grievance and negative backlash in some white areas. It not only moved away from the problematic language of "multiculturalism" but more substantially sought to re-balance policy work towards an emphasis on

commonality, cross-community partnership and greater contact between people of different ethnic, faith and social backgrounds. Previous University of Huddersfield research on how community cohesion was actually being understood and implemented by youth and community workers in Oldham, Greater Manchester (Thomas, 2007; 2011a) showed that this was a re-naming and a re-balancing of multiculturalism, not its 'death'.

However, to date there is only limited evidence of marginalised white communities participating in community cohesion and integration work, or of more positive attitudes to ethnic diversity. Indeed, past University research in the towns of Oldham and Rochdale suggested that some white young people would favour even greater ethnic segregation than already exists (Thomas and Sanderson, 2013). Alongside this, the most mono-cultural areas of the country remain white ones, with some white people, particularly in economically marginalised areas, having very little opportunity to meet people of different backgrounds. Here, policy-makers need a better sense of both attitudes within such areas towards greater local diversity and cross-community contact, and of the local capacity to participate in cohesion work.

A further context for local policy attempts to develop community cohesion and integration work since 2001 has been one of greatly increased immigration from Eastern Europe that has rapidly altered the demographic make-up of some areas. Since 2008, the country has also experienced a very significant economic recession. What has also shaped the current context has been a recent wave of anti-minority, specifically anti-Muslim protest, much of which has centred on the activities of the English Defence League (EDL), a social movement group that since 2009 has staged street demonstrations in towns and cities across the UK as well as developing a significant online presence (Busher, 2015). While the EDL and most of its various offshoots have claimed to comprise peaceful protest groups and have taken a number of measures to 'police' their own demonstrations (Busher 2013a), these events have provided significant public order challenges and have added further stress to community relations, as shown by rallies held in the north Kirklees towns of Dewsbury and Batley in recent years. These mobilisations have highlighted the need to better understand how such groups are viewed within the sort of marginalised, mainly white communities that they claim to speak for, and to document how the cohesion and integration agendas are playing out in these communities.

Research Methodology

The University of Huddersfield research team was a cross-disciplinary one, consisting of Dr. Joel Busher (now University of Coventry) and Dr. Graham Macklin, both experts on far-right social movements and formerly of the Centre for Research in Social Sciences (School of Human and Health Sciences (HHS)); Michelle Rogerson and Kris Christmann, both criminologists with significant survey design experience, of the Applied Criminology Centre (HHS) and Professor Paul Thomas, an

educational sociologist interested in policy enactment (School of Education and Professional Development).

The project used a mixed methods design, combining survey-based quantitative methods with interview and focus group qualitative methods. This allowed the research team to understand a broad sweep of views on community relations and perceptions of the EDL within predominantly white areas, whilst at the same time undertaking a deeper exploration of the lived experience of local residents.

The household survey comprised 31 questions on five main themes:

- What they valued most about their locality and their town (e.g. Dewsbury/Huddersfield; Halifax/ Todmorden) as a place to live;
- The main challenges facing people in their locality, in their town and the UK;
- Community relations and cohesion;
- Civic participation and trust;
- Awareness of and attitudes towards anti-Muslim protest groups like the EDL.

The Kirklees survey sample comprised 434 responses and in neighbouring Calderdale we had a smaller sample (212 responses), providing an overall sample of 646 responses. The survey was administered face-to-face on people's doorsteps. In Kirklees, it was carried out across four research sites: three areas in north Kirklees and one in south Kirklees. The four areas were chosen by the research team in collaboration with Kirklees Council officers to reflect priority areas for the revised Kirklees Community Cohesion strategy, alongside a comparator area from the southern area of the authority. In Calderdale, it was carried out across three targeted research sites: Illingworth (North Halifax), Sowerby Bridge and Todmorden. The three areas were chosen by the research team in collaboration with Calderdale Council officers in order to provide a range of sites that provided a cross-section of predominantly white British neighbourhoods in Calderdale. Within each of the three areas, a targeted sample was used and so it is important to emphasise that this sample was **not** representative of the local authority areas as a whole, or of their electoral wards within which the samples were taken.

Across both area samples, 60% of respondents were female and 40% male. Although a good range of age groups were covered, the 65+ age group was slightly overrepresented. Most of the respondents were long term residents, with half having lived in the area for 20 years or more. The qualitative element of the research comprised 14 key informant interviews and twenty four focus group discussions. Key informants were selected purposively to ensure coverage of each of the research sites and representation from a range of different institutional stakeholders: the local authority, Police and schools/youth work. A minimum of three focus groups were held in each area (for the purpose of the qualitative component, one with young people aged approximately 16-20: in two of the areas a number of focus groups were held to effectively engage with young people), one with young adults (aged approximately 21-50), and one with older adults (aged 50+). The following topics were discussed: what people valued most about and the major challenges facing

Dewsbury is dying slowly (Young Adult).

Indeed, shortly after fieldwork was completed, the MacDonald's burger chain closed their Dewsbury outlet. The shops and market stalls that do still operate in Dewsbury Town centre are increasingly run by Asian proprietors and for some respondents these two realities have merged to create a racialised and negative perception of change:

Every shop is run by Asians now; all the shops are closing (Young Person).

(Dewsbury?) Asian... Disgusting...Place to avoid (Older Adult).

One result of this general decline was a shared perception among both young people themselves and older adults of a lack of safe spaces and places for young people to go to.

Another key 'place' finding that was relevant across the entire Kirklees and Calderdale research area was around the perceived weakness of civil society and leadership within white, especially economically marginalised, areas. This identified a leadership vacuum that could sometimes be filled by self-appointed individuals with far-right political agendas, and which otherwise left such communities very reliant on the role of ground-level local state professionals at a time of very challenging spending cuts. Most key informants and focus group participants were in agreement that white British communities don't have the same degree of organised community mobilization, communication and leadership structures as do Asian heritage communities:

Participant (male): *Their religion is a lot stronger than ours isn't it.*

Participant (female): *We are losing ours.*

Participant (male): *As we are losing ours you know the mosques are thriving.*
(Older adults, North Halifax)

In terms of speaking with people of authority, there is less of that in the white community because those particular leaders don't have as much buy-in, I suppose, from all the community (Kirklees Respondent 3).

You have so called community activists who push a right wing agenda and they're all heavily involved, they're the ones that try to get funding to take these young people on activities and they've tried to get xxxx built so they're actively involved, they're not only just portraying this negative message about Muslims...they're getting young people involved in activities, so they are doing some positive things... (Kirklees Respondent 5).

This suggests both that Anti-Minority protest group activists can gain credibility in the eyes of some local residents by championing local issues and that such a

'championing' role is possible in situations of weak local mainstream civil society structures and activity.

Attitudes to Anti-Minority Protests

In the survey and during the focus groups and interviews, participants were asked questions about their attitudes towards and experiences of contact with the EDL. Unsurprisingly, given the number of EDL rallies in Kirklees, recognition of the group here was high - most (63%) of the people who completed the survey had heard of the EDL. Those who said they had heard of the EDL were asked to complete a word association exercise. They were given 20 words (with a range of more positive, negative and neutral significations), and asked to select the words they thought most accurately described the EDL. There were three main findings from the combined survey, focus group and key informant interview analysis.

Firstly, there was only limited support and relatively little sympathy expressed for the EDL.

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents in Kirklees expressed broadly negative feelings towards the EDL. Only 13% of survey participants in the Kirklees sample expressed sympathetic views towards the EDL, a little under 21% of those who had heard of the EDL. In general, responses were dominated by words with clear negative significations such as "racist", "extremist", "violent", "dangerous", or "ill-informed". The most frequently chosen description of the EDL as 'anti-Muslim' was more ambiguous. Most respondents appeared to use it in conjunction with negative words, but some used it in conjunction with more positive words. This finding was supported by the focus group data. Most respondents were critical or dismissive of the EDL as an organisation. Much of this criticism centred on the aggressive reputation of the EDL, the potential for violence which the spectacle of street demonstrations and heavy policing carry, and the significant disruption these demonstrations cause to the wider community:

It's just causing trouble for our Town [...] it doesn't resolve anything [...] people who attend these demonstrations are not from here [...] and how much police resources and that they waste (Young Adult).

They just come bombing it and throwing stuff and wrecking the whole town centre which means that nobody can go out shopping and all the shops have to close down (Young Person).

Secondly, more sympathetic views towards the EDL were associated with low trust and hearing about the EDL through personal networks. When data for the combined Kirklees and Calderdale sample were analysed together, there were a number of variables that were statistically associated with people being more likely to express more sympathetic views towards the EDL (see Table 1 below). It is

important to emphasise that the data in Table 1 describe *statistical association* rather than causality. What we can see, however, and what is broadly in keeping with the findings of national survey data on EDL activists (Bartlett & Littler, 2011), is that more sympathetic attitudes towards the EDL are associated with particularly low levels of trust in public authorities, with being male and with a general dissatisfaction with where they live. Given that engagement with groups like the EDL often takes place through personal networks (Busher, 2015), the finding that greater sympathy with the EDL is positively associated with hearing about the group through friends (either offline or online) and negatively associated with hearing about the group via television, is also to be expected. The finding that there is a correlation between self-reported nationality as English rather than, for example, British, is also an interesting one and would appear to correlate with research that points to the creeping racialization and increasingly exclusive, rather than inclusive, nature of English identity (Thomas, 2011b).

Table 1:

Variables associated with views sympathetic to the EDL	Relative Influence	Statistical Significance
18-24		**
65+		**
Male		**
Self reported nationality: English		**
Trust in Police		**
Trust in Government		**
Trust in Council		*
Dissatisfaction with town as a place to live	2.899	*
Heard about the EDL through Friends		*
Heard about the EDL through Social Media		**
Heard about EDL through TV		**
Key		
Statistically negative relationship		
Statistically positive relationship		
Statistically significant (p<0.05)		*

Additionally, there were resonances of the EDL narrative, if not the tactics. Despite the negative perceptions of the EDL, a number of what might be called EDL themes or concerns did resonate with some survey and focus group participants, i.e. concerns that their voices were not listened to, that there was preferential treatment of people from BME backgrounds, and that changing demographics and immigration was contributing to changing their neighbourhoods in ways with which they were not entirely comfortable or to which they objected. It is worth noting, for example, that 19% of Kirklees respondents said they were 'highly likely' to sign a petition against a new mosque in their area, and 13%' quite likely' to sign, figures significantly higher than those relating to a petition against a new church in their area (3% and 2% respectively).

Attitudes towards ethnic diversity and attempts to build cohesion

As might be expected, a rather complicated picture emerges from the data on questions about contact and integration. The survey data indicates, broadly, positive support for increased cross-community contact and integration, whilst having more mixed views on the current extent and nature of such contact and integration. The survey utilised a standard question previously used by national government surveys such as the 'Place' Survey, around perceptions of how people from different ethnic groups get along locally. Whilst the data for Calderdale and for the small south Kirklees sample both produced more positive pictures of attitudes towards diversity and cohesion, the data from north Kirklees/Dewsbury is more challenging – a reflection of the targeted approach taken there to sampling. For instance, the results show that more than a quarter (26.8%) of Dewsbury respondents overall agreed either definitely or mostly that Dewsbury is a place where people from different ethnic backgrounds get on, while over a half (58.4%) disagreed either mostly or definitely. Very similar responses were given to the question of whether Dewsbury is a place where people from different religious backgrounds get on, with 55.9% disagreeing either mostly or strongly. In both cases, however, interpretation of these data is problematised by the large number of "not sure" responses (14.8% for ethnic differences and 17.7% for religious differences respectively) in Dewsbury.

However, these negative perceptions of current cross-community contact and relations in Dewsbury are balanced by responses to further questions. In response to the question of 'whether it is good that there are people of different ethnic backgrounds living in their towns', just over one half (52.1%) of Dewsbury respondents definitely or mostly agreed, and 28.5% respectively definitely or mostly disagreed. A similar commitment to and acceptance of diversity was shown in the next question about the presence of religious diversity in their local town. When asked whether it is good that there are people from different ethnic backgrounds, or

religious backgrounds, living in Dewsbury, on both questions, close to 20% of Dewsbury respondents answered 'Not Sure'. This may indicate respondents' reluctance to comment on such a charged issue, or even that people with negative feelings about diversity would rather say nothing at all. However, another way to interpret this response is that it is indicating both the need and a significant potential for greater community debate about and involvement in cohesion activity that demonstrates the positive benefits of diversity and contact.

This positive support for the existence of ethnic and religious diversity in their local town extended to support for there being more contact than there is now between people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. 52.4% of Dewsbury respondents definitely or mostly agreed that there should be more contact between people of different ethnic backgrounds. This support from a substantial portion of respondents for both the existence of local ethnic and religious diversity and for more contact between diverse communities casts a different light from the more negative perceptions of current community relations in Dewsbury and was supported by focus group data that highlighted the existence of micro level friendships and conviviality across ethnic divides. Together, our data demonstrates that there is an appetite for contact and dialogue amongst this significant portion of north Kirklees respondents, if policy and practice can support and encourage it in helpful, rather than unhelpful, ways.

On this issue of what policy and practice should do to encourage and support community cohesion and greater cross-community contact, research findings from across the two survey areas are somewhat contradictory. Here, residents want greater cohesion, as the discussion above indicates, but some do not want such contact to be 'forced'. For other respondents, this reality of significant divides means that there should be active programmes of community cohesion contact, such as 'school twinning' and that: *People need to be taught to mix with people* (Young Person). For many respondents, though, such cohesion work must avoid the perception of 'social engineering', of people being forced or manipulated in to contact:

Mixing? 'Yes, I think provided that they want it and it's not forced upon them, I think it's when it's forced upon them [...]' (Older Adult).

It just comes down to that fact of not being forced to it's our choice [...] you can't force groups of people to get together and enjoy themselves it has to happen naturally (Young Adult).

For some respondents, more work needs to be done with residents within their own communities to strengthen local participation and civil society organisations before cohesion work can be considered:

I do think that your white working class, however you want to describe it, those residents [...] before we actually start the cohesion work we need to actually provide some activities in that area to build trust otherwise cohesion is not going to work (Kirklees Respondent 2).

This is supported by academic evidence around 'contact theory' (Hewstone et al, 2007) that suggests people need to feel positive and confident about their own community and identity before they engage in positive contact with other communities.

Some other respondents identified the need to avoid 'tokenism' when cohesion activity is initiated:

A lot of projects that I've been involved with or I've seen have had some impact initially but it's about sustaining the impact, it's alright bringing white kids and Asian kids together and it might work but it's about keeping it gelled together (Kirklees Respondent 1).

At the same time, though, 'one off' events involving food and fun activities for children were seen as helpful, 'no pressure' forums for mixing and contact.

Concluding thoughts

Given the substantial concern amongst marginalised white communities that 'no one listens to us', this co-produced research project had important process benefits in that it demonstrated and acknowledged, both to the communities themselves and to key local policy-makers and practitioners, the need to better understand attitudes and dispositions within such communities. It has produced findings that are now being carefully considered by the two local authorities concerned (processes that the University research team remains involved in) and will directly be influencing the directions of future policy and practice regarding such marginalised, mainly white communities. The research team are now in the process of producing academic outputs based on the research findings and these will be detailed in a future issue of '*Identity Papers*'.

References

Bartlett, J. and M. Littler (2011). *Inside the EDL: populist politics in a digital age*. London: Demos.

Beider, H. (2011). *Community Cohesion: the views of white working-class communities*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Busher, J. (2013a). Grassroots activism in the English Defence League: discourse and public (dis)order. In M. Taylor, P. M. Currie and D. Holbrook (Eds.), *Extreme right-wing political violence and terrorism* (65–84). London: Bloomsbury.

Busher, J. (2013b). Anti-Muslim populism in the UK: The development of the English Defence League. *The changing faces of populism: systematic challengers in Europe and the U.S.* H. Giusto, D. Kitching and S. Rizzo (Eds.). Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 207–226.

Busher, J. (2015). *The making of anti-Muslim protest: grassroots activism in the English Defence League*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Cantle, T. (2001). *Community Cohesion: a report of the Independent Review Team*. London: Home Office.

Hewitt, R. (2005). *White backlash and the politics of multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hewstone, M., Tausch, N., Hughes, J. and Cairns, E. (2007). Prejudice, intergroup contact and identity: do neighbourhoods matter? In M. Wetherell, M. Lafleche and R. Berkley (Eds.) *Identity, ethnic diversity and community cohesion* (pp. 102–112). London: Sage.

Open Society Foundations (2014). *Europe's white working class communities: a report on six European Union cities*. New York: Open Society Foundations.

Sniderman, P. and Hagendoorn, L. (2009). *When ways of life collide: multiculturalism and its discontents in The Netherlands*. Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

Thomas, P. (2002). Youth work, racist behaviour and young people—Education or blame? *Scottish Journal of Youth Issues*, 4, 49–66.

Thomas, P. (2003). Young people, community cohesion, and the role of youth work in building social capital. *Youth and Policy*, 81, 21–43.

Thomas, P. (2007). Moving on from anti-racism? Understandings of 'community cohesion' held by youth workers. *Journal of Social Policy*, 36 (3), 435–455.

Thomas, P. (2009). Between two stools? The Government's Preventing Violent Extremism agenda. *The Political Quarterly*, 80 (2), 482–492. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-923X.2009.01985.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2009.01985.x)

Thomas, P. (2010). Failed and friendless—the government’s Preventing Violent Extremism agenda. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 12 (3), 442–458. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00422.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00422.x)

Thomas, P. (2011a). *Youth, multiculturalism and community cohesion*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, P. (2011b). All white? Englishness, ‘race’ and ethnic identities. In A. Aughey and C. Berberich, C. (Eds.), *These Englands: a conversation on national identity*, (pp. 75–93). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thomas, P. (2012). *Responding to the threat of violent extremism—failing to Prevent*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Thomas, P. and Sanderson, P. (2011). Unwilling citizens? Muslim young people and national identity. *Sociology*, 45 (6), 1028–1044.

Thomas, P. and Sanderson, P., (2013). Crossing the line? White young people and community cohesion. *Critical Social Policy*, 33 (1), 160–180.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/idp.2015.1167>

Article copyright: © 2015 Paul Thomas, Joel Busher, Graham Macklin, Michelle Rogerson, Kris Christmann. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

