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Ethnic desegregation and 'resegregation' in northern English schools

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Abstract

This article discusses findings on inter- and intra-ethnic friendship choices among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and white students within three schools characterised by varying ethnic composition and levels of diversity. Although many participants perceived ethnically diverse schools positively, students commonly described the majority of their friends and, in particular, close friends, as belonging to the same ethnic group. Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, although often homogenised as South Asian within academic studies on school segregation, were far more conscious of their own and the others' cultural distinction than discussed by literature on ethnic minority – and in particular – Muslim youth. The findings demonstrate how presenting ethnic minority concentrations as self-segregated or resegregated can mask the everyday realities of students, who navigate racism, whether subtle or explicit, and find safe and accepting spaces to express their ethnic identities. Through using students' own accounts of negotiating such challenges, this article adds to our understanding of young peoples' experiences of multi-ethnic school settings.

Keywords

Racism, homophily, friendship choice, ethnic minorities in schools, race riots

Introduction

In 2001, Oldham in England, together with other northern towns experienced what were described as the worst 'race riots' since 1985 (Miah, 2012). This resulted in government-commissioned reviews to investigate the cause of the disturbances in Bradford (Ouseley,

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2001), Oldham (Ritchies, 2001) and Burnley (Clarke, 2002) and culminated in the Cante Review (2001) (Halsall, 2013). They all highlighted the failure of communities to integrate, leading to 'parallel lives' and this resulted in a deliberate shift in policy for managing diversity, known as Community Cohesion (Cantle, 2001).

Oldham stood out as an interesting case study among the 'rioting' towns for several reasons. Halsall writes, since the early 1960s, Oldham, as a town, has had its fair share of social problems within the British Asian communities, such as unfit housing and social exclusion. Second, Oldham was one of the areas that experienced civil disturbances, or as the media coined it 'race riots'. Moreover, following these disturbances, Oldham was one of the first areas where Community Cohesion was introduced from both local and central government levels, therefore becoming the model on which subsequent statutory and voluntary sectors referred to (2013: 2).

This article revisits data collected in Oldham as a key intervention to encourage Community Cohesion was about to be implemented. In 2010, several of the towns' schools were to be merged and would create more equal shares of ethnic minority – namely, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage – and white British students. This would provide opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to mix and potentially form cross-group friendship ties. Yet, at the time of this study, anxieties were being reported by communities regarding the consequences for the preservation of white culture (Miah, 2012) and potential for increased racist violence (Makers, 2011).

Against the backdrop of the pending mergers, a study was conducted with Pakistani, Bangladeshi and white British heritage students in the town in order to unpick themes related to inter-ethnic mixing in schools. In doing so, the study explored the following research questions: How do students feel about the pending mergers and does this differ based on ethnic background? Do students have a preference for same ethnic group friendships in schools and, if so, why?

The article draws upon the theoretical discussion on homophily in framing the findings from the study. Homophily is described by Lawrence and Shah (2020: 513) as 'the tendency to associate with similar others' as a 'fundamental pattern underlying human relationships'; and more specifically a preference for friendships with those from a similar background (McPherson et al., 2001). In doing so, it examines the utility of policy discussions on the problematic nature of segregated communities as they continue to emerge (Casey, 2016; Sewell, 2021).

Although the data were collected a decade ago, the study occurred at a crucial policy 'cross-roads' within the United Kingdom, and therefore adds to our understanding of how communities experience such shifts. Furthermore, and perhaps even more crucially, the study highlighted the prevalence of racism as a lived experience among all student groups; however, racism was not given the same attention by other studies on the mergers (e.g. Al Ramiah et al., 2015; Hewstone et al., 2019). Despite this, high-profile debates on racism continue to surface, as seen with the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent publication of the Sewell Report (2021) which downplayed the impact of racism within British institutions – such as schools. The discussion provided within this article therefore remains relevant to our understanding on how communities, and young people in particular, experience their ethnic group identities against the backdrop of being the target of

government policies, while negotiating the lived realities of racism. Through using students' own accounts of negotiating such challenges, this article adds to our understanding of processes that take place in young peoples' experiences of multi-ethnic school settings.

Background

Oldham was once a thriving industrial hub and the largest textile producer in the world (Kalra, 2000). As a result, it attracted labourers from Ireland to work in its mills, many of whom eventually left for better opportunities elsewhere. Women were also employed in the mills; however, they were unable to work nightshifts due to legal restrictions in place at the time. At the end of the Second World War, Britain looked to its former colonies to recruit labourers who would work for less than their white British counterparts and who were willing to work through the night, significantly increasing production. This very act of employing South Asians to work in the night and white workers during the day was one of the first deliberate ways of segregating the new arrivals (Webster, 2003). As with the Irish, the predominately Pakistani (later joined by Bangladeshi) workers suffered racism from both employers and the towns' people. However, as Kalra (2000) points out, the Irish labourers worked in Oldham during a period of economic prosperity, whereas the South Asian men arrived as the industry was in decline. This led to large-scale unemployment of Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers, who – unable to secure subsequent long-term employment – found themselves at the margins of society.

Many had already purchased houses, due to the discriminatory nature of the social housing market (Ritchies, 2001; Webster, 1993). Yet, the only affordable houses were in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Oldham. These areas also experienced a 'white flight', as white residents moved out, resulting in concentrations of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis within certain pockets of the town. At the time of the riots, Oldham was ranked the 38th most deprived local authority (out of 354) in England (Ritchies, 2001). Furthermore, some wards within Oldham were shown to be even more socio-economically deprived than the town as a whole (Thomas and Sanderson, 2012). Although this deprivation impacts white communities in Oldham too, Webster (2003) points out that, in 2001, the four wards in which Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were most concentrated reported the highest proportion of unemployment in Oldham.

Residential concentration can also lead to concentration of ethnic groups in schools and, as aforementioned, this was highlighted as a problematic feature of Oldham (Miah, 2012). The Ritchie report (2001: 23) investigating the Oldham disturbances concluded that:

The present depth of segregation has been allowed to develop over a number of years. The situation has not been successfully addressed and consequently community and educational divides are now well entrenched in Oldham. If the problem is to be addressed on the scale that is required, there must be radical solutions backed up by the resources to see them to fruition. There will have to be a willingness by all to make changes.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy outcomes of the disturbances was the way they altered the public imagination regarding South Asian communities. Miah (2012) discusses how the fact that a sizable proportion of those taking part in the riots challenged stereotypes about young Asians being well behaved and law abiding compared to Black Caribbean youth (see e.g. Mac an Ghaill, 1988). This was quickly exacerbated by 9/11 just months later, posing an additional concern regarding Muslim youth in the west and their potential for supporting terrorism (Meer and Modood, 2009).

Although the rioting youth in neighbouring towns and cities – namely, Burnley, Leeds and Bradford – were also predominately South Asian heritage, what was noted in the case of Oldham was racist incidents reported to the police were more likely to contain a violent element compared with other local authorities from 1994 to 2001 (Webster, 2003). Furthermore, Thomas and Sanderson (2012) discuss how Oldham is among the few places in the country where whites are more likely to report being victims of racially motivated crimes. Although they argue for caution when interpreting this, what they do highlight is the ‘racialized nature of lived experience’ in the town (165).

The emphasis on segregation within northern towns like Oldham was asserted to be a consequence of poorer management of diversity compared to areas such as Leicester (Cantle, 2001), which also have residentially concentrated ethnic minority communities (Simpson and Finney, 2009). However, Amin (2002) argued that such assessments downplayed the economic profile of the northern towns, in which decades of deprivation had led to a feeling of competition between neighbourhoods and ethnic communities. For example, Miah (2012) described how ethnic minority and majority communities believed that others were recipients of more funding or better services, and that economic insecurities fuelled intergroup tensions. For authors like Kundnani (2001), viewing disturbances as a result of segregation simply added to racist views of South Asians by further problematizing them as failing to integrate, rather than addressing issues of long-standing structural racism which led to their residential concentration.

The school mergers

In 2001, white students made up more than 95% of the student body in six secondary schools, and ethnic minority students formed 77% and 97% in two of the town’s schools (Ritchies, 2001). Miah (2012) describes how both the Cantle and Ritchie reports presented such schools as reinforcing the separation of minority communities from mainstream white society, which contributed to the civil unrest. He discussed how this ‘encouraged Oldham to adopt policies that would lead to better ethnic integration and the desegregation of schools’ (28). Oldham was selected as one of 14 local authorities for a government-funded school improvement scheme, called ‘Building Schools for the Future’, which Miah (2012) critiqued as a deliberate attempt to integrate Muslim communities in particular, according to his readings of former education advisor, Sir Cyril Taylor’s writings on the creation of new school Academies.

Students from existing schools – which, in this case, were either largely white or Asian heritage – would merge to form new academies with ethnically diverse student bodies (Hope and Hoekstra, 2010). The rationale behind doing so was to desegregate schools to

create space within communities to cultivate intercultural exchange among young people from different ethnic backgrounds often residing in different neighbourhoods (Van Houtte and Stevens, 2009). This was believed to lead to greater intergroup understanding, resulting in an increase in positive attitudes across groups (Allport, 1979; Blau, 1974) and thus, in turn, better integrated and socially cohesive communities (Stark, 2011).

Several indicators are used to measure the success of such mixing within research on ethnic group relations. Inter-ethnic group friendships are one such measure, argued to be important for the creation of positive outcomes from intergroup contact (De Souza Briggs, 2007; Hamberger and Hewstone, 1997) and crucial for prejudice reduction between groups (Pettigrew, 1998). Stark (2011: 4) writes, 'It is generally assumed that having the opportunity to interact with classmates would eventually improve students' attitudes or lead to friendships'. However, several studies on ethnic friendship choices within schools in the United Kingdom have reported that young people demonstrate greater propensities for same ethnic friendships, even when they have the opportunity to form friendships with children from other backgrounds (Reynolds, 2007; Smith and Schneider, 2000; Smith and Tomlinson, 1989).

Furthermore, British studies are in keeping with earlier findings from the United States where cross-ethnic friendships are argued to be weaker in terms of levels of intimacy as well as longevity (Hallinan and Williams, 1987). Nonetheless, there is also evidence that intergroup friendships can also be influenced by the ethnic composition of schools in terms of both the proportions and number of groups (Britton, 2011; Quillian and Campbell, 2003).

Conversely, a body of literature, almost as extensive as these supporting positive outcomes of intergroup contact, shows how diversity within schools creates no difference in attitudes or may even lead to negative outcomes such as an increase in stereotypes about other groups and intergroup conflict (Agirdag et al., 2011). Therefore, the presence of other ethnic groups does not necessarily lead to intergroup friendships and positive attitudes and experiences about other communities.

In September 2010, the first of a series of planned changes to Oldham's schools began. In the same year, a group of academics commenced a study of the school mergers to investigate changes to attitudes and behaviours among students as a result of inter-ethnic group mixing. A series of survey and observational research was conducted over a 5-year period for the study (see Al Ramiah et al., 2015; Hewstone et al., 2019). As expected, initial results found that the quality of contact reported with participants' own ethnic groups was perceived more positively than the quality of contact with members of the other group (Hewstone et al., 2019). However, as the study progressed, the gap between reported differences in the perceived quality of cross-group contact narrowed. Furthermore, the number of respondents who reported having no friends from the other ethnic group decreased as the project went on, nevertheless the overall trend for same ethnic friendships continued (Hewstone et al., 2019).

Despite the merger producing a school with similar proportions of Asian heritage and white students, the study clearly demonstrated what it described as a 'resegregation' of students (see Schofield, 1997). Al Ramiah et al. (2015: 105) explain, 'our observational study showed multiple patterns of resegregation within a desegregated context in which

students from each ethnic group were numerically well represented and thus had the opportunity to mix'. Observations of the school dining hall estimated that only 5% of student groupings contained one or more members of a different ethnic group and, by the end of the study, students were still far more likely to report friends from the same ethnic group.

Al Ramiah et al. (2015) explored why students avoided forming cross-ethnic friendships, which they summarised as either a: (1) lack of interest in the other group; or (2) fear of rejection of the basis of ethnicity (100). The research concluded that, overall, students did not hold negative attitudes towards other groups and it was a lack of interest, rather than fear of rejection, that resulted in the low prevalence of cross-ethnic friendships in the merged school.

Although the study confirmed the prevalence of homophily, the reporting of friendship preferences among students was lacking in two significant ways. Firstly, the Asian heritage students from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds were grouped together in the discussion of the findings, which previous studies have rightly criticised as 'essentialising' South Asians as culturally homogeneous and reinforcing crude perceptions of student experiences (Crozier and Davies, 2008: 286).

Secondly, studies discuss how racism is significantly under-reported within school settings as many students come to accept it as a feature of daily life, nevertheless, reported or not, actual or perceived racism influences friendship choices (Hooijsma et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2007). Given the backdrop of ethnic tensions which led to the school merger under study, it is perhaps even more crucial to explore the topic of racism when attempting to understand apparent friendship preferences among young people in the locale.

Agreeing with concerns expressed by Stark that 'previous research may have overlooked some important consequences of mixing because it restricted itself to correlation data' (2011: 4), this study revisits the qualitative data collected with students in Oldham through ethnically matched interviewers at the start of the study in 2010. In doing so, it is possible to add to discussion on resegregation and prevalence of same ethnic friendship choices. Thus, this article provides an important addition to the findings described above through a more nuanced discussion of inter- and intra-ethnic friendship choices among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and white students within three schools in the city, characterised by varying ethnic compositions and levels of diversity.

Methodology

In summer 2010, almost 10 years after the riots, and towards the end of the last academic year before the mergers began, 84 students were interviewed by ethnically matched facilitators in three schools with different shares of ethnic composition. The schools were co-education comprehensive schools with students ranging from ages 11 to 16 years. School A was a majority white school (approximately 75%), with both Pakistani and Bangladeshi minority populations. School B was approximately 50% white British, with the remaining half of the school comprising mainly of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin students. School C was a majority (over 90%) ethnic minority school, with a dominant

Bangladeshi group and a minority Pakistani and white school population. School C was due to take part in a desegregation initiative in the following academic year.

The research employed a grounded theory approach to understand processes taking place as perceived by the actors involved (Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Focus groups are a particularly useful method for collecting interview data with children and adolescents. Gibson (2012) describes how group interviews can provide a more familiar setting and allow children to discuss topics in using language they would employ during everyday interaction with their peers. Furthermore, focus groups involve discussions which allow multiple views and experiences on a topic to be expressed. All participants were interviewed only with members of their own ethnic group present. Using semi-structured interview schedules, the ethnically matched facilitators presented students with a series of topics, including friendship. The focus group sizes averaged eight students per session and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and ethnicity-appropriate pseudonyms were used when quoting students to protect their anonymity. The facilitators and author of this article discussed the data to identify issues and organise findings into agreed themes.

The findings were also shared with a sample of teachers and students from Oldham to gain validation of the emerging themes. Existing academic literature and theoretical approaches on ethnic group friendships were used to expound the findings, which are presented in the next section.

Findings

In keeping with previous studies in the United Kingdom, same ethnicity friendships were commonplace within the three schools in this study. Yet, all groups, regardless of background, reported valuing similar characteristics in friends. When asked what was important to them in friendships, the most common attributes listed were loyalty, trustworthiness, having things in common, being perceived as a good or kind person and avoiding deviant behaviour (such as drug abuse and criminal activity). Participants from all three ethnic backgrounds recognised that other groups also possessed characteristics they value in friends. The majority of students clearly expressed their openness towards friendships with students from other ethnic groups. Yet most students described having largely same ethnic friendships and this was especially true for close or best friends, echoing other studies (Reynolds, 2007; Thelamour et al., 2019).

Students discussed commonality, familiarity, being understood and being embedded within existing wider social networks and communities as core explanations for friendships with children of the same ethnic group. However, it was also evident that students from all backgrounds believed that racism was a feature within wider society and that experiencing racism from a member of another ethnic group would act as a deterrent in forming friendships as described in earlier literature (Agirdag et al., 2011; Vervoort et al., 2010).

School choices and ethnic composition

The findings demonstrated that ethnic minority respondents were not averse to diverse schools both in theory and in reality, which challenges the perception on self-segregation.

When asked about school composition, the consensus across groups was that students were, at the very minimum, willing to tolerate the presence of other ethnic groups within their schools.

Geographical areas in which students live greatly influences the secondary school they attend as many families opt for a school closest to their neighbourhood. As a result, student populations within schools often reflect the ethnic composition of their surrounding neighbourhoods. A number of Bangladeshi students at the majority Bangladeshi heritage School C – due to be merged with the largely white school – discussed being open to a more diverse setting. However, most of the interviewees described being very comfortable at their school as it currently was and their main criticism was poor facilities, rather than its ethnic composition.

Bangladeshi students who attended the already mixed Schools A and B also described perceived structural inequalities when discussing School C, indicating its reputation within Oldham's Bangladeshi community as a neglected inner-city school. Yet the reputation of the majority Bangladeshi School C as being fraught with structural problems was discussed by all Bangladeshi focus groups against the backdrop of the available school options in the city, among which were majority white schools. The latter were described as having potentially better facilities but came with the risk of racism. Students therefore described both options – a majority white or majority Bangladeshi school – as having disadvantages for Bangladeshi students at School B, as illustrated in the quote below:

Dilwar: School [majority white] is racist, and [School C] is just full of Asians and just a mess...

Forhad: And there's no other schools close by, there's just three...

Interviewer: I'm going to [School C] tomorrow to do another group like this actually...

Dilwar: That's a mess.

Interviewer: That's a mess is it? Why's it a mess, tell me about it...

Homaira: It's just got drugs, gangs, only one or two English [white] people...

Anwara: They're all just fighting.

Alea: There's just fights and things like that – it's old and broken.

[Discussion about great facilities at School B]

Interviewers: And so your parents didn't really have any influence in making you decide whether you should come here; you all pretty much picked the place yourselves?

Dilwar: There wasn't really a 'pick' – this is the only one that's half decent. (Mixed gender Bangladeshi heritage Students, School B)

The students here described choosing their current school based on reputation and facilities over same ethnic group population. They also rejected the majority white school

due to a fear of racism (discussed later) and therefore recognised that their options were limited based on facilities and safety.

A number of the Pakistani participants from all three schools expressed similar opinions about the town's majority Pakistani school (not included in the study). Even the Pakistani students at Schools A and C, who expressed discontent about their smaller numbers in these schools, had mixed feelings about attending the majority Pakistani school. A more optimal solution for these students was a larger Pakistani student population in their present school, resulting in more equal proportions of ethnic groups.

There was a small minority of less than 5% white students attending the majority Bangladeshi School C. White students interviewed at this school described being unhappy, but this was discussed in terms of their minority status rather than the facilities. Neither the white students nor their parents had chosen School C but rather been allocated a place by the local authority. The white students at School C reported bullying inside of school by Bangladeshi students and outside of school by white peers in their neighbourhoods for attending what was described as a 'Paki' school.

Therefore, we found that ethnic minority respondents were not averse to attending ethnically diverse schools and there were clearly instances where students rejected schools which were almost entirely made up of the same ethnic group. However, the pending mergers were discussed in a very different light. There was widespread anxiety about the potential conflict and expected increase in racism as a result of the mergers, echoing findings from earlier studies (see [Hope and Hoekstra, 2010](#)). The following quote from a focus group with Pakistani students at School C illustrates the anxiety:

Imran: It's [the merged school] going to an academy, there are going to be a lot of fights.

Waqar: People say they're not going to but it will be loads of fighting.

Imran: Too much.

Iesa: There's going to be bare [many] Goray [whites] in there.

Interviewer: Ah are you moving to [white school]?

Iesa: Yeh.

Hamza: We're guna get jumped.

Interviewer: Do you think?

[multiple respondents]: Yeh (Male Pakistani heritage students, School C)

Interestingly, lack of opportunity to befriend students from other ethnic groups was only expressed by Bangladeshis at School C, who were perhaps comfortable enough in their majority group status – as the numerically dominant group at the school. Respondents in School B had the most opportunity for cross-ethnic friendships, yet even within the most desegregated school in the study, there were interventions in place to encourage greater inter-ethnic mixing among the student body. One such intervention was the use of seating plans during lessons. Here teachers decided where students would sit in

the classroom in an attempt to avoid ethnic clustering and encourage greater intergroup exchange. Despite the interventions, students continued to congregate into same ethnic groups during breaks and in the dining hall at lunchtime (as also observed in the merged school by [Al Ramiah et al., 2015](#)).

This was discussed in one of the focus groups:

Interviewer: So in classes do you sit next to who you want to?

[Multiple respondents]: No.

Shamsa: Even though they have a seating plan, if a Christian [white student] wants to sit near another Christian and that they just budge up.

Afreen: You have friends [from another ethnic group] and you be close to them in lessons but as soon as the lessons finished they run off with their other friends and don't want to know.
(Female Pakistani heritage students, School B)

The above discussion indicated how students who would inevitably choose to re-join their friends despite efforts on the part of teachers to encourage mixing.

Cross-ethnicity friendships

The facilitators asked students about their experience of cross-ethnic friendships and, in most cases, they were described as acquaintances rather than friends, who would chat in passing or add each other on social media. However, there were students who joined in with other ethnic friendship groupings in their schools:

Laura: I chill with Asians, I'm the only white in my group. It's harder in what you say and do because of their religion and stuff but other than that...

Interviewer: Does that get easier with time?

Laura: Yeh you get used to it.

Interviewer: How about the boys?

Joel: Erm, I have a few Asian friends...

Simon: Yeh.

Stephan: But we tend to stay in our own groups though. (Mixed gender White students, School B)

School A with its majority white student population did demonstrate how ethnic composition within a setting can influence cross-ethnic group formations. Here both the Pakistani and Bangladeshi students were minorities who, combined, formed less than 25% of the school population within a majority white school. The two minority groups reported merging together due to the scarcity of students from the same ethnic

backgrounds as the quote below from a focus group with male Bangladeshi students at School A illustrates:

Rupon: All of us Bungis [Bengalis] we just stay in one place [in school] we just chill there.

Interviewer: Is there anyone other than Bengalis in your group?

Arif: A few Pakistanis.

Hossain: We include them yeh, they're alright.

Arif: They used to chill on another side [of the dining hall] but now I don't know how it happened I think cos there's a few of them. In my year we've only got three Pakistani people.

Anveer: And in mine there's only one.

Hossain: So they might feel a bit left out. (Male Bangladeshi Students, School A)

The merging of Pakistani and Bangladeshi friendship groups is in keeping with [Blau's \(1974\)](#) work in which he argues that, while there is a preference to associate with members of one's own ethnic group, in the absence of group members, individuals would rather ally with members of other minority groups than with no one at all.

However, in another focus group discussion, the students described how, in the absence of large numbers of Pakistani students in the majority Bangladeshi School C, the Pakistani students did not join friendship groups with the dominant Bangladeshi group but remained largely separate outside of the classroom. Furthermore, they did not describe seeking out white students to merge friendship groups with either, as another numerical minority group in their school. Instead, the Pakistanis students from different year groups would 'chill' together outside of lessons, formed across age/year group friendships. However, there were discussions of students who had no co-ethnic group members at the school being welcomed into the Pakistani group. During one focus group, the Pakistani students at School C mentioned a Somali friend, an Arab friend and becoming good friends with an African Christian.

Similar findings were described in Reynolds' study of Caribbean students in which she writes, 'in largely mono-ethnic provincial areas they [Caribbean students] often felt isolated and alienated from their white peers, and one strategy to cope with the situation was to actively seek out friendships with other Black and minority ethnic students' (2007: 391). Thus, we found same ethnic friendship groups among Bangladeshi and Pakistani students; however, where students were in a minority, they did describe merging friendship clusters, or including other, non-white students within their groups.

Commonality

We asked participants to describe commonalities and differences between the three dominant communities in the town. Some students in the study discussed common perceptions about other ethnic groups, as well as being aware of others' views about their own group. Here we found examples of stereotypes such as language and cultural symbols

like food and clothes. An awareness of being judged on the basis of cultural norms was discussed as increasing the appeal of same ethnic friendships, rather than resulting in regular conflict between groups.

Discussion with Pakistani students on the differences between their community and Bangladeshis focused on items such as food, in this case fish or paan (a type of chewable tobacco leaf) and traditional dress, namely, sarees and how they were un-Islamic compared to Pakistani dress, due to women exposing their midriff. In addition, Bangladeshis were discussed unfavourably by some Pakistani students for frequently speaking Bengali in school. The most common statements made by Pakistani students regarding their differences with white people were in respect of alcohol consumption, lack of belief in God and anti-social and racist behaviour.

Turning to Bangladeshi views about Pakistani students, religion and being an ethnic minority were the most frequently mentioned commonalities between the two. However, it was clear some Bangladeshi students felt Pakistanis had a superiority complex and were 'snobby' towards them. There were also conversations among male students in approximately half of the focus groups about how Pakistani boys believed they were physically tougher or 'harder' than Bangladeshis and how this can occasionally result in rifts.

Interestingly, despite less exposure to the white community, Bangladeshi students in School C discussed far more points of commonality with white people, than the Bangladeshi students in School A (majority white) and School B (approximately 50% white) who had more interaction with white students than their peers in School C. This finding supports Bakker and colleagues' (2007) study who write, 'some children do not have a single friend from another ethnic group but still have positive attitudes [towards them]' (in Stark, 2011: 3). There were also fewer reports of racism by Bangladeshi students at School C and this was clearly a result of less opportunity for such experiences both at school but also within their majority Bangladeshi residential areas. In Schools A and B, several Bangladeshi students echoed the opinions of Pakistani students on the town's white community being racist and, as discussed in the next section, racism was believed to be prevalent.

Throughout the course of the focus groups, white students' perceptions regarding the two Asian groups were expressed. These were largely in relation to feeling apprehensive or threatened by large groups of South Asians, particularly 'gangs', and opinions about what the Asian communities had contributed to Oldham. The following statement demonstrates a distortion regarding the size of the Asian population, which comprised just over 17% of residents in the town at the time (Office for National Statistics, 2012).

Interviewer: So do you think other groups think the same way about Oldham?

Emily: Don't know.

James: I think they would be proud they have built a community and there are more Asians than whites so I think they would be proud of that. (Mixed gender White students, School A)

Interviewer: You said about sending all the Asians back, do people see that as racist?

Michael: But it's only for people claiming [social] benefits and not working.

David: But you have the stereotype of people coming here getting benefits and then having a mansion in Pakistan, and they say Asian families are having bigger families to get benefits.
(Mixed gender White Students, School B)

Frequently listed differences by white students and Asian students involved religion, as well as obvious markers such as skin colour. Religion was discussed in terms of different lifestyle choices among ethnic groups, particularly in relation to drinking, socialising and freedom.

Interviewer: So what way are you similar or different to other groups in Oldham?

Amy: I think Asians are a lot stricter with the way they live.

Tom: With alcohol and things...

Amy: The way they dress and they have to marry someone of the same race.

Catherine: I think we have a lot more freedom than they do and I feel quite sorry for them that they can't just do what they want. (Mixed gender White students, School A)

Perceptions of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students as having less freedom were also discussed in relation to teacher attitudes toward students from the two ethnic backgrounds in their study of schools in the North-East of England (Crozier and Davies, 2008). Earlier studies also highlight how perceived ridicule of cultural symbols such as language, food and dress can lead children to internalise such derision or distance themselves from other groups who they believe to hold such views, contributing to students choosing to remain in a same ethnic comfort zone (Ghuman, 2002; Salway, 2008; Smith and Tomlinson, 1989).

Many white students also reported feeling uncomfortable with languages other than English being spoken in their presence, creating tension between whites and both Asian groups, regardless of who was speaking what 'foreign' language. Several studies describe the benefit of inter-ethnic mixing in schools for immigrant children and their ability to learn the host countries' language (Stark, 2011) and thereby participate more fully in society through their entry into the labour market (Putnam, 2000). However, the students in our study spoke fluent English and choosing to speak their mother tongue in school was not a necessity but a core part of their identity. As Ghuman explains, 'It is clear from the literature in the field that for many young people their community languages fulfil a symbolic need rather than a functional one' (2002: 56). For many of the students we spoke to, eating fish and rice, rather than roti, or wearing a shalwar kameez (traditional Pakistani tunic and trousers) rather than a saree or a skirt, not drinking alcohol, and switching codes between Punjabi and English or Bengali and English, without being perceived as weird, inferior or deviant, was an important part of their friendships with students from the same ethnic heritage. Supporting this, Arweck's (2017) study of an ethnically diverse school in London described how, 'likeness or sameness created spaces where this identity had a place and was validated' (2017: 146).

Bifulco et al. (2008: 5) describe this as neutral ethnocentrism explained as a 'desire to interact with those similar to oneself'. Initially, Clark in his study of residential

segregation explained what was described as a universal ‘preference for living and socialising with neighbours of similar class and interest’ (1991: 17). Krysan and Reynolds further defined the theory by describing neutral ethnocentrism as ‘benign and positive feelings towards one’s own race’ emphasising ‘feelings towards one’s own group rather than feelings towards the out-group’ (2002: 941).

The general position of most students in our study when articulating why they formed same ethnic friendships can be described as neutral ethnocentrism, in keeping with Al Ramiah et al.’s (2015) explanation of homophily; however, as discussed in the next section, this can go beyond a ‘neutral’ position of preference for commonality but also shown to be strongly influenced by racism.

Racism

Students from all three ethnic groups described experiences of colour racism. Accounts ranged from implicit racism in the form of ‘funny looks’ or perceived exclusion from activities, to explicit harassment and physical violence. The latter was most commonly described by ethnic minority students living in or attending schools in majority white areas, as illustrated by Bangladeshi students in majority white School A:

Rafique: It can be a bit scary cos in some areas [in school] there are some smokers and it’s scary when you go past them. The teachers try budging them away but they keep doing it.

Asadullah: Yeh, my friend walked past and they were smoking and they started shouting ‘Paki! Paki!’ and he just laughed.

Interviewer: Well it’s good he could laugh about it?

Rafique: He said to me yeh why did they call me a Paki, I’m not even a Paki!

Fardin: It’s stupid, why do they call Bengalis Pakis?

Rakib: They wouldn’t like it if we call them ‘white’ something. (Male Bangladesh heritage students, School A)

Personal experiences of racism influenced how students perceived the perpetrator’s ethnic group as well as reinforcing their ethnic ties with their own group, as discussed in other studies such as Hooijsma et al. (2019). The following discussion among white participants describes the complexity of contact and interaction between groups and its impact on opinions of other groups:

Interviewer: What do you think would help to stop racism?

Amy: Exposure to more differences makes people more aware of it and if people are more aware of it then people are less racist. Coz like Oldham is a melting pot of different people and I think people from Oldham are more accepting than people from Rochdale for example.

Interviewer: Is that mainly in your generation?

Catherine: Yeh, if you speak to old people they are not very PC [politically correct] and are quite racist but they grew up in a time when there was no coloured people and it came quite quickly and they had to come to terms with it and they are quite opinionated.

Interviewer: So are you saying exposure reduces racism?

Amy: Yeh, definitely [others agree].

Interviewer: So what about negative experiences with other races how does that affect your views?

Tom: Well one bad experience has done it for me and that's not that good really, but I dunno you hear about all these racist things all the time and it does affect your views.

Interviewer: If you saw racism happening, would you say anything?

Josh: Keep it to yourself because if they are in a big gang they might beat you up. They go over the top.

Interviewer: Who?

Martina: Like Bengalis and Pakistanis they get big groups together...

Catherine: White people do too!

Josh: I know but most of the time it's them because we might get gangs but we don't make them bigger, they do. White people don't get as much as them, they go over the top.

Interviewer: OK, so once they have a gang what do they do then?

Martina: They hit you or say they come and jump you.

Interviewer: Has that happened to you?

Martina: No, but...

Tom: It happened to two of my friends. They were walking home and then some [Asian] people jumped out on them even though they had done nothing.

Interviewer: How would that affect your views on their group, would it give you a negative perception?

Josh: Yeh.

Interviewer: Has it happened to any of your friends?

[multiple respondents]: Yeh.

Tom: They were my friends. (Mixed gender White students, School A)

This discussion took place among white students who were the numerical majority and where the Pakistani and Bangladeshi students they describe formed a minority comprising less than a quarter of the total school population.

There were similar accounts of Bangladeshi and Pakistani students' experiences of racism resulting in a distancing from children from the perpetrator group. This finding echoes [Britton's \(2011\)](#) who argued that prejudice and intergroup conflict reduce the attractiveness of potential friends from other groups, which preserves an ethnic social hierarchy, even in desegregated schools. However, in our study, students also described another response to racism, which took the form of retaliation or revenge. Students from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds discussed how whites were mostly 'jumped' in defence or for revenge.

Juel: He [a white student] wrote something on the board about Islam and he got jumped by Bengalis for it. (Male Bangladeshi heritage student, School A)

Amjid: Yeh, you know what happened? My older brother – he got jumped by Goray [white people] and they had a piece of wood and they smacked him with it. So after that a couple of years later he saw that same guy in college and he went up to him with a couple of mates and he broke his jaw. (Male Pakistani heritage student, School A)

Group attacks of individuals or 'jumping' as it was referred to by participants was described by all groups. Although there were numerous references to jumping, it is unclear how often these actually occur. The descriptions of retaliation for racist attacks are in keeping with reports by youth on the cause of the 2001 protests, which were discussed as a response to far-right racism and threats of violence, rather than young South Asian men failing to integrate or undergoing identity crises ([Kundnani, 2001](#); [Miah, 2012](#)). However, reported incidents of racially motivated violence by all groups – as illustrated by descriptions of being jumped – demonstrate how common this racialized experience of living in Oldham is for young people of all backgrounds, supported by previous studies ([Thomas and Sanderson, 2012](#); [Webster, 1993, 2003](#)).

[Webster \(2003\)](#) highlighted similar findings discussed in this section. His analysis of youth anxieties regarding avoiding certain areas of Oldham, based on perceptions of racism, were supported by actual reported incidents taking place within them. In other words, perceptions of neighbourhoods being hostile to certain groups were found to be a reality for many residents of Oldham. One participant described such an incident when living in a predominately white area:

I used to live in Shaw yeh, and some guys across the street spray painted 'white power' on my garage door. (Male Pakistani heritage student, School A)

As aforementioned, Oldham's ethnic communities were residentially concentrated at the time of the study, and this continues to be the case based on the last Census figures. Although the Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents have 'spread out' into neighbouring wards, as they increase in their share of the towns' population, they remain concentrated as communities. Given that perceptions of racist areas were closely mapped against actual experiences of racist incidents avoiding white wards is understandable. [Webster \(2003: 110\)](#) described how, 'Although both white and Asian young people reported high levels of

worry about crime and becoming victims of crime, Asian young people were particularly worried. Most marked was a lack of mobility and movement of Asians in terms of going out compared to whites’.

What appeared from the discussions with young people is that the town was viewed along racialized lines, as noted by others when describing perceived ‘no-go’ areas. This is relevant for contextualising the anxieties presented here regarding the mergers, particularly in light of those schools that were to be rehomed in white neighbourhoods (Miah, 2012). Not only did the idea of greater inter-ethnic mixing create concerns among students, but white parents also expressed their apprehension towards the presence of larger numbers of Muslim students entering their neighbourhoods, with public debates printed in local newspapers stating that some white parents would relocate in response to this ‘forced integration’ (see Miah, 2012: 34–35).

In addition to colour racism, Islamophobia was described by Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage students as a pervasive feature of wider society. White students in the study also demonstrated an awareness that both Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were Muslims and some described Islam’s association with terrorism in mainstream media and culture.

Therefore, within the focus groups, racism was discussed as clearly influencing cross-ethnic friendship formations due to perceived rejection by, or avoidance of, a group, as well as retaliation for racism. Against this backdrop, peer support from same ethnic friendships were also discussed as providing safety and protection, as the following focus group with Pakistani participants at the majority white School A illustrates:

Interviewer: Why do you think it’s important that your friends are from the same group?

Ayesha: It’s important cos you get along more with them.

Hafsa: It is important cos you can talk in your own language and dis other people.

Danish: Back up for fights.

Anjum: That’s Oldham [laughs]. (Mixed gender Pakistani heritage students, School A)

‘Back up’ was described as a form of group support against victimisation and racist bullying. Both providing and receiving support in the form of back up is an explicit demonstration of commitment to group safety, which goes beyond homophily. Membership within same ethnic friendship groups can provide students with positive outcomes in terms of acceptance of students’ cultural identity but also allows peer support against racist bullying and violence.

Discussion

Students generally discussed a greater propensity for same ethnic friendships based on commonality and familiarity, in keeping with the studies discussed above, framed here as homophily (Al Ramiah et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2001) and neutral ethnocentrism (Bifulco et al., 2008; Krysan and Reynolds, 2002).

Research exploring ethnic composition in schools has found that ethnic minority students are more likely to experience racism and bullying as the relative numbers of white students grow. For example, a study by [Agirdag and colleagues \(2011\)](#) found fewer cases of peer victimisation for ethnic minority students who attended schools with higher proportions of the same group. In contrast, levels of peer victimisation did not increase for white students as their proportions within schools decreased. A study by [Vervoort and colleagues \(2010\)](#) demonstrated how negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities grew as their numbers increased within majority white schools. White students also described an increase in positive feelings towards their own group as a result of the growing ethnic minority populations. Their findings are in keeping with earlier studies on ethnic competition theory. Such studies suggest that ethnic minority students are more likely to face hostility than their white peers as school populations alter.

This is an important consideration for why resegregation may occur. Given the findings on ‘jumping’ and discussion on retaliation to racist violence in our study, even subtle or perceived rises in racism as a result of changing ethnic composition could well lead to a greater prevalence of same ethnic friendships, not less.

As described, participants were not opposed to being within diverse school settings and many ethnic minority students actively chose to attend such schools over the majority Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage schools in the city. In light of these findings, this article argues that same ethnic friendship groups observed in schools are perhaps more accurately understood as self-congregation, rather than self-segregation or resegregation – as they are commonly framed in academic and policy discourse (see, e.g. [Casey, 2016](#); [Hewstone et al., 2019](#)). [Kalra and Kapoor \(2009: 1397\)](#) elaborate on this when examining the use of segregation as a conceptual tool to develop policy, ‘the notion of segregation in its current application in British social policy confuses rather than illuminates social processes’.

This article argues that, in understanding the presence of homophily as a social process as described by [Kalra and Kapoor](#), its context is important. This includes grounding current experiences of young people in the historical realities of racist housing markets, the decline of industries leading to mass unemployment and lack of opportunities for social and residential mobility; and within a school’s setting – two generations post migration – the congregation of students in relation to perceived commonality and access to peer support. Within discourse on ethnic minorities in Britain, by presenting this process of self-congregation as self-segregation, has contributed to portraying minority communities – and Muslims in particular – as unwilling to integrate into mainstream society ([Meer and Modood, 2009](#); [Miah, 2015](#)).

Based on the findings from this research, presentations of same ethnic friendship groups in studies exploring mixing in schools need to be mindful about pathologizing ethnic minority children’s choices and thus, ethnic homophily is not necessarily the same resegregating. The danger of reporting huddles of students in school dining halls as self-segregated interprets them as disengaged with the majority, rather than normal activity for young people clustering together with students sharing similar backgrounds and experiences. This remains just as relevant for discussions regarding Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities today. In the recent Sewell Report ([2021: 44](#)), during discussion on the

socio-economic position of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, discourse on self-segregation remained as dominant as it did in 2010; the report states, 'One reason for this issue [deprivation] being most pronounced among people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic backgrounds is that they tend to live somewhat more separately from the mainstream, both physically and in terms of social norms, and are two of the groups most likely to bring in spouses from their ancestral homes, especially the Pakistani group'.

The findings from the study should not lead us to interpret diversity as inconsequential for the experiences of young people; or that desegregation initiatives need to be declared redundant. Having opportunities to befriend students from other groups in school may well result in an increase of inter-ethnic friendships as reported by Hewstone et al. (2019). Furthermore, studies measuring the impact of the mergers on attitude change may provide insight about their success as interventions for prejudice reduction or the converse – both are important for understanding what is described by the literature as resegregation. Thomas' (2006) fieldwork with youth workers in Oldham engaged in community cohesion initiatives also provided examples of positive exchange. However, interestingly, rivalry between white youth from different neighbourhoods was also noted as a reason for conflicts, reminding us that a greater exploration of geographical differences (see Webster, 2003) as well as class (Thomas and Sanderson, 2012) is important for understanding inter-community dynamics, but which were not possible to engage within the scope of this particular study.

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