



**Discussion Paper**

**Does diversity in society inevitably lead to a rise in xenophobia among children and young people?**

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Across Europe, and in the context of a post-BREXIT situation, society is having to accommodate to large numbers of people from diverse cultures. There is a reported increase in xenophobic incidents, bullying and social exclusion, indicating that diversity runs the risk of intolerance and prejudice. This is played out in all manner of social situations in schools and universities, in the community and in the workplace. This discussion paper, written by three U.K. Social Scientists representing the disciplines of psychology, criminology, education and sociology, focuses on the legal and moral aspects of the issue as well as on interventions that promote tolerance and xenophilia in a range of social contexts. It concludes with recommendations to social scientists in all European countries to enter the debate and carry out research in this challenging and highly topical field.

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**Diversity in society**

At a time of mass movements of people from war-torn and economically-deprived countries to Europe, during a period of economic austerity and uncertainty, caused by a global financial downturn, the issue of diversity is high on the political agenda. In this discussion paper, we, as UK academics, are using the UK as a case study, post-BREXIT (the UK's decision to leave the European Union). However, in this post-BREXIT context, we

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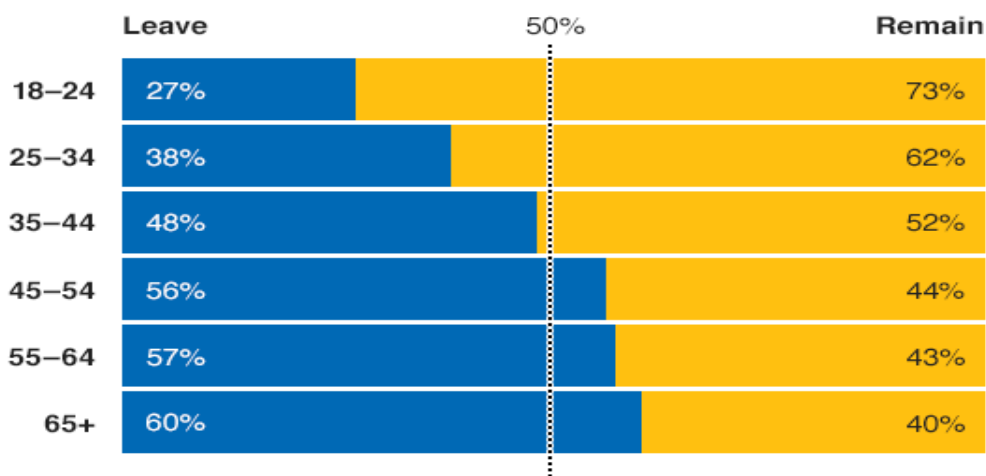
are aware of the implications across Europe where the same issues are currently the subject of fierce debates. Many questions are being asked. Notably, is the concept and very existence of the European Union still relevant? Is it still worthwhile and viable to be an active member state? This current tide of thinking is being met by a number of clashes, disturbances and civil unrest. Nonetheless, it provides the backdrop to our conceptual framework for this piece.

Since 2004, the UK population has grown steadily by around 250,000 each year, with migration contributing greatly to this figure due to instability in Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. These predictions indicate an increase of 8 million by 2020. The incomers tend to be young (between 20 and 40 years); 25% of live births in 2014 were born to women from outside the UK. A large number of refugee children are unaccompanied. It is impossible to give absolutely accurate figures but one estimate indicates that around 24% of minors are travelling without their parents and, understandably, many of these children are traumatised and so need access to child and adolescent mental health services. Furthermore, many need physical health care treatment due to malnutrition, injuries and dehydration (Ramel, Taljemark, Lindgren, Johansson, 2015).

### Brexit Referendum 2016

The 2016 UK referendum on whether to leave or remain in the European Union (EU) divided the nation with just over half voting to leave. As shown in Figure 1, younger people were more likely to vote for ‘remain’ than older people, with 73% of 18-24-year-olds voting to remain. Many of these younger people reported feeling angry that the ‘leave’ campaign appeared to gamble with their future. There were also marked regional differences with the percentage of ‘remainers’ being highest in London, Scotland and Northern Ireland while the percentage of ‘leavers’ was highest in the North East of England, the West Midlands, Wales and Cornwall, a phenomenon which, it could be argued, was linked to poverty, deprivation and the decline of industry in these areas.

**How different age groups voted**



Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls



**Figure 1. The EU Referendum in the UK**

The NatCen Panel post-referendum survey (Swales, 2016) found that the traditional left- right split was less important than people's position on social values, that is on the 'libertarian-authoritarian' scale. The data gathered from this survey indicated that "leavers" were most predominant in three groups: the economically deprived, affluent Eurosceptics and older working class people. One of the conclusions was that: "The Leave victory was not about demographics alone though it is clear that age, levels of education, income and newspaper readership are all related to the likelihood of voting Leave. Matters of identity were equally if not more strongly associated with the Leave vote - particularly feelings of national identity and sense of change over time." (Swales, 2016, p. 13). The reasons given by 'leavers' are confirmed by US researchers (e.g. Hochschild, 2017) in studies of the indigenous white population (especially in more impoverished areas) who document feelings of being 'strangers in their own land', perceptions of exclusion from wealth and employment in a global economy, and a strong sense that mainstream political parties on the left and the right have marginalised them and failed to listen to their views. Indeed, the populist 'reclaim the nation' talks that were used during the Brexit campaign echoed a similar rhetoric to those used by Donald Trump in his Presidential Campaign. Such claims to make nations great again by prioritizing native citizens and somehow reclaiming a 'lost territory' gained momentum. Thus, such feelings of national pride, are not, and were not, unique to the Brexit situation, but reflect a shift in global political ideas. Furthermore, studies have shown that across Europe, people may feel that their national identity and culture is being eroded by the high level of immigration which is facilitated by EU membership (Carey 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2009; McLaren 2002). Immigration, which brings with it varying cultures and languages can lead to existing residents developing their opinions of the EU through their reaction to newcomers. In the UK, both the Labour and Conservative political parties were aware of the growing national concerns regarding immigration, and this coupled with a failure of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to reduce immigration significantly, meant that the politics of immigration has been high on the agenda for some time in the UK. This growing concern led to the rise of The UK Independence Party whose main focus was the withdrawal of the UK from the EU (Ford and Goodwin, 2017). It was these arguments around national identity, national sovereignty and the need to redirect finances being paid into the EU to the public purse, especially the National Health Service, which dominated the leave campaign. This coupled with a growing sense of Euroscepticism (Swales 2016) garnered much support for the leave campaign.

Following the UK referendum result, there was a sharp increase in xenophobic incidents as if people felt that they had somehow been given permission to express prejudice towards certain minority groups, even though this is illegal in the UK (Corcoran et al., 2015). Eastern Europeans, who had come to the UK post 2004 following EU expansion, were especially vulnerable to attack as were those who had recently sought asylum from wars in Syria and Afghanistan and economic deprivation in such countries as Tunisia and Somalia. In the three months following the referendum, 33 of the 44 police forces in England and Wales recorded their highest levels of hate crimes since comparable hate crime data began to be collected in 2012. Whilst 62,518 hate crimes were *reported* in 2015-16, it is estimated by the Crime Survey for England and Wales that 222,000 hate crimes were actually *committed* (Corcoran and Smith, 2016). This is consistent with

research carried out by the Leicester University Hate Crime Project that shows only a quarter of hate crime victims report their experiences to the police (Chakraborti et al., 2014). Reasons for this may be a lack of understanding of the legislation around hate crimes or the normalisation of hate crime in the lives of those who experience it. This is despite the fact that the UK has one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world to combat hate crime (University of Leicester Centre for Hate Studies, 2017).

We acknowledge that the expression of hate crime is only one manifestation of racial prejudice. However, the post-referendum abuse took a variety of forms: verbal taunts and insults; attacks on property (shops, homes and cars); physical attacks on individuals, including serious assaults leading to injury or even death. Many targets were too afraid to report the abuse so that the available statistics are most likely to be under-estimates of what actually happened. The common theme was that such individuals should “go home immediately”, even though many targets were born and raised in the UK and were contributing to the economy. In some cases, they were third generation British nationals with British passports.

Unfortunately, this kind of behaviour has existed for many years. Hate crime is a relatively new phenomenon in criminal law but has existed throughout history as those who are deemed to be ‘different’ have been persecuted by some. The victims are chosen because of particular characteristics such as disability, gender, sexuality or religion (Aziz, 2018; Ray, 2011) or their ethnic identity (Petrosino, 2003). Hate crime has been defined as ‘any incident, which may or may not constitute a criminal offence, which is perceived by the victim or any other person, as being motivated by prejudice or hate’ (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2005, p.9). At the time of writing there had been two terror-related attacks, one in Manchester and then, a week later, another one in London. Following these atrocities, the hate crime that has received the greatest level of attention has targeted the Muslim community. There has been a sharp increase in recent years of 326% in anti-Muslim hate crime (Tell MAMA, 2016). Muslim women are disproportionately attacked and those that wear traditional Muslim dress, the niqab or the hijab, are especially vulnerable to being victims of hate crime (Tell MAMA, 2016). This is a reflection of current ‘common-sense’ thinking among some members of society, fuelled by a selection of media representations and platforms, such as “Britain First”, an anti-Muslim group on the social networking site Facebook, with over one million members. The existence of these groups and the messages they circulate reinforce an undercurrent of belief that the Muslim community are “public enemy number one”, and thus a “justification” for xenophobic behaviour becomes normalised.

### **The development of xenophobia in children and young people**

Clearly, children and young people are influenced by the attitudes and actions of adults in their families and communities and there is growing evidence that prejudiced behaviour takes place regularly in UK schools. The rise of Islamophobia in the national context, for example, is mirrored in British schools, with 11% of all Islamophobic incidents taking place in schools and colleges (Tell MAMA, 2016). Homophobic bullying, disablist bullying and bullying due to race, gender or religion are, according to legal definitions, ‘hate crimes’ and, as research indicates, children and young people are both victims and perpetrators of this kind of violence or bullying at school (Aziz, 2018). If such behaviour were to take place outside of the school setting and by those who are over the age of criminal responsibility, there would be legal consequences and official

records of these incidents. However, as these occurrences are generally dealt with by the school, there is often a lack of understanding of the nature and extent of the problem (Lee, 2018; Myers, 2018). Such behaviour within the educational setting, impacts on the emotional health and well-being of children and young people, and fosters attitudes of intolerance and discrimination.

To gain insight into the development of xenophobia among youth, we need to understand some of the processes through which children and young people learn to be tolerant or intolerant of people from other cultures. Strong feelings of positivity or negativity apply to whole groups and of relevance here is the body of research into the development of the young person's sense of ethnic identity - that is, their awareness of their membership of a particular national or social group. Oppenheimer and Barrett (2011), in their investigations into the attitudes held by children and young people towards in-groups and out-groups, challenged the view that a positive attitude towards one's own national identity necessarily resulted in prejudice towards "out-groups" within the same society. The exception was when that out-group was perceived to represent a threat to a nation. Their research indicated how important it is to take account of the socio-historic context in which children are growing up.

More recently, Ruck and Tenenbaum (2014) investigated the attitudes of 60 young people in the UK (half in early to mid-adolescence and half in late adolescence) about the rights of asylum-seeking youth. The study used vignettes, each involving a 12-year-old refugee, matched to the gender of the participant. Two of the vignettes described a situation where the refugee wished to exercise a self-determination right (e.g. choosing where to live or refusing to carry ID) and two described a situation where the refugee child wanted to have a nurturance right (e.g. being provided with food or clothing or emotional support). The participants in this study showed the greatest level of support for the child asylum-seeker's rights to emotional support and the right of freedom of religious expression, but the lowest level of support for the right to choose where to live.

In a follow-up study, Aznar et al. (2018) investigated how young people reason about the social exclusion of minority asylum-seekers. They used a series of vignettes as the basis for interviews with 10-16-year-olds in two London boroughs where, in fact, the majority of voters in the referendum voted to remain in the EU. Here is one example:

Rachel is celebrating her birthday at home. She wants to invite her friend, Fatimah, who is a Muslim asylum-seeker but she decides against it because she doesn't know if her parents would agree. How good or bad is it to exclude Fatimah? Why do you think that? How good or bad is it to exclude Fatimah because she is a Muslim asylum-seeker? Why do you think that?

The majority showed empathy for the feelings of asylum-seekers by suggesting that a Muslim child should not be excluded from the birthday party for such reasons as: "...because then Fatimah will feel lonely and upset, she needs to make friends because she is in a new country so they should be able to join the group." (13-year-old girl). However, they were less positive about asylum-seekers' rights, for example, to medical treatment. A typical justification was:

“It depends. If they don’t pay taxes, then ‘No’ because the NHS (National Health Service) is for people who pay taxes and if he gets surgery then the people who are paying taxes will get annoyed.” (12-year-old boy)

We can assume such observations are bandied around at home. Would a 12-year-old understand the complexities of the tax system? Or is this an example of learned behaviour picked up from older generations in the home setting? As indicated above, Oppenheimer and Barrett (2011) found that prejudice towards an "out-group" was more likely when that group represented a threat to the nation. For example, in their cross-cultural study, Azeri children expressed negative attitudes towards Russians, a finding which could be understood in the light of the fact that Russia had supported the Armenians when they occupied Azeri territory in 1992. The current fear throughout Europe of terrorist attacks by Isis supporters is likely to fuel xenophobia and *could* explain the emergence of prejudice towards Muslims at an early age in some community or family contexts, but research into this area is needed before such claims can be validated.

However, it would be too simplistic to conclude that xenophobia is the dominant view in the UK. Many UK citizens welcome the positive contribution made by incomers to the National Health Service (NHS), to agriculture, to the building trade, tourism and hospitality, and to banking and finance. Many strong friendships and partnerships have been forged through shared participation in educational projects (such as ERASMUS) and shared enterprise (e.g. in banking and healthcare practice). The Archbishop of Canterbury in his 2017 New Year address urged the divided nation to work towards a process of healing and emphasised reconciliation and harmony as the only way forward. Furthermore, he argued that being hospitable to strangers and living well together is at the heart of British tradition and values.

Many people, especially youth, appreciate the vibrancy of multi-cultural cities like London, Leicester and Leeds. Several generations have been raised in diverse communities where friendships, networks, community activities and long-term relationships have taken place. So, although we cannot deny that xenophobia exists, it is counterbalanced by its opposite – *xenophilia* (the welcoming of strangers) - in many contexts. One powerful example is the strong response from the whole country, offering personal, practical, financial and emotional support, regardless of ethnicity, to the people caught up in the tragedy of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire disaster. A central London block of flats, mainly occupied by foreign nationals from diverse cultural backgrounds, was engulfed in fire, killing over 80 residents and those who survived lost their homes ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)). The UK was united in grief. However, should it always take a disaster to unite a country and push aside xenophobic beliefs?

### **Counteracting xenophobia**

There is already a long tradition of anti-bullying work in UK schools which can offer relevant advice on the effectiveness or otherwise of a range of interventions (Cowie & Myers, 2018a). There are many parallels between bullying and xenophobia. Bullying emerges when there is an imbalance in power between individuals or groups or where certain people are perceived as vulnerable. Bullies take advantage of this situation and abuse their power over others in a whole variety of ways, through physical attacks, verbal insults and social exclusion – behaviour designed to make the target feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, worthless and

endangered. The knowledge that has been built up over the years about addressing bullying whether at school, college, university or in the workplace can be used to counteract xenophobic actions. There are many ways in which schools and the community can empower children and young people themselves to challenge such negative behaviour. We can extend the number of bystanders prepared to take action against xenophobia by training children and young people in peer support methods which, over many years of practice, have been shown to improve the emotional climate of a school and to encourage children to take action against bullying and other forms of social exclusion (Cowie, 2011).

Other approaches, such as restorative practice in schools, including conflict resolution, can help to change the climate of particular social contexts and offer win-win alternatives to violence and abuse (Cremin & Bevington, 2017; Hopkins 2004; Sellman et al., 2017). Schools are in an ideal position to address social and moral issues, such as the role of incomers in mainstream society, and can create opportunities for young people to engage in reasoned debates about controversial issues. This in turn could be brought home to the family, to challenge the dominant discourse discussed above which is often unfounded in evidence or official statistics.

These discussions develop the capacity to examine statements of prejudice critically and to consider the evidence base for opinions. For example, on the night of the terrorist attack on concert-goers in Manchester on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2017, many members of the Muslim community were working throughout the night as doctors, nurses, taxi-drivers, parents and helpful bystanders. This challenges the prejudiced views that all Muslims are a threat to society. Dialogues and debates around these and similar issues, foster perspective-taking skills that enhance empathy for the suffering of others in society and challenge prejudice and intolerance. Such interventions are most effective when they operate at different levels – individual, group, family, community and wider society (Cowie and Myers, 2018b). At the individual level, young people can learn social skills that enhance empathy, perspective-taking and moral reasoning. At classroom level, children can be given opportunities to develop positive attitudes towards one another and to develop moral reasoning skills based on evidence-based thinking and the ability to engage in logical debate about topics of social relevance. Where children engage in this kind of approach that challenges intolerance, xenophobia and social exclusion, research indicates that some of the values are taken home by the children who can then ‘educate’ their parents by challenging some of their beliefs (Schulze-Krumbholz et al., 2016). These approaches enhance integration rather than social exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

In this discussion paper, we argue that it is important to help children and young people to develop the skills and qualities of moral reasoning and perspective-taking and to learn to use a problem-solving approach to difficulties as they arise in their everyday lives. The emphasis is on restorative practice with its attendant qualities of forgiveness and reconciliation. We discussed the UK in the context of Brexit, but all European countries need to consider their values as nations and as members of the EU. All countries in the EU need to address the complex issues raised in today's society by the huge migrations of diverse groups of people fleeing war and persecution or extreme economic deprivation. The potential for conflict among people from

diverse cultures and belief systems is very real but do European countries really want to build walls to keep people out or are they able to welcome the vibrancy and dynamic quality of the life that diversity brings?

It is not easy to challenge xenophobia but, arguably, we have no choice. According to the law in the U.K., and in some other European countries, discrimination against certain groups of people due to their ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability is a criminal offence. Rather than prosecuting more incidents of hate crime, surely the way forward is to challenge the prejudices that underpin such behaviour? We have discussed such views and solutions in this article but there is a long way to go. Pragmatically, all nations need the skills that outsiders bring to their society, whether in health, finance, agriculture, commerce or business. Morally, it is better to live in a just society with room in its heart for people who have been oppressed by war and poverty and with laws that promote diversity.

We posed the question "Does diversity in society inevitably lead to a rise in xenophobia among children and young people?" in the title of this discussion paper. We cannot offer easy answers to this question. But we can propose that there is a substantial body of knowledge in the various disciplines of the social sciences to help the fostering of tolerant values among children and young people, whether in schools or in the community. There is scope for further research in this field since the promotion of tolerance and the celebration of diversity takes time and patience. In the current climate, there is an urgent moral imperative for social scientists to enter the debates around xenophobia and challenge prejudice when they encounter it with evidence that demonstrates the rewards that come to those societies and communities that promote and celebrate diversity. Specifically, there are important implications for schools in multi-ethnic communities to emphasise the value of diversity in deepening understanding of cultures different from one's own and in extending knowledge of one's own history and sense of national identity.

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