

The immigration effect

Professor Mary J Hickman, Director of the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, looks at how immigration affects social cohesion...

The consequences of recent immigration for everyday life in the UK are very much disputed. While many point to migrants' economic contribution, others raise concerns about pressures on welfare, labour and housing markets, and the cohesiveness of everyday life.

This article is concerned with the findings of a research project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which set out to improve our understanding of the relationship between new immigration and social cohesion. We did this by exploring the rhythms and realities of everyday life for both long-term settled residents and new immigrants in six places across the UK: Leicester, Downham (South East London), Kilburn (North West London), Peterborough and Thetford, Dungannon (Northern Ireland), and Glasgow.

We carried out key informant interviews and in-depth, life-narrative interviews with a cross-section of local residents. As a result, we believe that three considerations have to be taken on board in considering immigration and social cohesion: relations between people, local narratives of belonging, and the impact of social and economic transformations.

Relations between people

We found a de facto recognition that Britain today is multi-ethnic and multicultural and therefore social cohesion was not perceived as being about expecting consensus on values and priorities. The majority of long-term settled residents understood social cohesion to be about a willingness and ability to be able to negotiate a difficult line between commonality and separation. We concluded therefore that the dominant 'consensualist' sensibility informing social cohesion policies, with its implication that immigration threatens a shared national identity and its emphasis on identifying processes that can foster commonalities, is out of step with the rhythms and realities of everyday life.

In contrast, our research suggests that it is necessary to enable and support both expressions of 'difference' and of 'unity' in local areas. Both are opportunities for people to learn about each other and relate to each other if they so wish – we found many examples of people attending the ethnic celebrations of groups other than those to which they themselves belong. The public events and public

spaces that enable people to mix are welcomed by most, if not all, people. The focus on shared norms and values that characterises current policies of social cohesion should complement, rather than substitute, the established multicultural valuing of cultural diversity.

This suggests that a fixed notion of Britishness and British values is not the route to social cohesion. We are not of course saying that a sense of Britishness is unimportant. Rather, pointing out that individuals have their own 'sense of belonging to Britain'. Although large numbers of people might share similar ideas, there are in fact many 'senses of belonging to Britain' and they all contribute to the social cohesion of the UK. Responding to the variation and differences that exist between people by defining Britishness in a definitive way is counter-productive when ideas about Britain vary so much in different parts of the UK let alone between long-term residents and new immigrants.

There was, for example, little interest in Glasgow and Dungannon in discussing the meaning of belonging to Britain. People were more concerned about either their local jurisdiction or sometimes moving beyond national attachments. In England we found that minority ethnic long-term residents and new immigrants were usually more explicit than others about their positive reasons for and feelings of belonging in Britain. Majority ethnic interviewees in England, on the other hand, often found it difficult to reflect on their feelings of belonging to Britain, because they had not previously considered the matter. For this group Britain was a 'taken for granted' home.

Local narratives of belonging

The fact that many long-term settled residents shared similar understandings of social cohesion, that it involved negotiating a difficult line between commonality and separation, did not mean that they all agreed on how it was to be achieved. There were differences about who was responsible for social cohesion. These differences are rooted in the narratives of history, immigration and belonging that characterise a particular place. We found that these narratives were a key part of the complexity that underpins the relationship between new immigration and social cohesion and, therefore, knowledge of them needs to inform strategies developed to support community cohesion.

We found two dominant narratives of place. One narrative represents a local area as homogenous and 'settled' and it generates expectations amongst the long-term residents (both majority ethnic and minority ethnic) that the burden of achieving social cohesion lies with the new immigrants. A second narrative represents a local area as heterogeneous and acknowledges histories of immigration in the area and the existence of many transnational families, and sees the responsibility of achieving social cohesion as a shared one.

These are two broadly different narratives and we found them both repeated across the six research areas. They are nevertheless fluid narratives, which predominates can change. In certain areas where the long-term settled felt 'this is our place', there has been a shift that has allowed an acceptance, and valuing, of heterogeneity to be represented. This can occur for a variety of reasons. Successful social interventions led by local agencies are useful in heightening mutual understandings between long-term settled residents and new arrivals. These mutual understandings might include letting new arrivals know the local terms and expectations of neighbourliness and engendering an appreciation of what new immigrants bring to an area.

Social and economic transformations

Everyday realities in the UK are under pressure from the forces of individualisation, globalisation and post-industrialism. The social and economic transformations that result – increase of flexible and mobile workforces, longer working weeks for those in paid employment, the normalisation of structural worklessness, the necessity of a dual income for household survival, reduced welfare spending and curtailed community expenditure – connect with social cohesion in two main ways.

First, they are experienced by everyone and can be inimical to social cohesion in general because of the transformations in work/life balance they bring about and especially by producing conflicting demands between family and work. The increasing pace of life and the pressures of consumerism were of concern for many people we interviewed because of their impact on family life, especially relations between parents and children, and the limitations they place on the possibilities for wider social relationships and associations. These altering dynamics of family and work life are changing the connections and associations between people and altering the possibilities for wider social connections.

Second, these transformations have specific impacts in places where people do not see themselves benefiting from globalisation and other recent changes. These social and economic transformations produce winners and losers. One consequence is that the limited opportunities and multiple deprivations of some long-term settled residents in parts of UK towns and cities undermine social cohesion. Often the consequence of the arrival of immigrants in a particular place is to highlight pre-

existing problems. Some long-term residents experienced government concerns with immigration as prioritising the interests of globalised business while neglecting their specific needs. Two areas of specific concern were housing and education. Some people felt their, and their children's, prospects were reduced because of immigration.

In areas characterised by poor resources, negligible agency involvement and overcrowding in substandard accommodation, little space exists for good relations and the tendency to stigmatise all new immigrants as asylum seekers was increased. However, where resources and agencies of mediation follow new immigrants into an area and improved facilities are made available to both the long-term residents and the new immigrants, neighbourly relations can be improved.

The ways in which different interventions across a range of policy areas – unemployment, lack of public and leisure facilities, low educational achievement, family breakdown – inter-relate needs to be reassessed in terms of how they singularly and in combination impact on social cohesion. Tackling deep-rooted inequality and discrimination is essential for social cohesion for all.

Conclusion

To ensure the cohesion of the social fabric of society it is necessary to consider both how people connect with each other and fundamental issues of deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination. Discussing how people get on together without dealing with inequalities will not work. Social cohesion is an ongoing process of negotiation between parties with a mutual interest in determining satisfactory boundaries between commonality and separation locally. It is important to ensure that the benefits of investment in local places accrue to both the long term settled (majority ethnic and minority ethnic) and new immigrants. We found that the history and perhaps even more importantly the narratives about a place were a key factor not only in predicting how immigrants were received but in predicting how equipped an area was to adapt to socio-economic changes, the most visible manifestation of which is new immigrants and therein lies the relationship between immigration and social cohesion.

The full report *Immigration and Social Cohesion in the UK* is available to download free from <https://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=970>



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