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# Contemporary grammars of political action among ethnic minority young activists

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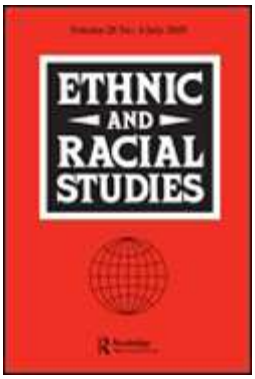


# CONTEMPORARY GRAMMARS OF POLITICAL ACTION AMONG ETHNIC MINORITY YOUNG ACTIVISTS

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# CONTEMPORARY GRAMMARS OF POLITICAL ACTION AMONG ETHNIC MINORITY YOUNG ACTIVISTS


## ABSTRACT

Despite public and media attention on ethnic minority young people's political engagement in recent times, often expressed in crisis narratives about disengagement, disaffection or extremism, there has been little consideration of the range, or distinctive forms, of political action among ethnic minority young people. The purpose of this article is to address this by presenting qualitative research on political activism among ethnic minority young people in Birmingham and Bradford. We find evidence for 'new grammars of action' and highly 'glocal' (as distinct from transnational and diasporic) political orientations among the activists with whom we worked, as well as the significance of religious (as distinct from ethnic) identities in informing some activists' political engagements. We conclude that whilst there is evidence for changing political subjectivities, there is a need to take account of the interplay between old and new grammars of political action.



## KEY WORDS

Political participation; Activism; Social Movements; Youth; Globalism; Religious Identities


## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority young people's political engagement has featured in public debates in recent times in a range of ways, often connected with concerns about disengagement, disaffection or extremism. Analyses of falling electoral turnouts have drawn attention to low levels of voter registration and turnout among ethnic





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minority groups generally, and it is suggested that this is particularly the case among ethnic minority younger people (Purdam et al 2002; Electoral Commission 2005). It should be noted that falling levels of electoral engagement are evident among the electorate more generally, and such trends are neither recent nor peculiar to the UK (Giddens 1994; Hay 2007), nor are such concerns confined to ethnic minority young people, as young people's electoral and party participation generally has been declining at a faster rate and across different states (Norris 2003).

Nevertheless, some groups of ethnic minority young people have become particular objects of public anxiety in relation to their civic and political participation. Significantly such concerns have undergone a discursive shift from a primary concern with ethnicity to a focus on religion, with particular emphasis on young Muslims. Thus, the disturbances of 2001 in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham and the bombings in London on 7th July 2005 sparked intense public debate over the disengagement of young Muslims from mainstream political and civic life. The official reports on the circumstances around the disturbances of 2001 identified the disengagement of young people from local democratic processes as a key factor contributing to the events (Cantle 2001); whilst a Working Group set up by the Home Office in August 2005 to consider ways of engaging Muslim youth following the London bombings noted that 'Participation by young Muslims in civic and political activity is lower than the national average', attributing this to their lack of confidence in mainstream Muslim organizations, as well as to low levels of political efficacy in relation to UK political and civic institutions (Home Office 2005, 14). Subsequently young people's participation in local democratic structures has featured in the Government's 'Commmunity Cohesion' and 'Preventing Violent Extremism' (PVE) agendas. This has led to the institution of





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local youth forums and consultations, the establishment of a national Young Muslims Advisory Group to advise Government Ministers;[1] as well as numerous local PVE-funded projects aimed at engaging with young Muslims in order to promote community cohesion and combat extremism.

Despite such concerns expressed in public and media debates, there are major gaps within the existing research literature. Whilst there have been several quantitative studies of ethnic minority electoral participation (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2007), only exceptionally has there been any attempt within these studies to consider the effects of age (Electoral Commission, 2005). The result is that the issues of youth participation on the one hand and minority ethnic participation on the other have developed as largely distinct areas of concern. Substantively, then, we know relatively little, empirically or conceptually, about ethnic minority young people's political engagement.

Similarly, the qualitative literature on youth political participation contains little focused research on the participation of ethnic minority young people. There are some excellent studies of ethnic minority political mobilizations in relation to the local state (Solomos and Back 1995) and focused on strategies of mobilization and leadership across different ethnic groups (Werbner and Anwar 1992), but aside from Eade and Garbin's work on political action among young Bangladeshis (2002; 2006), there has been little consideration of whether there are distinctive forms of political action emerging among ethnic minority young people in the present period. The purpose of this article is to consider this question by presenting findings on forms of political activism among ethnic minority young people, based on qualitative research with twelve groups of ethnic minority young political participants/activists in Birmingham and Bradford, carried out over the period



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2004-6.[2]

Our analysis is set within the context of broader shifts presently occurring in citizens' political participation. Recent literature points to the emergence and proliferation of new forms of political participation (Norris 2002). Indeed many argue that we are witnessing a refashioning of the political, with traditional forms of participation focused on representative democracy being eclipsed by forms that are increasingly focused on the terrain of culture (Nash 2001), and which express new types of political subjectivity and different perspectives on the relationship between citizens and the state. Whilst the rise of new social movements, and the identity politics that these expressed, greatly altered the political terrain on which citizens, and particularly minority groups, have mobilized, it is suggested that contemporary movements have somewhat different relationships to culture and identity politics and distinctive patterns of engagement – expressed in more personalized, ad hoc and 'DIY' activism (Wieviorka 2005; McDonald 2006). Our data suggest that these subjectivities are expressed among the activists with whom we worked, and these shape their perspectives on both representative and identity politics.

A further feature of much of the literature on contemporary forms of political and social action has been concerned with the impact of globalization, and the information-communication technologies that underpin globalization, in transforming the modes (Wieviorka 2005; McDonald 2006), targets and repertoires of political action (Norris 2002; Bennett 2003). Fundamental to this has been the significance of the local in the ways in which global issues, organizations and movements are expressed – captured in the notion of the 'glocal' (Eade and Garbin 2002). Our data reveal highly glocal concerns among young activists, which are more than simply a refashioning of existing transnational and diasporic



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connections, but indicative of a more profound shift in how local spaces are conceived in relation to awareness of global political issues, and this has been enabled through access to international media outlets and active engagement in internet-based publics.

Our research also engages with literatures on 'new ethnicities' and the increasing significance of religious identities among young people of minority ethnic heritage (Jabobsen 1997; Mushaben 2008; Bouzar 2001), and in this article we pay particular attention to the ways in which religious identities shape political activity among our respondents.

Whilst much of our data point to the significance of emergent political subjectivities, new grammars of action and changing forms of socio-political identification, we conclude that these do not entirely displace older forms of action, but can co-exist with them – although in reworked ways. In this respect, we conclude that there is a need to take account of a more complex relation between old and new grammars of political action.

## THE STUDY

Our study is based on work with ethnic minority young participants/activists in Birmingham and Bradford. As many youth studies researchers have argued (Eden and Roker 2000), current crisis narratives about youth political apathy have tended to displace attention from forms of political participation in which young people *do* engage. Our study set out to address this issue by exploring modes, targets and repertoires of political action among ethnic minority young participants/activists. To do this, we worked with a broad conception of political participation that included different levels of engagement (from participation to activism) in formal,





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informal, youth, community, neighbourhood, gender and campaign politics. We worked with a range of groups in the two cities, including:

- two groups of Members of the Youth Parliament (MYPs) from the Bradford Keighley Youth Parliament (BKYP) and the Birmingham Young People's Parliament;

- a women's group in Birmingham, comprising significantly Pakistani, Yemeni and Indian women, established to provide women with a 'space of their own' and to challenge community and local state responses to women's concerns;

- an organisation in Bradford providing a range of educational, social and recreational provision for predominantly Muslim young women in a 'women-only' environment;

- a youth group based in Birmingham, focused on addressing experiences of African Caribbean young men and women, organising to inform 'the public and government agencies on gang culture' and to challenge 'the boundaries of local and governmental action'. Following the 2005 disturbances, the group has begun to work with young Bangladeshis to address common issues facing young people in the city;

- a youth group in Bradford engaged in youth, community, self-help and neighbourhood renewal projects; working primarily with Pakistani young men, the group has recently set out to include in its activities young Slovenian men newly migrated to the local area;

- four local youth groups in Birmingham and Bradford focused on increasing



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educational resources and opportunities working with Pakistani, Yemeni, Somali and white young people;

- a Bradford-based youth group, working with Pakistani, African Caribbean and white young people to 'encourage positive identities' and 'celebrate young people's achievements';

- A Birmingham-based anti-war, 'Muslim justice movement', organised and led by young Muslim men.

We carried out 12 focus groups (6 in each city) and 50 individual in-depth interviews, involving a total of 76 respondents (39 in Birmingham and 37 in Bradford). Our respondents were aged 16 to 25, with slightly more men than women in the sample. The self-ascribed ethnicity of respondents included: 'Pakistani', 'Kashmiri', 'Mirpuri', 'Yemeni', 'Afro-Caribbean', 'Black British', 'Somali', 'Indian', 'Black African' and 'Mixed Race'.

The focus groups consisted of a group discussion with between 4-12 individuals, focusing on the group's activities, membership, experiences and reflections, and their perspectives on political institutions, processes and issues. These were followed by individual in-depth interviews with the focus group members. A key aspect of these interviews was discussion of people's personal political biographies, which explored how and why individuals became politically active, the range of activities in which they participated, their views of their local areas, the range of issues that concerned them and how they saw their future political interests and participation. Our rationale for including a 'political biographical' perspective was driven by our concern to understand not just the dynamics of a range of groups and their collective experiences, but to consider also





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members' paths into those groups and the range of repertoires of action in which they engaged, including 'everyday' and 'subpolitical' action (Giddens 1994; Beck 1997). These interviews were supplemented by interviews with youth workers and local authority and youth services personnel.

Birmingham and Bradford have significant (young) ethnic minority populations, and somewhat different demographic profiles, economic development and histories of political mobilization. Ethnic minority groups comprise 29.6 per cent of the population in Birmingham, and 21.7 per cent in Bradford, with ethnic minority young people constituting 38 per cent of the 16-24 cohort in Birmingham and 34 per cent in Bradford (Census 2001). Both cities were formerly industrial centres that have witnessed major deindustrialization and are currently engaged in strategies for regeneration: whilst Birmingham is currently reinventing itself as a 'global city' with burgeoning financial, service and cultural sectors, Bradford's local economy has experienced much less growth. In both cities, there are marked patterns of geographical concentrations of ethnic groups, giving rise to some distinctive patterns of political mobilization and local community politics (Garbaye 2005). In both cities ethnic minority young people have assumed a political visibility as a consequence of disturbances (occurring in 2001 in Bradford and in 2005 in the Lozells area in Birmingham), concerns about community cohesion, educational attainment, gang culture, and political extremism. Nevertheless, the groups with whom we were in contact expressed concerns regarding the mechanisms for addressing the experiences of ethnic minority young people within local democratic structures. These contextual issues certainly had an impact on the issues and policy agendas that pertained in each city as well as young people's engagement in their local areas (O'Toole and Gale, forthcoming).

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## CHANGING PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

There is an emerging literature suggesting that patterns of political participation in many democracies are changing (Zukin 2006; Giddens 1994). Norris (2002), for example, argues that political participation is changing in terms of its: targets (to a wider range of institutions beyond the nation state); agencies (where declining party, trade union or formal interest group membership should be viewed in relation to the rise of social movements, more fluid networked political organizations and single-issue campaigns); and repertoires (to include everyday, lifestyle choices or political consumption). More recently, there has been increasing interest in the role of new technologies in facilitating or even transforming political action (Bennett 2003). Seen from this viewpoint, declining participation in key institutions of representative democracy is not evidence of political apathy *per se*, but potentially indicative of wider social and political changes that have been occurring in the contemporary period, such as the emergence of 'de-traditionalization', 'reflexive individualization' and 'postmaterialist values' (Giddens 1994; Beck 1995; Inglehart 1997; Dalton 2004).

This context, it is suggested, has given rise to new political subjectivities or 'grammars' of action (McDonald 2006) that are characterized by a turn towards more reflexive, 'DIY', everyday, fluid and expressive forms of political engagement (Beck 1995; Giddens 1994; Bang 2003). Such characterizations underpin Wieviorka's (2005) and McDonald's (2006) accounts of the political subjectivities expressed within contemporary social movements, which they suggest differ to those that underpinned 'new social movements'. McDonald suggests that recent years have given rise to new, more personal and interpersonal, networked grammars of political action, which are distinct from earlier 'civic-industrial grammars of action' expressed through hierarchical, mediated and



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collectivist forms of organisation. This resonates with Wieviorka's characterization of contemporary social movements, where 'Each individual wishes to be able to choose his or her struggle, involvement and collective identity; but people also wish to manage their participation in action in their own way, at their own rhythm and be able to stop if they so desire' (2005, 11). Thus contemporary movements are much less ideological than previously, founded on an ethos of action rather than programmes or sloganeering, and express a commitment 'to living differently now, as opposed to programmatic or linear attempts to shape the future' (McDonald 2006, 64).

It is often speculated that such shifts in grammars of action are particularly relevant to the young (Norris 2003), who are more likely to be politically engaged in activities outside mainstream electoral or party politics. It is also suggested that ethnic minority groups are much more likely to be engaged in alternative rather than conventional forms of participation, and within social movements, as a consequence of exclusionary norms and practices within mainstream political arenas (Gilroy 1987; Black Public Sphere Collective 1995; Solomos et al 2003). Lower levels of electoral engagement among these groups should not then be interpreted as evidence of political apathy (Marsh et al 2007; Bousetta 2001). Furthermore, participation in social movements by ethnic minority groups has led to recognition of the role of identity and race in shaping social inequalities in addition to class (Gilroy 1987; Solomos and Back 1995), whilst mobilizations based on religious and cultural identities have in turn re-shaped the character of identity politics (Modood 2006). We identify a need, however, for more detailed research to specify how youth and ethnicity intersect in the understanding of these patterns of participation, in terms of both the issues that animate ethnic minority young people's political engagement and the modes through which this



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engagement finds expression.

In line with the literature alluded to above, our research found that the high levels of political interest and engagement among the activists we met were not matched by identification with representative political institutions. Indeed, a constant feature of activists' political engagement was their scepticism with regard to representative politics and institutions: relatively few were actively involved in organizations associated with representative democracy. Although most were likely to be voters, almost none cited affiliation to any particular party as a reason for voting: instead reasons were often local (to block the BNP) or global (to register opposition to the war on Iraq). Among our sample, there were few party members, and even where there was activism on behalf of a party, it was qualified (as we discuss later). What characterized our respondents' activism was a tendency to prefer direct involvement in horizontal, informal networks or movements, or ad hoc involvement with particular initiatives, rather than membership of formal, centrally organised political organizations.

Even respondents who were members of a local youth parliament were ambivalent about its status as a representative institution, and in one focus group there was extensive discussion of whether 'parliament' was an appropriate term for the Birmingham Young People's Parliament. As one Member of the Youth Parliament (MYP) argued:

> You're branding yourself with this, this – and *why*? [...] [Impassioned] Clearly people are not involved, participating in that kind of democracy to *begin* with, why are you giving yourself *that* label deliberately? [...] It's amazing the number of people you can speak to, both adults and young people, who will say that Westminster no longer actually changes a great



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deal in terms of policy. And to have that same kind of connotation with a young people's forum, you know, nothing'll ever change. [...] And that's you know, that's actually a much *bigger* problem, that people are disaffected in that way…

Indeed, this MYP expressed frustration with national politics and the party political system, in a way that speaks to McDonald's contention that contemporary grammars of action privilege a personal politics of self-actualization:

In terms of national politics, I would be sorely tempted to deface my ballot and just express my *sheer*, you know, sort of discontent if you like. *Extreme* discontent with the way the machine works at the moment, and I think that's part of what we were talking about earlier, with Westminster being more of the machinery, than politics in the broader sense.

Many other respondents shared this ambivalence towards 'machine politics', and placed an emphasis on a variety of forms of direct, personal action. As one women's group activist discussed:

*Respondent*: I've been on like you know marches and things for campaigns that I think are really important but, I don't think I'm *that* political. [...] I want to spend my energies on doing the work I'm doing, as opposed to kind of making change within the Government, or sitting on even a local level as a Councillor. I don't see that as productive for *me*.

*Interviewer*: OK, so you'd see yourself more at grass roots?

*Respondent*: Yeah. As just more of a doer. I think you get really kind of – held up in a system, and I don't really want to be a cog really…

Many activists were oriented towards DIY action in relation to local spaces, or specific social issues, or web-based action (such as blogging or web-site





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construction). As a women's group activist commented of her organization's approach:

> Whether they're a housewife, whether they're a career professional, it doesn't matter to us as long as they're always questioning and not accepting the status quo. [...] So if they've got a community problem or whatever else hopefully they've got enough you know, confidence in themselves, or see a positive example, they'll be like "Yeah you know what? I'm gonna go do something about that because it's wrong".

The contention that new grammars of action are expressed in a politics of personalized action, in which individuals do not subsume their identities within that of the group (McDonald 2006) sheds light on the highly contingent relationship some activists forged with party engagement. This was most obviously expressed in the case of the 'Muslim Justice Movement', an informal, self-organised group based in Birmingham, who were ambivalent towards (although not entirely rejecting of) established forms of political engagement. The MJM had been to anti-war meetings hosted by the Socialist Worker Party and various mosques across the city, participated in marches and petitions against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had been active in grass-roots campaigning for the Respect Party in Sparkbrook, canvassing door to door in the run up to the 2005 General Election.[3] Their relationship with these organizations was qualified, however, and they did not strongly identify with Respect, despite the fact that they campaigned on the ground for them, as one activist explained:

> it's not that I have any affiliation with Respect in terms of its ideology, or anything, 'cause I'm still trying to unravel that myself. I know that they're a coalition of various different groups and [...] I'm still trying to look for some kind of coherent aim, some agenda […] And, I'm just flirting with



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various different groups. [...] I'll never join any of them. They've all asked us, because they would do, but I've never joined any of them.

As is clear from the work of Solomos and Back (1995: 130-170), the motivations underlying the party engagements of ethnic minority activists have long been multiple and complex, often deriving from other sources than commitment to the ideological premises of any particular party. However, the activists discussed in Solomos and Back's work were nevertheless full members of political parties (most commonly the Labour Party), since operating from within the machinery of party politics was seen to afford greater opportunities for realizing these activists' political objectives (Solomos and Back 1995: 130-70). In contrast, the MJM can be seen to operate externally to party politics, withholding full commitment but mobilizing in consort with party initiatives where this offered scope to achieve their particular goals. This stance was also replicated in their relationships with mosque and other campaign organizations, which were based on hands-on involvement rather than formal membership or affiliation. This tends to substantiate McDonald's contention that activists avoid subsuming their identities into that of formal political organizations.

## GLOCAL POLITICAL ACTION

It is often argued that contemporary forms of action are increasingly concerned with glocal issues, particularly facilitated by new technologies (Castells 2004) and that these have fundamentally altered the character of political and social movements (Wieviorka 2005; McDonald 2006). Eade and Garbin's (2002) study of young Bangladeshis' political activism makes clear that global connections are shaped by local contexts and our data show that activists in our sample continually made such connections. The global concerns among our activists, however, were



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built not simply through transnational links between localities, homelands and diasporas, but were manifested through a more profound engagement with global politics and campaigns. In this sense, our data reinforces arguments made by McDonald and others that globalization has opened up novel modes of action, which both draw upon and extend globalized forms of communication and networking, and are different not only in scale but also in kind from earlier modes of action. An important aspect of this development is the scope for networking and consciousness-raising afforded by globalized communication systems. For McDonald, globalization (albeit in highly uneven ways) creates a space of flows, facilitated by network logics that engage with personal experiences linking individuals across space (although not uniformly) (2006, 32). Such changes in apprehensions of space potentially create very different ways of engaging politically.

The suggestion that representative politics no longer capture the imagination of citizens who are more likely to be oriented towards global and local issues, was evident across our respondents. As one women's group activist elaborated:

> *Interviewer*: What does 'politics' mean to you?
>
> *Respondent*: What does it mean? [...] middle aged men in suits, talking endlessly, and not really doing anything constructive! It's got quite a negative [...] impact on me. But I think that's due to you know, all of these individuals not really making it accessible, on a real kind of basic level and so there's more barriers up again, with people who aren't able to overcome them. [...] there aren't kind of those dreams go[ing] across. [...] on the flip side of that, it's something that I'd like to change. You know, [politics] does kind of grab me as well. How do we function internationally and how I feel about all of that, that's more interesting to me than nationally.



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Among our respondents, global concerns ran alongside and were often made concrete through local connections. Thus anti-war activists drew clear links between their concerns with global issues and those within their local communities – expressed in highly 'glocal terms' – as one activist explained:

> it was the war on Palestine and everything, but [...] we'd start off from sorting out everything in our little communities because they reckon that the government is not doing anything. So, if it's just like, a woman that just needs her shopping done, we'll just get it done for her. We'll go to shops and, like, if she hasn't got transport we'll help her out. It's just, it started off with little things like that, that was the idea and that is still the idea. That we'll start off and when they need us for a protest, Anti War Coalition, what Anti War Coalition do is they call us up and then we'd go down with them in their coaches...

Such responses seem highly suggestive to us of the linking of spaces that has been made possible by global information networks, and for these activists this was facilitated by their consumption of, and critical engagement with, a wide range of media sources that made the connections between their own and other global spaces possible and vivid (and see Gale and O'Toole 2009). They were very aware of, and politicized by, the highly uneven nature of global information flows, and particularly the role of the media in creating differential responses to humanitarian crises and conflicts in different regions and communities. For some groups, such activism was pursued through everyday life politics, demonstrations, campaigns or e-activism. This was particularly evident in the practices of Muslim Justice Movement (MJM) activists in Birmingham, who were critically engaged with a range of media, not only through consumption of a global range of broadcast and



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internet media sources, but also as producers of media communications – through blogging and website construction – as a form of direct action that allowed them to circumvent conventional mediated forms of politics.

## ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

The political subjectivities among the activists in our study were intimately connected with questions of identity, but the forms these took suggest that identity politics for young people has become somewhat different to the forms that characterized earlier ethnic minority mobilizations, particularly in the significance of the local and global and with the emergence of religious, as distinct from ethnic, identities. In relation to the latter, our research concurs with the emerging research on the identities of young Muslims across Europe which points to the decoupling of ethnic and religious identities among many young Muslims, with religious identities forming a more focal reference for identity and political engagement (Jacobsen 1997; Bouzar 2001; Mushaben 2008). Many young Muslim men and women expressed a strong commitment to personal piety, which they explicitly differentiated from the 'ethnic' heritage of their parents' generation. As a young Muslim man in Birmingham commented:

> I think [...] the youngsters are more attached to Islam [...] that's more of their identity, of Muslims, British Muslims, and they don't paint themselves as [...] Pakistanis as much, [...] they know that they've got some connection with Pakistan [...] but I think [...] they've come to the conclusion that they're more British Muslim. And, [...] I don't think the two clash, one's where you're born, the other thing is what you believe in.

He went on to explain:



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> it wasn't like [my parents] forced me how to pray or something, [...]It's kind of left down to me, if you know what I mean, that if I wanna do it you do it. …obviously, if I wanted they encouraged me […] it's more me now telling them, rather than them telling me. 'Cause again there's, like, kind of typical story of them coming from Pakistan, they weren't exactly religious, but their kids turned out more religious than they are.

Mushaben's study of young German Muslims' engagement with the 'Pop-Islam' movement suggests that young Muslims' rediscovery of Islam expresses a demand for recognition that is rooted in a desire for participation with equal rights within the structures of both the state and society (2008: 512). 'Pop-Islam' is a popular Islamic movement in Germany led by a charismatic preacher (Khaled), whose appeal lies in providing young Muslims with guidance for: 'do-it-yourself integration processes, rooted in a (re)discovery of Islam' (2008: 508). Mushaben asserts that 'Young, devout and trendy, Muslim youth want the *umma* – a universal community of believers – to pull them out of the swamp of 'failed integration'. They read the Qur'an looking for real-life guidance, not for instructions on bomb-building.' (Mushaben 2008: 513)

For many of our respondents, the emphasis they placed on faith as something standing apart from more immediate ties of family and ethnicity was closely entwined with their political engagements. One young Muslim man, active in a wide variety of anti-war campaign work, expressed a similar contrast between his own religiosity and that of his parents, indicating clearly that his faith was a major source of motivation behind his political engagement:

> My religion has given me more freedom than anything […] I mean parents they bring up their kids more culturally, especially Pakistani, Indian and





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> Bangladeshis. It's quite, I don't know, when they read islamically it's, it's, it gives them more freedom the way I see it, and it's given me more freedom to do things, and more freedom to speak out. It's like when my parents say to me, "Don't go to a protest, they're gonna arrest you", but Islamically it tells me to, yeah, go to a protest and I see the word of God greater than my dad's any day…

Importantly though, this sense of a relationship between personal piety and politicization was not simply expressed as a commitment to the interests of a global Muslim 'public', but also countenanced the mobilization of personal religious ethics in response to much broader understandings of social justice. As one respondent commented:

> But [...] we don't believe that because we are against the war, then we're not being patriotic. We believe that, we probably, yeah [we are] patriotic. We're doing it because of things like, how Islam teaches us to stand up against any injustice that is happening around the world. It doesn't matter whether it's happening to a non Muslim or a Muslim.

## NEW AND OLD GRAMMARS OF ACTION

Whilst our data resonate with the literature on changing political subjectivities and new grammars of action, it is important not to overstate the transformations in political action in the contemporary period. It is clear for many of our respondents that, whilst their relationships to collective political organizations, their global and local concerns and the place of religion in their lives have altered their political engagement, issues relating to inequalities, racism and exclusion still figure very strongly in their everyday experiences and political engagements. In this respect,



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we suggest our findings point us towards the co-existence of grammars of action. For example, as we saw in the example of Muslim respondents who had canvassed for the Respect Party without themselves becoming party members, it is evident that they have re-appropriated what McDonald describes as 'civic/industrial' grammars of action albeit to achieve alternative goals to those for which they have tended to be used historically.

Eade and Garbin's research found that newly significant religious orientations among young Bangladeshis were often overlaid with long-standing political concerns. Thus the shift towards identification with Islam among their respondents did express a new politics concerned with authenticity and belonging among second and third generations, but this was also conditioned by their experiences of longer-standing forms of discrimination:

> For those who defined themselves first and foremost as Muslim, the traditional form of Islam in the subcontinent based on syncretic practices and the cult of holy men (*pirs*) seemed irrelevant to their present economic and political environment. The issues of discrimination and social exclusion were far more important to them. Furthermore, the fight against Islamophobia replaced the older anti-racist campaigns. (2002, 145)

Whilst their young respondents were turning away from the ethnically and culturally oriented politics of their parents, they suggested that the riots in Bradford and Oldham echoed the struggles that occurred in Tower Hamlets in the late 1970s, in terms of concerns about segregation, racism, community self-defence and unequal distribution of resources. Our own data point to the continued salience of these issues, and a sense that these shaped the political terrain on which young



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people stand. As one women's group activist commented:

> we don't choose to be political but we're forced to be so to try and address any of the inequalities. So I guess in that respect, we are.

Within our data, similarly, it is clear that whilst ethnic minority young people are oriented towards global sets of concerns, these are often linked to engagement with local ethnic minority community issues that include challenging continuing patterns of spatial marginalization – for example one group of activists campaigned against a proposal to site a casino in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in Birmingham (Alum Rock) with few other regeneration schemes, which they linked to broader issues of global poverty and conflict.

Whilst many groups with whom we worked were concerned with creating a political space for the articulation of new/hybrid ethnicities among young people, they also expressed an awareness of the struggle they faced in challenging representations of black youth or Muslim women: as one 'Young Disciple' from Birmingham commented:

> we're living with it, day in and day out, you know, these Asians kids are this, these black kids are that. So we've got to live with it [...]. Now, when someone throws that at you, and you're already living with it, you're thinking, 'Well, what is the point of me trying to be civilised about this? Why am I being discriminated? Why am I being targeted?' […] If I do defend myself, they gonna call the police. Or if [...] I don't defend myself, you know, I'm still gonna get trampled on. So what do I do? [...] either way I'm gonna get trampled on, or they gonna call the police, and the police are gonna come out and say, 'Oh, arrogant black people' […] so there's no





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point, there is just no point at all.

Such representations were very clearly felt as exercising particular constraints on the range of possibilities for political expression. Thus, even where we see strong evidence of personal piety and identification with Islam underpinning political engagement, this ran alongside a consciousness of how the political terrain on which young people engaged has been altered by 9-11 and the 7th July bombings:

> The Muslims, yeah, the Muslim youths, [...] they've always been talked about, the Muslim youth and this and that [...] and we're like, "Are we?" [laughter] I don't think we are, you know what I mean? [...] some of them are like, 'that doesn't represent my views', [...] on the news, for example, somebody saying that 'they're getting all extreme or radical' and [...] I can't even know about all these kind of situations. [...] but definitely it's now from that group where [...] they're being forced almost to get an opinion on the [...] situations that are going on at random...

Similar sentiments were also expressed by young Muslim women in our sample several of whom voiced a keen sense of the need to respond to stereotypically gendered constructions of Islam. As one woman MYP from Bradford stated:

> I think now like as a Muslim women, [...] coming from a [...] black background, it feels more important [...] that we are seen to be out there and being active, because […] they're always thinking about the Muslim community secluding itself from everyone else, and isolating itself, and especially Muslim women being oppressed and being subjected to their fathers and tied to [...] their religion. Whatever the nonsense they have said



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> […]. I think that there are a lot of assumptions made about me and people like myself and it was important and thinking back on it, that I did get involved in challenging things and that I did have an opinion and [...] I was assertive, without being too aggressive and I think yeah, Muslims have opinions too…

## CONCLUSION

In this article, in highlighting the lack of focused research on ethnic minority young people's political engagement, we point to the significance of 'new grammars of action', glocal political engagements and identity shifts in shaping ethnic minority young people's politics. We suggest that the literatures characterizing contemporary patterns of political engagement in terms of a move towards more personal, interpersonal, reflexive, DIY and more informal political action help us to understand the fluid and often ad hoc engagement that many activists had with conventional political organizations and institutions. This was evident even among the young parliamentarians and those who had engaged in party work in our sample. Similarly, we argue that there are some distinctive 'glocal' connections being made by many of our respondents, which inform their everyday political action, and that these are somewhat different to transnational and diasporic connections noted in other studies of ethnic minority mobilizations (Eade and Garbin 2002). Significantly, these are made possible by young people's reception of a wide range of media and communication sources enabled by new technologies, and these permit activists to engage in global issues directly through blogging, e-campaigns and website production.

We suggest that earlier new social movement style mobilizations on the basis of ethnic identities are not viewed in quite the same way by our respondents, although



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such mobilizations are not regarded as irrelevant, rather religious identities emerge alongside ethnic identities as bases for mobilization and in response to racialized representations and exclusions. Similarly, some respondents do reference political parties in the course of their mobilizations. The forms that their mobilizations take, however, are more networked and less collectivist, and more ad hoc and less ideological and programmatic, than either party or new social movement mobilizations. We suggest, then, that the significance of 'new grammars of action' should not be read as displacing conventional or identity politics, rather these can co-exist with them although potentially in reworked forms.

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[1] As Hazel Blears commented when establishing the YMAG: "Ensuring young Muslims have access to constructive, democratic channels for dealing with concerns and frustrations is crucial to our efforts to build strong, resilient



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communities." BBC news: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/uk/7656108.stm (7th October 2008)

[2] We are grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for funding this research.

[3] Specifically, they campaigned for Salma Yaqoob, who stood as the Respect candidate for Sparkbrook and Small Heath in the 2005 General Election, coming second after Labour with 27.5 per cent of the vote, and later became Respect Councillor for Sparkbrook in the 2006 local elections.

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