



Identity and the Legacy of the Slave Trade

What is identity?

Identity is an area of much contention but it is generally seen as being *multiple*—for example, there is no single Black or Asian identity but, rather, one that is as much affected by gender and class background as it is by where one lives, where a one's parents or grandparents were born and one's religious or faith background.



Talked of in this way, identity can mean different things to different people, implying therefore that it is difficult to talk, for instance, about an identity that spans entire ethnic groups. This has led to tensions, not only among academics, but also among groups and individuals who argue that it is necessary to be able to speak of group identities, particularly for persons of BME backgrounds, in order to enable those who experience discrimination to become empowered by a collective sense of self. Such collective or group identities should be based on the notion of being linked to others by virtue of minority ethnic background, across geographical locations. Ultimately there is no real difficulty with this approach for many theorists but it is the idea that there is a core identity within a person—which does not change but signifies both to oneself and to others 'who you are'—that has driven criticism from those who write on identity issues. They argue that these claims are far too reductionist, suggesting that the existence of an 'essential core' may imply that an identity is fixed and static and is one that refuses to be affected by historical development or social change. An additional problem with an 'essentialist' view of identity is that it defines entire ethnic groups by virtue of their natural sameness, without taking into account the differences that may exist *within* such groups.



However much of the current commentary on identity points away from this position towards viewing minority ethnic identities as socially constructed, affected by social and historical change and

gender/class/sexual orientation/religious background. It also argues that people from diverse backgrounds now embrace global as well as national identities. Importantly, having an ethnic group identity should not be restricted to those individuals of Black and minority ethnic heritage within a society and must also include White indigenous groups. Current discourse on identity, which will impact greatly on schools and young people, has opened up a wider debate about national identity, and Britishness in particular. Recent research and National Curriculum reviews (*Diversity & Citizenship in the Curriculum* and *Diversity & Citizenship: A Review*, both DfES, 2007) have looked explicitly at this issue noting that although the curriculum should be used to promote diversity through focusing on the collective identities of students, this should be done in ways that do not



exclude minority ethnic children or resort to a narrow ahistorical view of Britishness. It is also an integral aspect of the DfES *Every Child Matters* policy that children be able

to explore their personal, local, national and global identities. Ultimately, therefore, it is essential for schools to enable young people to explore their identities not only to assist them in coming to an understanding of their own place in the world but also to engage them, regardless of ethnic background, in appreciating and improving their awareness of diversity issues.

The role of history in shaping identity cannot be underestimated, although it can act both to exclude and include identities by virtue of the competing ways in which people interpret their histories or heritage. The sense of history upon which for example notions of Englishness is based may work well for some and not others:

It allows individuals to identify with something outside, and greater than personal experience. It binds individuals into a broader interdependence with others in the nation-building project. In consequence, groups or individu-



als who have no place within the dominant national story find it difficult to understand how they could ever properly belong. [Runnymede Trust, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*, 2000, p. 17]

Deriving a sense of belonging from an identification—of considering oneself Black British, British Asian, African Caribbean or Muslim for example—is essential if that identification is to have meaning for a person.

Where history has acted to exclude Black and minority ethnic groups from a particular aspect of their identities, it will be difficult for such belonging to exist. One important example of this occurred throughout the periods of Transatlantic slavery and British colonialism in the central ways through which the identities of the indentured and colonised were re-categorised and replaced by those of slaveowners and colonisers. Such identity erasure went beyond the processes of re-naming slaves or the British appropriation of aspects of non-Western cultures and extended to modern-day racisms that justified the low economic, educational and labour market participation of specific Black and minority ethnic groups in British societies.

Today's stereotypes which portray us as being fit only for manual and menial labour, or as idle scroungers who do not wish to work, can be traced directly back to the insulting and contradictory views which prevailed about Black people throughout the eighteenth century. [Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, 1985, p9]

Identity is clearly affected and constructed by history, and for Black and minority ethnic groups identity is based not only on the way that history has described them, but also in often challenging these historical descriptions. Whereas psychologists historically viewed Black individuals - certainly in the

US but also in the UK—as self-hating by virtue of their experiences of societal racism, the civil rights and Black liberation movements in America and the surge of identity politics within the UK saw a re-defining of the term ‘Black’ in rejection of the negative connotations associated with its use. Furthermore in rejection of the work of theorists such as Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1950s—whose work with African American children in which they were asked to point to the dolls which most looked like them, posited the idea of an identity encompassing early Black self-hatred - it is now possible to find books and toys that encourage positive identities for children.



However, it remains the case that Black and Asian children are less likely than their White counterparts to see themselves reflected amongst the teaching staff in their schools or, indeed, when they are older, among their college or university lecturers, or in senior positions in both the public and private employment sectors. Thus, despite the hybrid and constantly changing identities young Black and minority ethnic people currently inhabit and the historical journey they have taken from being constructed as inferior towards embracing more positive and empowering senses of self, there remains much to be done to ensure that BME young people are able to step into a much wider range of identities than are currently available to them.



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Resources

Children can be encouraged to feel confident about their identity by learning about their history, both ancient and more recent and through gaining an understanding of their culture and traditions. There are a number of resources in the Real Histories Directory that focus on an exploration of local communities. **Lewisham Voices**, (www2.lewisham.gov.uk/lbl/LewishamVoices/) for example, features photographs and stories of families living in Lewisham, south London. **The Northamptonshire Black History Project** (www.wellingboroughrec.org.uk/blackh/blackh.asp) records and promotes Black history in Northamptonshire over the past 500 years and **Liverpool Black Heritage** (www.visitliverpool.com/blackheritage/home) tells the story of Liverpool's black heritage in bygone years as well as revealing the many facets of contemporary black Liverpool life.

Hidden Histories

(www.hlf.org.uk/English/PublicationsAndInfo/AccessingPublications/Publications.htm) tells the story of Black and Asian cultural heritage, found in archives, museums and historic houses in the UK and helps us to understand our communities and to connect with our past. **Connecting Histories** (www.connectinghistories.org.uk/) is a website that aims to record histories and memories of different communities in the form of archives, photo galleries and discussion boards etc. Channel 4's **Origination:Insite** (www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/I/insite/index.html) brings together stories about the many different cultures that make up modern England. It could be food, people, history, music, fashion, art or even the story of your own family. In order to share experiences and feelings of group identity, Photo Insight's **Experiences** project (www.photoin sight.org./home.htm) brings together the stories told by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

There are also resources for learning about the contribution of black individuals to British History. **Pogus Caesar's OOM Gallery** (www.oomgallery.net/) features film, digital prints, free online exhibitions and rare photographs of prominent Black individuals. **UntoldLondon.org.uk** (www.untoldlondon.org.uk/) shows where to find culturally diverse histories in London. **Black Europeans – British Library Online Gallery** (www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/blackeuro/homepage.html) has a series of features on the contributions of individuals of African descent to European history and **100 Great Black Britons** (www.100greatblackbritons.com/) focuses on British society with a biographical database of 100 Black Britons who have made or are making an important contribution.

Who Do You Think You Are?, (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/familyhistory/bbc/?familylink=wdytya) the National Archives' Family History guide to resources, provides information on tracing your family history and highlights the journey made by a number of celebrities. Young people share their own sense of who they are and how they fit into their communities on **theoneminutesJr.org** (www.theoneminutesjr.org/) site using one-minute movies. For the **This is Where I Live** project (www.runnymedetrust.org./projects/whereILive.html) the Runnymede Trust worked with groups of young people across the UK to find out their views on the past, present and future of multi-ethnic Britain. The resulting CD-Rom is free for use as a teaching resource.

There are many outlets providing artefacts that can be used at home or in the classroom to encourage positive identity in children. **Positive Images** (www.multicultural-art.co.uk/) specialises in multicultural prints and posters for schools and colleges. **Positive Identity** (www.positive-identity.com/) supplies African, African Caribbean, South and East Asian and European dolls as well as books, posters and puzzles. **Persona Dolls** (www.persona-doll-training.org/) has a range of multicultural dolls and **Noire Dolls** (Tel: 020 8881 1673) supplies knitted African dolls in a variety of skin tones, while **Zawadi Enterprises** (www.zawadi-enterprises.co.uk/) has black toys, books, puzzles and posters. **Hibiscus Books** (Tel: 020 7692 0643), **Promoting Our Heritage** (www.promotingourheritage.co.uk/), and **Letterbox Library** (www.letterboxlibrary.com/acatalog/index.html) all have books on black history and culture while **Tamarind Books** (www.tamarindbooks.co.uk/) are publishers of multicultural children's books.

A number of storytellers who work in schools and help to share cultural traditions are listed on the Real Histories site including **Patience Agbabi**, (www.renaissanceone.com/) **Jan Blake** (Tel: 020 8692 0623), **Alex Pascall** (alexpascall@yahoo.com) and **Roi Kwabena** (www.freewebs.com/roikwabena/).

Afrikan Quest (www.southwark.tv/quest/aqhome.asp) is a website set up in an attempt to counter negative media portrayal of persons of Afrikan descent.

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The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.