The co-production of historical knowledge: implications for the history of identities

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Abstract

This essay argues that understanding people's lives, emotions and intellectual reasoning is crucial to exploring national identity and that 'the co-production of historical knowledge' provides an approach or methodology that allows for a deeper comprehension of people's self-identities by encouraging a diverse range of people to participate in the research process. We argue that many academic historians have maintained an intellectual detachment between university history and public and community history, to the detriment of furthering historical knowledge. We argue for a blurring of the boundaries between university and communities in exploring modern British history, and especially the history of national identities. It includes extracts of writing from community partners and a brief photographic essay of projects related to exploring identities.

Key words: Co-production of research; national identities; communities; public history.

The Academy for British and Irish Studies at the University of Huddersfield explores ways in which people identify themselves in relation to the group of islands that lies off the north-west coast of continental Europe. It is a multi- and inter-disciplinary research centre that allows its members to approach research questions relating to national and other identities from a wide variety of methodologies. Because of its catholic and eclectic nature, it has been a conducive atmosphere in which to develop new approaches to historical research.

In *Britishness since 1870*, Paul Ward, one of the founding members of the Academy and co-author of this essay, wrote that 'ordinary people ... played the major part in constructing their own identities' and that due regard needed to be paid in listening to expressions of self-identity in the historical record rather than relying on judgements made by others, often from elite groups in society, to interpret questions of Britishness in the United Kingdom since the late nineteenth century (2000: 4). This was an attempt to consider how to interpret identity not as an academic exercise but as a way of understanding how millions of individuals thought about their social and national context in particular historical circumstances. In his essay on Englishness, written at the start of the Second World War, George Orwell asked 'Are there really such things as nations? Are we not forty-six million individuals, all different?' He answered in the affirmative, suggesting that:

> The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids hiking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning – all these are not only fragments, but characteristic fragments, of the English scene.... Yes, there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization.... It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own.
>
> (Orwell, 1941)

Orwell was at once trying to disentangle the complexity of national identity *and* to express his own view of what it meant to be English. His view was personal to himself. It rested on his own life, born the son of an imperial civil servant, educated at Eton, his own imperial service in the Burmese police force, his adoption of socialism and journeys through the north of England, his anti-fascist military service in the Spanish Civil War and his desire to see Britain socially transformed in the People's War. Orwell's understanding of national identity—his own and other people's—was shaped by his own experiences and made all the richer for that.

We argue in this essay that understanding people's lives, emotions and intellectual reasoning is crucial to exploring national identity and that the co-production of historical knowledge provides an approach or methodology that allows for a deeper comprehension of people's self-identities by encouraging a diversity of people to participate in the research process. We argue that many academic historians have maintained an intellectual detachment between university history and public and community history, to the detriment of furthering historical knowledge, and we argue for a blurring of the boundaries between university and communities in exploring modern British history, and especially the history of national identities.

Co-production of research, which can be defined at its most basic as research *with* rather than *on* people, is an established part of a number of social and health sciences disciplines. It emerged from the involvement of service users in understanding needs of public service delivery (Gibbons, 1994; Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff, 2012), combined with critiques of academic disability studies, in which activists demanded that academics take seriously the voices of people with disabilities under the slogan 'nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 2000) and varieties of community-based participatory research and action research, which have been used in social policy, collaborative ethnography, education and social geography among other disciplines.

While History as a discipline has long experience of relationships with the public, it is at its base a discipline resting on individual research, traditionally in archives and libraries, where demands for quiet or silence further preclude collaborative working. Historians sift through hundreds and thousands of

documentary sources to reconstruct and understand what happened and why, but they usually undertake this as individuals, as lone scholars, who then publish sole authored books and journal articles. Historians consider that they have a special and individual relationship with the primary source materials of their research. For social scientists, anthropologists, health and other researchers there is a place for 'the public' to engage *with* research because it is based in the present. The primary research data emerges from 'the public' and therefore a direct relationship develops between the academic researcher and the primary sources. Similarly, this relationship applies to oral historians and sometimes contemporary historians, but most historians deal with pasts that are not linked directly to the present, often by sheer temporal distance. This encourages detachment between the process of research and the public, even if public audiences are sought for historical publications. As Christine L. Borgman argues:

> in the humanities the image of the 'lone scholar' spending months or years alone in dusty archives, followed years later by the completion of a dissertation or monograph, still obtains. … When one is groomed to work alone and does so for the years required to complete the doctorate, collaborative practices do not come easily.
>
> (Borgman, 2009)

There have been significant radical initiatives in the history profession, including a democratisation of academic history, which led to the 'history from below' perspective, particularly in social history since the early 1960s and in labour history and women's history. Oral, labour and women's historians operated across the boundaries between academia and community-based initiatives, considering that working with those they researched could have the effect of empowering people outside the universities, and that history was a method of reconfiguring authority. This resulted in the development of academic journals in the United Kingdom that were intended to include 'amateur' as well as university historians, such as *History Workshop*, *Oral History* and the Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History (now *Labour History Review*) and *Llafur* in Wales. Yet many of these have followed a path to traditional methods of peer review and publication that further strengthen the individualistic tendency of historical research.

Some oral historians theorised such ways of working as 'sharing authority'. In the UK, the Popular Memory Group in the early 1980s considered that the 'history from below' historians were not paying sufficient attention to the continuing imbalance of power and authority in the relationship between universities and 'the people' (Popular Memory Group, 1982). In the United States, oral historian Michael Frisch coined the phrase 'shared authority' in 1990 to describe the dialogical nature of the oral history interview, addressing the issue of authorship of historical stories. He explained that 'The interpretive and meaning-making process... [is] shared *by definition* [in oral history]—it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in

general' (Frisch, 2011: 127). Shared authority, in theory, allows the subjects of the research—the interviewees, or narrators, as many oral historians sharing authority prefer to call them—to shape the directions that the research project will take.[1]

Many of the practitioners of these 'new' histories emphasised their challenge to societal power structures and endemic inequalities, and were and are active in configuring changes in academia. They are, in that sense, citizen scholars, as John Tosh has described nineteenth and twentieth-century historians, on the one hand engaging in politics themselves through their own actions but also because 'history is a critical resource for the active citizen in a representative democracy' (Tosh, 2008: ix). But the barrier between public engagement with history in its enormous variety of forms and academic history is still discernible and real. There are incursions. The National Archives in 2014 called for citizen-historians to participate in the analysis and interpretation of hundreds of thousands of pages of First World War diaries 'to reveal the story of the British Army on the Western Front' (The National Archives, 2014). This is an excellent example of 'crowd-sourcing'—drawing on the resources of large numbers of individuals to undertake extensive tasks—but it also reveals the National Archives' awareness that the centenary is about contemporary Britain's understanding of itself, its articulation of its own multiple identities in response to a major historical event one hundred years ago. The centenary of the First World War is being commemorated by localities, institutions and ethnic groups and the commemorations will reveal myriad ways in which people are connected to the past before they were born. Such groups are in a good position to undertake research in collaboration with university academics to understand the impact of the centenary on British society and identities in the early twenty-first century. This was recognised by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), working in partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund, when they funded coordinating centres for the centenary based in universities, demanding that 'a significant proportion of ... [funded] activities should involve researchers and community groups in the co-production of research' (AHRC, 2013).

This is a very public history and shows the way in which co-production as an approach to academic research has been making inroads into the arts and humanities generally and into the study of the past. The First World War coordinating centres were just one of a number of grant opportunities from the AHRC that emphasise co-production as a methodology. The cross-research council Connected Communities programme places the methodology at the core of its mission, exploring the interaction between universities and 'community partners' in the pursuit of new knowledge (AHRC, n.d. a. and AHRC Leadership Fellows, n.d.).[2] But historians so far are not fully engaged with the co-production approach and many of them are just finding their way. As yet, there has not been a connection between the literature on 'shared authority', public history and what might be called 'archival history' (but see Kean, 2010). To some, co-production seems to be 'community history', which as Alison Twells has argued:

shares with local history and heritage a potentially fraught relationship with academic history. All three are sometimes seen by professional historians as amateurish, insufficiently rigorous in respect of method and lacking in contextualisation regarding content; they suffer dismissal as a set of stories with little reference to a broader national history.

(Twells, 2008)

Nonetheless many historians are engaging with community groups and other partners external to universities in research collaborations and it can be considered that the co-production of historical knowledge involves the analysis and interpretation of primary sources in such collaborations. The co-production of historical knowledge operates in terms of partnership between academically-trained historians and public groups or individuals, who bring expertise borne of experience and emotion, to undertake systematic historical research using primary source materials. Such research can be guided to reach appropriate levels of originality, significance and rigour, and is then communicated publically in a variety of forms, including peer-reviewed outputs. It is more than university historians engaging in the dissemination of their own research findings—co-production also involves active engagement at the stages of analysis and interpretation, and ideally in the design of the research project.

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An interlude: co-production of historical research at the University of Huddersfield

The following photographs spotlight a few of the collaborative research activities undertaken by historians and other academics. As a department, History at Huddersfield puts public engagement, partnership working. and co-production at the heart of its research activity and participates in research centres such as the Academy for British and Irish Studies to support multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches to co-production. Other projects include working with people with learning disabilities and mental health issues to tackle stigma, working with communities to explore their archaeological heritage, and working with charities such as Save the Children to understand humanitarianism.

Figure 1. Sound System Culture exhibit on display at the Tolson Museum, Huddersfield, October 2013. Sound System Culture is a community arts and heritage project that documents the lives and experiences of those who were involved in Huddersfield's reggae sound system culture. Led by Mandeep Samra and Let's Go (Yorkshire), it was community designed and supported by academic staff and PhD students, who joined the project at its dissemination stages. Sound system culture flourished in the UK as a result of the mass immigration of Caribbean people to Britain in the post-war period. The project involved several phases including the collection of oral histories, development of a photographic exhibition, production of a book and a film, and interactive sound installation built by Paul Huxtable of Axis Sound.

Figure 2. Attendees at the Sound System Culture Exhibition launch at the Tolson Museum. Over 70 people attended the event. The exhibition was curated by Mandeep Samra and was based on the collection of more than 30 oral histories with members of the community and hundreds of photographs.

Figure 3. Developing the Sound System Culture exhibition layout at the University of Huddersfield, March 2014, as part of the University's Research Festival. A group of postgraduate researchers worked together with Mandeep Samra to co-curate an exhibition of the Sound System Culture project at the university. Students helped select photos from the project collection of both donated historic material and contemporary photographs documenting the project's evolution. Students helped determine the layout and utilized University resources to produce enlargements of the photographs for display.

Figure 4. The Hepworth Wakefield is one of many community partners participating in Imagine: Connecting Communities Through Research. The gallery engaged in a collaboration with young people in Wakefield to imagine the future of the city by examining its past and present through exploring landscape art. A further co-produced project will involve the use of artwork and oral histories to explore and help enhance understandings of civic identities in the context of regeneration. This project has been initiated at the University but seeks to develop co-production through involvement in public events at the gallery.

Figures 1–4, Elizabeth Pente

Figure 5. Bhangra Renaissance is a Heritage Lottery funded project, with a vision to celebrate Panjabi heritage to preserve the future. It focuses on the origins of the dance form of Bhangra and its impact on the identity. VIRSA (which means heritage in Panjabi) is a community group made up of young volunteers who conduct research, practice and celebrate the heritage of South Asian Arts in Kirklees. The University has provided financial and intellectual support to the project, which emerged from a Masters of Arts by Research thesis undertaken by Hardeep Sahota, the project's leader. An extract of the book is included as part of this article.

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Co-production has the potential to expand understanding and experience of people's pasts.

In other disciplines it has been recognized that this is a necessary response to criticism that:

> research conducted in communities often fails to meaningfully include communities in its design and undertaking. Co-production is now also perceived as a solution to an argued 'relevance gap' in research and to the demands of 'impact'. Co-production in research aims to put principles of empowerment into practice, working 'with' communities and offering communities greater control over the research process and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience.
>
> (Durose et al. 2011: 2)

Historians have also identified a relevance gap for their discipline and a variety of solutions have been offered. *History and Policy* in the UK 'publishes high quality historical research freely accessible online and creates opportunities for historians, policy makers and journalists to connect. We do this to demonstrate the relevance of history to contemporary policy making and to increase the influence of historical research over current policy' (History and Policy). In the United States, Jo Guldi and David Armitage, the authors of *The History Manifesto*, published on open access, have argued that 'short-termism' has undermined the influence of historians and that providing histories of the *longue durée* (the long term) will enhance the relevance and influence of history and historians in addressing at least some of the major issues facing the contemporary world (Guldi and Armitage, 2014).

History & Policy and *The History Manifesto* remind us very much of the Fabian Society in late nineteenth century Britain, which sought to change society through being 'a fact-finding and fact-dispensing body' aimed at policy-makers rather than the people. An alternative approach, based on 'cultures of democracy', is being developed in Modern British Studies at the University of Birmingham, where it is intended that the relevance gap will be addressed through:

> new forms of public engagement and democratic participation through an ongoing programme called Witnessing Britain. Rather than provide another platform for social and political elites, these events will enable conversations about the everyday experiences of social, cultural, political and economic change that have defined modern Britain.
>
> (Modern British Studies @ Birmingham, 2014)

This approach is very welcome and is resulting in valuable conversations such as the 'Connecting Histories—Voices Past and Present' events at the Library of Birmingham, which seeks to 'share information about present work, activities and possibilities; and to think ahead towards the kinds of activities we would like to see in the city and how we want to see the city develop as a place to live, to work and

seek inspiration in, through its heritage and history, and by sharing and increasing our knowledge about the city and the groups and localities that comprise it' (Library of Birmingham, 2014 and Mohammed, 2014).[3]

Such events are designed to ensure that the multicultural nature of Birmingham is represented in histories of Britain. Linda Shopes has suggested that there are mutual benefits in the collaboration entailed in sharing authority:

> working with a community group to develop a public history project or program is complicated and at times contentious. Although oral history provides outstanding opportunities to democratize the practice of history—to 'share authority' ... as interviewer and interviewee, scholar and community work together to understand the past, in practice the process requires negotiation, give-and-take, and considerable goodwill. Scholars do not get to exercise critical judgment quite so forcefully or conform to current historiographic thinking quite so deftly; laypeople do not get to romanticize the past quite so easily.[4]

(Shopes, 2002: 597)

Negotiations like these are certainly needed but co-production addresses the deeper underlying issue of the chronic underrepresentation of black Britons in higher education, highlighted by 'Connecting Histories' in Birmingham and the What's Happening in Black British History? (#WHBBH) initiative by Miranda Kaufman and Michael Ohajuru (Ackah, 2014).[5] Co-production of historical research does not address this fundamental structural problem, but sustained collaborative work, with high quality research outputs, provides a way of ensuring that British historiographies are informed by and engage with Black British and other marginalized histories, while at the same time empowering communities with the research skills that underpin evidence-based political argument. As James Green has argued, 'Historical narratives can do more than redeem the memory of past struggles; they can help people think of themselves as historical figures with crucial moral and political choices to make, like those who came before them' (Green, 2000: 11).

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VIRSA – Celebrating our past, preserving our future

Hardeep Sahota

Bhangra Renaissance is a Heritage Lottery funded project, which focuses on the origins of the dance form of Bhangra and its impact on the identity and shared heritage of participants in Kirklees and across the region. VIRSA (which means heritage in Panjabi) is a community group made up of young volunteers who conduct research, practice and celebrate the heritage of South Asian Arts in Kirklees. It works with a range of services from the museums, libraries, local schools, colleges and University of Huddersfield. The project included an exhibition, a series of dance performances, and an academic symposium at the university. Hardeep Sahota, the project's coordinator, also wrote a book. Here he explains the motivation behind the project and its meaning in relation to identities in the United Kingdom:

> *Touching the ground to honour Mother*
> *Earth they evoke the spiritual essence of*
> *their fertile land that has bestowed*
> *abundant harvests.*
>
> *The fields of golden wheat witness the' steady*
> *regal pace of the dancers, as they slowly*
> *Gather speed*
>
> *As fine dust is raised high into the air,*
> *dancers begin to move with exploding*
> *vibrancy, energy and zeal. Their costumes*
> *Are myriad colours with intricate embroidery*
> *That shimmers in the heat of the India*
> *Sun. The thundering sound of the dhol drum*
> *being played resonates through every kernel*
> *of the body. These are Bhangra dancers*
> *from the land of the five rivers, the Panjab.*

These are the visions in my mind's eye, evoking my cultural and spiritual heritage, when I touch the floor before any Bhangra dance performance. I am an artist and active practitioner of the art form of Bhangra, which has formed an integral part of my life and my identity. Bhangra has a multi-layered history, and has evolved in modern times to form a crucial element in most Panjabi social interactions. The dance has both physical and emotional benefits, as it promotes fitness, reduces stress and gives enjoyment. Through Bhangra, spirituality can be expressed; through Bhangra, sexuality can be expressed. It is a natural, earthy dance with warrior

rhythms that seduce the dancer and the audience. Bhangra is being able to shed your inhibitions completely, to move to the music without any hesitation, not thinking about a particular move. At best a dialogue through body movements is achieved; it becomes instinctive, spontaneous and interactive. Gesturing through Bhangra moves with fellow dancers inspires a connection with them, and for me, personally, the realisation of a connection to a higher spiritual plane.

What is Bhangra? There have been many explanations suggested to me throughout my life, but as a second generation British Sikh I have to look back at my childhood, to the music and dance of the time which formed my ideas of Bhangra. Research suggests that the release of Malkit Singh's *Gur Naal Ishq Mitha* in 1986 was one of the defining moments in contemporary Bhangra. The first sound on this track is a pulsating dhol beat; this sound defined the way Panjabi music would move forward in the UK and the Bhangra industry worldwide for future generations. Malkit Singh emulated the sounds of the Panjabi harvest and presented different strands of music, cultural and oral traditions. What we know of Bhangra came together at this point; but the story behind Bhangra's renaissance runs much deeper than this. It's not just about music and dance. We need to look at the fundamental elements that were synthesised to create what is termed 'Bhangra' by the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the South Asian diaspora. Exploring the historical, spiritual, academic and secular components of the Panjab, as well as how the language evolved, we may head towards a better understanding of Bhangra.

Sahota, H. (2014). *Bhangra: mystics, music and migration*. Huddersfield: Huddersfield University Press. Further information about the project is available at http://www.virsa.info/

Collaboration and co-production also engage academics with the history that goes on outside universities.

Benjamin Filene, writing about the United States, points out that:

> History is thriving in popular culture—on TV, in films and novels, online, and in people's living rooms. If interest in the past is booming while museums and sites are struggling, we need to reassess. Perhaps we in museums have focused too much on what we think people need instead of what they want. What drives outsider historians?
>
> (Filene, 2012: 14)

Faced with a potential fall in application numbers to university history courses in the United Kingdom, a co-productive approach to research, a response to 'the market' for history, may well ensure that History courses become relevant and useful. Green argues that unless scholars 'engage in social struggles, they risk indulging in obscure discourse that has "no echo outside the academy since the critics have no material ties to people, parties and movements outside"' (Green, 2011: 4. Green is quoting Michael Walzer).

This is about embedding impact in the project from the outset, thinking about how the research has public utility. Clearly, there is some potential for 'user-inspired research' to come into conflict with academic freedom and autonomy but we are not suggesting a commercial model for co-production. It is the individual expertise of the historian in their chosen area of research that is of value to most collaborators. Indeed, we would argue that co-production allows historians to spend more time with their research, conducting a longer conversation about it, developing it, improving it, and seeing through the consequences of the research *after* publication. Furthermore, public collaboration in the research process may well have the effect of giving a mandate to historical research and therefore making it more likely that policy-makers listen to the voice of university historians.

There are, of course, many different models of collaboration and co-production. Steve Martin has examined modes of co-production that involved practitioners at different stages of the research process, sometimes at only one or two of the stages or the throughout the entirety of the process. He identifies a range from 'low levels of involvement by practitioners, for example as the providers of data or passive recipients of research findings' to projects in which 'practitioners play an active role in commissioning, overseeing and learning from studies' (Martin, 2010: 211. See figure 6). Similarly, the nature of the external co-producer is likely to vary enormously, from major cultural institutions to grass-roots organisations. The AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award programme tends to provide support for relationships with large institutions given that the scheme requires a co-supervisor in the partner institution, but provides clear examples of PhD students acting as intermediaries between universities and external partners (AHRC, n.d. b).

Collaboration is highlighted as a defining element in practicing *public* history but even such organisations as the National Council on Public History beyond noting that the 'collaborative approach inspires regular debates about a role for "shared authority" and the proper place for the "professionalization" of local history,' provides few guidelines on how collaboration should occur (NCPH n.d.). We suggest that it is liberating to recognize that there is not an ideal type of co-production and that the process can be 'defined in the doing' with success measured incrementally.

Utilisation	Academic independence		Design				Evidence gathering		Analysis		Dissemination	
			Initiation	Scoping and specification	Commissioning	Methodology	Literature review	Data gathering	Processing evidence	Reporting	Publication	Learning
		Informant						X				
		Recipient						X				X
		Endorser		X				X				X
		Commissioner	X	X	X	X		X			X	X
		Co-researcher	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 6. Modes of co-production of research identified by Steve Martin (2010)

The digital age adds many new possibilities for co-production as the NCPH note:

> As with public scholarship in general, digital technologies play an increasingly important role in the work of public historians, creating new spaces where they share their work and encounter fresh and varied audiences.
>
> (NCPH, n.d.)

Beyond ways to share work and encounter new audiences, digital technologies allow for public input as well, extending the possibilities of crowd-sourcing and collective interpretation. The 2014 conference of the International Federation for Public History addressed this theme exploring the on-going revolution that digital technologies create in the field of public and academic research (IFPH, n.d.).

Many academics have concerns that participation in the research process by outsiders will not produce the highest quality research outputs and that while there are certain historical possibilities in co-production they tend to be as later outcomes after publication. Co-production, some think, is better linked to co-curation of museum exhibitions, for example. But again it is possible to learn from the ways in which museums operate. For example, Manchester Museum ran a programme called 'Collective Conversations,' which they describe as 'an ongoing, award-winning way of working … based on notions of creating intercultural dialogue through developing an expanded "community of interpretation," and negotiating the interpretation of the museum's objects' (Lynch and Alberti, 2010: 19). Academic

historians could consider how such 'communities of interpretation' might operate in advance of writing and publication. If many museums think that community engagement enhances the quality of exhibits, then historians might explore how similar processes might enhance the 'originality, significance and rigour' of research outputs. For a more cautious approach it is again possible to learn from oral history. Lorraine Sitzia suggests that 'it is important to realize that many products are possible from one project, and perhaps embracing this concept frees us from the inevitable restrictions that come with shared authority' (Sitzia, 2003: 99). In this way, historians can still produce academic single authored monographs and journal articles, but also produce other outputs in collaboration with their partners. Nonetheless, we are seeking to explore ways in which peer-reviewed academic outputs can be co-written, considering that this is important in ensuring fair distribution of power and authorship.

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Proud to say I am Black and British?

Milton Brown

The following passage is from an unpublished piece of autobiographical writing in which Milton Brown, chief executive of Kirklees Local TV, discusses aspects of his life and their impact on his sense of identity. Milton has established Kirklees African Descent Community Media Productions to explore histories of immigration in West Yorkshire in partnership with the University of Huddersfield.

My father and mother migrated from Jamaica in 1960 and 1961 respectively. I was born in October 1961 at Huddersfield Princess Royal hospital. My younger brother was born in 1962 and my sister was born in 1958 in Jamaica and came to England in July 1962. Our family heritage was typical of many migrants from the Caribbean and in many ways our experiences of the difficulties were shared when immigration waves increased during this period of time. There was an inherent resistance and hostility from a large percentage of Britain's white indigenous communities. Indeed, any families arriving from the Commonwealth to build a new life faced hostility from those who did not want them here....

My father worked in a plastics foundry on 12-hour shifts and my mother worked in a wool mill on 12-hour split shifts. Mother put herself through college and became one of the first black computer operators for Huddersfield Ben Shaw's Limited in the early 1970s. From 1965, Mother was a community activist, galvanising the community to be socially, economically and culturally proud and progressive. Father worked extremely hard and left the foundry in the mid-1980s to become a metro bus driver until he retired and returned to Jamaica in 2004. Mother was well known and respected for her community work and for having the ability to positively and cogently argue the case for the African Caribbean community to have a meaningful voice in the town of Huddersfield. Father was known within the community to be a very serious man who always said what he meant and meant what he said. Many of my father's peers would consider carefully what they would say around him and feared his anger if they disagreed with him....

In June 1980 I joined the Royal Air Force as a Regiment Gunner. My first six weeks at RAF Swinderby were a nightmare. Never before had anyone, regardless of his or her status, called me a nigger and I did not retaliate. The Sergeant and the Corporal, whose names I remember to this day continually warned the black airmen not to form an oil slick (two black people is an oil slick). Nicknames were given to black airmen such as 'chalky', 'midnight' and 'sun block'. Interestingly, they never gave me one. In fact the Corporal told me that the hierarchy was watching me 'very closely'. Every other morning during bed inspection my bed was singled out, and on occasions they would throw my bedding out the window. Other white airmen would be confused; many of them could not iron, sew, cook, or wash clothes. Since

my mother's death I had been doing these household chores for myself. On occasion it was me who would help them sort out their beds for inspection. I was so upset, and cried under the sheets quietly every night for about two weeks, but I knew I could not go back to the streets and father. The fact that I could not argue or fight back and had to accept this kind of racial abuse was destroying my very soul...

In 2011 I was awarded a Fellowship by the United Nations for People of African Descent. I felt proud. Has it been worth it? Do I feel any better about the issues of race discrimination and prejudice? Do I feel a sense of achievement now? Can I say, with pride, conviction and honesty that I am Black British or even English? In spite of all my achievements and the barriers that I have faced I can honestly say no. No, I do not feel Black British or English. From 1961 to the present day I feel the country has not progressed enough for people of African Descent. Still we see 52% of 16–25-year-olds from the African Decent Community unemployed. There are just 30 black male head teachers in England's 21,600 state schools, triggering accusations that the country's education system is 'institutionally racist'. Furthermore:

> 'Leading black academics are calling for an urgent culture change at UK universities as figures show there are just 50 black British professors out of more than 14,000, and the number has barely changed in eight years, according to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Only the University of Birmingham has more than two black British professors, and six universities out of 133 have more than two black professors from the UK or abroad. The statistics, from 2009/10, define black as 'Black Caribbean or Black African' (Shepherd, 2011).

> On reflection, my father was a very determined man. He would look people in the eye and consistently express what he wanted to say and he meant every word. As a youth I found this very destructive. As an adult, I value the strength and character of the man and walk in his footsteps with that same courage and self-belief.

> I am of the view that something has gone wrong in the way the African Descent Community see themselves. I believe there is an issue of displacement, a sense of giving up, a loss of hope, purpose and the motivation to collectively change our circumstances. I see and hear several successful black men and women and often wonder if they feel Black British, and if so, what are the cultural markers for them? Could their experience of success be the stimulus that provides a road map for the rest of us and enable me to feel proud to say I am Black and British?

For further details about Kirklees Local Television and their series of films about ethnic minority histories, see http://www.kirkleeslocaltv.com/

The co-production of historical research seems to offer significant advantages in understanding national identities.

It promises to offer insights not necessarily open to university academics in understanding the life experiences of people in the past and the present. Furthermore, it underpins notions of the development of British culture through a series of conversations about the ways in which people within Britain live their lives in a world based on international mobility. It allows ways of understanding how the wide variety of identities of place, gender and ethnicity contribute to the negotiation of national identities in specific spatial contexts and at specific historical moments. Stephen High, in a considered and impressive argument about sharing authority in oral history, digital story-telling and engaged scholarship does point out that collaboration 'is not always possible or even desirable' (High, 2009: 29). We would agree with such a statement, but we would ask all historians of national identity to consider whether the opportunities provided by co-production are likely to contribute not just to 'good history' but to better history.

Notes

1. For shared authority see, for example, Michael Frisch, 1990, and Steven High, Lisa Ndejuru, and Kristen O'Hare, 2009. The discussion of shared authority has limitations. It does not seem that a synthesis of thinking has been systematically undertaken and the notion is somewhat limited in oral history, since while it applies to the process and creating the primary source it usually does not extend into interpretations and outputs.

2. A major project we are working on at the moment is called Imagine: Connecting Communities Through Research. It asks community groups to think about how to 'Imagine better futures and make them happen' and our role is to consider how community groups and voluntary organisations use a reading of the past to think about themselves in the future. It is funded by the ESRC and AHRC under the Connected Communities programme. http://www.imaginecommunity.org.uk/

3. As we write, Birmingham City Council's budget proposals for 2015/16, a response to the austerity of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, will see 100 library staff losing their jobs and opening hours reduced from 73 to 40 hours per week.

4. An excellent case study in West Yorkshire is provided by Fiona Cosson (2010).

5. For WHBBH https://www.facebook.com/BlackBritHist). See also the panel discussion at University College London, March 2014, on 'Why isn't my professor black?' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBqgLK9dTk4

A note on the production of this article

There are numerous people who have shaped our thinking on co-production and history, including community groups and academics from across the Imagine project, including Kate Pahl, Sarah Banks and Angie Hart (who introduced us to the notion of 'defining in the doing'), Natalie Walton, Steve Pool, Kim Aumann, Zanib Rasool and others. In and around Huddersfield we have had conversations with Rob Ellis, Jodie Matthews, as well as Jo Dyrlaga, Alice Brumby and Charlotte Mallinson at the university and in the town especially with Mandeep Samra from Sound System Culture. Nicole Harding kindly read through the essay. This wide range of discussion allowed us to develop our thinking and Paul and Liz drafted this essay from previously unpublished writing, drawing on each other's learning. Hardeep Sahota and Milton Brown were invited to contribute—Paul and Milton gave a joint paper at the first 'What's Happening in Black British History?' event in London in October 2014. In his reading of the essay, Milton encouraged us to foreground the importance of community partners in understanding feelings and Hardeep, as ever, encouraged us to think about history as being so much more than texts. But for all this collaboration before writing, we would consider this to be towards the lower end of the spectrum of co-production. We do hope the essay and its parallel writing format recognizes the distinct contributions to co-production. We have taken the view that steps towards successful co-production are better than declaring the methodology unfeasible.

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