UK community cohesion is being increasingly challenged by right wing groups utilising discourses of Islamophobic hostility. In the research setting of South Yorkshire and against a background of low ethnic diversity and industrial decline, the British National Party (BNP) has achieved some electoral success. However an interfaith community dialogue project has been working to challenge the growth of BNP extremism by engaging groups from white mono-cultural communities in dialogue exploring the causes and implications of prejudice on which extremism feeds. Community cohesion and peacebuilding methods generally maintain that in such circumstances bringing groups together in a process of inter-community dialogue can challenge hostile prejudice. However findings arising through this research argue that low levels of ethnic diversity and limited opportunities to meet other groups requires a different approach. This paper describes a method of intra-community dialogue developed to meet the needs of communities in the research locality that aims to challenge prejudice and hostility by enabling people to talk with each other, inside their groups, through a process of facilitated non-judgemental dialogue.

**Key words.** Community Cohesion, Peacebuilding, Extremist, Intra-community, Dialogue.

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Introduction

This paper arises from action research exploring the extent to which secular and religious peacebuilding may prove to be a resource for contemporary UK community cohesion. The research was centred on an interfaith community dialogue project set up to counter the divisive narratives of the British National Party (BNP), an extreme right wing group postulating the defence of white working class Christians against threats posed by immigrants and Muslims. As part of its work the community dialogue project developed an innovative process of ‘in-group’ or intra-community dialogue which may be transferrable to environments where tensions exist between groups but where it is neither feasible nor sensible to bring them together in inter-community dialogue. Drawing on peacebuilding and community cohesion strategies, this paper sets out to illustrate these dialogue processes in two ways. Firstly by exploring aspects of the development of right wing extremism that precipitated the project’s development and the consequent practical learning that helped develop intra-community processes. Secondly through an illustration of the methodological dialogue framework arising from the research which may be of interest if the approach is to be replicated elsewhere. Generally speaking any transferable learning arising from this research for interventions within the field of human security lies in the concept of prevention: in checking the development of tensions that might otherwise precipitate a crisis.

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper arise from action research carried out between October 2010 and December 2011. A range of literature and theoretical knowledge guiding those involved in action research has proved relevant to this study. Gustaven’s exploration of the relationship between theory and action research findings, together with Mcniff et al., and Mcniff’s and Whitehead’s guidance regarding the conceptual and practical management of complex action research projects have proved useful. Montero’s exploration of the participatory nature of action research illustrates aspects of the researcher’s cooperative engagement with the community dialogue project. However, Stringer’s description of community based action research as “...a collaborative approach to enquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems.” Most concisely expresses the fieldwork method employed. Building on this position the researcher’s key role was agreed as one focused on capturing relevant learning so as to support the project’s develop-
ment of a dialogue framework. This learning forms the basis of the research outcomes presented in this paper.

Action research focused on the community dialogue project’s involvement with nine dialogue groups that met during 2010 and 2011. The research method comprised three elements. Firstly, semi-structured interviews with members of the project management committee that explored a range of issues including the rationale for embarking upon the uncharted territory of intra–community dialogue. Secondly, the researcher became an observer and participant of a consortium providing supervision, critical peer reflection and oversight of the work of those facilitating dialogue. This provided an overview of the strategic development of the dialogue method and a detailed understanding of how learning was arising from and being applied to individual dialogue groups. Thirdly, the researcher undertook individual and group interviews with participants of dialogue session. During these interviews participants were encouraged to reflect critically on their experience of dialogue. Interview outcomes were fed into the reflective learning of consortium meetings, creating a contemporaneous link between the work of facilitators, participant experience and developing learning.

An important aspect of the researcher’s engagement was agreement that all individuals and groups would be strictly anonymous. Because of this the research project is not named since its unique activities would enable localities and groups to be identified. This would undermine both the confidential nature of discussion and might create a risk of groups and individuals being vulnerable to harassment from extremists.

**Intra-community dialogue**

Before proceeding further it may be helpful at this early stage to summarise some key differences, identified by this research, between inter and intra-community dialogue. Where communities face each other with hostility and belligerence, community cohesion and peacebuilding strategies commonly advocate dialogue between groups as essential in generating a climate disposed towards peaceful coexistence. Such processes are generally referred to as inter-community dialogue and have the usual aim of exploring difference between groups, identifying common ground and in doing so reducing tensions that could be exploited to generate inter-group hostility. However the paper argues that this approach is not the only way forward and that in some circumstances contact between groups is neither possible nor is it the most effective way forward. This may be because a group is neither ready nor willing to meet members of other groups, or there is no opportunity to do so. Given such a situation how are hostile prejudices and stereotypes towards an out-group to be addressed? The paper argues that the way forward may lie within intra-community dialogue. This involves people talking with each other in a non-judgemental environment, inside their groups, and with the aim of exploring the difficult feelings on which extremists feed but without the expectation of participants meeting another group.

**The Community Dialogue Project**

Established in March 2010, the community dialogue project’s inception and implementation built on a stand taken by local faith leaders during election periods in opposing the extreme right. Employing both public and charitable funding, the project describes its vision as: "...a resilient, interconnected society which embraces diversity as normal, positive and enriching,
and in which we share a real commitment to justice and equality for all”. The project’s key outcome is to work in such ways that: “Communities in South Yorkshire are more resilient to racist politics and divisive ideologies and feel empowered to challenge racism and faith-based prejudice in themselves and others.”

The project was developed and managed by people with a spectrum of religious belief and led by a management committee with responsibility to oversee achievement of three core activities. Firstly, supporting and encouraging interaction between groups and communities that do not ordinarily mix. Secondly, developing a communications strategy to counter the effect of divisive reporting in the media. Thirdly, the provision of ‘safe spaces’ dialogue sessions within which difficult conversations around the causes and implications of racism and faith-based prejudice could take place. This third activity is the central feature of the paper’s discussion and involves dialogue facilitators meeting with groups from across the locality prepared to become engaged with the project.

At commencement the community dialogue project prioritised working with Christian congregations, reflecting a concern that BNP support was growing within such groups. All dialogue groups were set in communities where the BNP had made political headway or were looking to increase their support. However it should be noted that the BNP was not the only form of extremism operating in the research locality. Other right wing extremist groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) were similarly active: furthermore, three of the four bombers responsible for the atrocities perpetrated in London during 2005 had their homes in adjacent districts. However whilst these other forms of extremism are equally corrosive for community cohesion, only the BNP had begun to successfully cross a threshold which spanned their organisational history of racism, street disorder and direct violence and a post-millennium modernised image of respectability and their defence of national values. In doing so the BNP had made significant progress in gaining support in local authority, parliamentary and European elections.

From the outset, the project utilised a concept of non-judgmental dialogue in its work with communities. This is not to deny the importance of mainstream anti-racist and anti-prejudice strategies and campaigns. Rather it reflected a belief amongst project founders that whilst vociferously challenging racism may prevent the expression of hostile behaviours and rhetoric, and is rightly targeted on extremist groups such as the BNP, such strategies do not reach far into the lives of individuals and their communities. Indeed a significant factor behind establishing the project was the view that people felt there was little time to talk about fears and experiences leading to prejudice, felt inhibited in doing so, and feared opening themselves up to accusations of racism. By contrast groups such as the BNP have had no compunction in encouraging such discussion, as the following section of the paper illustrates.

**Right Wing Extremism in the Research Locality**

The South Yorkshire districts of Sheffield, Doncaster, Barnsley and Rotherham include communities scoring significantly above the UK national average in terms of economic, social and health deprivation. The district can be seen as characterised by the decline of heavy engineering industries and the continuing aftermath of a bitter mining dispute that took place during 1984 and 1985. With the exception of Sheffield, cultural and ethnic diversity is well below the

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7. Project Documentation 2010
8. The principle funding body withdrew support for this activity just before project commencement.
9. Interviews with project founders and managers. December 2010
national average with long established, white mono-cultural working class communities being typical features of the area. Some research participants referred to their locality as ones with families living for many generations in the same community, with limited social and geographical mobility and very little chance to encounter cultural or ethnic difference. In many ways the contrast with urban conurbations in other parts of the UK, where ethnic diversity is a constant feature of everyday life, could not be more striking.

Industrial action which flared in the research region during the winter of 2009 brought to the surface many of the pressures experienced in the locality. Employment opportunities that some communities had thought rightfully theirs vanished as an international energy conglomerate, unseen and without warning, commissioned multinational subcontractors to have work undertaken by non-UK nationals. Overnight, the ‘other’ was on the threshold, taking resources that individuals and communities saw as rightfully theirs. Neighbourhoods in the research locality were already reeling from the effects of the global financial crisis, where the behaviour of distant banking entrepreneurs had suddenly and directly affected the security of many ordinary people. Now they faced a new challenge. Globalised capitalism had made a further abrupt and unwelcome intrusion into their communities in ways that had a direct impact on the capacity of communities and individuals to meet their basic and aspirational needs. Limited space prevents a much warranted discussion of the relationship between globalised financial systems and community well-being. However Cooper’s critique of community cohesion policies provides a succinct analysis of how economic factors directly affect the local environment. In his view: “The local and the global have become increasingly tangled, with social well-being at the local level increasingly dependent on decisions made by supranational institutions... and powerful international leaders at the global level.”

The British National Party (BNP), with a history of racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic cultural violence but with a new postmillennial discourse of Islamaphobia and protecting the white working class, was soon involved in the ensuing protests which arose from this entanglement of the local and global. Despite opposition to their presence from workers, politicians and trade unionists, the group were active both on picket lines and in operating a web site coordinating industrial action. Although mainstream politicians echoed the BNP mantra of ‘British jobs for British workers’, they were powerless to act against migrants whose arrival was justified by EU employment regulation, but whose presence was perceived as a threat. Whilst the establishment appeared disconnected from the concerns of communities, the BNP were opportunistically articulating the anger, disappointment and betrayal felt by some. By doing so the BNP positioned itself so as to open a portal to an underpinning ideology of national values and resources threatened by multiculturalism and ethnic diversity.

Surprisingly, in a society commonly perceived as secular, this ideology gives a major focus to Christianity and religious identity that the BNP have melded with nationalism and British values.

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11. The recently abolished Yorkshire Forward Development Agency estimated that in 2009 the Yorkshire and Humber economy shrank by 5.4 per cent as a direct result of the 2008 banking crisis with employment contracting by 2.8 per cent (Yorkshire Forward. 2010).
in an unhealthy and belligerent cocktail familiar to peacebuilding practitioners.\textsuperscript{14} A 2009 internet blog credited to Mr. Griffin, the BNP leader stated: "The British National Party is the only political party which genuinely supports Britain’s Christian heritage. It is the only party which will defend our ancient faith and nation from the threat of Islamification. It’s not racist to support British jobs for British workers or to be opposed to militant Islam, it’s just common sense and in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{15} The group’s alignment with Christianity can be seen as a necessary counterpoint to their anti-Muslim rhetoric rather than any deep-seated spiritual awakening. However the stance also chimes with discourses of national values, provides a cloak of respectability to Islamophobic policies, and repositions the group away from their aggressive history of prejudice and racism. Eatwell’s and Goodwin’s analysis of 21st century extremism sees the BNP replacing crude biological racism with a more sophisticated position based on hostility to multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. In particular Islam and by implication Muslims are portrayed by the BNP as a source of criminality, intolerance, and in general terms a threat to the national community – and the attacks of the 11th of September 2001 and the Madrid and London atrocities are used by the BNP to homogenize violence as behaviour typical of an entire religion.\textsuperscript{16}

Connecting with public anxiety about terrorism is only one element of BNP strategy. Goodwin et al. suggest that a concern to understand local anxieties and especially perceived grievances around the fair allocation of resources is just as important in establishing a grassroots BNP presence, especially in areas where voters feel excluded from mainstream political parties.\textsuperscript{17} And is evident in election slogans such as: "We are the Labour Party your grandfathers voted for."\textsuperscript{18} Bottero’s discussion of the white working class is usefully set beside this analysis. In her view: "...their voiceless status and... increasing social marginalisation... [and] feelings of betrayal (by liberal elites and, more pointedly, the Labour Party) might drive the white working class into the arms of the BNP."\textsuperscript{19} Her analysis was reflected in themes which emerged during a number of dialogue sessions including one which took place in a locality with a strong BNP presence which saw one participant comment: "What’s the point...nobody listens to us...the BNP chap is decent and understands our point of view."

Set against this discussion a series of themes can be identified that lay behind the growth of extremism in the research locality. The decline of traditional heavy manufacturing and mining accompanied by the decay of institutions such as trade unions and working men’s clubs that traditionally linked white working class communities and the Labour Party - and which might provide a counter narrative to extremism - had profoundly disturbed communities. Feelings of unwarranted change, powerlessness, loss and bitterness allied with experience of class prejudice were themes that have regularly surfaced in dialogue sessions. This sense of alienation was allied with significant experience of deprivation that the BNP successfully articulated as an outcome of mainstream political neglect and the deprivation of resources that have flowed instead to the ‘other’. The BNP narrative framed communities as ignored by mainstream politi-
cal groups, defenceless in the face of competitive immigration and threatened by the influence of multiculturalism and Islam. The BNP state that in standing up for neglected communities and advocating a return to traditional British rather than multicultural values they are articulating a view felt by many. However viewed through the lens of peacebuilding, protracted social conflict and social identity theory, the BNP can be seen as drawing hostile boundaries surrounding communal identity groups. Their construction of a malevolent out-group challenging a disadvantaged in-group represented a potential spiralling in tensions between communities.

Against this background the community dialogue project sought to establish opportunities which could challenge the BNP whose success stemmed in part from a strategy of talking empathically and openly with communities about their perceived sense of grievance and disadvantage. Whilst not consciously setting out to replicate this approach the project sought from the outset to develop a process which was both non-judgemental and challenging. The next section provides a description of these dialogue processes together with an analysis of key factors which influenced their development, and a review of the critical research themes which arose as outcomes of implementation. The processes explored are not a prescriptive formula for successful intra-community dialogue. Rather, the intention is to summarise key learning that arose through developing innovative arrangements tailored for each unique dialogue group. This learning may be relevant in other settings, providing it is customised to meet the needs of a particular environment.

A model of intra-community dialogue

This research identified a process for intra-community dialogue made up of three elements comprising:

- Principles for undertaking inter-community dialogue;
- Core skills which those facilitating dialogue need to be competent in; and
- A broad framework for planning and providing a dialogue session.

What were the factors behind developing this approach? It may be helpful to begin a response by providing some analysis of the communities and groups where dialogue sessions took place.

Developing intra-community dialogue: group setting

The data which underpins the dialogue processes and research outcomes is drawn from research with facilitators and group participants involved in nine dialogue groups distributed across the research locality involving approximately 84 participants. These groups were convened between July 2010 and April 2011. All groups were set in white monocultural communities. Some groups were located in working class estates; other groups reflected localities of greater affluence and a more diverse class structure. Table 1 provides an overview of the groups with which facilitators worked and from which participants were identified who agreed to be interviewed.

At first glance, table 1 suggests groups had much in common. The majority was convened by members of the clergy and had their roots in faith-based activity. This can be seen to reflect

both the project’s interfaith background and partnership working across the locality, giving easy access to ready-made networks of locally based religious groups which were used to publicise the project’s aims and objectives. However closer analysis reveals important differences which were relevant to developing dialogue processes.

**Group convenors**

People who convened dialogue groups where in a role which could be considered as one of leadership. In seven of the nine groups this person also became a member of the dialogue group, creating some debate within the facilitator consortium regarding the role of group leaders and the need for facilitators to take control of group activity in order to perform their task effectively.

**Number of sessions**

Three groups committed themselves to three dialogue sessions, three groups for two sessions, and three groups one session each. This variation was both a reflection of early uncertainty on the part of the project organisers with regard to how many sessions would be most effective in achieving their objectives, as well as the amount of time participants were able to commit. For facilitators, two or three sessions provided the best opportunities for building a relation-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Convener</th>
<th>No of sessions</th>
<th>No of participant</th>
<th>Type of group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1 (pilot group)</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Specially convened faith-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Specially convened faith/ secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Existing Liturgy group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>Parochial Church Council</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Specially convened faith-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Community Worker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Recreational group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Church campaigning group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 7</td>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Church governance group/evaluative group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 8</td>
<td>Church Management Team</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Church governance group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 9</td>
<td>Community Worker</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Recreational group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ship with a group and delivering facilitation that met the group’s needs in a way which was consistent with project objectives. Groups two and nine expressed interest in taking dialogue further by meeting people from other communities.

**Types of Group**

The nine groups can be seen to comprise 6 distinct types of groups. This differentiation is important because it directly impacted on the way in which facilitators worked with a particular group. The group cohort comprised:

- Three specially convened groups: where members of congregations were asked if they would like to take part in a dialogue session.
- One liturgy group.
- Two recreational groups - where people met for an existing reason. One group was a ‘mother and toddler’ group and another a social meeting of older people.
- One evaluative group - where a group undertook an evaluation of project facilitation processes rather than fully participating in dialogue.
- One church governance group - which involved a religious organisation’s management team.
- One church poverty action campaigning group.

**Implications**

Three groups were specially convened for the purposes of a dialogue session. Some facilitators held that these types of group would have a different set of dynamics and require a different facilitation process - for example people getting to know each other and feel secure enough to talk about difficult issues. On the other hand, the remaining six pre-existing groups would be likely to have an established pattern of dynamics, behaviour, and group security requiring different strategies for facilitators to get group members engaged in dialogue. Two groups, a governance group and a campaigning group, had an established purpose and remit, and saw an opportunity for dialogue about prejudice and racism as being important for their development, or consistent with activities in campaigning to address inequalities. Critical learning arising from these two groups centred on the usefulness of building a relationship with group members by identifying the common ground between project and group objectives. The project’s involvement with a liturgy group brought faith values and theology to the forefront of dialogue. Facilitators who worked with this group had values congruent with those of the group, emphasising the importance of matching appropriate facilitators with the identity of a particular dialogue participants. The evaluative group gave the governance body of a faith partnership organisation the opportunity to take part in a dialogue session. This group offered useful suggestions for project development, especially in being sensitive to issues which might be current concerns in some communities, for example domestic violence, but opted primarily for an evaluation of facilitation rather than engaging in dialogue objectives.

The two recreational groups presented contrasting responses which both proved crucial in developing dialogue methodology. The ‘mother and toddler’ group, which came at mid-point in the sequence of groups, proved challenging to engage. Whilst some group members did become involved in discussion, the majority failed to respond to the facilitators initiatives. Some important and basic lessons were learnt regarding continuity and clear communication between facilitators and individuals involved with groups who have asked for a dialogue session.
to be convened. They included: those convening a dialogue session would need to keep group members involved with and supportive of the initiative and crucially, facilitators must ensure that all participants give permission for their involvement. By contrast, work with a recreational group for over 50s, which came later in the sequence of sessions, provided the setting for one of the most complex pieces of dialogue facilitation, and proved important for crystallising key aspects of learning around building a relationship with a group and exploring prejudice.

Our Community

However this analysis only conveys part of the picture. Facilitator consortium meetings and interviews with participants revealed more complex and meaningful ways of describing their communities and groups. Some participants articulated a strong sense of community, defined as ‘... our village... our estate... our church’. Others saw their community, which might comprise a few streets on an estate, as a protective entity against threats posed by outsiders, ‘... people who aren’t like us, who don’t think as we do.’ Participants also described communities within communities, with boundaries based around age, length of tenure, behaviour and dress or an individual’s position on a spectrum of faith belief ranging from liberal to evangelical.

One of the more surprising research findings was that irrespective of class or occupation, many participants articulated a sense of community, that focused on an empathy with the loss and continuing underlying anger arising from the 1984/1985 miners’ strike - as if this traumatic event bought the locality together as one community. The sense of grievance which the strike continues to generate has been an important factor in the advance of the BNP, illustrating the party’s capacity to draw opportunistic links between hostility to outsiders, community perceptions of betrayal by mainstream labour movement groups, and resentment at the unfair resolution of a bitter and divisive conflict.

Developing intra-community dialogue; the community dialogue project perspective

Research interviews with project founders and managers revealed sensitivity to the needs of communities and especially the sense of alienation and disenchantment felt by some. This awareness appeared crucial in developing a concept of intra-community dialogue that emerged at an early stage of project development. Providing time and safety to engage those who may be drawn towards the BNP was seen as an important step forward in addressing the causes of what might make communities vulnerable to the influence of extremists. Alongside this there was recognition of the need to go beyond, in one respondent’s words “election time posture politics” and explore what makes communities vulnerable to the right wing voice. One respondent emphasised ”... the need to create a space of trust and dialogue which went beyond I’m right and you’re wrong.” Others stressed the importance of setting the right environment for exploring prejudice and that a climate of trust and safety was essential if the experiences and views the project was trying to reach were to be expressed. Together, these factors influenced the priority given to enabling people to talk in their own groups about why they felt as they did. Indeed one project founder argued that being with people from different backgrounds in the same room, as a first step, could make it harder to achieve these requirements and would make essential exploration of prejudice difficult. Another commented that

23. Project Management Committee member (2), December 2010, personal interview.
24. Project Management Committee member (9), December 2010, personal interview.
much could be achieved if you started with "... who you are - so much of how we feel and think about things depends on where you are in our heads, rather than the facts."  

Alongside this research, interviews provided the opportunity to ask project founders and managers whether they had considered bringing groups of different ethnicity together in order to tackle the pernicious impact of growing extremism. One project founder commented that people need to feel confident when speaking about their faith before meeting other groups; and that this is not always the case. This person believed that before inter-community contact: "People needed to feel secure that they would not make mistakes, be laughed at, offend... [and that this was] important before meeting people whose faith can be articulated more strongly."  

Another commented that starting dialogue with a group of mixed faith and ethnicity could itself present further problems. People with prejudiced views would already be closed to others and in an inter-community environment any challenge would risk moving such individuals into a corner rather than achieving change. Finally, a number of people saw dialogue sessions concentrating on white communities as a priority, because this is where the extreme right wing were most likely to make progress. Allied to this were concerns expressed by one person at the extent to which the BNP had adopted a narrative of white British identity and values being eroded by outsiders, as a prelude to targeting Christian communities. Providing a counter narrative to this development was important for some people.

However, providing such a counter narrative was easier said than done. A core belief of some project founders was that the process of changing the attitudes of ordinary people touches on areas that are difficult to talk about although – in the words of one project founder; "...if you don't get people to talk, it will be difficult for them to change."  

How was the project to start a process of dialogue capable of challenging prejudice and racism? A number of people believed that it was important to give people the opportunity to feel able to talk about what "...everyone is thinking about but not talking about - they don't talk because they might be accused of being racist."  

This involved "...creating a climate of trust where people can move beyond the "I'm right; you're wrong mainstream antiracist strategy.... A climate where people can ...trust each other, where people feel safe... and accepted for who they are, and where they know their fears and anxieties are listened to and addressed."  

One project founder summed up the underpinning driver behind the community dialogue project approach: "It doesn't challenge racism by putting me in a room with a Pakistani or black person - it's putting me in a room with other white people where we could be enabled to talk about why we feel this way."  

However early project experience revealed that during processes of reaching out to people who may be vulnerable to extremist influence, any suggestions of racism were unhelpful, inhibiting discussion and stimulating defensiveness. The following section reveals some early lessons of dialogue which were instrumental in developing the projects approach.

**Developing intercommunity dialogue: participant perspectives**

The action research methodology provided unique access to the reflective learning and peer supervision of facilitators and included their early experiences of providing intra-community
dialogue. These experiences revealed much about community and group attitudes towards outsiders, which proved to be instrumental in developing the community dialogue project approach. It was striking that some level of hostility towards outsiders was a continual theme of group discussions. One dialogue participant provided a helpful insight into the cultural context of what amounted to apparent antipathy towards anyone who does not come from their village or immediate neighbourhood: "Fear of the outsider...people who aren’t like us and don’t come from round here...it’s drummed into you at birth." Concern about outsiders could begin with those from the next village, move on to people encountered less frequently such as fruit pickers and travellers and culminate with outsiders who were often heard of but seldom seen and rarely personally encountered—typically immigrants and Muslims. Indeed some dialogue participants revealed a strong sense of Muslims as threatening outsiders, people who were seldom glimpsed, but who nonetheless presented an intimidating difference: "People who dress differently...I read somewhere the other day there will soon be Muslims on the north Yorkshire moors...I was in (name of a locality town) and was in a lift with someone who was dressed like a terrorist."

Surprisingly, low levels of ethnic diversity in the locality appeared to be irrelevant to the level of hostile views expressed towards out-groups. Indeed, in some groups the more remote and distant a presence, the greater the associated crescendo of threat and alarm, suggesting that an imagined threat could be as profound as one coming from an adjacent community. However this position was for some dialogue participants combined with another view—‘there isn’t any prejudice around here—because there isn’t anyone to be prejudiced about’. Even in localities with strong electoral BNP support, any suggestion that communities might be challenged by racism and prejudice could result in hostility directed at facilitators—outsiders who think they know best. One dialogue participant of an early dialogue session set in an affluent white mono-cultural community summarised the difficulties faced by facilitators in the following terms: "After the meeting, the first one, two or three people said they didn’t see why they should be involved. ...The people who ran it were at a disadvantage to us because they were strangers to us... some of the ones there immediately thought there are no issues about racism and faith-based prejudice here so they have immediately felt affronted by having to consider that there might be. [In our community] there is no outward prejudice at all ...but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty like Muslims, that’s a sore point. People who don’t believe the same that we do. It’s more than race."

Clearly if people could both deny prejudice and perceive a threat of ‘the other’—even though this out-group was remote from the reality of their everyday experience—any dialogue intervention needed to be sensitively handled. Suggesting a group might be experiencing prejudice could do more harm than good. Alongside this, practical issues emerged which argued for the projects approach. One dialogue participant commented: "In our area it’s 98 per cent white British - there isn't much diversity and we don't get much chance to meet people. Going straight into a meeting with another group would feel artificial and frightening." This view is significant: a number of dialogue participants referred to people in their communities who had

31. dialogue participant, July 2011, personal interview.
32. Dialogue participant, reported at facilitator’s consortium meeting January 2011.
33. Dialogue participant, reported at facilitators consortium meeting January 2011.
34. Facilitators notes of dialogue session July 2010.
never met people who were not white, reflecting limited opportunities for contact with people beyond someone’s community. Set against this environment the project’s dialogue framework needed to achieve a finally balanced process of sensitivity to group culture and commitment to achieving the purposes of the community dialogue project.

**Intra-community dialogue: principles, skills and framework**

**Dialogue Principles**

Based on reflective learning arising from early dialogue sessions, a series of principles were developed to underpin the way in which the project and dialogue facilitators worked with a community:

- Building a trusting and empathic relationship with the dialogue group.
- Respecting and working with the identity of a group and its unique community or cultural context.
- Ensuring there is permission from the group for dialogue to take place.
- Understanding and taking into account the hopes, aspirations and fears of communities within which the group is set.
- Working with communities from the perspective of how they see themselves: Some communities have strong self-esteem but know that they are seen negatively by others.
- Recognising that some communities have very strong experiences of loss arising because of industrial decline.
- Identifying with the group issues they would like to explore and exercise processes they find acceptable.

These principles were to prove important in helping facilitators move from the role of outsider towards becoming a helpful presence in a group. Some principles had a practical outcome, for example identifying issues a group would like to explore and group activities such as role-play they found acceptable. Others guided facilitators towards building a trusting and empathic relationship with the dialogue group by respecting and working with the identity of a group, its unique community or cultural context, and the hopes, aspirations, and fears of communities within which the group is set. Indeed working with communities from the perspective of how they saw themselves was an important element of facilitators work. For example in-group norms of positive esteem arising from "... treating people decently and fairly..." proved fundamental in challenging behaviour that undermined group self-esteem by failing to treat outsiders properly.

**Facilitator Skills**

Building on these principles, facilitators were required to have an appropriate level of skill and experience in:

- Planning and designing dialogue sessions.
- Facilitating groups and group exercises including techniques such as role-play.
- Bringing examples from outside group experience into the group process.

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37. Facilitators dialogue report, September 2011.
Assessing, understanding and working with group dynamics.
Creating safety for facilitators and participants.
Pursuing issues in more depth with an individual in a group and the group as a whole.
Being able to introduce and apply relevant theory.
Being able to introduce and work with relevant theology.
Being able to reflect back the experience of what happened in a group to participants.
Welcoming people's need to learn and their curiosity.
Working with co-facilitators.
Modelling positive communication.
Modelling positive behaviour.

The importance of a skilled approach to facilitation was soon evident. Early experience showed that dialogue could have a powerful and potentially disturbing impact in the lives of groups and individuals, already experiencing sudden change. Indeed interviews with some dialogue participants revealed that eight months later, a dialogue session was still the source of discussion and strong views. Dialogue participants were entitled to expect that those working with them possess suitable competencies. These included skills in planning and designing a dialogue session - a crucial opportunity for facilitators to learn more about the community, and to begin building an important trusting and empathic relationship with the group - together with facilitating groups and group exercises, especially assessing, understanding and working with group dynamics. The ability to create safety for participants and facilitators was central to the dialogue process if participants were to feel secure and confident enough to discuss difficult issues. Welcoming people's curiosity and their need to learn proved a rich resource for facilitators. Indeed irrespective of the type of group and class of participants, people relished the opportunity to move beyond the kind of daily and unchallenging conversation that in the view of one participant can give a very limited perspective of the world.

*Dialogue Framework*

An unexpected feature of the research was that despite the unique nature and setting of each group, and the importance of developing a framework which did not 'shoehorn ' dialogue participants into a formulaic approach, a strong commonality was apparent between groups in terms of what helped a dialogue session to work most effectively. This was expressed in the importance of each dialogue session having some form of structured approach with a clear introductory element, the dialogue session itself, and reflective conclusion. In summary:

- **An introductory element** saw an opportunity to build trust and confidence with the group - to develop a theme of 'we are learning from each other', find out through the groups eyes what it felt like to live in their community and generally to establish what the group's concerns are and to really listen to them.
- **The dialogue element** of session described the period where people felt safe in being able to look at prejudice and stereotyping in a non-judgmental environment and in ways which could challenge the divisive and hostile narratives which they may hold or encounter.
- **A reflective element** emerged as an essential ingredient in concluding a dialogue session. This involved considering key themes which had arisen in the dialogue.
session, establishing whether participants have been overly disconcerted by the dialogue session, taking appropriate action where necessary, if there was any action people wanted to take as a result of the dialogue session and whether people felt differently as a result of the experience. This could include the extent to which people felt being more ready to challenge prejudice, and in one group included beginning to plan meeting the group from outside the community and in another developing contact with a mosque.

Key Research Themes

An important research task was to identify any congruence between the community dialogue projects innovative approach and theory and research surrounding existing established processes. A review of literature revealed that most theorists see contact between groups as central to developing a cohesive society. For example Cantle’s programme for developing community cohesion emphasises the importance of cross cultural contact and proposes a framework of associational, social and structural contact opportunities which can be used to bring people together. A central concern of Cantle’s approach is to develop strategies which will address parallel lives and the extent to which communities have little or no meaningful contact with each other. Generally speaking the mainstream arguments supporting inter-community contact are clear, well established - and appear to assume that contact between groups is the only way forward. This paper argues that such a perspective fails to appreciate the cultural complexity of communities beyond the parameters of urban conurbations. However the dialogue processes described in this paper can be seen to have some parallels with theory and research underpinning inter-community dialogue as the following review of literature reveals.

Allport in a seminal discussion of prejudice and in-group attitudes to race, argued that inter-group contact would lead to a reduction in prejudice, providing four key conditions are in place. Firstly, each group needs to have equal status within the contact situation. Secondly, contact should focus on common goals. Thirdly, achieving these goals should result from inter-group cooperation and not competition and finally those perceived to be in positions of authority, whether as community leaders or representatives of governance, should be seen to explicitly sanction any contact. Pettigrew’s discussion of intergroup contact theory and contemporary practice sets out four processes which build on Allport’s position. Firstly, new learning about another group can act to correct negative stereotypes which underpin prejudice. Secondly optimal group contact is likely to be most effective in modifying behaviour. This can lead to changed attitudes and positive expectations of interactions that have further beneficial effects on attitudes. Thirdly, Pettigrew believes that anxiety is a common theme in inter-group encounters. This emotion can lead to a negative perception of inter-group interaction which adds to prejudice. Pettigrew’s fourth process centres on inter-group reappraisal. He argues that optimal inter-group contact leads to reappraisal of in-group norms, positive attitudes towards out-groups generally.

This research argues that in hindsight some aspects of the project’s dialogue processes can be seen to have replicated Allport conditions. For example equality between group members and

valuing each perspective and contribution was to prove an underpinning principle guiding the development and implementation of the projects intra-community processes. Allied to this was a strong faith-leader endorsement of the activity, giving legitimacy to difficult and challenging conversations which dialogue groups embarked upon. This research also revealed that some elements of Pettigrew’s processes were similarly relevant to the projects dialogue framework. Learning about another group did not arise through direct contact as recommended by Pettigrew. Rather dialogue facilitators sought to explore the implications of negative stereotypes through encouraging participants to describe personal experiences of this type of hostility. Whilst this could include examples of perpetrating prejudice, more often discussion explored occurrences of being a victim, often because of disability, class, or geographical address. Facilitators used these experiences to reflect on the causes and implications of stereotypes and prejudice experienced by participants and the extent to which people from other communities might be similarly hurt because of ethnicity and culture. In this way facilitators aimed to provide groups with the opportunity to learn more about the predicament of an out-group and the extent to which common ground might exist.

Pettigrew’s concern to minimise anxiety was echoed in the priority dialogue facilitators gave to ensure sessions were safe spaces for participants, where they could discuss fears and concerns openly without being exposed to a judgemental or a critically challenging response. Furthermore project dialogue processes reflected Pettigrew’s emphasis on reappraising group norms, behaviour and attitudes combining in a new group culture toward outsiders. When describing the new found willingness of a previously ‘conservative’ group to challenge prejudice, one facilitator commented: “I think it’s a little bit about creating a shared culture...culture in a different sense - cultural conversation and openness. So there is now a culture in say the (name of locality) group - no doubt they have their culture outside - but there is a culture of our dialogue with them, which is quite, sort of high-energy, fairly open, and pretty robust.”

Peacebuilding research arising in both the Middle East and Northern Ireland provides a basis to the community dialogue projects work. For example Church et al. describe an approach to conflict resolution which they refer to as both intra-community dialogue and single identity work and which describes a process for engaging community members in conflict resolution but for whom a culture of sectarian division is a deeply entrenched reality. Against this background the authors question the Allport / Pettigrew contact hypothesis: in their view “...increased intergroup contact has not rendered viable, reconciliation in this [Northern Ireland] society.” They suggest that what is needed in some circumstances is a process that will both engage those people most steeped in their own traditions and lead to an increase in group esteem which may be supportive of eventual contact with other communities. The authors are conscious of difficulties related to the extent to which intra-community processes may make communities more insular: “Proponents of this methodology argue that it serves as the primary way towards peace in [Northern Ireland] this society. Traditionalists in peacebuilding and conflict resolution...argue against [a] lack of focus on cross community dialogue and engagement.”

41. Facilitators’ consortium meeting. May 2011.
43. Ibid. 8.
44. Ibid. 17.
This paper argues that an inflexible adherence to either approach could be seen as unnecessarily top-down - an outsiders prescription of what is best for improving community cohesion - and is likely to fail to take into account those self-perceptions and complexities of a community which should be the starting point of embarking upon a challenging dialogue agenda. Furthermore, whilst for some communities inter-community dialogue may be an appropriate way forward this was not the case in the research locality. Only a minority of groups – two of the nine involved – expressed any interest in meeting people from a different ethnicity. Alternative innovative strategies were required which could address this position in ways appropriate to local needs and responded to concerns regarding prejudice and extremism that were rising in line with the extent to which extremists were gaining support.

Hewstone et al.’s research based on segregated communities in Northern Ireland argues that indirect contact, in-group members hearing about positive experiences of relationships that fellow group members have with an out-group, can have a positive impact on the group overall. This was clearly the case in one dialogue session where a fiercely anti-traveler discourse was challenged by another group member reporting positive and sustained relationships with members of the travelling community. More generally, dialogue sessions sometimes included accounts by participants of positive contact with people of different ethnicity. Such contributions were invariably subject to careful group reflection and appeared to give practical endorsement of the potential value of indirect contact in reappraising prejudice, but without anxiety inducing encounters with an outside group.

Chris and Turner’s development of ‘imagined contact’ provides further insight into the way in which the dialogue processes worked. Their methodology is designed for use in localities where direct contact between groups is not possible. In such circumstances they demonstrate that ‘imagined contact’ where participants work through various scenarios involving social contact with outsiders can effectively reduce prejudice. Some aspects of the work of dialogue facilitators mirrored this methodology in ways not dissimilar to those aspects of their practice described above which reflected Pettigrew’s approach. Facilitators encouraged participants to consider individual experiences of prejudice, for example because of class, or their community in terms of how they know it is perceived by others. Particularly powerful experiences of prejudice were evident in some participant’s experience of disability, especially when this involved a family member. This kind of reflection provided an opening to imagining how prejudice might be experienced by others. The other could be individuals within a participant’s community, often young people, who were perceived as outsiders because of their failure to conform to traditional rules. However dialogue could be broadened from this perspective to imagining how people from different ethnicity living within or outside the community experienced prejudice.

Alongside these strategies analysis of facilitator activity, and interviews with dialogue participants, revealed a range of broad themes that contributed towards applying the dialogue approach in a way which engaged participants. Firstly a theme of participants and facilitators learning from each other proved useful in building a respectful relationship with a group and engaging participants in dialogue objectives. Secondly it proved important for facilitators to work in pairs. This helped relationship building with a group, enhanced the quality of essential

45. Hewstone et al., “Prejudice, Intergroup Contact and Identity.”
46. Hewstone et al., “Can Contact Promote Better Relations?”
pre-dialogue planning, and provided the opportunity for facilitators to adopt or change roles when a dialogue session is underway. Thirdly some of the issues explored could produce anxiety and discomfort. Facilitators learnt to maintain a balance between providing a structure – which is what people expected – then shifting towards working with people as equal partners. Finally, religion was an important factor in most groups. In some it formed the rationale for the group’s existence: in others religious organisations provided the buildings which enabled a group to meet. However in some groups, faith identity and faith values moved quickly into the background with participants being preoccupied by more secular issues. Some facilitators found it easier to work with people who did not focus on faith identity although in other dialogue sessions faith provided an ‘opening’ with beliefs which helped people to think about prejudice and racism. Some Christian participants felt that anti-faith and anti-Christian prejudices were issues in their communities. Being helped by facilitators to discuss these experiences enabled people to challenge prejudice and assumptions about people they have not met: ‘we’ve had these experiences: what about other people who experience prejudice’.

Overall these strategies proved to be a useful entry into deeper discussion about prejudice and appeared crucial in helping the community dialogue project meet a series of complex and contradictory requirements. They helped the project focus on communities which could be vulnerable to right wing extremism - but without alienating participants by making them feel they had been problematised as prejudiced. They underpinned the development of a dialogue approach that strived to help participants feel safe and secure in expressing their feelings and concerns – whilst challenging and providing a counter narrative to sometimes antipathetic discourses focusing on outsiders. At no stage was this an easy balance. However the community dialogue project’s innovative efforts may represent an important community cohesion resource transferrable to similar localities.

**Conclusion**

This paper set out to describe the action research outcomes of a study focused on a community dialogue project engaged in a challenging and important task. The dialogue processes outlined in this paper which arise from the projects work are not prescriptive. Rather they illustrate a form of intervention which can be applied when contact between communities is not feasible but where groups remain vulnerable to the hostile and divisive attention of extremists.

Many of the experiences and feelings articulated in dialogue groups and by research participants suggest feelings of discomfort and alienation. These can range from a disconnection from mainstream governance groups, through to previous industrial disputes remaining as a source of grievance and unresolved resentment. Some people involved in the research articulated a strong sense of apprehension regarding outsiders. In much of the research locality the communities where this model of community dialogue has been developed are characterised by low levels of ethnic diversity. However this ‘absence of presence’ has not prevented the development of hostility towards ethnic minorities. Although these perspectives may be constructed in part by limited social mobility and little contact with groups of other ethnicity, some of this apprehension may also be related to fears about individual and group capacity to meet basic needs. These fears are driven in part by a cultural history of strong and unresolved resentment arising from industrial decline and a significant industrial dispute. Community cohesion strategies appear to have difficulty in acknowledging the relevance of these powerful
forces such as these. This is regrettable since they can be seen as an instrumental factor behind the electoral and community support of the extreme right wing and argue that community cohesion strategies should pay closer attention to the situation of white monocultural communities.

Against this background a community dialogue project has developed an innovative approach customised to meet the needs of local communities. This approach does not seek to rival or offer any kind of shortcut to inter-community processes which are commonly found in peace-building and community cohesion methods. However in areas of low levels of ethnic diversity, and where communities offer a complex range of reasons preventing them from meeting with other groups, another process is necessary in order to challenge the fears and prejudices on which extremism feeds. The community dialogue project has aimed to provide a non-judgemental environment in which people can consider why they have negative feelings which others can exploit and to explore alternative ways of seeing the world where outsiders are not a threat.

A significant area for future research lies in exploring the effectiveness of the community dialogue project’s approach. Research undertaken so far reveals encouraging levels of satisfaction amongst dialogue participants regarding their involvement in the processes. However more work is needed to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of participant experience.
Bibliography


