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From neoliberalism to neopopulism: how grassroots faith communities are resisting division and crossing borders

Naomi Thompson, Goldsmiths, University of London SE14 6NW, UK

Graham Bright, York, UK

Peter Hart, University of Leeds, UK

Naomi.thompson@gold.ac.uk

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that those distracted by a continual critique of neoliberalism have missed its transition into a more conservative and sinister form that we term neopopulism. We explore how neopopulism has emerged in recent decades as the neoliberal project has failed. The groups most failed by neoliberalism, capitalism and the meritocracy have been encouraged to blame each other rather than the systems that have failed them. In this context, fear of minority groups, including religious minorities, has grown. We go on to explore how our recent research with faith-based community workers provides evidence for how some faith groups are resisting division and bringing people together in resistance to both neoliberal and neopopulist values. Our research involved interviews with participants from a range of faith traditions, some who were volunteers and some who were paid professionals for faith-based organisations and focuses primarily on their engagement with young people. We conclude that while the practices of these faith-based community workers present a challenge to neopopulism, a more explicit resistance to the fear and suspicion borne out of this context is needed.

Key words: community work, youth work, faith, religion, neoliberalism, populism

Over centuries, since long before state services existed, faith-based groups and organisations have engaged with their communities. Faith-based forms of community work have been key to the development of varying expressions of community development. These fields of practice have an often-antagonistic relationship with states and institutions due to their common principles of operating from the 'grassroots' rather than 'top-down', and as a result of their facilitation of empowerment and critical consciousness, rather than of compliance. For example, the Sunday Schools of the late 1700s that taught young people to read and write, were criticised for giving working class young people such power, lest they challenge the social order (Thompson, 2018). In this article, we explore how contemporary faith-based community work has a role to play in resisting both neoliberalism and right-wing populism. Whilst our own research is located in the UK, debates around neoliberalism, populism, resistance and social justice have international resonance, with the detrimental impacts of capitalism and division being felt globally.

This article draws on empirical research with faith-based youth and community workers in England and Scotland. Emerging themes include promoting inclusion and striving for justice in faith-based work; asset-based approaches to community practice that possibilise and reclaim grass-roots co-production in regenerating different forms of capital; challenging neoliberal discourses of 'deficit' and 'risk'; and recreating civil-democratic and dialogical spaces. In contextualising this, we explore how the rise of neoliberalism since the late

twentieth century has seen community and youth work distorted to focus on people's deficits rather than their potential, to promote individualism over collectivism, and has been subject to a measurable 'value for money' agenda that ignores the softer, long-term outcomes of the work in favour of the values of the market (Davies, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Taylor et al, 2017).

We argue that in recent years, neoliberalism has morphed into something more sinister that we term *neopopulism.*[1] A key shift in context between these ideologies has been the move from any attempt to lay claim to liberal values (Zizek, 2018). Instead, discourses of division and fear have been politicised with marginalised groups further stigmatised. Academics and practitioners, distracted by a continued critique of neoliberalism, have arguably missed this subtle shift. For example, our conceptualising of neopopulism is related to, but distinct from, Featherstone's (2008) work on populism. He argues resistance to the globalizing and homogenising agenda of neoliberalism can be manifest as exclusionary nationalist practices seeking to prevent transnational alliances. We argue, however, that neopopulism is not disconnected from capitalism and neoliberalism, rather it has emerged from the predictable failure of these forces to meet their espoused egalitarian and distributive aims. Our research demonstrates how faith-based community workers seek to resist this oppressive culture, which echoes dark facets of human history, by bringing people together to resist division and fear.

Successive post-2010 UK governments have implemented years of austerity. Moves towards localism and decentralised decision making have been integral to implementing this agenda. Government has become governance (Miller and Rose, 2008). Yet, despite this ostensible new localism, more radical forms of community development practice have fared badly under austerity. Given the tensions created by fiscal reductions and increasingly targeted state-investment, it might be argued that the resultant 'austerity localism' has been a 'Trojan horse' strategy for state withdrawal of support for work which it deemed inefficient, or politically undesirable.

However, austerity has perhaps also rendered visible much of the work of grassroots faith communities. For example, the largest UK foodbank provider, the Trussell Trust which operates from Christian foundations and principles, has increased its services and campaigns significantly since the 2008 recession. Similarly, Sikh communities have actively welcomed homeless people into their Gurdwaras to share Langar, as well as in some cases, taking Langar outside the Gurdwara to feed local people who need it (Singh, 2015). In 2017, faith communities responded to the London Grenfell Tower fire by opening churches and mosques to provide food and shelter and to act as distribution centres for donations to those affected. Alongside this, faith groups were part of the movement of local activists and groups coming together to hold government and austerity policies to account for this tragedy. As such, we argue that faith-based community and youth work can be seen not only to meet need, but to name and challenge injustices (Pimlott, 2015). The faith-based community and youth workers in our research are resisting neoliberalism and neopopulism through their work to bring people together, to challenge the stigmatisation of

communities, and to resist the asset-stripping that governments have imposed on young people and communities.

Morphology: neoliberalism to neopopulism – the devil that came in the night

Drawing on Apple (2013), Tania de St Croix (2016:27) sums up neoliberalism as 'an almost religious ideology in which the private and the market are necessarily good, and the public is seen as bad'. Under this rubric, the rule of the market is hegemonized, public services, and those who use them are stigmatised and discoursed as problematic. In this article, we argue that capitalism and its espoused claims of meritocracy, merely attempt to disguise widening inequality and obscure growing structural inequities through thinly-veiled discourses of blame. Neoliberalism was always destined to fail large groups of people, who now, more than ever, must be victimised, blamed, and even eliminated in order to justify the rubric of capitalist logic. In this section, we explore how the key characteristics of neoliberalism have allowed it to morph from a questionable public discourse that cements austerity and financial stringency, into a widely accepted new public discourse that both abandons any sense of the liberal values that supposedly underpinned it, rendering its evolution as neopopulism even more dangerous and divisive.

The neoliberal climate is characterised by its emphasis on marketization, on shrinking the state and providing a free market for public services that can identify clearly their outputs and demonstrate return on investment. One of the clear challenges of this context for voluntary and community services is that it promotes competition rather than collaboration. Organisations compete for funding, and in times of austerity, from a smaller pot than was previously available. However, this undermining of collaboration and solidarity is by no means simply an unfortunate by-product of financial stringency. Solidarity has been systematically undermined, as seen in the UK through anti-lobbying restrictions on charities, increasingly punitive responses to protest, and the undermining of trade unions (de St Croix, 2016; Mayo, 2017). As such, individualisation has been purposefully unleashed as a mechanism of neoliberal rationality to espouse meritocratic ideals: that those who work hard will do well, but those who fail have not worked hard enough. This individualisation has permeated public and political discourse over the last forty years. It obscures social inequalities, allowing them to go unaddressed. Far from supporting the reality of the meritocracy, the neoliberal era has precipitated widening inequalities between rich and poor. This is particularly exacerbated for those belonging to minority groups (Mayo, 2017).

A secondary characteristic of the neoliberal project has been its focus on people as in deficit and at risk, and its increased surveillance and control of people. This appears significant given the illusion of a smaller state (de St Croix, 2016; Mayo, 2017; Pimlott, 2015). In this context, universal youth and community services have seen reduced funding in the UK, whilst funding that remains is centred on controlling a problem or fixing people's 'failings'. Examples of this include the use of counter-terrorism budgets to address potential radicalisation, or projects to prevent teenage pregnancy, crime and anti-social behaviour. Such interventions are more focused on surveillance and control than on empowerment and

autonomy. Indeed, the values of the meritocracy necessitate that we view those in need of welfare or intervention as at fault; as lazy, greedy or morally corrupt and, ultimately, responsible for their own failure, having refused to use their own agency to succeed.

The top-down deficit-focused policies that have emerged in this period have fed, rather than challenged, global populist discourses; the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, 'Prevent', is a pertinent example. Such policies create division and intolerance in which people fear and blame each other for societal problems, rather than seeing them as symptoms of structural inequalities that have been cemented by neoliberal governments. Mayo (2017) explains how blame for the housing crisis in London, created through disinvestment in social housing, has been diverted onto migrants, and feeds wider discourses about immigration as bad. Mayo argues that, on a global scale, as neoliberal austerity policies have increased inequality, people have sought more radical alternatives leading to a polarisation in politics. The 'radical right' has gained significant traction in this context, resulting in the growth of right-wing populism.

We identify this context as *neopopulism* and argue that it is both related to neoliberalism, and distinct from it. It is a context that has emerged as the neoliberal promise of prosperity has remained unfulfilled for many, with inequalities worsening in a culture in which individualism has become deeply ingrained. Younger generations find themselves stripped of assets (Bright, Pugh and Clarke, 2018) and significantly worse off than the generations before them. Yet, these generations have been both divested of assets and indoctrinated in a societal discourse that obscures structural inequalities and stigmatises those with the least. These generations look beneath, rather than above them, for targets for their anger and frustration, and politicians and governments mobilise and reinforce this as a convenient distraction from what the state might otherwise be doing. We argue that as neoliberalism has failed, that instead of something more social democratic emerging, something more sinister has been birthed. This is no accident. Governments who have used practice and policy to demonise and manage certain groups of people, fuel blame for failure of neoliberalism. It has been achieved through undermining solidarity, stigmatising groups who hold little power to resist, and the political mobilisation of fear and division.

Analyses of neoliberalism in relation to community and youth work recognise it has shifted to something more than financial efficacy and stringency. Tania de St Croix, for example, states:

> *While it is important to acknowledge the influence of the 2008 financial crash and its global impact on public spending, an exclusive focus on this 'most visible' area of change can risk obscuring the broader direction of travel. The current phase of cuts, closures and redundancies are presented by governments as unfortunate but inevitable… However, the so-called financial 'crisis' has not disrupted the major political parties' ongoing devotion to the market; rather, in the years following the crash, social inequalities and traditionalist values became more deeply embedded.*
> (de St Croix, 2016: 14)

Here, de St Croix touches on the idea that the liberal values purported to underpin the neoliberal project have shifted to a more 'traditionalist' set of values. Similarly, Mayo (2017) recognises increasing populism in the neoliberal era, framing it as a symptom of the failure of market forces. These analyses have failed to fully articulate what neoliberalism has morphed into; we argue that a continuing focus on critiquing neoliberalism in such analyses only serves to distract from the shift in ideology and values underpinning neoliberalism as it gives way to creeping neopopulism. Within this shift, there has been a move from any attempt to claim adherence to liberal values, to an embracing of deeply conservative ones. The levels of mistrust, suspicion and control that have emerged through neopopulism go beyond the neoliberal project. For example, right-wing nationalist movements driven by hate and division have been politically mobilised in the election campaigns of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and the referendum of the UK's membership of the EU. Elements of these campaigns have been explicitly racist. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), for example, unveiled a poster portraying a long line of refugees from ethnic minority groups with the words 'breaking point' during the Brexit referendum. This was an image which was both misleading and served to mobilise hostility towards refugees and asylum-seekers by dehumanising them. We argue that neopopulism emerged in the neoliberal era, first seen following events like 9/11, but is now a powerful force more dominant and more sinister than neoliberalism. It has emerged as capitalism, neoliberalism and the meritocracy have continually failed certain groups of people whilst obscuring the social inequalities they face. Politicians, media and public discourse have mobilised against the groups most pertinently failed by these systems. These *most failed* groups have become both the objects of blame for their own failure and the reason behind the hardships experienced by other groups who have also been failed by the neoliberal project. This is a politically driven narrative that accounts for the failures of capitalism and supports the continuation of the current system of economics. As such, neopopulism is a global force that mobilises right-wing, nationalist movements to obscure the failures of neoliberal capitalism by blaming and 'othering' the most vulnerable, usually minority, groups.

In this context, fear of 'the religious' has grown, particularly in relation to minority ethnic and religious communities. The 'othering' of such groups is seen most pertinently in both Islamophobia and the fear of immigrants across the Western world, particularly where they emigrate from poorer contexts to our own. The hostility that stems from this fear extends to refugees and asylum seekers, who have been reframed from being seen as in need, to groups whose motivations for migration are not to be trusted. The public discourse about them has taken a sinister turn. References to refugees as 'terrorists' and 'cockroaches' have been deployed by public media (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2018). In relation to young Muslims, Khan (2013) refers to the deployment of discourses of 'theyification'. Similarly, Jeldtoft (2013) argues that negative and hyper-visible public discourses about Islam frame Muslims so powerfully that the everyday realities of their lives are not seen. The growth of exclusion and 'othering' of religious groups in this context has led the faith-based community workers in our study to seek both safe spaces for their communities, and opportunities for dialogue between their communities and the societal discourses that exclude them (Bright et al, 2018).

Community development and resistance

A key debate in community development over recent decades, has centred on tensions between working with assets or responding to the deficits in communities. This debate sits within wider tensions between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' practices, and between radical and consensus forms of community development. State-funded and mainstream services have been critiqued for imposing top-down assessments of problems within particular groups and communities that can increase stigmatisation and thus exacerbate rather than address such problems. The UK's Counter-terrorism strategy (Prevent), for example, presents a particularly problematic top-down strategy that increases suspicion and fear of Muslim communities. This policy has been criticised for increasing stigmatisation and isolation (Abbas and Awan, 2015). Whilst 'community cohesion' had a focus in policy discussions in the early twenty-first century, it has been undermined by an ideological commitment to austerity and deficit-focused policy interventions such as Prevent (Mayo, 2017).

Asset-focused forms of community development have emerged in Western contexts during the last few decades as a form of community self-help, becoming popular in the UK in early twenty-first century. Asset-based community development (ABCD) has often been celebrated as the solution to problematic policy-making (McKnight and Kretzmann, 2012). It is based on the idea that by focusing on 'capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in a community', practitioners and services are able to see beyond 'problems that need fixing' (IDeA, 2010: 7). It critiques practices that focus on people's deficits and argues that people need to be part of shaping their own solutions. However, whilst ABCD has a clear role to play in reducing top-down stigmatising of communities, it has been argued that it may overlook inequalities, or, even reinforce them (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). Focusing solely on assets rather than problems may lead to the needs of particular communities being disregarded. As such, it is argued that the turn towards a focus on assets rather than needs in community development has in some cases further legitimated neoliberalism, funding cuts and inequalities (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). Therefore, whilst there is a clear rationale for focusing on community assets rather than defining people and communities by their problems, for interventions to be progressive, they arguably also need to actively resist neoliberal discourses of self-help and austerity.

In reaction to the neoliberal project, Featherstone et al (2011) have introduced the concept of 'progressive localism'. Featherstone et al critique 'austerity localism' as simply the latest implementation of the politically-driven neoliberal agenda to reduce welfare provision. They argue that more progressive forms of localism are needed that actively resist neoliberalism. Such forms of localism recognise that as inequalities continue to grow, excluded groups need community development responses that resist neoliberal ideas of 'self-help', and that campaign for their needs to be met through state investment. Beyond this, there is a further need to challenge the division and inequality created by the neopopulist discourses of division and fear. According to Featherstone et al, progressive localism involves local

organisations working together to resist, rather than collude with, problematic policy discourses. Such progressive local partnerships that bring people and groups together could arguably play a role in resisting neopopulism. This form of practice would go beyond plugging gaps left by state funding cuts to challenge inequality and individualism, thus resisting both neoliberalism and neopopulism.

In our research, we found that faith-based community workers were developing progressive partnerships based on 'border crossings' (Coburn, 2010; Giroux, 2005) that bring people and groups together to build community, and challenge division and mistrust. In the previous analysis of our data, we found that these community workers were facilitating 'inclusion within' by providing safe spaces for excluded groups, and 'inclusion without' by developing collaborative work with and between their own faith community, other faith groups, and the wider community (Bright et al, 2018). Whilst resistance, protest and solidarity have been systematically undermined during the neoliberal era (Pimlott, 2015; de St Croix, 2016), we argue that faith-based community workers are generating resistance through such progressive local partnerships. As noted earlier, a key example of this was seen after the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in west London in 2017 where over 70 people were killed, when local faith communities were a key part of working together with other community groups, of different faiths and no faith, to respond to the needs of victims, create community solidarity and hold the government to account.

Our research with faith-based youth and community workers

This article draws on research conducted with nine faith-based community workers in the UK from a range of faith backgrounds (Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian). Some were volunteers while others were paid professionals working for faith-based organisations. The research aimed to draw out rich qualitative description. We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which involves in-depth thematic analysis within and across small samples of data (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The initial write-up of our study appears as a chapter in the SAGE Handbook of Youth Work Practice (Bright et al, 2018).

For the purposes of this article, we have revisited our analysis of the data from this study to explore what it tells us about how grassroots faith-based community development is responding to and resisting both neoliberalism and neopopulism. It should be noted that whilst our research participants were working across their faith communities, the focus of the original study was on work with young people in particular; thus, the data contains more about their work with young people than with other age groups.

The main themes that emerged from our original analysis were as follows:

1. Engagement: the forms of practice used by faith-based youth and community workers
2. Education: the pedagogical approaches that underpin these methods of engagement

3. Ethics: the values and purposes of the work including a strong focus on facilitating inclusion.

In this paper, we identify new sub-themes that illustrate how the *engagement* practices of the faith-based community workers challenge neoliberalism and neopopulism, using an *educational* approach that centres on border pedagogies (Coburn, 2010; Giroux 2005), and that draws on an *ethical* framework encompassing values that resist division and fear.

Faith beyond walls

A spectrum of practice emerged from our research interviews. This ranged from open access youth work that was open to all young people, to more specific faith teaching for those from within, or wanting to engage with, the teaching of faith traditions. Another realm of engagement was inter-faith work which brought young people of different faiths together. Other forms of dialogical work included engaging with the local communities in which faith organisations were located. These practices included enacting commitments to meet social and community needs, and to break down intolerance and misunderstandings about the faith group. These approaches, in particular, can be viewed as a bulwark against neopopulist discourses. They demonstrate a deep commitment to breaking down divisions and enabling community 'border crossings'.

Responding to austerity

Research participants were keenly aware of how their work with young people and communities contributed to civil society. Given the climate of neoliberalism and austerity, they appeared acutely aware of gaps in service provision, and how the work they did was able to challenge this deficit. Respondents' work spanned small social action projects to taking over local authority provision that was no longer funded:

> So what we've done in the past is we've got a group of kids, Muslim kids, Christian kids, gone down to the local supermarkets who support what we do, and then the foodbank collection so we hand people leaflets if they want to donate for us, and then the food that people give us within that hour, our trolleys full of food and we'll walk it round to the local foodbank and give it to them there. (Steven, a Revert Muslim Youth worker with an inter-faith organisation)

> So we have, well we have a centre… a council property… that was going redundant because of the lack of youth work that there was in the city. So we took on that and picked up an existing, sort of existing project that they ran as a youth, open access youth project provision there. And we had previously ran one here, which we'd closed down due to residents' complaints, we had a very high volume of young people, roughly about, well between 120 and 140 on a Friday night, and of that about 90% of those were traveller young people. So they caused significant issues in a quite affluent area of York so we had to shut down before, before we were shut down, but

the council approached us and asked us to re-open that at this new youth centre which is nearer the traveller sites and also it's a real area of need in York where it is. So, we agreed. So we run that on a Friday night. (Beth, a Christian youth worker).

Whilst Beth was the only example of a faith-based worker taking over the running of local authority provision, the other youth and community workers were also keen to frame their work as contributing to civil society. For example, Steven explained how through social action projects such as litter picking, Muslim young people in particular were able to challenge perceptions of their community as 'problematic citizens'. Similarly, Balraj, a Sikh youth worker, explained how socio-political engagement was a key element of his practice, with his young people engaging in protests and campaigns in actively resisting austerity and right-wing populism. Warsan, a Muslim youth worker, framed the purpose of setting up a Muslim Scouts group as a diversion from anti-social activities for young people, who weren't accessing (and/or felt excluded from) other provisions on offer. Even Jim, a Christian youth worker who was explicit about the ultimate purpose of his work being to share the Christian faith, was running a youth club to serve local young people that he described as having 'no agenda'. Some of these practices, as well as responding to neoliberal austerity, were challenging neopopulist discourses that stigmatise religious and minority groups.

Resisting individualisation

Our research participants appeared to be resisting the neoliberal focus on individualism, self-help, resilience and meritocracy in their work with young people. Their practice was built on recognising the need for reciprocal relationships between people and on fostering interdependence and inter-generational support through, for example, mentoring and mediation. As well as challenging neoliberal values of individualism and its flawed notion of resilience, the practice of bringing generations together also challenges the division and fear between generations that is present in neopopulist discourses, where the young are demonised, rather than the impact of austerity and asset-stripping being recognised. Forging relationships with young people, between young people, and between young people and the wider faith community were key aspects of our participants' practice. The commitment to generational mentoring was perhaps most central for the Buddhist volunteers.

I mean the main, we refer to him as the President Ukedu, if you like the teacher, almost like a mentor, in terms of practicing his Buddhism his main focus, one of the main focusses he has is encouraging the youth. Yeah, I mean guidance and encouragement is quite significant in terms of, a lot of energy's put into thinking about the young people in terms of their futures in a way, yeah. (Kana)

I have got my mentor in life [name] who is a Buddhist leader and he really encourages us to nurture the future, to nurture the youth because, you know, obviously you have to have someone to do young people, they are the [unclear] of the future, and it's not just this life but it's continues eternally. (Saori)

Similarly, Jim, a Christian youth worker, explained how building relationships, family and community was a significant part of his role:

> So what we try and do is say 'well, we've got, we've got a community here that young people can be part of and feel valued in, that's brilliant... And so, like I've been really, I have been really pro-active in the church, trying to integrate young people with the life of the church, recognising that they need that community… I think it's quite rare for like a young person to drop out of their wider family, as in their blood family. So you kind of think well, that, you know, some would, for various reasons, but actually on the whole, and so you think well why do they drop out of church, they obviously don't see it as family or a community that they can connect with, or belong to or be part of, or are valued by. So it's easy to walk away.

This challenging of generational division and creation of generational chains challenges the mistrust between generations and asset-stripping of the young that is prevalent in the neoliberal and neopopulist era.

Changing power dynamics and challenging hierarchies

Neoliberalism and neopopulism have encouraged heavy governance of the young, yet the participants in our study were attempting to break down such hierarchies of control within their communities. Encouraging young people's participation and voice were significant within their work to build relationships and community. They were facilitating young people's ability to have a say and contribute to the faith community, often breaking down institutional barriers in order to achieve this. They viewed themselves as mediators between young people and the faith community. Jim, for example, explained that:

> Well I think one of the roles of the youth work in this context is a sort of mediator and almost as a voice for the young people. So there's a voice for the young people speaking into the systems and infrastructure of the church which can become very rigid, very much like 'this is how we do things' and 'these are the boxes you tick' and all that stuff and obviously young people don't operate like that. So there's a role of kind of balancing the gap I think of, and trying to help young people to recognise that they can have a voice, and they can have a voice within the life of the church and that they, they are a valid, valued part of life at the church and they're not, 'oh those kids' or whatever they might see that they're seen as, or some people might even see them like. So I think that in my role there is very much that voice thing and as the mediator.

Similarly, Balraj outlined how he had worked to help Sikh young people have more of a voice at his Gurdwara and even to sit on the committee.

> So there was really two key things, one was young people not feeling that they had any ownership or much kind of engagement activities in the Gurdwara, and then the kind of older populations wanting young people to be involved but nobody was coming up with the solutions to well, how do we bridge this gap a wee bit… We've

now actually got young people that sit on the trustee boards of the Sikh Centre which has never actually happened before.

Warsan also explained how her role involved mediating between young people and leaders of the Mosque.

The practice of mediation also extended beyond single faith traditions for some of the research participants who were actively seeking to create a sense of community between young people of different faiths and no faith. This was most explicit for Steven and Mark, whose roles were specifically concerned with promoting inter-faith dialogue and cohesion between young people. However, as we explore later, it also featured in other respondents' accounts and forms a key way in which they were resisting neopopulism.

Working together

Working between different faiths and groups was a key theme across the interviews. By collaborating, rather than competing, participants in the study engaged in resisting market-values of neoliberalism and the divisions created by neopopulism. This was most apparent in the work of the inter-faith organisation for whom both Mark and Steven worked. Each outlined how creating a sense of community and friendship between young people of different faiths was central to their work. However, such inter-faith work was also explicit in other respondents' narratives. Warsan, for example, outlined how her Muslim Scouts group has engaged with the local Christian and Sikh Scouts group:

> *Recently we organised a faith show, so like the Mosque, the Gurdwara and the Church which was really good, like they got to speak to like, like I think there was for the Church there was a priest and for the Mosque it was just like one of the boy trustees and I think the same for the Gurdwara.*

Daniel, a Jewish youth worker, was also engaging in inter-faith work:

> *We go outside the community and talk to other faith groups and particularly, I think, politically it's very important for Jews and Muslims to be talking as much as possible. So yeah, that's part of the work.*

Other youth workers who weren't engaging in explicit inter-faith work, emphasised how young people of other faiths were welcome and had attended their activities. Within these collaborative practices, a pedagogical approach of facilitating dialogue and crossing borders between communities and groups, was apparent. These approaches represent grassroots attempts to foster inclusion and understanding, which challenge neopopulist discourses of division and mistrust.

Safe dialogical spaces – resisting didacticism and fostering inclusion

As well as seeking to work with other faiths, research participants described the importance of creating safe spaces for young people of their particular faith community. This facet of

practice predominantly took the shape of sessions run primarily for young people subscribing to a particular faith tradition. For example, Warsan's Muslim Scout group was created as a safe space for the young people in her community to gather and engage with each other. Warsan described this work as being concerned with developing a safe, inclusive space for a group that often experiences stigma and exclusion in other contexts. This is particularly pertinent for those groups most heavily stigmatised under neopopulism, such as young Muslims. Other respondents framed similar spaces as somewhere young people could ask questions or discuss difficult subjects in a faith-specific environment. This was often seen as a safer space to engage in such dialogue than within wider faith institutions where barriers to questioning might exist. Beth explained of her Christian youth group:

> it's about discussion, it's not really about saying this is the law and this is what we think, it's more about finding out what they think and why and encouraging them to ask the 'whys' rather than just agreeing because we've told them that's the way it is.

Daniel explained that his Jewish youth group was a safe space to discuss LGBT issues in particular. His inclusive approach meant that a range of young people, including LGBT and atheistic Jews, were able to access the sessions and openly discuss their own interpretations of what it means to be Jewish and LGBT. In his inter-faith work, Steven explained that he was able to create spaces where young people of different faiths, as well as those who were agnostic or of no faith, could raise questions. Balraj demonstrated an innovative approach to creating a safe space for Sikh young people to discuss issues they were facing, through an online strategy to support young people who were facing negative experiences at school due to their Sikh faith. These safe spaces created by the youth and community workers allowed for a form of dialogical pedagogy away from the didacticism often experienced in religious and other institutions. The need to foster such safe, inclusive spaces for young people of faith, and particularly those from minority religions or facing other intersections in their identities, was at least in part a response to the stigma created by neopopulism.

Challenging division and fear

Neopopulist discourses of division, fear and mistrust have been reinforced by problematic policy-making and practice, perhaps more pertinently in counter terrorism narratives, as well as through media reporting of minority groups as problematic, such as reporting on refugees and migrants. Our research participants were keenly aware of the impact of such discourses on their communities and a key aspect of their faith-based community development practice was providing a positive representation of the faith tradition or community to the wider public. This was particularly deliberate where youth and community workers felt faith communities were misunderstood and subject to negative stereotyping. Mark explained how he had worked with the Muslim community in his area to open up the mosque to people of other faiths to help break down misunderstandings. Mark also described how he and his organisation refused to do any inter-faith work where there was any inference that they should address radicalisation. Indeed, his and Steven's

organisation was deeply committed to promoting the values of ABCD and to resisting a deficit focus:

> *I think it was only last month we got offered a large amount of money and I can't remember who, it was like an anti-extremism unit, and that's now changed, oh it was anti-terrorism and it's now changed to extremism, but it's kind of the same group of people running a different department with a slightly bigger pot of money and they're offering it and we're like, no we can't, as nice as the money would be, we're not going to be used as your inter-faith gurus to help you with that kind of thing.* (Mark, Christian youth worker with an inter-faith organisation)

Similarly, Balraj described how he opened up his local Gurdwara for public events including charity events, tours and visits, with the explicit aim of enabling connection with, and learning about the local Sikh community.

> *The Gurdwara's always open like last year we did, I remember, we did count that had 50,000 visitors that came to Gurdwara last year… One of the first things we did back in 2012 was we did like a charity event, and we raised funds for a local children's hospital that needed to raise funds for a new wing that they were making of this hospital. So we did a fundraising event and we fundraised almost £8000 for that because we managed to get all of the community together.*

At times the voice of the community was used to challenge discriminatory practices in the work place more formally. In this example, Balraj highlights how the Sikh community were able to influence a large high street chain to change their policy across Scotland, after the experience of one local woman:

> *Two years ago we had a woman who was refused a job at [a high street shop]; she went through the interview process, she was given a full offer of employment in writing, and on the day that she arrived at work they said that she would have to take off her Sikh articles of faith like the bangle, because she was in breach of the health and safety policy, and if she would not do that then she would have to leave the premises and she would no longer be able to work there. So, like that in itself presents a problem. You know we obviously fought that case and it was fine, she got the job back and [the company] changed their policy...*

This theme also overlaps with the 'Working Together' theme discussed above. However, the distinction lies in the difference in intent – one being to represent minority and misunderstood faith communities to the wider public, the other being to facilitate relationships between people of different faiths for their own sake. This positive representation and building of community relationships was the most pertinent way that our research participants were resisting the fear and hate created by neopopulism rather than simply the individualism that comes with neoliberalism.

Conclusion

The faith-based community and youth work we encountered in our research appears to represent a form of asset-based community development – with the community workers working with communities in positive and empowering ways. In many cases, they are doing this where funding for community development activity is scarce or misplaced. There is a question to be raised about whether these practices collude with the state rather than offering an active resistance to neoliberalism, by plugging gaps in provision and reinforcing the ideologies of austerity and community-led self-help. For example, Beth's work to replace local authority provision could be seen as either a challenge to neoliberalism and austerity or a collusion with it, by reinforcing that such work should be delivered by communities rather than the state (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; Featherstone et al, 2011).

However, there are indications in our findings of faith-based community work seeking to actively challenge the discourses of division and fear promoted by neopopulism. For example, and perhaps most explicitly, in the work of Steven and Mark to bring young people of different faiths together, and the activism and protests engaged in by Balraj and his Sikh youth group.

As such, we argue that faith-based community development is going some way to resist the forces of neoliberalism and neopopulism, and the values of individualism, deficit, and fear that underpin these forces – through bringing different communities and groups together. However, there is a need for a clearer understanding of neopopulism and, with this, community development activists, both faith-based and not, could be doing more to explicitly protest, resist and speak out against neopopulist discourses.

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[1] Neopopulism is a concept that has gained some limited traction in academic literature, particularly in relation to Latin American countries. Much of this literature refers to neopopulism as founded in overt right-wing dictatorships, to which neoliberal and democratic ideals became hopeful antidotes. We, however, use the term differently to refer to the re-emergence of right-wing populism arising from the *failure* of neoliberalism to deliver on its espoused distributive objectives.