

## **Integration and Belonging in the United Kingdom**

**Alessandra Buonfino**  
**The Young Foundation**

## About the Transatlantic Council on Migration

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## I. Introduction

In a diverse world, a society governed by good relations between its people is essential. “Good integration” happens every day in different areas around the country, either as a unified response to a tragic event, in the private sphere, or in the successful performance of some ethnic minorities in education and employment. Yet, in some respects, communities are moving apart, pulled or sometimes pushed, by their own choices. As we struggle through an economic downturn, issues of integration and community cohesion are likely to become more pressing, not least because tensions in some areas may arise as perceptions of competition for resources and dwindling jobs intensify.

The key to a sound policy response is to accept that there is no magic recipe when it comes to integration and belonging. In London today, there are about 34 communities of foreign nationals with more than 10,000 members each: these include many Europeans, including 125,000 French people and an estimated 50,000 Swedes.<sup>1</sup> More than 300 languages are spoken by London’s school children. And in Birmingham, for example, nine neighborhood wards have a higher percentage of ethnic minorities than white native-born residents.<sup>2</sup> The patterns of diversity and belonging are becoming increasingly complex — and as a result require smarter policies and new political strategies for dealing with changing identities and changing patterns of belonging.

People belong when the most important systems around them send signals that confirm and recognize their value as members of society. These systems provide the essentials of life: nourishment, care, recognition, protection, and prosperity. They range from the access to others who know and care for us to the signals we absorb from culture and rituals; or the kinds of messages we receive from the economy — for example, the availability of entry-level jobs and opportunities for advancement. The messages that different groups receive about whether they do or do not fit in should inform and shape the policies and strategies of belonging. Such messages should be broadly underpinned by a number of essential requirements.

First, agencies, politicians, community leaders, and journalists should learn to discuss and communicate success as well as deal with failure. The way we discuss and portray issues can change opinions, create prejudices, encourage misunderstandings, and increase tensions. Discourses portraying immigration as a burden, Islam as an intolerant religion, and segregation as something “that ethnic minorities do” have the effect of hindering success, making integration more difficult to achieve, and favoring the rise of tensions and of populist far-right parties. This becomes even more of a danger in the midst of a serious economic downturn.

Second, institutions should be innovatively designed to determine whether the inevitable divides that exist in any society are accentuated or downplayed. If dominant institutions like political parties, trade unions, or voluntary organizations are divided on racial or religious

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Buonfino, “Integration and the Question of Social Identity,” in *Rethinking Immigration and Integration: a New Center-Left Agenda*, (London: Policy Network, 2007), <http://www.policy-network.net/uploadedFiles/Publications/Publications/Immigration%20and%20Integration%20final.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

grounds then there will be more of a risk that leaders will try to accentuate the divisions. Equally, if schooling, housing strategy, or even arts and cultural funding encourage communities to segregate, then it is likely to work against integration. The emphasis of social design should be in bringing people together through day-to-day encounters: more often than not, an exchange of words, contact, or a smile can be enough to decrease prejudice and can be simple but strong local forces of integration.

Third, an integrated society is a matter of skills — those of teachers, community leaders, the police, politicians, or employers – which are crucial as such people are the first port of call when integration is happening and when conflict arises. Integration is a *learned competence* and these subtle skills determine whether events escalate or dampen down. They are about knowing what to say and what not to say, when to be firm, when to turn a blind eye, and when to find a compromise. In abundance, they can help a society cope with great shocks but where they are lacking, small issues can become big crises.

Fourth, laws and institutions should be designed to provide incentives (and disincentives) to integrate. The most successful forms of integration often occur when the incentives available to people and communities encourage mixing and encounters, and when the responsibility and social design of institutions make that possible. Integration should be underpinned by universal legal rights and the ability to expose hypocrisies where these are not lived out. Integration should also be about setting clear limits where claims and demands are felt to cause resentment or when they contrast with national values.

Finally, integration should be encouraged both at the national and the local levels. The local level, of the neighborhood or the street, can often provide an ideal space for innovative encounters, for negotiating new forms of neighborliness and local belonging. Often integration that wouldn't seem possible at the macro level of national policies or institutions is already widely happening in neighborhoods and streets around the United Kingdom. Learning and scaling-up existing success might lead us in the right direction.

The debate on immigration and integration is a pressing priority and a chance to think about new and more intelligent approaches to a more diverse society. There are successes out there but the hardest work will be to stay ahead of the curve. An integrated society is hard to achieve and requires constant hard work on many fronts; we will need to get many things right in tandem for such a vision to work. We also have no choice but to act, for one of the lessons of history is that even the best things can unravel more quickly than they can be put together.

## II. About the Author

**Alessandra Buonfino** rejoined the Young Foundation in August 2008 and is responsible for work on civility with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, mapping needs in Wales, creativity, and European cities with the British Council. Dr. Buonfino first joined the Young Foundation at its inception in April 2005 and worked on subjects as varied as neighborliness, luxury goods, and far-right extremism. Before returning to the Young Foundation, she was Head of Research at the think tank Demos, where she remains a Senior Associate and still leads on current research on happiness and changing aspirations in today's Britain. She also worked as a research fellow on an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project on migration and terrorism in Britain and Germany; and as a consultant on cities and diversity for the British Council, and on communities and wellbeing for Tesco. Dr. Buonfino has written extensively on issues related to communities, neighborliness, belonging, and immigration. She was co-author of *People Flow: Managing Migration in a New European Commonwealth*, co-editor of *Porcupines in Winter: the Pleasures and Pains of Living Together in Contemporary Britain*, and most recently editor of *The Future Face of Enterprise* on making Britain into a thriving enterprise nation.