Title: An exploration of British cultural values and identity from the margins

Abstract
Concerns about the extent and quality of cultural diversity in the UK have deepened and intensified in the last decade. Along with other countries in Europe, high profile debates have been taking place about integration, and multiculturalism has been called into question from both the political left and right. Fuelled by fears that minority groups are not only living ‘parallel lives’ (Cantle 2001), but also pose a threat to national identity, integration policies and practices across Europe have increasingly been concerned with ensuring that migrants adopt the language and cultural values of the host country. In the UK this shift has been accompanied by a change in language, with the concepts of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘integration’ being replaced by ‘community cohesion’. This more recent concept places its emphasis on new arrivals, Muslims and minority groups in general to learn about and to demonstrate ‘common values’.

The use of compulsory integration measures aimed at the individual migrant have increased: language testing, classes in civic education and testing about the history and political system of the country have become a core part on integration policies in many countries across Europe. For example, the UK introduced a ‘Life in the UK’ test in 2004. Similar measures exist in other European countries: the Netherlands has the ‘inburgeringsbeleid’, in 2003 Austria introduced an ‘Integration Agreement’, and France adopted the ‘Contrat d’accueil et de l’ integration’. Perchinig (2012) suggests that this represents a re-framing of integration away from the rights-based conceptualisation which existed up until the 1990’s, where the focus was on legal equality, security of residence and social and political participation. In this framework, the state was the main actor responsible for removing barriers and ensuring appropriate support was in place for migrants to have equal access to education, the labour market and society more generally. Since the 1990’s integration policies were re-framed around a duty based concept which shifted responsibility to the individual migrant. Integration has become an identity issue with migrants having to prove their willingness to integrate and to commit to the values and cultural traits of the host country.

In these debates there is assumed to be a set of dominant and clearly defined British values (as articulated in Life in the UK). These are set in opposition to migrant values which are left unexplored, but generally depicted as of concern. But how is this expectation to adopt a British identity, and espouse British values, viewed and experienced from the perspective of the migrants themselves, and how is cultural hybridity, or conflict, managed or avoided? This paper will report on a participatory action research project with refugee women in the UK. Through a range of activities – photography, creative writing, collage and scrap books – the women were encouraged to become observers of their own cultural lives and identities. The paper explores how British cultural values are perceived, negotiated and performed by refugee women, and asks how formations of identity, including British identity, are understood.