Caught Between Two Worlds? – Faith identity development in cross-cultural young people

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Abstract

This case study of South American families in London, seeks to identify the extent to which the cross-cultural environment of second generation immigrant young people affects their faith identity development. It highlights the influence of family language and cultural identity on young people's faith identity, as well as significant generational differences in an understanding of God and faith. A theology of marginality is proposed, that redefines marginality into a positive liminal position that affirms the young people in their cultural and spiritual identity. Such a theology provides a challenge for the church as a whole as it seeks to support families in this context, in which mutual understanding and interdependence is facilitated and valuable theological insight offered to the Church's mission in an ever changing multicultural world.

Introduction

In the U.K, as an increasingly multicultural society, immigration has become a hotly debated topic for politicians and society as a whole (Wyatt 2014)[1]. Within this debate the situation of second generation immigrant young people is rarely mentioned. These are children and young people who have been born in the U.K or have come to live here as a result of parental choice, and they are often faced with both socio-economic and emotional consequences of that choice. A report assessing the situation for irregular migrant children[2] concludes that rapidly changing government policies over the last twenty years have contributed to a situation in the U.K which leaves some children in a state of 'destitution and social exclusion' (Hughes and Sigona 2012:8). Even when legal status is obtained they are still faced with the challenge of reconciling their dual cultural identities within the multicultural landscape of the U.K; as Joerchel (2006:4) asks: 'In what way do children in such a fusion of

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[1] Wyatt's report on a recent television debate on the topic reflects the way in which immigration issues are often negatively presented.

[2] Children born to parents without legal status.

cultural diversity make sense of their interconnected cultural environment and thus of themselves within it?'

There are many questions to be asked as to how the Church seeks to support families holistically within a cross-cultural environment, but my research focused on the impact on the development of a faith identity in these young people. Over the past ten years I have worked as a Salvation Army minister in London and a great proportion of that ministry has been with South American families. Through this ministry experience I reflect that, in Church, usually the first response to these families has been to address the socioeconomic problems that arise through immigration, as these are initially the most apparent needs; particularly due to the political nature of changeable immigration laws and procedures (Government UK 2014). Providing practical support with language, food and a place of fellowship are immediate responses to support them – speaking more specifically about supporting asylum seekers and refugees, a report by the Church of England (2004) states that 'churches frequently find themselves "filling a gap" in provision'.

However, what becomes clearer as families start to form part of the worshipping community, are significant issues faced by the children as they seek to develop their faith and their identity. Family conflict can arise due to the different environment and culture within which the children are growing up, compared to their parents. Observations in my research are that generally these families are closer-knit than English families, but the children will be given little choice over two significant factors in their identity development – firstly, Church attendance and secondly, maintaining the Spanish language.

Due to my personal interest in this subject, but also my feeling that research into the situation of these families would provide insights for other ministers and Salvation Army corps in similar circumstances, I decided to focus my MA dissertation on assessing the extent to which the faith identity development of young people is impacted by their cross-cultural environment, and what lessons can be learnt for the Church to support them. My research used an instrumental case study methodology as well as literature review to enable the findings to highlight practical as well as theological steps that can be taken forward in this ministry.

Although the focus of the case study was the issues faced by the young people, by involving parents as well as the young people themselves in the research it illustrates the different worldviews that they are exposed to.

The Case Study

Families were approached who attend the corps I currently lead, which contains South American parents and at least one teenage child. For an instrumental case study a large sample is not necessary as the purpose is not to generate statistics but to allow for 'naturalistic generalisations' that others can identify with and apply to their own circumstances (Thomas 2011:1).

My initial research used participant-generated visual data - the parent and the young person were asked to take three photographs that illustrated for them something 'significant' in their relationship with God and this was then followed by an interview where they were able to explain the content of their photographs and answer some follow-up questions. There were several reasons for choosing to do the initial research for the case study using visual data. Firstly, the adult participants' first language is not English and although they are competent in the language, using visual material enabled them to feel relaxed and in control about how the discussions would be led. Secondly, using photographs enabled both adults and young people participating to articulate spiritual and emotional matters which are, by their very nature, abstract and difficult to put into words. Dunlop notes that 'visual material can operate on a subconscious level to elicit responses about meaning, identity and spirituality' (Dunlop and Ward 2012:435). By putting the participants in control of what to photograph, it also meant that it challenged them to think through their decisions before the follow-up interviews, meaning that not only the photographs themselves but also the cognitive processes that had been part of that process provided me with valuable insights into the participants' view of themselves and their relationship with God and others.

The young people and the adults were asked how they would like to conduct the follow-up interviews and their response to this simple question immediately highlights generational differences – the young people chose to do the interviews as part of a group of their peers, and the adults decided that they would prefer one-to-one interviews as for them this was a more private matter and, although they agreed to

their data being used in a research project, they wanted to ensure their voice was heard and felt this might be compromised if discussing it with others. In each case, after explaining their reasons for each photograph they took, follow-up questions were asked under two categories, firstly questions about the cross-cultural context of the participant's family and secondly questions about faith. The questions within each category were designed to draw out responses from the participants that illustrate significant social, cultural and religious elements of their identity. The questions about the family cross-cultural context sought to assess the worldview of the young people and also of their parents. The category of faith aimed to look closer at the participants' understanding of their Christian identity and to what extent this may be impacted by family and other environmental factors.

Both the visual data and the interview data was analysed using an open-coding system and then the themes that emerged formed the basis of a literature review so that all of the information together could help to answer the research question. The themes were categorised as 'culture' and 'faith'. The first category revealed socio-economic, generational and language factors that impact world view and identity development of the young people. The category of faith revealed significant generational differences in the participants' views of God, Christianity and the role of the Church.

Language and Identity

In the political and media discussions about immigration often there is a focus on the need for competence in the English language and this is a need that is also recognised as a priority by those who immigrate. However, the significance of language in the establishment of one's identity cannot be underestimated, and the choices people make as to what language to speak are conscious decisions that reflect their motivations and sense of self. When people are away from their home country, for whatever reason, there is also a strong desire to maintain a group cultural identity. For parents whose children grow and develop their identity in the U.K the choice of language can become a source of conflict. The young people may become frustrated at their parents' lack of understanding, often having to translate for them or explain letters. Also, 'Older bilingual children and adolescents who become conscious of which language their peers speak may well reject a language

(usually the home language) so as not to be different from them' (Grosjean 2011). Parents can see any rejection of their language as a rejection of their cultural heritage and the very essence of who they are. When it comes to church and faith parents in these families often seek a homogenous language church which affirms their cultural identity – for their children however, the culture of that church is not theirs, as they feel both British and South American.

Generational differences:

The conflict that can arise due to the different cultural backgrounds of parents and young people is conflict that can be seen in all nationalities. My research highlighted that for young people in a cross-cultural family background the generational differences can be exacerbated as parents can feel less integrated into western culture. Some young people in these circumstances feel a sense of confusion and identity crisis – a 'cultural dissonance' (Nilan and Feixa 2006:66). This leads some people in churches and in society as a whole, to conclude that the only way forward for these young people and their parents is to fully integrate into the host nation and culture.

However, my case study demonstrates that not all young people struggle with their multiple identities and literature affirms this. It could be argued that in the post-modern culture within which the young people are growing up in the UK there is a rejection of meta-narratives and certainties and this enables young people to become adept at managing multiple identities, without confusion or difficulty. The importance to young people of individualism and choice are key characteristics of the postmodern culture within which they are living (Murray 2004:65). The generational conflict comes when parents are holding to the certainties of their own cultural and religious identities. The role of the Church can be to promote mutual understanding between the generations by encouraging both adults and young people to listen to each other and learn from their different perceptions about life, Church and God.

Faith

One of the goals of a Christian community is that faith will be formed in its members. This faith will be continually nurtured and developed through the forms and structures of the community, as well as through the relationships within it. My case

study highlighted generational differences in a definition of faith – for the parents being a Christian is primarily about knowing the facts about God and living in accordance with His standards and for the young people faith is defined through relationship and emotions – if they 'feel close' to God.

Many developmental theorists have sought to assess the processes through which faith is developed (Fowler 1981; Westerhoff 2000; Phillips 2011). These theories are often used in some form by churches seeking to understand how the growth of faith can be facilitated. However, there are many shortcomings in these theories, especially when considering a cross-cultural environment, because they are mostly Western based theories and do not fully take into account the agency of young people nor the environmental factors that impact faith development.

Missiologists also seek to provide insight into how faith formation can be encouraged by churches and many speak of contextualisation – 'enabling the Gospel to move across cultural barriers' (Boyd 2008:20). Clearly, crossing cultural barriers does not only include geographical or race boundaries, but could also include generational boundaries. Furthermore, for young people in cross-cultural families, there are additional complexities as they are faced with boundaries of race and generation within their own family and community. How then can the Church support these young people in their journey of faith?

There are two general responses. The first is one initially espoused in the 1950s by Donald McGavran, known as the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP). He surmised that 'people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers' (McGavran 1990:Pref.). This can be illustrated by the popularity of homogenous language churches, such as those attended by many Spanish speakers in London. Likewise, many have used the HUP as justification for youth-specific ministry that contextualises the Gospel in a postmodern environment. There are criticisms of this from those who believe there is a danger that as the Church seeks to contextualise its mission in an increasingly individualistic society, it runs the risk of conforming to the 'pervasive influence of consumerism' (Murray 2004:65).

A second response is heterogeneity, where the principles of unity and reconciliation are reinforced by all cultures and age groups worshipping and learning about faith together in Church. However, 'just because you mix two cultures doesn't mean that

you get two equal cultures' (Fresh Expressions 2014). Whether the cultures are generational or racial there is usually a dominant culture. The structures and forms of the Church do not always give an equal say to all – for example, young people may not be old enough to participate in decision making meetings and language barriers may prevent a speaker of another language fully understanding all that happens within the Church. Law (1993:47) suggests that there is often a 'naïve belief that by putting two very culturally different groups together, the Holy Spirit will make Pentecost happen'.

It would seem that both a homogenous and a heterogeneous model fall short of what is needed to support these young people in their faith identity development.

Theology of Marginality

In sociological and political terms marginality is seen as a negative concept and the aim is seen to be creating an inclusive society where all are assimilated into what is considered the norm. Under this definition marginality is a failure to become integrated and a marginal person has to make a choice to either stay marginal or attempt to become part of the centre. My case study highlighted the further complexities for second generation immigrant young people, as they become 'marginal' within themselves – neither fully 'English' nor fully 'Latino'.

A more positive definition of marginality is needed, which stresses the value of those on the edges as well as those in the centre – the truth is that you cannot have one without the other. Rather than feeling in-between or in neither cultural worlds, those who are living in cross-cultural circumstances should feel the value of being in-both worlds. When we look at the Biblical narrative of God's chosen 'exclusive' community of people we see many examples of where He used those on the 'outside' to fulfil His plans and purposes for all people – for example, Tamar and Rahab (Spina 2005).

A theology of marginality comes from this redefinition and a cross-cultural young person becomes an illustration of a new way of thinking about a Christian position in the world – they are neither fully in one culture or another, they are what Young Lee (1995:63-65) calls 'in-beyond' both worlds, as they reconcile both worlds from their marginal position. This, in other words, could be described in the words of Jesus as he prayed for his disciples in John 17:14-19 – that they are 'in the world, but not of

the world' – 'simultaneously the total affirmation and the total negation of the world' (Yung Lee 1995:72).

Young people living in a cross-cultural environment within their family may provide a useful insight into how the Church can engage in ministry and mission. Their insight into living in two cultural worlds can become the lens through which we view God and His world – 'marginal people can creatively combine the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider' (Yung Lee 1995:152). As one young person in my case study put it: 'I am able to see both [cultures] from a different perspective'. Whether the cultures are ethnic, generational or church cultures is not the significant aspect of this theology; what is significant is that the viewpoint is decentralised and focussed on reconciling all 'cultures' together.

Conclusion

A theology of marginality suggests that in terms of cross-cultural ministry the church can promote marginality as a positive position for both young people and their parents in these cross-cultural contexts, to encourage them to understand that finding the balance of cultures in their own personal identity reflects how as a Christian the balance is to live 'in the world, but not of the world.'

Another factor to consider is that our churches will inevitably contain a mixture of generational and ethnic cultures and this study into how young people in cross-cultural family environments can be encouraged in their faith formation provides valuable theological and practical insight into how the church negotiates the complexities of mission in a multicultural environment. As churches we can be a place to promote the mutual interdependency of generations and cultures to provide a full picture of what it means to be God's people in this world.

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