

Can National Identity Ever Have “Fundamental Values”?

International Review of Qualitative
Research
2020, Vol. 13(1) 5–8
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DOI: 10.1177/1940844720908560
journals.sagepub.com/home/irq



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Abstract

This brief article acts as an introduction to this special edition on Fundamental British Values (FBV). From the outset, it is important to state that we as a group of contributors believe it is fundamental to value Britain and all of its peoples in different and differing ways to those espoused in the Government Prevent Agenda, FBV, and the “media’s moral panics” about the terrorist within.

Keywords

Fundamental British Values, prevent agenda, education

Introduction

The U.K. government is currently asserting the need for the curriculum in England and Wales to promote “Fundamental British Values” (FBV), in response to perceived threats from various radicalization and globalization. The prime mover has been seen as Islamic, but there are further underminings in nationalisms within the United Kingdom such as the Scottish referendum of 2014, as well as anti-EU expressions of nationality. “Brexit” was a demand for a return of “political sovereignty”: “we want our country back,” as well as a demonization of immigrants. More generally, there have been other assertions of nationality, as in Hungary, Russia, and to some extent the USA, as well as a growing sense of disillusion with neo-liberal globalization (Economist Special Report, 2016).

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In the broadest sense, “Fundamental British Values,” as the U.K. government promotes it (the upper case is a significant reification), raise issues of interpretation that include the tensions between revolution and restoration and indeed reaction (Arendt, 1977). We, though, like Holman Jones (2019) believe,

that when we gather together in “sanctioned” and “official” public spaces such as a conference SIG gathering, or a university classroom, (and we would add in school classrooms and curricular) or in the pages of indexed and ranked journals, as well as when we assemble in “unsanctioned” and “unofficial” spaces such as “unranked” journals and hallways, public squares and street corners, and other spaces in which human equality or relational freedom is not readily manifest if not impossible—our gathering must, to borrow (Bulter, 2015) phrase, make a “call for justice”.

Our gathering, our call for justice, began with presentations that we made in a symposium at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry held at Urbana-Champaign May 2017. The symposium was entitled: Can national identity ever have “fundamental values”? In this symposium, we explored aspects of the historical, philosophical, political, and educational aspects of national identity and its translation into curricular and educational arenas. What emerged from this symposium was a radical re-examination and exploration of FBV which included issues around historical and contemporary definitions of British Values (Stronach & Frankham, 2020; Hodkinson, 2020), the implications of FBV for Muslim home educators (Pattison, 2020a, Pattison, 2020b), how FBV may be understood as a token attempt toward societal inclusion and empowerment of all citizens (Houston, 2020) and, finally, a paper which reflects analytically on FBV and its wider implications for alternative education through expressions of Foucauldian governmentality of self-surveillance and management (Pattison, 2020a).

In this special edition, then, our treatments of national identity and values are various, but if there is a commonality about them then it lies in epistemological and ontological approaches that emphasize the dispersion of meanings rather than the somewhat pointless attempts at definition and specification. An addition to this kind of agonistic dispersion can be seen most vividly in Oppenheimer (2007) where questions of origin and identity are upended. The “historical” sequences of Celtic/Roman/Anglo-Saxon/Viking are radically and permanently changed by a careful analysis of DNA gene sequences, and the tracing of “British” origins to a much more ancient post-Ice Age recolonization from the “refuges” of the Ukraine, Moldavia, and especially the French-Spanish Ice Age Refuge—it seems that we owe more to the Basques than the Brits!

Thus, the contributions traverse wide substantive and disciplinary areas including children’s rights, education, home education, disability studies, and history. While these contributions differ in substantive foci and approaches employed, what they all have in common is an interest in the usefulness, or otherwise, of state sanctioned measures of identity. As well as an overt and sustained interest in, and a commitment to attempting to further social justice, inclusion and human rights within the vitriolic rhetoric of FBV. Through this special edition, we continue a conversation by asking whether there are such things as “British Values,”

fundamental or otherwise, and why do government feel a need for such a “Britain” to exist? The papers that follow capture a commitment to justice and speak from each author’s experiences and worlds. The diversity of those experiences and worlds creates what we hope is a multiperspectival and rich tapestry of thoughts and reflections on the question that formed the title of our symposium and provided the organizing construct for the five papers to follow. Each of the papers here, while bearing some resemblance to the papers presented at Illinois, have been extensively revised and improved by input from reviewers. Titles have changed slightly to catch the nuances and shifts that emerged in the revision process. What has emerged is a series of papers that collectively provide a lens through which we can continue to explore crucial questions about identity formulation, community, and the controlling influence of state sanctioned values imposed in state schools and sites of alternative education. It is hoped that they make a contribution to the ongoing conversation and scrutiny of FBV.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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