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Summary

Reactive Identity Theory (RIT) is prominent in the immigration, ethnicity and assimilation literature (c.f. Bonacich and Modell 1980; Rumbaut 1994; Sears et al. 2003). RIT challenges more traditional patterns of linear ethnic assimilation, and suggests that ethnic identity can become more salient: ethnic minorities may experience a “rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness” particularly in hostile contexts associated with disadvantage and discrimination (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:152). RIT stems from the Social Identity Perspective (SIP), which incorporates Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel 1982) and Self-categorisation Theory (Turner et al. 1987). SIP suggests individuals create distinct social categories to classify and organise their social worlds. Individuals compartmentalize themselves and others into these categories, thereby defining in-groups (“us”) and out-groups (“them”).

We extend RIT to religious identity and test whether reactive religious identities and reactive religiosity are features of a “hostile” context characterised by changes in the local religious composition, which raises the salience of religion as a relevant social category in the individual self-concept. A reactive religious identity model might predict an increase in self-reported importance of religious identity and an increase in religiosity in some individuals over time due to changes in the religious diversity in an area (Sears et al. 2003). We use data from the Citizenship Survey 2007 and the British Social Attitudes Surveys 1998 and 2007, combined with local authority religious composition data from the Census 2001 Small Area Microdata Sample, to test this reactive religious identity model. We find that local authority religious composition is a significant predictor of religious identity in areas with higher proportions of members of non-Christian religions. These increases could plausibly be in response to changes in the religious composition of these areas and so could provide support for a broader theory of RIT.

