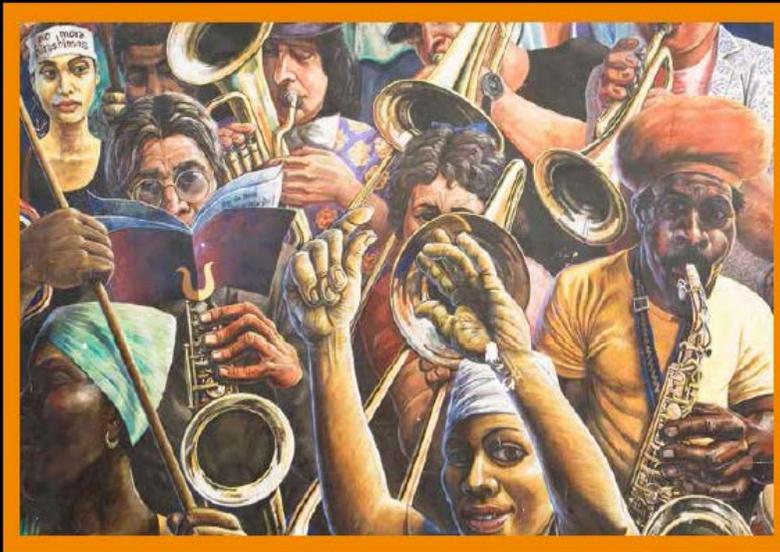# Living Multiculture

The new geographies of ethnicity and the changing formations of multiculture in England

Summary

- As more places become ethnically diverse, approaches to managing multiculture based on formal strategies of cohesion and integration fail to capture much of what it means to live in multicultural Britain today.

- It is important to recognise the everyday, routine and low-key ways in which people regularly negotiate and manage cultural difference in their day-to-day lives.

- Policy thinking needs to recognize the capacities and skills that complex populations may develop to engage with and navigate cultural difference.

- Policy interventions need to more dynamically and creatively build on the informal and micro, and directly seek to contribute to creating the conditions for multicultural exchange.

Introduction – multicultural living beyond segregation and integration

Britain is experiencing significant shifts in the geography of its multiculture. Some places are becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse while others are experiencing diversity for the first time. At the same time new migration settlements and the social mobility of older migrant communities mean that minority ethnic communities are becoming more diverse and socially differentiated. Such changes – often rapid - present major challenges for policy-makers and service provision at both national and local levels.

In the UK more traditional approaches to managing an increasingly multicultural population have, since the 1950s, tended to be based on a dualistic model of encouraging integration, whereby 'minority' groups are urged to conform to a 'majority' culture and anti-discrimination legislation is developed. Such an approach is also reactive and tends to arise in response to crisis events – such as riots, violence, deaths – and feeds a sense of 'panic' around intractable social division, cultural separation and (less so) extensive racism – the long list of inquiries and public reports reinforces this association (e.g. Swann, Scarman,

Macpherson, Cantle). In this way cultural difference becomes shorthand for social tension and a range of societal problems that need to be managed and controlled. This approach, while formally celebrating diversity, tends to privilege 'majority' culture working with a view of making 'others' like 'us'. However, for many people the scale and extent of ethnic and social diversity means that increasingly complex cultural and other social differences are lived in much more everyday, routinized, low-key and relatively confident ways. This form of multiculture is less panicked, mundane even, and is rooted in the particularities of the places where people live. What does such everyday multiculture imply for policy?

The Living Multiculture Project

The following policy recommendations are based on a piece of research called *Living Multiculture* which focused on the everyday experiences of living in **contemporary but very different urban areas of England** sharing social resources and public spaces.

Living Multiculture was a two-year project that began in July 2012 and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Its focus was the changing nature of diverse populations in urban England and we asked two questions. First, how do people manage growing cultural diversity and ethnic difference in their everyday lives? And second, what role does the place they live in play in this process? We looked at those settings where cultural diversity, ethnic difference, social mixing and living in localities together are treated as everyday and routine.

Methodology

The project looked at people, places and experiences within three very different urban case studies:

- Hackney in North-East London - a borough which has a long established migrant settlement and 'super-diverse' multiculture

- Milton Keynes in South-East England - a new city that has only recently become multicultural

- Oadby in Leicestershire – a small suburban town on the edge of Leicester with a growing South Asian origin middle class

In each of these areas members of the research team spent time in various settings where different groups of people meet and where social interactions occur: cafés and libraries; public events; social-leisure clubs; public parks; 6th Forms and Further Education colleges.

We conducted over a 100 interviews and formed 12 groups of participants (post-16 students, social club members, and park users) that met for a collective group interview 3 times each. We conducted a series of individual interviews with local and national policy makers and community organisations and shared our findings as part of these interviews conversations. Finally we undertook participant observation in public spaces and at public events. In each case study area we formed an advisory group of local policy makers and activists to enhance the value and impact of the research.

Key findings

Inviting and safe public and semi public places are important for generating senses of comfort, collective sharing by different populations and spontaneous 'at ease' sociality and interaction. As one respondent commented of a park in Hackney: *"I don't really come to the park to socialize although I might end up*

talking to somebody at the café or something, it might be purely practical, I mean someone'll say "can I borrow this chair?" and then you get into a conversation about that […] but I mean it depends how you see socializing, if its just like being in the company of other people then [being in the park] that's socializing in a way."

Young people particularly experience high levels of ethnic diversity in their day-to-day lives and have complex mechanisms for understanding and negotiating with others. In all the colleges, there was interaction across different cultural backgrounds and, despite tensions, students felt that there was mixing across ethnic groups. For example *"I mean, like, 'cause all our friends, we're on like the same page, with our mutual friends. We go out, all different types of friends and everyone just sits with everyone. But like, it's not dominated by one – one, like, culture, so it's a variety of all" (Tahir, Oadby 6th Form college).* Set against this we also found that mixing outside of college was more limited.

Leisure group membership can be important for building a wider sense of local belonging and be generative of affective community feeling. In all the leisure groups there was a strong sense of place and of how shared activities can create conditions for spontaneous cultural encounter. For example, Howard from the Hackney Writers' Group explained: *"I like the group, it's just what Hackney is about, just getting people together from different backgrounds […] I really love it."*

Policy makers are aware that place matters to how multiculture is experienced and of the importance of place identities and histories in shaping policy interventions. In Oadby, for example, the nature of the place was seen as key to managing difference as this contrasted with the 'ethnicity expertise' of nearby Leicester *"In many ways in the City, the councils there because they are grounded in all of this ethnicity cultural stuff, probably have almost a better understanding than my members, yet, paradoxically, I think the Borough and certainly Oadby as a place to live within itself, is probably much more settled and much more comfortable"*

Policy implications and recommendations

The *Living Multiculture* research suggests that people develop place-based competencies for negotiating cultural difference and managing social change. This is not to say that tensions don't emerge, but it does mean that the possible policy interventions are not straightforward. And certainly it is not about one culture conforming to the norms of another.

There are three broad policy implications arising from our work:

- Policy interventions are about cultivating spaces for encounter and exchange rather than 'social engineering' for 'integration', but this is not the same as doing nothing;

- A 'one size fits all' approach won't work and policy needs to account for place-specific dynamics;

- In times of austerity these interventions and initiatives that remain critical to wider senses of social resilance and cohesion are not cost—intensive and can be folded into existing interventions. Yet even then austerity may make it more difficult to take account of some of the things we have identified as important (e.g. maintaining and developing park spaces, keeping libraries and other spaces for social interaction).

Policy Recommendations

- Recognize what residents' value about where they live and what makes places livable and gives places their particular 'signature' identities.

- The micro exchanges, shared resources and materialities matter: small things - sitting places, water, books, gardens etc. – can be key resources offering ways of bringing diverse populations together.

- Protect and generate safe and inviting public spaces which encourage inclusive social wellbeing and multiple usage (e.g. parks, libraries, squares and sitting areas, water features, play areas, markets, and sports facilities). This also seems to be the message from the work we did in the chain cafes we visited. The balance between creating spaces within which people feel secure because they have a shared identity or interest and those within which relatively light touch forms of interaction are possible is an important one.

- Broadly defined/locally inclusive celebration events and festivals work as important bringing together opportunities for social resilience, cohesion and wellbeing to effectively bring different populations together in collective and collaborative ways.

- It remains important to publically articulate anti-discrimination commitments and equal opportunities. Tensions and conflicts associated with diversity can be used productively to bring different groups and stakeholders together when they focus on shared areas of concern (as they did in community based projects responding to the 2011 riots in Hackney).

- Tensions around diversity and difference may also come through in 'non-obvious' policy arenas – for example, planning practice may play a key role in setting out the negotiated spaces of everyday multiculture, not only through street design which helps to construct a particular public realm, but also in the process of managing parking regulations around key faith times, and even in implementing policies on house extensions and renovations.

- While 'local' and 'independent' is often viewed as better for localities some corporate semi-public spaces such as brand cafes and restaurants are important sites of multicultural use and at ease sharing which is worth considering in new planning applications.

- Civic society is often vibrant and thriving with ethnically mixed social leisure clubs and organizations active and well attended. These present opportunities to bring more informal social capacities and local collective know-how into local policy-delivery forums.

- Children, adolescents and young people are a part of local populations that are most consistently exposed to and experience cultural difference through education settings – recognizing that diversity impacts on this demographic in particular is important in service provision and resource allocation. This can mean they have skills for managing diversity but may also generate more bounded and defensive in the ways in which they engage with cultural difference.

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For more information and publications see our website:
www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/living-multiculture/