Living Multiculture: the new geographies of ethnicity and the changing formations of multiculture in England

Summary of Emerging Findings Summer 2013

Living Multiculture is a two-year ESRC-funded research project based at The Open University, the University of Leicester and the University of Surrey, focusing on the ordinary encounters of increasingly diverse populations in everyday locations. Our research asks two main questions: how do people live cultural difference? And what role does place play in this process?

Our research takes place in three locations – Hackney, Milton Keynes, and Oadby (near Leicester). In each of these places, we have four main field sites:
- sixth form & further education colleges
- parks and public space
- leisure groups and clubs
- libraries, cafes and semi-public space

We have now completed the first stages of the data collection and are beginning detailed analysis. This briefing summarises some of the themes emerging from the data at this stage. It should be noted that these findings are very 'early days analysis' and we will continue to refine them as we engage further with the data.

- The most ethnically diverse settings in our study were the sixth form and further education colleges, where young people took ethnic diversity for granted. It was clear that frameworks, initiatives and events set up by the colleges were important in influencing social interactions there.
- Young people we spoke with in the colleges were very articulate and reflexive about ethnic difference. This included reflecting on how jokes and humour can ease (and aggravate) possible conflicts, and how they know when this is appropriate.
- Many of the organised leisure groups we researched were ethnically diverse, but many were not, despite being open to everyone. But class and gender seemed at least as important in influencing who attended which leisure groups.
- Participants experienced parks as localised places where they could connect with nature and 'green things', and experience solitude, as well as prizing the ability to share these spaces. Being around people without directly interacting seemed as important as more definite encounters.
- When directly interacting with unknown others in public spaces like parks, this was usually enabled by external factors – dogs, sports activities, children, events, sitting and play areas – through which people could strike up conversations that were not directly personal.
- For some people parks were also experienced as places of potential threat and conflict and incivility. This was not usually expressed as fear of difference, but as fear of being in isolated spaces, particularly for women. Tensions around behaviour, sharing and use of space sometimes expressed. Again rarely articulated around ethnic difference per se.
- Cafes and libraries, like the parks, also seemed to be particularly open to ethnic and other difference, perhaps in part because they are places that can be made either anonymous or more

personal; and where people engage in many semi-private activities alongside each other in semi-public space.

- We noticed that the branches of multinational chain cafes which we studied were particularly ethnically mixed, often more so than local independent cafes, perhaps reflecting that standardisation and anonymity allows these spaces to be remade by different people.
- When asked to describe recent change in the place where they live, even within the context of a research project about ethnic diversity, many people described the built environment rather than the local population.
- Local identity in the three places seems based on complex (and different) mixes of factors. Class and taste were articulated more often than questions of ethnicity, though we will continue to unpick these interactions. Long-term residency did not appear to be a requirement in being considered 'local' for most of our participants.
- Place-based senses of community belonging were less widely articulated by participants but senses of place identity and connection were strongly expressed in all places. This was particularly strong in Hackney where rapid social change was widely perceived and was most often commented on.
- Diversity of populations was commented on but also not usually seen as significant. This more taken for granted diversity position reflects a non-panicked, 'its ordinary' disposition to difference generally. Some narratives did reveal strain and anxieties and avoidances about difference in some contexts at some times.
- There was strong evidence of skills and competencies in negotiating difference in everyday settings – schools particularly and also parks, cafes and libraries in terms of dispositions to share/be in ethnically mixed public and semi-public space.
- Leisure groups are important nodes of social belonging and social connection but also sites of emotional connection. Doing things/together practices connected people across difference.
- Conviviality is an appropriate descriptor of (and evident in) people's negotiations, uses of space and local resources. Strain and avoidances are in the data but a 'living together' sensibility is present in structures of feeling or affective atmospheres, in place identities which put value on being ethnically mixed, in instances of day-to-day resilience and in continuing interactions.
- Materiality and non-human things seem to be powerful in shaping connective social interactions across difference.

WHAT NEXT? We are now part-way through a detailed analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts and fieldnotes from the first stage of our fieldwork. The emerging themes will be used to help us to define questions to ask of local policy makers in the second stage of project fieldwork. We intend to interview around 5-7 civic leaders, policy makers, community activists in each of our three fieldwork geographies. In these interviews, we will present some of the findings from our first stages of research, and ask participants to reflect on them with us. We will also probe to what extent questions of everyday, ordinary encounter feature in the way that leaders in local institutions think about ethnicity, diversity and multiculture. This stage of the research will partly act as dissemination, but will also help us to develop research findings about how our research might be used in policy.

If you would like to find out more about the Living Multiculture project, please contact Sarah Neal on sarah.neal@surrey.ac.uk or see our website: www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/living-multiculture/