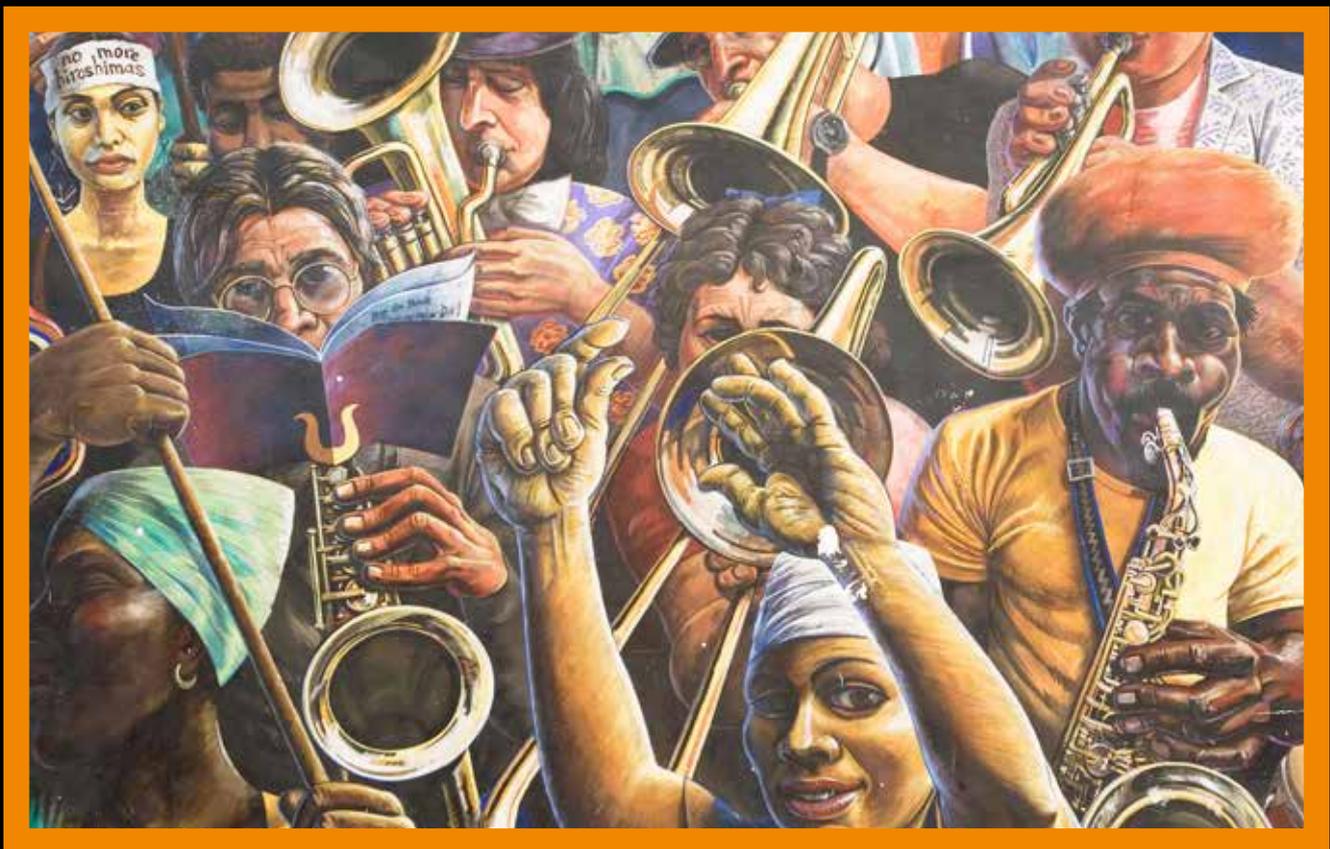# Living Multiculture

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

What has the *Living Multiculture* project been about?

Living Multiculture was a two-year project that began in July 2012 and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Its focus has been on the increasingly diverse populations of 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? Often, ethnic difference and cultural diversity are studied as 'problems', or when conflict emerges. Our project took a different approach. We looked at those settings where cultural diversity, ethnic difference, social mixing and living in localities together are treated as everyday and routine.

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

- Hackney in North-East London (an inner city borough which has long history of diverse migrant settlement and, with the more recent migrant settlement by Eastern European, Latin American, Black African migrants and a rise in mixed ethnicity households, has a 'super-diverse' multiculture)

- Milton Keynes in South-East England (a new city that has recently become multicultural with an increasing Black African population)

- Oadby in Leicestershire (a small town on the edge of Leicester, experiencing suburbanisation and 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. These settings were selected as sites that might most effectively capture processes of urban publicness; sociality and identification.

As well as observing how people use and interact in these settings the research team invited a small number of people to first talk to them about their lives and living in the areas and then take part in small group interviews. We met with each of these groups on three separate occasions – this helped build relationships with people as well as allowing us to hear more and to hear better about peoples' experiences and views of diversity and the places in which they lived. Finally, we engaged in a series of interview conversations with local policy-makers and others active in the local community. These conversations have been a way of discussing our findings in policy settings and exploring how the ways in which people live cultural difference in their everyday lives might be supported through a range of formal and informal initiatives.

The research team is: Sarah Neal, Katy Bennett, Allan Cochrane and Giles Mohan. Hannah Jones, Kieran Connell, Christy Kulz, Akile Ahmet and Carolina Ramirez have worked on the project and been valued members of the Living Multiculture team.

This document sets out a summary of the project's key findings in five key areas.

Public and semi-public spaces

Public space is where the visibility of diversity is apparent and where sharing space and social goods takes place. Being in public spaces is negotiated primarily through the 'courteous' processes of 'civil inattention' but also sometimes through convivial exchange. Public and semi-public spaces generate forms of elective belonging because they can appeal across cultural and social difference and are effective at *inviting* people in. Presence in such spaces – parks, libraries, chain cafes - are where sensibilities and practices converge: people are drawn to them as spaces to *do* things in them and to share them with unknown and ethnically different others. In this context we found that:

- Parks are popular and important spaces in everyday lives. All the parks, but Springfield (Hackney) and Knighton (Leicester) Parks in particular, were well used for diverse reasons. These ranged from going for exercise, dog walking, taking children to play, sitting and relaxing,

socializing, going to the café, and going for picnics. Adam described being in Springfield Park:

"I'll maybe come and sit here and read for a bit sometimes and I often sort of use it as a route sort of going down towards the canal on my bike [...] 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."

- Urban parks are places visited by ethnically different groups although there were some variations between the lower density urban environment of the Milton Keynes parks where usage was less intense, and those in the denser urban environments of Oadby and Hackney. In Springfield and Knighton Parks, with long established multiculture, the park users are ethnically diverse. This was commented on positively by a number of park users. For example, Grace, a long-term Springfield Park visitor, said:

"And as you can see, it's such a diverse community. It's not, you know...people - just Afro-Caribbean. If you look around, there's everybody in the park. Do you know what I mean? Using the park...strolling through the park [...] Even my community, [and] the Jewish community that I live in, and even the non-Jewish community members that are on my street - we're all in the park. Ah, especially when it's snowing! Everybody [comes]..."

- Parks are important for giving people a public space for creating a sense of civic and local connection but also pleasures. The parks in the study brought people together in everyday ways creating spontaneous interactions in the ice-cream queue, on the swings, with un/known others as well as forming publicness through various events such as fun days and festivities. We observed these as popular and well attended by culturally diverse populations - the Springfield Park Disco, Knighton Park Community Fun Day, Milton Keynes World Picnic for example.

- Being in park meant participants felt connected to other, culturally different groups, just through shared presence. Senses of connection were felt without any direct interaction necessarily taking place.

"We're in Stamford Hill so it's the Orthodox Jewish area and they're known for keeping themselves to themselves but they're walking through this park as well which is nice to see [...] You usually see them walking in the street and you don't get much interaction [...] but at least in the park you feel like you're kind of interacting even if you're not speaking with them directly, but you're sharing the space together. Even though you're sharing a street space together it feels different because [here] you've both come to the park to enjoy what it is." (Lucy, Springfield Park)

- Parks elicit deep affection. Participants spoke of them as a place of comfort and memory-making, especially around life course associations. For example, being taken as a child, taking children as a parent, family picnics. Participants often spoke of feeling love for the park.

- The materiality of public spaces are important for generating spontaneous conversations and social interactions between those people in them. For example, books in libraries, nature things – trees, snow, plants, water, a view – and things, benches, food, swings, sandpits, slides, balls, dogs, - all came up as 'contact makers' creating connections between people in the park.

- Parks and public spaces can establish atmospheres of conviviality, pleasure, comfort and inclusiveness. These are impressions, associations, or feelings that linger and are potent in making them places where people *elect* to be.

- However, parks may also be ambivalent spaces. Some tensions came up around the park spaces in terms of worries about groups of young people, complaints about ball games, senses of safety and the park feeling empty, but these tensions were not directly articulated in relation to cultural difference or experiences of racism.

- Cafes provide narratives of places and are markers of place identities. The cafes we studied, despite being chain cafes, were reflective of each of the localities. Each chain café we worked in attracted diverse customers, in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and class. The ethnic diversity of the chain cafes' clientele contrasts with other cafes in our sites. In Hackney and Oadby the differences between cafés are particularly striking. Some of this difference reflects the gentrification of Hackney and the village identity of Oadby.

- Like parks cafés are used in multiple ways – to work, escape, restore, eat, catch up, be alone – and these are part of daily routines, meaning staff know customers. It also blurs the line between leisure and work (or school).

- As in parks, the customer proximate design of chain cafes (sharing tables, sofa areas), and café practices (queueing), create possibilities of encounter and interaction with unknown others. The informality of the fast food system (self-service, eating with fingers, self-clearing) adds to the sense of a busy, ethnic-, gender- and age-mixed micro world. Corporate café spaces, with their recognizable brand and cultural blandness are particularly conducive for creating a 'confidence' in using and being in them which feeds into them working as environments of undemanding conviviality.

Identifications and identity transitions

The project's interest in the fluidity of people's various social, geographic, cultural, ethnic, and generational identifications meant that we focussed on those life course moments when transitional identities might be most apparent – with young adults. We noted ambivalence and slippage in young people between engaging with interethnic crossings and cultural openness but also cultural defensiveness and anxiety. We

reached young people through the local 6th Form or FE College - sites in which multicultural contact, proximity and receptiveness to cultural difference and exchange might be expected. In this context we found:

● The 6th forms and FE colleges were the most ethnically diverse sites in the research.

● Students overwhelmingly identified the cultural diversity of their college positively. A significant number of students travelled from outside the college locality to attend the colleges and some of this appeal was the cultural and ethnic diversity of the college as well as its academic reputation.

● Unlike their parents and grandparents, students felt they had more opportunity to meet and get to know people from different ethnic groups and that they were familiar with and had grown up encountering cultural difference.

● Students were generally comfortable and at ease talking about cultural difference. This seemed to reflect the routine experience of being in environments in which cultural difference was ordinary combined with recognition that people usually had complicated cultural, religious and local identities and family backgrounds:

"I think that when you're used to everyone having an ethnic background with them, it's not – I think that it's simply – you don't massively over-emphasise it as part of knowing them. So I think that it's – it puts the importance of their ethnic background a lot more into perspective." (Ameila, Oadby 6th Form)

There were place inflections to this with Oadby and Hackney participants appearing to be more confident around ethnic difference and Milton Keynes students more uncertain and cautious.However, having to explain these complexities could become wearing as Melissa (Oadby 6th Form) said:

"Everyone thinks I'm Caribbean for some reason. And because I have a piercing here, you know, they're like, "Oh, she's Jamaican, she's this" but when they actually find out "No, I'm Zimbabwean", they're like "You what? How? Which one of your parents are black?" And I'm like, "No, they're both African. It's awful to have to start explaining everything because no-one ever believes me the first time round. It's quite annoying."

● In all the colleges students had friends from different cultural backgrounds and felt that there was mixing across ethnic groups in colleges. There was some variation in relation to how these friendship groups stretched beyond these college spaces. In Oadby the friendship networks did – hanging out, being in each other's houses, and at parties and community events.

"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)

But in Milton Keynes friendships tended to be more confined to the college; something Salima explained

"But you find that you mix with them in school, but then outside school it is 'I don't know you, we don't know each other.'"

● However, mixing across ethnic diversity was uneven and partial with some feeling that these friendship groups and the 6th form area were often divided around ethnicity and felt exclusive

"(W)ell you have exclusively one ethnic background friendship groups that happen. This doesn't mean that all their friends are one ethnic background, but it is simply the people that they...go over and...that is the group you will sit with as a default setting, it doesn't mean you are not going to walk over and talk to other people." (Amelia, Oadby 6th Form college)

● Humour was widely used by students as a way to get along and manage diversity. But there was recognition of the subtle skills that joking required for it to feel appropriate and friendly – students could draw upon ethnic stereotypes to make others laugh, yet they were also careful regarding their joking practices and who they were shared with. Joking did not always make people feel good, but they were unable to air this because it was 'only a joke'. Humour allowed boundaries to be tested while social harm was minimised:

"I find this a lot with my friends, like we make jokes amongst each other about our races but in a, like we're friends, and it's kind of like when other people are around you have to kind of bite your tongue and be careful what you say just in case they get offended.... So I guess in that sense when you're around other people you have to be careful." (Yasmeen, Hackney 6th college)

● All the colleges celebrate the diversity of their student population. Visuals and images on walls and corridors reinforced this sense of diversity and celebration. Tyssen Hill in Hackney in particular takes an active approach to its diverse student body through events designed to celebrate its diversity and promote understanding of other religions, cultures and countries:

"It's, kind of, showing a respect and love to each, I mean, ethnic backgrounds.... And last year...there was an argument saying that there was no Afghanistan Independence Day ever done and this year they did it, so it actually showed the respect to every kind of culture and just, you know, eliminating all those issues of differences and puts us at ease."
(Abdul, Tyssen Hill 6th Form College)

- The interior lay out of colleges contributed to the experience of mingling, sharing spaces and socialising. These noisy crowded spaces worked as hubs of exchange and meeting between groups of friends who were ethnically mixed and those that were not ethnically mixed. These were surveilled but mainly in a light touch ways and participants showed an awareness of which spaces of the common areas certain groups tended to use and sometimes this 'mapping' of interior spaces was ethnically inscribed.

- Most students talked very positively about living and/or studying in their various localities, although safety emerged in different ways. Some young people interpreted Hackney through an association with knife crime, gangs and violence. In Oadby there was banter about it being a boring place compared to the multiculture of Leicester and London.

"Oadby Parade is not like...it's not modernised, it's just Oadby Parade, it's not as if you change it for cultures or something like that, it's just very, how it is, whereas Melton Road [Leicester] like I said it's all Indian stalls and all that, Oadby Parade is just, it's Oadby Parade."

Milton Keynes was spoken about affectionately and proudly but also as a difficult city for young people to move around in with participants expressing senses of ethnic separation

"I mean, we've got Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Jewish sometimes. I mean, everybody's living in their own sections. I mean, no one has anything to do with each other." (Omar, Grafton FE College, Milton Keynes)

Sociality and connection

To understand conviviality and everyday social life the project worked with a range of non-faith based, 'mainstream' leisure and interest based social organisations – a gardening club, a football club, a sports club, a creative writers' group, a women's coffee morning and a women's running group. As with our public and semi-public spaces our focus was on the ways in which belonging and place attachment were enacted through elective practices of *doing* things together. Like cafes and parks the social-leisure organisations were mediated by the places where they were located. In this context we found:

- Leisure group membership was important for building wider senses of local belonging and community feeling. In all the leisure groups there was a strong sense of place and embeddedness: For example, Howard from the 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."

And Jodie in Oadby Sports Club felt the club to be:

"a bit reflective of [...] the overall community here [...] one of the things I think is everybody seems to get along very well within the community. And I wonder if what's happening at the (sports) club is a sort of reflection of that [...] I think the family atmosphere is possibly partly due to the fact that a lot of people join and stay for quite a few years."

- Being in a group was a way of doing an activity members' loved or wanted to be good at *and* as a way of being sociable. The group activities were key to bonding between people from diverse backgrounds. *Doing things* – gardening, playing tennis, running together, or sharing writing exercises - created environments for supportive connections that were able, often easily, to work across ethnic difference. This 'magical' process was discussed by Kathleen from the Writers' Group

"We're set the same task [and] I think what is really magical about it, is because we are such a huge mix of people, with the same task we take it in SO many different directions [...] we've all got very different life experiences that we bring to the same task and that creates really interesting conversations and things....'

- Leisure groups were emotional spaces characterised by affection and strong ties between members. Clubs were felt to be like families in which the routines and familiarities of being in them reinforced wider senses of connection. Nadine in Milton Keynes Football club said:

"The football club is a mini hub [...] it's a way to get into the community and get fit at the same time, but then make lots of new friends."

They were enduring, long-term - and often cherished - commitments in people's lives. Devon told us that the Writers' Group:

"means a lot to me, it really does, I'd call it integral in terms of my life and in terms of just good things."

and Imran from Oadby Sports Club also captured this well:

"there's a lot of integration and we try and promote it [...] because that's what the club's about really. That's what distinguishes us as a nice sort of friendly, amenable club [...] everyone's interlinked."

- Social clubs create a secure space for their members to talk to us about living in places. The intimacy and familiarity between group members allowed a variety of occasionally difficult conversations about living in multicultural or gentrifying environments to take place. This particularly came out in Hackney in relation to gentrification:

"I'm scared about how Hackney's changing: I feel kind of left behind sometimes, I don't know why exactly…it kind of feels it's almost moving too fast, not exactly for its own good – it's really exciting living here and I think Hackney's got loads to offer and I'd REALLY miss it if I didn't live here." (Jessica, Writers' Group)

and race:

"Okay, I might get dirty looks. I might get people crossing the street holding their handbags and what-not (murmurs of agreement) but there was that one really nice Jewish man that helped me push my car on the day when I wanted to cry and that's like a really nice thing and it kind of helps you to not see just, erm, a group of people who are unfriendly." (Jake, Writers' Group)

- The social groups were places in which the rapid social change in all the localities was recognised, discussed and collectively commented on. Gentrification was a focus for Hackney; increasing multiculture a area of discussion for Milton Keynes and a growing South Asian middle class settlement in Oadby.

- Membership of one social-leisure group in Oadby and Milton Keynes often meant involvement in other local leisure clubs creating localised networks of civic connection, as Najdah from the Morning Meet Up club explained:

I love what I'm doing [here] I've done a lot of voluntary stuff, I've done a lot for Age Concern, so I do just voluntary […] I feel as if I'm giving something back to the community, trying to bring communities together."

- Social leisure groups may be ethnically diverse and work as sites of mixing across cultural difference. They are indicative of the multicultural formations in particular localities. For example, two of the participating social-leisure groups were ethnically very diverse – the creative writers group in Hackney and the sports club in Oadby. Within these two groups people were confident and at ease discussing ethnic difference, connections and tensions. However, two of the participating social-leisure groups were much less ethnically diverse the members of the Morning Meet Up group in Oadby were overwhelmingly

Muslim women and the two groups in Milton Keynes were all white British.

- Social–leisure groups are, unlike parks, cafes and education institutions, much 'slower' sites of multicultural interaction and diversity. But if they are culturally mixed they become sites of confident, emotionally intense and on-going interaction.

Policy thinking and policy practices

A concern of the project was to explore whether the 'small' or 'micro' data collected by the team on place based experiential multiculture connected to and/or might inform local and national policy worlds in relation to policy interventions. The Coalition government's focus on integration as its leitmotif for diversity policymaking represents a broadening and modification of, but not a complete departure from, older cohesion strategies. Current integration approaches put localities and neighbourhoods at the centre of policy initiatives. In this context we found:

- Clear understandings that localities were rapidly changing and becoming more ethnically and socially diverse. This sometimes meant difference was seen as an attribute of the place. In Hackney, it was emphasised that:

"my experience of being in Hackney is that people are interested in what makes Hackney different, rather than afraid of it." (Voluntary sector representative)

In Oadby the nature of the place was seen as key to managing difference as this contrasted with the 'ethnicity expertise' of 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." (Local government officer)

- While local authorities and organisations no longer have any specific responsibility for community cohesion *per se*, it was clear that policy-related actors retained a wider concern for the social cohesion of the communities.

- Policy awareness of the mundane tensions of living multiculture is often translated into mundane forms of public policy that nevertheless require sensitive handling. In Oadby, this was apparent in the ways in which issues of cultural difference were translated into planning or parking issues. One of these related to the Friday Farmers' Market since there was a tension between parking for the market and for the mosque for Friday prayers:

"So how things actually get talked about is a parking problem that we're worried about." (Local government officer)

Another site of contestation related to planning issues regarding to the size of homes, multiple occupancy, and

external appearance. In Hackney the dominant challenge relates to gentrification, of incorporating class difference. One issue was that the new residents made different demands on public services, for example, by complaining about noise without always talking to neighbours, but it was said:

"you know it is not always realistic to expect that kind of environment in a high density urban area." (Local government officer)

- One of the consequences of recent changes in the ethnic composition of urban environments is that policy makers were responding to wider sets of voices seeking to be heard. There is always a danger that formal politics might make it difficult for this to happen, but we found in Oadby that there is active engagement from a rich set of community and faith groups. Different organisations in Oadby communicate regularly and in both informal and formal ways creating a culture of civic engagement. The Oadby Stakeholders is a good example of a local forum bringing together diverse interest groups. In Hackney, the Community Insights project which arose out of the 2011 riots and involved providing small pots of money to community groups, also provides a powerful example of this 'policy community'.

- While public spaces (like parks) and semi-public ones (like cafes) spaces offer informal micro opportunities for interaction and exchange, policy-makers emphasised the need for policy worlds to support and create spaces where 'unthreatening' and routine social interaction can take place. In Hackney, Ridley Road market was highlighted as a 'bringing together space' that the Council supported as well as initiatives such as widening pavement and 'slowing streets' to create more social space and possibilities for interaction. In Milton Keynes public space was also identified as a focus for 'quiet' but active intervention to encourage civic and socially cohesive processes. The recent establishment of MK Rose reflects this:

"one of the things we are trying to do is to try and create some of these public spaces...and...the one we are concentrating on in the MK Rose because that's what we've just done and it's meant to celebrate the history of Milton Keynes." (Local councillor)

- There was some policy nudging in local approaches to diversity as a number of participants suggested that bringing together multicultural local populations was not necessarily (or even best) managed through an explicit focus on 'diversity'. In Milton Keynes, the active promotion of sports-based or arts events was seen as a way of getting the community together without making it too obvious, as one of those involved commented:

"creatively to build those bridges...the integration element grows organically without us noticing because we will all be contributing in the society here, without you noticing." (Community activist)

- Public events, festivals and celebrations were all identified as important for localities but these events varied in the extent to which they were direct celebrations of cultural diversity. For example, in Hackney, which has a long

tradition of celebrating the Borough's different ethnic communities difference appeared as an implicit aspect of public events (Hackney Carnival, the Olympics Parade) rather than the explicit focus of public events. Oadby too tended to arrange its public events around faith or Oadby-focussed festivities. Milton Keynes most explicitly celebrated cultural difference – the World Picnic, the International Festival and the Arts and Culture Festival for example.

The difference a place makes

The project looked at three distinct urban environments which each work as a shorthand for the variations in ethnic diversity in contemporary England. While we have been working comparatively across these different places – emphasising distinctions and commonalities – we have also sought to align them so that work as relational narratives of the wider *social and spatial heterogeneity* of multiculture. In this context we found:

- The identities, landscape, built environment and history of places always interact with and shape the social relations of multiculture.

- Histories of migration and multiculture matter - in Hackney, ethnic difference is a taken for granted, and, at the same time, defining feature of the locality. Becoming even more ethnically diverse has not led to significant conflict or tensions. Polarisations have been more socially and economically driven as Hackney demonstrates an ability to use its long (and positive) story of difference to sediment it as a place where multiculture is integral to its identity.

- More recent multicultural residential drifts – suburbanizing and dispersing - are accommodated and places may adjust without explicit conflict. Becoming newly multicultural does not straightforwardly lead to divisions and cleavages. Neither Oadby nor Milton Keynes have experienced ethnic and race tension as they have become newly multicultural or sites of suburban multiculture. Milton Keynes, contrary to Hackney, emphasizes it has little pre-existing place history to the extent that almost everyone is a migrant.

- All places undergo constant processes of social, demographic, economic, cultural change and ethnic diversity is one dynamic of this. Change is a focus of anxiety and ambivalence about place identity. In Hackney change was worried over in terms of its diversity being flattened out by the residential settlement of an affluent, mostly white middle class. In Oadby change was worried over in terms of social mobility delivering the 'right sort' of middle class. In Milton Keynes its identity as a new city freed it up from some of this anxiety of change, but brought a focus on building and defining its city identity.

- In situations of constant change however, all these places, sought to have continuities in their identities and place associations. These can be powerful imaginings – Oadby tries to retain a civic village identity; Hackney a resilient community identity, Milton Keynes a growing, new city identity – all of which are inflected by ethnicity and multiculture.

Contact

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See our website: www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/living-multiculture/

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