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Welfare micropublics and inequality: urban super-diversity in a time of austerity, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*

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Abstract

This article argues for the importance of the role of the national and local state, and of increasing socio-economic inequality for understanding urban super-diversity in a time of austerity. Using a methodology and conceptualisation that avoids the methodological ethnicism and ‘methodological neighbourhoodism’ inherent in some diversity research, we draw on quantitative analysis and ethnographically produced material from south London to ask what differences make a difference. Examining interactions in ‘welfare micropublics’, including maternity services, schools, and elderly social care, we show that residents and service providers, often following an ‘ethos of inclusion’, routinely engage with difference in encounters, allowing the potential for conviviality to emerge. We argue that only by considering diversity together with inequality, can we develop more textured and nuanced accounts of super-diverse urban areas, including a fuller understanding of the social production of difference and indifference.

Keywords

Super-diversity, inequality, austerity, the state, conviviality, London

Introduction

Urban spaces have always been characterised by difference, but cities across Europe and the UK have in recent decades seen an intensification and multiplication of migration-driven demographic diversity. This diversification of differences of *inter alia* nationality, ‘race’ and ethnicity, faith, socio-economic status, and labour market incorporation, has been named ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007). Super-diversity is partly the result of demographic transformations linked to migration, which in turn is underpinned by global inequality (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014, 5). It references a ‘proliferation of migration channels and immigrant legal statuses’ (Vertovec 2007, 1028) entailing new inequalities based on legal status, which are further compounded by growing socio-economic segregation in cities (Tammaru et al. 2016). The emergence of super-diversity has coincided with rising economic inequality in the UK (Dorling 2018), the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy towards migrants (Jones et al. 2017), and a retrenchment and restructuring of the welfare state. These entangled developments add up to what Hall has called a ‘brutal migration milieu,’ where ‘the connections between power, violence and diversification’ are laid bare (2017, 1568). They also raise profound empirical, analytical, and ethical questions about the texture of urban lives and the possibilities for convivial living together in difference.

The 'diversity turn' in scholarship has entailed a return to studies of urban neighbourhoods as key sites of encounter, conviviality, and conflict (Berg and Sigona 2013). As others have pointed out (Burchardt and Höhne 2015), interactions in public are relatively well understood through rich ethnographic portraits of streets, markets, and other public and semi-public spaces (Rhys-Taylor 2013, Watson and Studdert 2006, Watson 2009, Hall 2012, Jones et al. 2015, Wessendorf 2013). Another strand of diversity literature has focused on the implications of super-diversity for service delivery and outcomes (Phillimore 2011, 2013, 2015, Nieswand 2017, Berg 2018).

However, the diversity discourse has been critiqued for its latent risk of producing an individualised representation of social inequalities (Valentine 2008), and for downplaying the continued importance of racism and discrimination (Back 2015, Alexander, Kaur, and St Louis 2012). Mindful of these critiques, this article asks what differences make a difference in Elephant and Castle, a super-diverse and stratified inner-city area of South London. In researching the area we wanted to allow categories of difference to emerge rather than imposing them (see also, Meissner and Vertovec 2015, Meissner 2015). Inspired by Bateson's work (1972), we did not presume to know *a priori* which differences were socially significant, nor did we presume that there would be only one answer to the question. Rather, we ask how, what, when, where, why, and for whom differences are produced, made socially significant, experienced, and represented.

[Linking super-diversity to the local welfare state](#)

In the UK, the national state shapes migrant flows and legal statuses, while the local state controls access to social rights on the ground. Patterns of inequality and stratification thus play out at a micro level, as the local state and its agencies and employees implement national policies. Austerity measures and neoliberal restructuring have resulted in local authority retrenchment and out-sourcing of responsibilities for service delivery from the public to the third sector. The trend towards 'mainstreaming' in integration has accelerated the reduction of support for services targeted at the most vulnerable minorities (Gidley, Scholten, and van Breugel 2018). To illustrate, the 2012 national framework for integration (Department for communities and local government 2012), signalled a shift in emphasis from the national to the local level, aiming to enable civil society and local areas to take action on integration issues that are important to them – without, however, providing funding. At the same time as this neoliberal retrenchment, an increasingly punitive national migration policy has meant the intensification of civic stratification (Lockwood 1996, Morris 2003) as several categories of migrants are no longer entitled to the same social rights as UK-born nationals.

Notwithstanding withdrawal of services, for many urban dwellers, especially poorer residents, children and young people, the elderly, the infirm, and those in social housing, the local state, in the form of 'the council', remains a key actor in daily lives as provider of benefits, housing, schooling, and care, sometimes delivered via arms-length organisations. To illustrate, local authorities are arbiters of the right to belong via residency requirements for inclusion on social housing waiting lists, and access to schooling, although this role is increasingly sub-contracted and outsourced to non-state providers. As well as regulating access to social rights, thus rendering particular differences (e.g. in legal status) especially significant, locally-based welfare institutions such as schools, libraries, and other public

services play a key role in moulding spaces of encounter in diverse areas. Staff in such institutions are tasked with enacting the brutal migration milieu, yet they *experience diversity as mainstream*; as Gidley, Scholten, and van Breugel (2018) argue, it is a mundane or commonplace fact of life they are used to working with, meaning they can seek to maximise the possibility of making mainstream services work to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, drawing on their rich qualitative knowledge of their users.

In this article, to examine the role of the local state in shaping conditions and experiences of diversity, for residents at different ages and life-course stages, we focus on the micro-scale, on particular welfare spaces, specifically maternity services, schools and youth clubs, and elder care.¹ We show that such welfare spaces are a crucial site of encounters, understood here as ‘meetings where difference is somehow noteworthy’ (Wilson 2017, 464). Following Amin (2002) and Back (1999), we see such spaces as ‘micropublics’, and understand them to hold the potential for conviviality and intercultural understanding, as well as conflict and exclusion, to emerge (see also Mayblin, Valentine, and Andersson 2016, Wise and Velayutham 2014, Neal, Vincent, and Iqbal 2016). Conviviality is a contested notion and idea with its own extensive literature (see Nowicka and Vertovec 2014); we use it here in Gilroy’s sense as referring to processes of ‘cohabitation and interaction’ that render multicultural ‘an ordinary feature’ of urban life, without signalling the absence of racism (2004, xi). We show that, in *welfare micropublics* in a super-diverse locale, prosaic encounters with difference are habitual and regular, and some workers develop what we call *an ethos of inclusion* to meet the needs of the most precarious.

In particular, we show that street level bureaucrats play a crucial role in shaping the nature of encounter in welfare micropublics, albeit in ways structurally constrained by national and local state policies. By street level bureaucrats, we refer to a range of workers, who were themselves characterised by diversity and cultural difference, tasked with delivering services face-to-face with the public, whether in the public or the third sector (Lipsky 2010 [first published 1980]). This group included teachers and other school staff, council officers, care workers, health professionals, and others. We show that at specific moments in specific sites, a range of differences made a difference to street level bureaucrats, and secondarily some differences became salient in encounters between and among residents and street level bureaucrats. We do not seek to provide a comprehensive list of which differences made a difference, but rather to lay bare the processes by which differences become salient in welfare micropublics.

In what follows, we start by introducing our site. We then describe difference and diversity in the Elephant and Castle area as it is rendered in UK census material and via socio-spatial mapping, and then examine the social production of difference and diversity via ethnographically produced material.

[The Elephant and Castle area: deprivation and diversification](#)

The Elephant and Castle area in the London Borough of Southwark, south of the river Thames, is experienced by visitors as an unsightly traffic intersection, undercut by criss-crossing concrete pedestrian subways, and surrounded by post-war social housing estates.

¹ The wider research project also included research on social housing estates, which is not explicitly discussed here.

Although within walking distance of London's centres of financial, political, and cultural power across the river, the Elephant and Castle area has historically been defined by intense poverty. In the 1890s, philanthropist Charles Booth and his assistants walked London, noting the wealth of each street's inhabitants, to construct their *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty* (White 2016). The maps coded streets by colour, with scarlet red and gold marking the 'well-to-do' and the 'wealthy', dark blue and black representing the 'casual poor' in 'chronic want' and the 'vicious and semi-criminal' 'lowest class.' The streets around Elephant and Castle were a mass of dark colours.

A hundred years later, the New Labour government commissioned an Index of Multiple Deprivation to map new forms of poverty: dark blue for most deprived and gold for least. Again, the northern wards of Southwark were swathed in darkness, with the area around Elephant and Castle especially dark blue (Noble et al. 2004). More recently, the area has seen a highly contested state- and private-led gentrification process, entailing evictions of social housing tenants to make way for private developments.² This 'great inversion' is illustrated in a map of London produced by the estate agents Savills, in which dark blue represents areas where house prices are declining, and scarlet red now used to mark zones moving 'upmarket'; the erstwhile dark zones of Southwark have in this rendition become vivid red property hotspots (The Economist 2013). Such changes to the urban fabric fundamentally structure spaces and possibilities of encounter at the micro-local scale.

As well as gentrification and socio-economic diversification, ethnic and linguistic diversity have also increased since the post-war period, first with the arrival of Caribbean migrants, and more recently with an acceleration of immigration from ever more different regions and countries of origin. Today, as detailed below, the Elephant and Castle area is characterised by high levels of diversity in terms of ethnicity, nationality, languages spoken, migration status, and faith, as well as stark juxtapositions between wealth and deprivation. The area's history of flux has undoubtedly contributed to the unremarkable-ness of diversity from the perspective of many who work and live there, resonating with findings in other super-diverse areas (Gidley, Scholten, and van Breugel 2018, Nieswand 2017, Wessendorf 2013).

Elephant and Castle is emphatically *not* an easily identifiable 'neighbourhood' with a distinct local identity or sense of place in the way of e.g., nearby Bermondsey (Jensen and Gidley 2016, Jensen 2017). We see it instead as a site of flows, whose centrifugal force pushes people out as well as drawing them in, characterised by a shopping centre about to be refurbished due to intense development pressure, and by apparently endless demolition and rebuilding of real estate. The erstwhile iconic roundabout has recently been replaced by an even more complex road lay-out as part of a regeneration scheme. This made it a fitting site for our study. The theme of *intersection* embodied by the traffic junction displaces identitarian or 'methodologically ethnicist' (King 2001) approaches to urban multiculturalism, which assume the a priori significance of particular differences, instead of allowing salient differences to emerge from the research data. The diversity turn has responded to the flaws in the ethnicist approach by turning to place rather than group as the unit of analysis. However, we are also mindful of a latent *methodological neighbourhoodism* in the diversity turn, which assumes the naturalness of neighbourhoods and reifies places even as it problematises groups. We settled on Elephant and Castle as a

² See, e.g., <http://35percent.org/the-southwark-clearances/>.

site that was at once arbitrary and strategic, rather than natural and bounded, and this grounded the methodological choices we describe in the following section.

Gauging super-diversity

When introducing the concept of super-diversity, Vertovec (2007) argued that it is the multiplication and compounding of variables and axes of difference that distinguishes super-diversity from other forms of urban diversity (see also, Vertovec 2017). In order to map and index super-diversity, we therefore need to show how different axes of difference and identification interact with each other. This presents a methodological challenge: how to measure and evidence diversity as a *condition* without falling into crude categorisation of pre-defined, ethnicised differences (see also Aspinall 2012, Stringer 2014).

The roundabout provided a ready-made pivot so we defined our area as consisting of all the census output areas (OAs), which had at least 95 per cent of their area within a 1-mile radius from the Elephant and Castle roundabout (postcode: SE1 6TG) as shown in map 1. The area thus defined is small enough to be easily traversed by foot, yet, with a population of 93,298, large enough to render quantitative analysis viable. We layered ethnicity with other axes of difference to explore their intersections. Juxtaposing quantitative analysis with granular ethnographic material, we can begin to explore what differences make a difference in a particular urban space, that is, to also appreciate the *experience* of diversity (cf. Burchardt and Höhne 2015, Meissner and Vertovec 2015). We begin with the census analysis, using the 2011 census.³

[MAP 1 here: Elephant and Castle area]

Diversity in the area is manifest across a wide range of measures. For example, residents reported 94 different ethnic groups, 50 different countries of birth, and 44 different religions. Nearly two thirds of residents (63 per cent) self-identified as other than ‘White British’ and there is no majority group. The area has a high representation of new and growing demographic groups in the UK (e.g., ‘white other’ and ‘mixed’ ethnicities, and African and Latin American migrants). Fully 42 per cent of residents were born outside of the UK, and 60 per cent of live births in the area were to foreign-born mothers (compared with 25 per cent across England and Wales), evidencing migration-driven diversity. Other axes of difference, including socio-economic measures such as unemployment, economic activity, occupation and socio-economic classification, qualifications and tenure, as well as health, showed high levels of diversity as well (see Krausova 2018). Lower level spatial analysis based on the characteristics of individual OAs shows that patterns of diversity in the area are also internally heterogeneous, e.g., the percentage of residents self-identifying as other than ‘White British’ range from 21 to 89 per cent in different output areas.

The census analysis thus highlights the complex diversities of the area, and, to an extent, the degree to which they overlap, but there are important elements that cannot be conveyed with census data specifically, or through quantitative tools generally. To take just one

³ Census data offer a snapshot of the population in small geographical areas; the ONS estimated its overall coverage to be 94 per cent for England and Wales (ONS 2012). It is nonetheless a partial look, and in areas of high churn and with many recent immigrants, coverage is likely to be lower, with estimates for Southwark specifically at 87 per cent, see http://www.2.southwark.gov.uk/info/200223/census_2011/2723/census_2011_briefing.

example, at first glance it would seem that the non-UK born population in Elephant and Castle comes predominantly from Europe and Africa, with the top three countries of birth being Nigeria, Ireland, and Ghana. However, looking only at countries of birth – or ethnic groups – obscures the sizeable and palpable Latin American presence in the area. The Latin American population consists of several small groups from various different countries (Berg 2018), for whom Elephant and Castle has become an important node in ‘Latin London’ (Román-Velázquez 1999). They are however relatively invisible in census terms, because of their diversity of national origins and citizenship (with some EU citizens among them), the absence of an over-arching ‘Latin American’ category, and undercounting, which is especially an issue for groups including people with uncertain status (McIlwaine, Cock, and Linneker 2011, McIlwaine and Bunge 2016).

Latin Americans thus constitute just one of the area’s ‘hidden communities’ (Pharoah and Hopwood 2013), highlighting the necessity of utilising multiple measures to evidence the full extent and texture of diversity in an area. Other hidden groups include the LGBT subcultures that come to the area’s nightclubs after dark, the students studying in HE institutions during the day, congregants coming to the numerous local churches to pray, and the area’s transient homeless and rough sleeper population – all invisible in census statistics, as are the quotidian interactions within and between them. By contrast, ethnography offers rich insights into the texture and complexity of metropolitan lives and the dynamics and paradoxes of urban encounters.

The conventional ethnographic approach of a single individual fieldworker immersing themselves in a bounded field struggles to capture the multiple scales of difference and belonging in super-diverse and transnationally connected sites (Berg and Sigona 2013). To mitigate this challenge, and because of funding constraints, we turned to ‘short-term ethnography’, that is, an orchestrated, collaborative and theoretically-informed approach, involving punctual but intense engagements (Pink and Morgan 2013). The complex diversity in the area and the small-scale parameters of the ethnographic research meant that our insights were necessarily partial. We addressed this by working as a team, each of us entering the field via a different service domain. We used the different service domains to organise our routes in, and, in this article, to organise our presentation of the data, but they do not constitute separate case studies; instead, the approach allowed us to multiply the perspectives and entry points into a fragmented and stratified field, creating a layered account.

Team members visited the area regularly between September 2013 and September 2014, pursuing the same research questions and using the same interview guidelines, but serendipitous encounters, particular institutional barriers, as well as chance opportunities meant that fieldwork proceeded slightly differently within each domain as is to be expected from an ethnographic approach. Between us, we conducted 45 interviews with residents and service providers (some of whom were also local residents) from the public as well as the third sector, and conducted participant observation in welfare micropublics, in the shopping mall, and on housing estates; an overview of interviews and sites is provided in figure 1.

[Insert FIGURE 1 here]

All interviews were transcribed and read through. The research team then discussed emerging themes in an iterative process of seeking similarities and differences within and between the domains of research to which we now turn.

Experiencing super-diversity: Maternity services

The domains of local state service provision in which we did ethnographic research were chosen to capture welfare services, and hence residents, across the life course. This is important because the exposure to, and experiences and dynamics of diversity, vary between generations and age groups (Sturgis et al. 2014).

We start at the very beginning of life, with maternity services. Maternity is at the forefront of migration-driven diversity and increasing stratification of belonging based on legal status. In the Elephant and Castle area, a majority of new and expectant mothers are not UK-born, and their access to maternity services is differentiated with some migrant groups liable to pay for services. As a publicly provided service that ideally follows expectant mothers and their babies through pregnancy and early years, providing both clinical care and a range of 'softer', non-clinical mother-baby activities, maternity services has the potential to be a significant micropublic that facilitates encounters across differences. Maternity services also gave us important insights into how gender intersects with other variables in a super-diverse setting (cf. Phillimore 2015).

The service providers we interviewed ranged in age from their early thirties to late fifties, and all but one were women. In terms of ethnicity, one had a mixed background, and one was from a minority ethnic background; the rest were 'white British'. New and expectant mothers we interviewed ranged in ages from their twenties to their thirties and were from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Four were local to the area, five had moved there in the past ten years. Of the 'newcomers', four were international migrants, from Australia, Eritrea, Iran, and the US.

It quickly became clear that socio-economic inequalities constitute a significant difference to both maternity service providers, and to new and expectant mothers, in a way that intersected with migration status. From the midwives' perspectives, complex and changing legal and immigration regulations (Meissner 2018, Berg 2018) made it difficult for them to decipher women's entitlements, especially where mothers had 'no recourse to public funds' (see Spencer and Price 2015). This status can leave mothers and babies subsisting on weekly allowances equivalent to less than two hours' worth of the London Living Wage, as this community midwife describes:

[T]he money for those people who have no recourse to public funds ... is really minimal. So I had a lady who was on £13 a week with one child and pregnant. And her child was wetting the bed and everything and ... she couldn't buy mats for the bed ... You know, it was just awful.

These complexities are compounded by funding cuts for third sector organisations, further increasing midwives' workload. Midwives noted that asylum seekers and undocumented migrants often do not engage with public services due to fears of deportation or being charged for treatment, or because any use of public services could potentially have a detrimental effect on future applications for permanent residence. Midwives described how

they felt that the system was not set up for 'late bookers' or mothers unfamiliar with systems and procedures, including especially newly arrived migrants and asylum seekers. Midwives also described how, increasingly, the majority of their time was spent addressing social issues with correspondingly less time left for clinical issues. One community midwife stated laconically: 'we are social workers.'

Entitlement and access to housing and services emerged as the other key difference in this domain. To illustrate, in an interview during a 'bring and share picnic' organised by a children's centre, a locally born and bred mother described moving back in with her own mother in a socially rented flat after becoming pregnant. She had been on a waiting list for social housing for seven years at the time of the interview, and explained that she could not afford to rent privately in the area – buying was not an option she mentioned at all – but was keen to remain close to her extended family who were all living on nearby estates. Her sister and the sister's young child, who had previously lived elsewhere, were also living with the mother, as well as another adult sibling of theirs. At the same picnic, we also interviewed an Iranian-born woman, who lived with her husband and their young child in a single room in a hostel, sharing a bathroom with several other people they did not know, after having to leave privately rented accommodation. They had applied to be accepted onto the Council's social housing waiting list but did not yet know if they would be allowed to. By contrast, a woman we interviewed at a community midwife-organised baby massage group had moved to the area recently, and described her move in terms of an investment from which she expected future gain:

Previously we lived in SE1 [post code encompassing the northern parts of Southwark and Lambeth] and we like where it is located on the map: Good transport links and easy to get north or south. And we probably would have bought in SE1, but then we thought this [SE17, immediately south of SE1] might be more of an investment. So, because this area is coming up, so we thought we would get more money later.

Thus, maternity services is a site where super-diversity meets stark socio-economic inequality, and entitlement is stratified by bureaucratic complexity including of immigration status and associated entitlements. In public and parochial spaces in the area, the long-settled and newcomers, the wealthy and the precariat, secure citizens and deportable migrants had few opportunities for meaningful encounter, with housing and leisure often de facto segregated along such lines. However, accessing maternity services brought them into proximity in welfare micropublics shaped by the workers who staffed them.

'We are in one of life's huge transitions', as a community midwife noted, with the services themselves characterised by 'flux and turmoil' in the words of another midwife. Service providers were aware of and working with difference, especially differentiations in service access and entitlements. We observed an *ethos of inclusion* among the workers, which meant that they sought to maximise their discretion as street level bureaucrats within the constraints of a regime of austerity and civic stratification to reduce the effects of significant differences on mothers' access to services.

However, stark inequalities in socio-economic status and access to housing did undermine the potential for meaningful interaction between expectant mothers, illustrated by the group's dynamics: three mothers who had grown up in the area on social housing estates stuck together, while mothers who had moved to the area more recently, and who knew

each other from the local NCT group,⁴ also stuck together, with no interaction between them. This lack of interaction was accompanied by familiarity and quiet indifference, rather than hostility and exclusion, creating a texture of ‘together apart’ (Jensen and Gidley 2016) rather than segregation. For expectant mothers, socio-economic inequalities and differentiation of legal status, as articulated in different trajectories into the area (e.g., born and bred; gentrifying property owners; recently arrived migrants/refugees), structured interactions in notionally shared spaces along lines of tacit avoidance of difference rather than either conviviality or hostility. The situation was slightly different in the area’s schools as we describe below.

Schooling

Initial mapping based on a range of official and publicly available data showed us the area has a mix of community and faith schools, and academies, which are independent of the local authority and receive funding directly from central government.

All schools shared a number of features, including high pupil turnover and linguistic and other forms of diversity, with an above UK average rate of pupils having English as additional language (up to 90 per cent of children in some schools). In some schools, pupils spoke more than 50 different languages between them. As a crude indicator of deprivation, the schools all had high rates of entitlement to free school meals (up to 92 per cent in some schools). Gentrification is also manifest in schools, with some schools having a mix of affluence and deprivation among its pupils. Teachers we interviewed mentioned challenges of funding cuts, deprivation among families, and churn among pupils.

In schools, as in the other domains, staff tended to be less ethnically diverse than the residents they dealt with – yet there was a degree of diversity in terms of class, age, gender, faith, ‘race’ and ethnicity, and migration history among them, which was variously brought to bear in encounters with residents. To illustrate, a primary school deputy head teacher compared her family’s experiences of arrival from the Caribbean decades ago to those of more newly arrived families of pupils at her school.

Teachers and support workers we interviewed had all worked in the area for many years and understood the needs of families in the area as complex and including domestic violence, language and literacy issues, as well as questions over legal status and entitlements. Many families were not familiar with the UK social services and benefits system and some families did not have recourse to public funds. School support workers were also concerned about what they characterized as a high incidence of low-level depression and anxiety among parents caused by destitution and uncertainties surrounding housing and benefits. Teachers had a grounded understanding of the area with their main concern being deprivation and the potential impact of gentrification. As the head of a sixth form put it:

Over 30 years we’ve gone from an established old-fashioned London docker community and obviously that changed ... What there hasn’t really been a change in is social class; we’ve had a big free school meal population and so although what the school looks like has changed it’s still been people without a lot of money.

⁴ National Childbirth Trust, a national charity, traditionally dominated by the white, middle class.

There was a high level of ethnic diversity within and between schools, with mixes of ethnicities and nationalities changing over time. Teachers were comfortable and competent at dealing with this:

[There was] a period where we had few children from African-Caribbean background whereas now that's a very high percentage of the school. ... When I first came here there were a lot of Turkish-Cypriot children and there are very few now. The largest group has become West African, particularly Nigerian ... Other groups like Somalis have been here and other groups have come and gone. Currently we have a large number of Arab speakers from various places in the Arab world ... Just constant change really (Inclusion manager, primary school)

Teachers were used to multi-layered migration experiences among their pupils, with particular migration trajectories sedimenting and manifesting in the languages spoken in school playgrounds. This included e.g. a contingent of Afghan girls in a secondary school, who spoke with each other in Dutch because they had spent time in the Netherlands before coming to London. Teachers were also attuned to the complexities of identity and belonging:

On a school trip recently ... there were two children; one who appeared like a white girl with red hair and one who appeared like a black boy and they found out they both had Jamaican, Scottish, and English mixtures of ancestry. They found out they shared the same kind of family ancestry. Things are complicated.

Sometimes, the differences that make a difference to children went unnoticed by teachers, as in this example, from a primary school inclusion manager:

I had a girl last year ... and she said to me one day that she's the only African girl in the school and my first reaction was 'how could you say that?' Because the school is maybe 50 per cent or more of children of African origin. I realised what she was saying was 'I've got the tribal scars on my face, I am culturally more African because I arrived here as a child whereas the other children were mostly born here'. She perceived herself as quite different to the African children who had been born here or saw themselves as British... There's all sorts of complex relationships.

To sum up, ethnic diversity was unremarkable, or 'commonplace' (Wessendorf 2013) to teachers and children in the schools in the area. Teachers articulated their multilingual, multi-faith, and multi-ethnic communities of children as a positive asset and emphasised the barriers to learning and integration created not through ethnic or cultural diversity, but through families' uncertain legal status and material deprivation. They voiced concern over what they saw as academic under-performance by ethnically white British children. This positive valuation of diversity, the ethos of inclusion mentioned above, was under pressure from the audit demands that are put on schools, exacerbated by the tightening of resources and benefits for parents. To illustrate, there were issues for schools who had high numbers of recent migrant children who did not speak much English and who arrived at an age where they are close to GCSEs (end of school exams). Some schools were reluctant to take such children, as teachers were under pressure to focus primarily on pupils likely to gain A-C grades. Yet, as one head teacher put it: 'They're our children regardless of where they're born'.

Older people

Southwark as a borough has a shrinking older population common across other London inner-city areas (Greater London Authority 2013) with only nine per cent of Southwark's population over 65 (around 25,000 people, Southwark Council 2012). How do new patterns of urban diversity manifest in the everyday negotiations of difference in spaces for older people? This was the central question behind this strand of research, which explored the vector of age as a potential difference that makes a difference.

Our Census analysis revealed that super-diversity is clearly structured by age, with less ethnic diversity among older people than among children and younger people; gentrification is also less an issue among elderly service users. Nonetheless, institutional spaces of interaction, for example in older people's day centres, were often purposefully designed to foster social contact, and as such, there was a belief that inter-ethnic conviviality was as apparent in this domain as in others, as the white British wellbeing manager in the pensioners' centre explained:

Gosh, we have people from all walks of life. We have our very English ladies, lived in Dulwich all their life [area generally associated with long-term settled, white British residents], and then we have some from Aylesbury estate [social housing estate associated with high levels of ethnic diversity and new migrants], those who have just come in, you know, really isolated. So it's very diverse but it works, it really works – there is no hierarchy, people just getting on and supporting each other.

It was evident that new interactions emerged as a result of opportunities as well as challenges specific to this period of the life-course. On one hand, social mixing with new people occurred through *choice*, when, as a result of people having more time in retirement, they developed new relationships and shared interests such as walking, singing, etc. through the day-centres. On the other hand, we also saw evidence of mixing as a *default process*, created externally, such as where people came together for services based on need. In this second process, we saw evidence of both self-segregation, where people tended to stick with those they felt to be most like them (for example where peer groups were maintained among white 'born and bred' women). On the other hand, we also saw evidence of how a shared need can provide a common experience and motivation to form relationships with others, giving new opportunities for conviviality to emerge. This could be seen for example in one of the centre's groups for people with visual impairments, where a sense of commonality based on a similar physical experience transcended other differences and provided the basis for new experiences, such as the group members' communal attempts to overcome disabling environments in a trip to the bowling alley.

Equally apparent was the intersection of experiences of ageing and ethnicity with other vectors of difference, including socio-economic status, although gentrification appears to have had less of a direct impact on this group. Less affected than other populations in terms of benefit cuts (although there have been deeply felt cuts and closures in services), there are nevertheless high rates of benefit dependency for the older population in the area. Six in ten older people live in rented social accommodation in the borough, with 11 per cent of older people living in homes hazardous to health (Southwark Council 2012, 4-5). Increases in the cost of living have also had significant impacts on some older people's ability to afford the costs of daily living and how to 'heat and eat'. It was evident from some of our conversations how disabling the urban environment was felt to be, from unhelpful NHS services and inconsiderate bus drivers, to the cracks and trees growing from the pavements, which were pointed out during the walking group. These left some of our informants feeling vulnerable and reluctant to leave their homes, despite the only regular visit being from a care-worker.

Conclusion: 'welfare micropublics'

As we have shown across these welfare domains, the local state plays a key role in channelling, moulding and shaping differences in particular spaces. Stratified civil and social rights make a fundamental difference. But the role of street level bureaucrats is also crucial in opening up or closing down possibilities of sharing space in the micropublics of the welfare state. Understanding – and qualitatively researching – these workers and micropublics is essential to understanding the social texture of diversity. How street level bureaucrats understand and see difference shapes the experience of inequality and difference. These individuals routinely work at the boundaries between cultures in a state of flux, and are tasked with mediating between different social, cultural, and institutional worlds. The approaches taken by such workers, as they exercise discretion in providing services, makes profound differences to the possibility of meaningful encounter as well as to individuals' livelihoods and resilience to austerity.

In particular, a prevalent *ethos of inclusion* among frontline workers leads to a commitment to keep open spaces for mixing and equal treatment within a larger landscape of brute inequality and stratification of entitlements. This does not mean thick forms of conviviality develop in them; more often intercultural encounters in our ethnography were a mundane, unremarkable experience of everyday simultaneous spatial proximity, creating public familiarity. At other times, though, such micropublics do produce meaningful encounters – for example, among the visually impaired group of older people mentioned above, or in the discovery of shared heritage among schoolchildren.

However, with welfare cuts, new rounds of service restructuring, and ever more complex differentiations in entitlements, it becomes increasingly challenging for street level workers to facilitate micropublics where conviviality can emerge. During our research period alone, one third sector organisation had to close down after its funding was withdrawn, and several local authority workers took voluntary redundancy. One local authority worker wistfully remarked that all she was doing was filling in spreadsheets, when what she really wanted to do was to be out among residents.

The advantage of the super-diversity frame is that turning away from methodological groupism makes visible the complexity of possible subject positions in a city, and the way

they intersect. However, there are two risks in this. First, methodological ethnicism can be replaced by a kind of *methodological neighbourhoodism*, in which communities are assigned characteristics of conviviality, cohesion, or hostility in a way that obscures the multiplicity of possibilities *within* an area at a smaller scale. Hence, we have focused on micropublics, showing that street level bureaucrats are able to structure a range of different forms of encounter in the squeezed spaces of the welfare state.

Second, in moving away from groups to fractally small categories of identification, differences are individualised, making it harder to identify structural inequalities such as those generated by socio-economic inequality or legal status. Super-diversity is a frame, which can be comfortably co-opted to a neo-liberal vision if we do not insist on attention to the inequalities wired into the diverse metropolis. In particular, as Olwig noted (2013, 478), the diversity frame, by blurring 'the boundaries between groups of people with its message that we are all different in various ways depending on a variety of factors', can dis-enable activist politics. However, a qualitative methodology which attends to how inequality and power reshape the lived experiences of diversity re-opens this possibility. In short, only by considering super-diversity together with inequality and austerity can we develop an adequate account of a site such as Elephant and Castle.

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