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Researching the Ordinary

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Review Symposium on: *Lived Experiences of Multiculture: The New Social and Spatial Relations of Diversity*, by Sarah Neal, Katy Bennett, Allan Cochrane and Giles Mohan, London: Routledge, 2018, x+181pp, ISBN 978-138-64505-9

This is a contribution to an ERS review symposium of the above book, submitted July 2018. This is the version accepted in October 2018, with some author corrections, before final editing process and editors' author queries.

Lived Experiences of Multiculture is an important contribution to a growing body of work that seeks to understand how people live together with difference, identified by the late Stuart Hall as the constitutive question of our time.

The ordinary

The book's starting point is a discourse about diversity dominated by the shrill voices of anxiety and pessimism, amplified by the entrepreneurs of fear who occupy centre stage in our public debates. Citing Greg Noble's descriptive account of an "unpanicked" multiculturalism, the book's agenda is to actively unpanick our cultural debate. This unpanicking proceeds through a valorisation of the ordinary, building on Suzanne Hall (2012),² who talks of "the measure of the ordinary",² and Jennifer Robinson's work (2006) on all cities as "ordinary".

The emphasis on the ordinary is deployed on several levels in the book, which is based on a research project called *Living Multiculture*. The three field sites are partly chosen for their ordinariness: Milton Keynes, whose name evokes images of bland, manicured banality, Oadby in Leicestershire, an undistinguished small town in the geographical middle of England, and Hackney, a site identified in the literature as characterised by the "commonplace" nature of its diversity (Wessendorf 2013). In an earlier paper related to the *Living Multiculture* project, Kesten et al (2011) argued that the debate on diversity focused too often on sites of spectacular "super-diversity" or "segregation" and should be examined 'in what might be described as an ordinary city', in that case Milton Keynes. This idea of ordinary cities informed recent analysis I conducted with Steve Hanson and Sundas Ali of national identity in England and Wales, where we identified a cluster of cities (such as London, Luton and Leicester) where residents identify as British and a larger cluster of "English" cities (typically Brexit-leaning "left behind" post-industrial locations like Grimsby, Wigan and Barnsley). In the middle of the chart was a cluster of what we called "ordinary cities", such as Coventry, Crawley, Reading and Birmingham, where there is a mix of English and British identification; at the dead centre of the chart sat Milton Keynes (Gidley et al 2018:15).

At a more micro scale, one of the most satisfying chapters in the book is about “semi-public” spaces, focusing on corporate café spaces such as Costa, Nando’s and McDonalds. Here, the authors argue that, in contrast to independent cafes (which are often sites of classed or racialised exclusion), the very cultural blandness generates possibilities of conviviality as familiarity leads to confident use, and customers practise a Goffmanesque civil inattention. (Again, I had an earlier version of this chapter (—Jones et al 2015)— in mind in identifying the “ordinary city” as one of the most plausible urban futures facing Britain, rather than the “revanchist” and “sectarian” cities summoned up by dystopians of the left and right respectively, with their emphasis on social and ethnic conflict and segregation (—Gidley et al 2018:38-39).)

The “ordinary city” scenario – characterised by benign indifference, living apart together (Jensen and Gidley 2016) – is based on the assumption of continued trends towards relaxed attitudes towards identity and difference, as well as the on-going transformation of our urban landscape by consumer capitalism. It is marked by the absence of identity-based conflict, but also thinned out sense of place-based belonging. The “Clonetown UK” phenomenon – the *sameification* of our urban landscapes of leisure and consumption, as chain retail crowds out local distinctiveness – promises the spread of comfort spaces such as Nando’s and Costa, creating a blasé atmosphere in which floppy rather than brittle identities thrive, and the risk of division is outweighed by that of increasingly attenuated place-based belonging.

Neal et al’s commitment to the ordinary registers most importantly in their methodology. In the tradition of anthropology and Raymond Williams’ “culture is ordinary” approach (and resonating with work by other current scholars such as Amanda Wise), the book focuses on the quotidian practices of everyday life. This draws attention away from what people “are” and on to what people *do*, and thus reduces the power of identitarian categories that structure contemporary diversity politics and the “methodological groupism” (Brubaker 2002) that inflects too much diversity research.

This shift from being to doing opens research up to the prevalence of *ambivalence*, and the discussion of ambivalence is a vital strand running through the book. In a research agenda opened up by Les Back’s identification of the “metropolitan paradox” (1996, cited here on p.3), in which the most brutal forms of exclusion and hostility share space with the most intimate and meaningful forms of intercultural encounter, I think that understanding the ambivalence of diversity is one of the key tasks for scholars in this area today, as we struggle to account for how trust and reciprocity combines with racialising prejudices and negative representations of the other, or how an apparent pro-diversity ethos combines with strategies of avoidance and self-segregation (Jensen and Gidley 2016, Berg and Gidley forthcoming, Everett and Gidley forthcoming).

The iconic

The focus on the ordinary, as noted already, cuts against a trend within diversity literature to focus in on spectacular iconic sites. In imagining multiculturalism, proper nouns do considerable work: “Eltham” has come to stand for particular forms of white racism, “Oldham” for “sleep-walking into segregation” – and Hackney for “super-diversity”. Jones (2014) has shown how local policy-makers internalise and reproduce these received meanings in shaping strategies for managing difference in municipalities. Researchers are complicit in such processes. As Neal et al note, “How places become presented, conceptualised and identified may be lasting outcomes of the research process” (p.47). At a conference on urban diversity I was at in the early 2010s, the sheer number of papers focusing on Hackney led a foreign academic to wonder if there were more ethnographers than ordinary residents on the streets of the borough.

Using Hackney as a case study site, then, risks amplifying such discourses. However, a subtle discussion in Chapter 3 gives examples of how being apparently “over-researched” also gives residents resources, as they become canny at using research to articulate their own agendas, or become skilled at resisting and criticising research, such that they are able to take more ownership of the co-production of knowledge locally.

The ethics of collaboration

One of the interesting features of this book is its collaborative dimension. As I have argued elsewhere (Gidley 2013), the multiplication of perspectives in a super-diverse location requires the multiplication of perspectives of anyone wanting to observe and analyse such sites, calling for collaborative modes of inquiry, working in teams that are multilingual, that are able to pursue multiple research strategies in sync. This is especially true of multi-sited research, where the aspiration is to understand the specificities and commonalities of heterogeneous sites, such as the three case studies of this project. And it is especially true in a context in which populations are increasingly networked and mobile, as in this research. Neal et al develop a number of sophisticated strategies for doing this kind of work, with different team members moving between sites, as well as reflexively using ethnographic fieldnotes and the practice of writing as a collective resource for feeling into other sites (see Degnen and Tyler 2017, Gidley 2018, Miller et al 2018, Robinson and Sheldon 2019 for resonant accounts of attempts at this sort of collaboration and the obstacles to it).

The kind of attempt at collaboration ventured by Neal et al is all the more valuable given the costs of collaborative research in the contemporary neoliberal political economy of scholarship. By this I mean not just the economic cost, although multiplying co-investigators for genuine collaborative or multi-sited ethnography generates economic costs which mean funding proposals based on such collaboration are often scored negatively for “value for money” in austere times. There is also the career cost, under an individualised, marketised and audited research regime, of diluting high value single authored outputs with multi-authored ones; the humility required by collaboration is ill-suited to a regime of value in the academic labour market based on the authorship of publications (Gidley 2018).

The political economy of research outputs reproduces the traditional hierarchies of value in the Western academy which valorise lone scholarship. This is true of ethnography, historically based on the figure of the heroic lone figure heroically immersed in a distant fieldsite, and the development of collaborative endeavours undermines the writerly authority implied in “graphy” part of “ethnography” (Gidley 2013). In *Lived Experiences of Multiculture*, five fieldworkers are named in the acknowledgements, and two of them (Hannah Jones and Keiran Connell) are acknowledged as co-authors of previous versions of Chapters 4 and 5, but it is the names of the four principal and co-investigators of the research project who are named as the author of the book, which must have been a difficult ethical choice.

The visibility of difference

Another of the key challenges of adequately researching contemporary diversity is that of how to see difference. As noted above, in their ethnographic focus on the everyday and ordinary, Neal et al shift from an account of being to an account of doing. The critique of methodological groupism developed by Brubaker and others grounds the emphasis on place rather than group that underlies Neal et al’s work, with identities emerging in interactions in the field in real time, rather than ascribed a priori.

But, as they acknowledge, ethnographic observation always occurs in a particular regime of racialised visibility, and, as subtly discussed in Chapter 3, the researchers were forced to navigate between a desire to describe interactions across lines of difference and the commitment to avoiding

essentialist and epidermalised optics for ascribing identities. How can you develop an account of meaningful interactions between, say, migrants and settled people, or members of racialised minorities and residents of majority ethnicities, without resorting to descriptions of identity based on assumptions generated from visual codes? As with multiplying perspectives to account for super-diversity's proliferation of incorrigible worldviews, describing encounters with difference without fixing identity remains one of the impossible but necessary tasks of research in this field.

This paradox produces a productive tension in the text, as identifications are posited but questioned simultaneously, producing a rich ethnographic account showing how difference and identity are always contingent and relational, emerging and disappearing in real time through interaction. This works especially well in the chapter on educational spaces, as banter between peers or the spatial arrangement of bodies at particular tables are shown to actively produce a constantly shifting play of identification.

Privacy and publicity

In the recent diversity turn (Berg and Sigona 2013) on which this study builds, much of the work focuses on public and parochial sites, such as streets and markets (e.g. Hall 2012, Rhys-Taylor 2013, Wessendorf 2013). This book extends that range, with accounts of public parks but also corporate cafes ("semi-public space"), social leisure spaces that sit between the public and the private, and also educational spaces. Neal et al use the notion of "micro-publics" popularised by Ash Amin (2002) and coined by Les Back (1999) to think through some of these sites. The book powerfully shows how different sorts of site open up and close down different forms of interaction, some more fleeting, some more meaningful, always ambivalent and always complex.

I would argue that we should take this extension beyond the public and parochial as an invitation to explore an even wider range of sites and spaces in diversity research. Blokland (2001) and Wessendorf (2013) have both noted that accounts of public familiarity often imply private segregation, with ethnographic immersion in commonplace diversity typically stopping at the doorstep, and private homes assumed to be sites of segregation. Humphris (2017) and Biehl (2015), in contrast, explore homes as sites of intercultural encounter too, opening up a fruitful area of inquiry. Similarly, the behind the scenes commercial spaces, where intercultural relations of trust build up between traders from different ethnic backgrounds might be another fruitful area of research (Everett and Gidley 2018).

Class, state and power

I want to finish by noting one thread that runs through the book, but which would also merit further exploration. The workings of class, the state and power in general come into focus at several points in the book. Class-based exclusions from independent cafes in Hackney, for example, show how class as much as ethnicity is a significant line of cleavage in the super-diverse city. The ability of the local state to frame multiculturalism is emphasised in Chapter 7, as educational institutions practise formal celebration of identities, manage differences and open up "slippage space" for identity work. The final chapter shows how local policy communities can play an active role in framing difference too.

Some of the social leisure spaces explored in Chapter 6 are also state spaces: a book group in Hackney meets in a library. Mette Louise Berg and I (forthcoming) argue that "welfare micro-publics" are key neglected sites for staging encounters with difference, as street-level bureaucrats (themselves demographically diverse) play a key role in preventing or enabling conviviality, enabling some differences to make a differences and others to become invisible. Austerity means that the convivial spaces hosted by the local spaces, as well as the slippage spaces in an education institution, are under threat – much as some of the ordinary sites of thin conviviality are under threat from

gentrification. And the ambivalence noted above sometimes seems to be class-inflected, as middle class participants articulate an ethos of mixing while private withdrawing from intercultural encounter. Although it sometimes slips out of focus, Neal et al acknowledge that the role of class, of the state and of power shape lives experiences of diversity, making a significant advance on some of the more boosterist accounts of conviviality.

In conclusion, Neal et al's beautifully written, granular account of lived multiculturalism takes us beyond the current diversity literature in a number of key ways, and invites us to push further in exploring ambivalence, private space, commercial and state spaces, and a fuller range of lines of difference.

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