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Multiculture and community in new city spaces

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Until recently, the dominant focus of academic work on issues relating to ethnicity and the possibility as well as the challenges of multiculturalism in Britain has been on the inner areas of the country's major cities. Since the 1960s Birmingham (Rex and Moore 1967; Rex and Tomlinson 1979; Solomos and Back 1995), Bristol (Pryce 1979), Liverpool (Ben Tovim, 1988) and London (Back 1996) have all been sites of research into ethnic relations. The work of Philip Sarre and others in exploring the experience of housing in Bedford was an exception to this general rule (Sarre et al 1989). The urban unrest in small towns in northern England in 2001 also called forth some significant academic responses (see e.g., Amin, 2002, 2003; Jahn-Kahn, 2003; Kundnani, 2001, Phillips 2006) but, like the inner cities, these areas are typically characterised by high levels of unemployment, poor housing stock and deep rooted residential segregation.

Contemporary popular debates around multiculturalism – or even worse multiculturalism – have tended to take a sceptical stance, to the extent that it is understood as a 'failure' (see, e.g., Finney and Simpson, pp. 77-78). And this is also reflected in the policy discussion around 'community cohesion'. Community cohesion emerged as a popular term within British public policy discourse after a series of reports in 2001 into inter-ethnic disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley (including Cantle 2001, 2004, Denham 2001, Ouseley 2001). These identified, among other things, a lack of clear political, community and religious leadership and a climate of ignorance, fear and division between different racial, ethnic and religious groups living in each area. The reports argued that these and other factors were responsible for creating a climate of

fear, suspicion and segregation within local 'communities' (in this case generally defined through local government areas, rather than neighbourhoods).

To a large extent, not surprisingly perhaps given their origins, in other words, these reports focused on issues of division and separation. The understanding that underpins these reports, with their emphasis on relatively homogeneous ethnic groups facing each other across a cultural divide (only capable of being overcome through an appeal to a set of British core values that would guide the way people treat and expect to be treated by each other) has, however, been persuasively questioned and even challenged. Deborah Phillips argues that the emphasis on the extent to which British Muslims in the cities where the riots took place live 'parallel lives' to more mainstream British society is misplaced. She draws on a range of evidence to illustrate the extent to which 'racialised spaces' may rather be 'sustained by fears of rejection, racism, and harassment' (Phillips 2006, p. 38).

The question remains whether there may be less – or differently - racialised spaces within which other forms of social interaction are possible. In his critique of the first Cattle Report (2001), Ash Amin highlights the importance of interaction 'in local sites of everyday encounter' (Amin 2002, p. 969) or 'sites of prosaic interaction' where cultural transgression becomes possible (Amin 2002, p. 970). And earlier, in his discussion of racism and multiculturalism in the lives of young people, Back (1996) similarly highlights the importance and possibility of spaces of transcultural dialogue.

Amin and Back share a perspective which suggests that working through fixed categories defined as 'communities' is likely to be a dead end, and that it is the new

possibilities for interaction in urban spaces, rather than the arid fixities of 'community' cohesion that matter. The potential significance of this way of thinking is highlighted in Paul Gilroy's work. He describes the choice for the future as one between 'a melancholic longing for a return to the relative cultural homogeneity of old' on the one hand, and an appreciation of the importance of what he calls the 'conviviality' of ordinary, everyday, lived forms of multiculturalism on the other. This routine multiculturalism is, according to Gilroy, one of the most effective tools for discrediting notions of closed and fixed identities at our disposal as it has evolved organically through a routine everyday exposure to difference (Gilroy 2004a and b, 2005).

The importance of these ways of thinking is reinforced by the way in which Britain's population has shifted and changed over recent decades. It may be that some of the claims made for Britain as a multicultural or diverse nation are exaggerated, but there is no doubt (as COIC 2007 emphasises) that it is no longer possible to describe it in terms that clearly identify areas which are free of the challenges of living together with difference. In particular what is apparent is that the old maps which connected multicultural populations with inner city areas and the post-industrial Pennine towns no longer offer accurate accounts of multi-ethnic and migrant settlement. On the contrary, by now the experience of multicultural encounter is one that is widely shared by those living in most of Britain's cities, big and small.

The recognition that a focus on traditional areas of settlement is failing to capture some of the complexities of life in contemporary Britain has encouraged the emergence of work concerned with the presence of multiculturalism, or at any rate

increased ethnic mixing, in less familiar places. So, for example, serious consideration has been given to issues of ethnicity and the countryside (see, e.g., Neal 2002, Neal and Agyeman 2006, Chakraborti and Garland 2004, Ray and Reed 2005). Attention has also been drawn (in an echo of the conclusions drawn by Sarre et al in the 1980s) to the problems of housing policy in a small town in England (Reeve and Robinson 2007). And work focused on Leicester has recently begun to open up some of the tensions, possibilities and limitations of prosaic encounter (Clayton 2009). However, it remains the case that there has been little consistent empirical work on the nature of ethnic and community relations in ('ordinary' or 'unexceptional') cities which are relatively prosperous, and have a much shorter (but increasingly significant) history of multicultural settlement.

Yet, the experience of such cities may be just as significant in developing a rounded understanding of the contemporary geographies and policy spaces of multiculturalism. In a rather different context, Ash Amin and Stephen Graham warn us of the danger of using particular emblematic cases to define the urban experience, and their warning may also be relevant here (Amin and Graham 1997). This paper champions an argument for research into issues of ethnicity, community relations and processes of social inclusion within new multicultural and city spaces in order more accurately to reflect the changing dynamics of ethnicity in Britain. Focusing on 'new spaces of multiculturalism' reflects a recognition of the shift away from ethnically homogenous spaces to increasingly multi-ethnic ones. This does not necessarily mean that the lived experience is so very different for racialised minorities – but it is likely to be constructed in different ways. As Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar remind us: 'No

matter how similar cities are in terms of overall scalar positioning, their complex layers of social history and social structure result in specific local forms of incorporation built on place-specific representations, legacies and expectations' (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009, p. 196).

New city spaces

The significance of these arguments for the research discussed in this paper is twofold. First, it directs attention towards the local – the microgeographies of interaction rather than the set piece conflicts (or the set piece encounters like festivals), allowing for the exploration of relationship building (however uneasily) in practice and through practices in particular places, rather than starting from expectations associated with the identification of pre-existing (socially and spatially bounded) communities. Second, implicitly at least, it directs attention to the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary.

This paper aims to take this further by considering the experience of an urban space which, despite a history of promotional boosterism, might be seen as quintessentially ordinary – a suburban place par excellence (at least according to Barker 2009). Milton Keynes is a prosperous and expanding settlement on the edge of the South East of England. Convention suggests that multicultural areas tend to exhibit high levels of residential and educational segregation, high degrees of poverty and deprivation and low rates of contact between culturally distinct individuals and groups. This is not the Milton Keynes experience. Although the city has an increasingly multiethnic population there is little entrenched residential and educational segregation, but only

pockets of deprivation surrounded by overall growth, and it does not seem to incorporate culturally isolated communities.

As a result, the case study offers the prospect of both reflecting on newly emergent spaces of multiculturalism and investigating the nature of routine multiculturalism in practice. This study of new city spaces is potentially significant because it offers researchers and policy makers a distinctive way into the challenges and opportunities presented by multiculturally constituted communities by looking at them in a different context.

Milton Keynes is one of Britain's new towns, designated over 40 years ago as part of a programme aimed at encouraging the deconcentration of population away from the country's biggest cities (particularly London), providing family housing and greenfield sites suitable for development by businesses. It is almost equidistant between London and Birmingham, although its face is resolutely directed towards the former, to which a high proportion of its working population commutes every day. Milton Keynes has a population of over 200,000, and has grown rapidly since the early 1980s, through a continuing process of in-migration. It has recently been identified as having one of the fastest growing economies in England based around private sector job growth as well as having the fastest annual percentage growth in population between 1998-2008 (Webber and Swinney 2010). It was at the centre of one of the 'growth areas' identified in new Labour's sustainable communities plan (ODPM 2003) and is likely to continue to grow even as the plan itself is wound down.

Since its inception Milton Keynes has faced the challenge of generating the sense of a cohesive community with a distinct identity, even in the face of popular scepticism (see, e.g., Charlesworth and Cochrane 1997, Clapson 2004). Like the other new towns of the South East which initially drew their population from the resettlement of skilled workers from London, it was at first ethnically homogeneous, still being identifiable as a distinct part of the 'White ROSE' (Rest of the South East – i.e. the South East outside London) in the 1990s (see, e.g., Allen et al 1998). By the early years of the next century that had already changed to the extent that, following the 2001 Census, the Commission for Racial Equality concluded that Milton Keynes was 'a remarkably average place. Almost every ethnic group is represented at a level very close to the average for England as a whole' (quoted in Cochrane 2008, p. 6).

And since then the pace of change has accelerated. In 2010, the annual school census (Milton Keynes Council 2010) identified 31% of school pupils as having Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds, with a still higher proportion in primary education (33.2%). Even in the sixth forms 28.9% of students fell into this category. Already in 2003, people identified as 'Black African' made up 1.3% of the population, the second largest BME category in the city (having risen from 0.3% in 1991), above the national average at the time of 0.95% (MK Council, 2003). More recent estimates indicate that this population has continued to grow significantly (now constituting 2.7% of the population) and as a proportion of the overall population it remains around twice the national average for England - now 1.4% (Office for National Statistics, 2007).

In this context, the local political vision has been summed up (in the community strategy) as being ‘to create a city that has soul, energy and dynamism’ and which ‘celebrates diversity’ (Milton Keynes Local Strategic Partnership, 2004).

The research project: focus and design

The principal aim of the research on which this paper draws¹ is to investigate the ways in which multiculturally constituted communities become established in new urban spaces. Its empirical focus relates to ‘Black African’ communities in Milton Keynes – and specifically to the Ghanaian and Somali populations. Focusing on these two groups helps to deconstruct the notion of ‘Black African’ as a homogenous category through the examination of the differences, difficulties, commonalities and successes associated with their distinctive experiences.

The Ghanaian community in Milton Keynes is a relatively confident one, not least because it has largely been built around the migration of relatively secure professionals from London over the last two decades. Many still have links to London based community activities. Ghanaians are not concentrated in any particular areas of Milton Keynes, but they remain well-connected through a range of formal and informal associations, even if they are not integrated into formal governance networks in the city (see, Henry and Mohan 2003, Mohan 2006). The Somali population by contrast has arrived more recently, and many of its members have come as refugees (see Sporton and Valentine, 2007, Sporton, Valentine and Nielsen, 2006 for further detail of Somali asylum seeker and refugee experiences in the UK). Although arriving in the city by a range of routes, for many Milton Keynes is their first point of

settlement in the UK. The community is more concentrated in the central estates of Milton Keynes (Fishermead and Conniburrow), and is less well-organised. Somalis have frequently been the subject of direct racial antagonism, reflected, for example in claims made about their access to social housing (see, for example, *Milton Keynes Citizen* 2007a) despite problems of homelessness faced by many (*Milton Keynes Citizen* 2007b).

The urban design of the city enables and encourages interaction but also generates obstacles. For members of the Ghanaian community, mainly living in owner occupied housing, and widely distributed across city, a continuing sense of community is maintained through church and other family networks. For members of the Somali community, mainly living in privately rented accommodation (often houses in multiple occupation) or in social housing, the separation is more apparent. Milton Keynes is divided into separate spheres by grid-squares of dual carriageways and, without transport there is little connection between them in part because public transport is orientated towards particular shopping areas that bypass the estates and neighbourhoods.

The research examines two key sites of local community construction – schools and provision for young people and religious centres. This focus reflects a number of factors: the age profiles of minority ethnic populations in the city (as reflected in the data from the Schools Census); the concerns over both young people and religion in community cohesion agendas; and the particular formal and informal roles that schools and religious centres play in sustaining ‘structures of community feeling’.

In total 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with various key agencies and figures throughout the city, in order to illuminate policy making agendas on multicultural and community building as well as to gain an insight into the experiences of the case study groups. These included interviews with a range of local authority staff, as well as youth workers, community development workers and staff working in schools. Alongside these, interviews were conducted with representatives of local community based organisations, religious centres and individuals operating in the voluntary sector in equalities and community development. The researcher was based at the Council for one day a week, and invited to attend relevant meetings, which allowed him to observe the processes of policymaking, discussion and strategy development in practice.

Finally, in order to gain a deeper understanding of notions of attachment, belonging and inclusion, five focus group interviews were conducted with young people from the case study groups, two Somali samples (four and six participants respectively) and three Ghanaian samples (six, seven and three participants respectively) were used. This method was adopted because focus groups are 'participant-led' and more likely to foster free-flowing discussion and be more conducive to gaining a detailed understanding of the experiences of migrant young people (Neal and Walters, 2006, p. 180). The first interview took place on the 30th December 2008 and the last on the 17th July 2009. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations across the city including office buildings, schools, churches, youth clubs as well as participants' homes. They varied in length from forty minutes to two and a half hours, including several follow-up interviews. All of the interviews covered: perceptions of Milton Keynes as a 'multicultural' space; notions of what 'community' means in Milton

Keynes; the effect of a 'new city' on how well people get on with each other; and involvement in local attempts to increase 'cohesion'. Other avenues were explored in greater depth depending on the position and experience of the participant (as well as their time constraints and willingness to participate). The semi-structured and focus group interviews were complemented by 'moments' of participant observation at key Milton Keynes Council, local and migratory formal and informal community events, in order to witness first-hand how migrant communities, as well as the wider 'Milton Keynes community', organise and are formed.

This paper brings together a consideration of the ways in which Milton Keynes is experienced and understood by members of the two communities (particularly young people) with a discussion of the ways in which local policy has been developed to reflect the city's changing and more diverse population. After considering how which young people experience the city and learn to negotiate their way through the situation in which they find themselves, the argument explores some of the ways in which the communities constitute themselves in Milton Keynes, recognising that this is a process rather than the expression of some pre-given cultural necessity. This leads into a discussion of the ways in which communities are represented and represent themselves within the broad political and governance context of the city, exploring the relationship between the council's search for representatives with whom to work and the construction of representative bodies within the community. Finally, some tentative conclusions about the relationship between policy and the challenges of the new multiculturalism are drawn.

New city spaces and new populations

In some respects, it is the shared understanding of the nature of Milton Keynes across any supposed ethnic divide which is most striking. In other words rather than finding evidence for the existence of parallel lives, it appears that (Milton Keynes as) place is experienced and interpreted in much the same way whatever community its residents are associated with (see, e.g., Clapson 2004, for a discussion of attitudes to living in Milton Keynes). Some of the perceptions of young people as expressed in the focus groups were unexceptionally similar to those that would be expressed by other young people. In particular, positive comments were made about the central shopping centre and associated leisure facilities, as well as about park space, allowing for sport-related activities of one sort or another. In one focus group it was even suggested that they preferred roundabouts (a signature and much mocked feature of traffic management in the city) to traffic lights.

Young people felt that Milton Keynes was a far safer place to live than bigger cities, such as London – safety emerged as one of young people’s biggest likes about Milton Keynes. In this context it was possible to identify a sense of territoriality among young people stemming from the grid-system which translated into feelings of safety within that square but a degree of danger outside it. Even in this context, however, the point was made that the dangers were not as great as postcode rivalries in London, even if (as one participant said) the Oldbrook Posse did not like people from Fishermead (a neighbouring estate) coming into their area.

The negative comments are familiar enough, too. Milton Keynes was identified as a big town, rather than a ‘proper’ city. So, for example, although the central shopping

centre, the clubs, cinemas and other leisure facilities were valued, there was a concern that there was really only one place to go. There were few accessible and interesting shops distributed around the areas of Milton Keynes. This problem was exacerbated by the nature of urban design coupled with a poor public transport system. Not only was there likely to be little of interest within walking distance, the bus system meant that travel to anywhere else was complicated and difficult. One participant summed up her frustrations with a middle sized settlement like Milton Keynes by complaining about the absence of a youth media scene.

“...I was just saying because I studied journalism that I realised that there isn't much of a kind of youth media scene like you have in other big cities. Obviously we have the local paper and everything but we don't have um you know, a magazine for young people or a newspaper for young people, you know a media outlet where there is stuff that relates to them cos if you read the *Citizen* (local newspaper) a lot of it just boring stuff you know 'cat up a tree' that sort of thing, stuff that nobody pays attention to...”

These responses to life in Milton Keynes, in other words, reflect no particular ethnically or community based sets of concerns – they are quite explicitly 'mainstream'. There may be a stronger sense of the lack of spaces for convivial cross-cultural interaction (also identified as an issue by one Council officer who was interviewed) which helps reinforce feelings of social disconnection and isolation city-wide but this seems to be an age related phenomenon affecting young people more widely, rather than one specific to Somali or Ghanaian young people.

However, this does not mean that differences are insignificant. On the contrary, in some respects the experience of those young people was rather more uncertain, and reflected a more ambivalent relationship to place. The comments that follow are drawn from one focus group, made up of young people with Ghanaian backgrounds. On the one hand, possibilities of convivial interaction are explicitly identified. According to one sixteen year old Milton Keynes, with its changing population, is good for bringing people together across pre-given community lines:

“...everybody has like a Jamaican friend, a Nigerian friend, a Somali friend. Everybody mixes with each other”.

But clearly this is not an unproblematic process of ‘mixing’. So, for example, here it seems to remain between members of a range of minority (in this case ‘black’) groups. A fifteen year old girl identifies some of the tensions, highlighting a process of separation while also pointing to the existence of a wider friendship group:

“...in our school we have a kind of mix but not really. Say there is like five black people that hang around together people feel really intimidated... I don’t know why but they are really intimidated and I remember white girls saying to me like “how come all of your friends are you know...black”?...I mean I hang out with like four white people and then all the rest of us are black and mixed-race and its like really weird like when we walk down the corridors because people look at you like they are scared...”.

Another participant, a twenty year old woman who moved to the city from London as a teenager, describes a longer process of negotiation:

“I remember when I first went to the city, I felt like wow, at that time I felt like I was the only black person there. I felt like everyone was staring at me. They probably weren’t, but that was what it felt like and I was just like I wanna go home and go back to London because I wasn’t used to it. I remember at school there was just one black clique and all the black people hung around together and it wasn’t until like a few years later when people started to mix and more people started to move here from different areas and it felt more multicultural and people started to mix and it didn’t feel like people were staring at me or like I as the only one. So I think it just took time to get used to it...

[W]hen I came here and the school is predominantly white, my teacher at the time when I arrived just shoved me in with the black people, which I, at the time, was just like “OK – I know it seems like I want to hang around with black people” and she just shoved me with them like “that’s your people, just get on with it”, which kind of threw me and then by the time I had left school quite a large majority of my friends were white”.

There was a widespread acceptance within the focus group that there was still a tendency for the friendship networks of young people to cluster within

'black' or 'white' groupings, even if these clearly went across more narrowly defined 'community' boundaries. But the wider divisions remained fuzzy and permeable, confirming the possibilities of convivial interaction. As one young person put it, "I just think it will be more mixed because we are all talking to each other already and everyone is getting along with each other in school and that. They do what they do and Ghanaians do what they do, but they still talk to each other". From this perspective, it should be apparent, conviviality should not be seen as some unproblematic process of coming together or homogenisation - a space within which difference can be negotiated and argued over, rather than one in which it disappears or becomes settled.

Making up communities

The broad assumptions around which the project was organised distinguished along relatively simple lines between the two communities on which it was focused. The Ghanaian residents were assumed to be reasonably affluent and well established, having followed a common migratory pattern (whether moving out from London in a second wave or arrived directly from Ghana as economic migrants). By contrast the expectation was that the Somali residents would be less affluent, more recently settled and usually to have arrived seeking refugee status. Similarly it was assumed that Ghanaian settlement patterns would be distributed, with no particular concentrations in specific neighbourhoods, while Somali people would be more concentrated in one or two areas.

It is, however, important to recognise that the communities themselves are not homogenous, but made up of overlapping and distinctive groupings. They are not somehow fixed, arriving from outside to settle in a new space, but begin to define themselves in all that space – reflecting a wide array of socio-economic and migratory experiences as well as intersecting with local political and social networks. The longstanding populations of each are constantly being changed and reshaped as a result of a multiplicity of ongoing migrations from Ghana and Somalia respectively (often via London whether first or second generation, or from northern cities, such as Sheffield in the case of Somalis) as well as from a range European countries such as Germany, Holland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In other words, these are communities in the process of being made in place, rather than arriving fully formed. And their local experience is also linked into complex patterns of movement as much as any inherent set of linkages back to any particular ‘homeland’.

Sometimes this can have rather surprising consequences. In one school, for example, it looked as if there was strong evidence of ethnically based segregation, as teachers expressed concern about the way in which a group of Ghanaian children apparently refused to mix with others in the playground, in contrast to the other children from a range of ethnic groups. It soon became apparent that the main reason for this related to the fact that English was not the first language of the children – instead they were speaking German to each other. As one educationalist noted:

“Within the past four years there has been a rapid increase in the numbers of children to our school and they have largely come via the European route, so they have come via Germany and Holland, so we

have 23 languages spoken in our school. A large percentage of our children are Ghanaian. Those Ghanaian children speak maybe German or Dutch and maybe Twi which is their own language and we have a high percent of children who came to the school with no English at all”.

The importance of the wider European connection was also apparent among members of the Somali community, with interviews suggesting that many moved to Milton Keynes because it seemed to share many of the features of their previous places of settlement in Sweden or Holland, but offered greater job opportunities. Among this group there was little commitment to long term settlement in the Milton Keynes.

The result is an increasingly diverse set of experiences and trajectories and growing division and dissimilarity within what are too often seen as closed and homogenous communities.

It is in this context that community identity is produced locally. Formal religion has a strong place in the lives of members of both communities and regular attendance at places of worship is common. Somalis in Milton Keynes generally hold Friday prayers in community centres (since they are currently in the process of raising money to build themselves a mosque), while Ghanaians attend a diverse selection of churches including Pentecostal, Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist with some predominantly Ghanaian in membership, while others contain ethnically mixed congregations. It is common to hear of people trying out a wide range of churches before finding the one they liked.

These are not neighbourhood churches, but draw in their congregations from across the city. They are not rooted in neighbourhood, or in neighbourhood based community. Each church seems to have at least one minibus to transport members without their own vehicles. Many Ghanaians are able to choose to attend a local chapel or branch of the church they attended before moving from London (e.g. Kingsway International Christian Centre) and in some cases even a local branch of the church they attended before moving from Ghana (e.g. Presbyterian Church of Ghana), demonstrating the transnational dynamic of the Ghanaian community within the new city as well as the impact that religious centres can have on the processes of inclusion and integration upon arrival within the city (see Glick Schiller et al 2006 for a discussion of the role of Christian churches in the incorporation of transnational migrants in place).

For both groups the religious centres were often the key sites for interaction between those directly from Africa, those from London, those from Europe and the second generation born in the United Kingdom. Indeed for many they are the focal point of their social lives. For those newly arrived, whatever the routes by which they have come, these centres actively provide support for settling in, and can be seen as examples of what Robert Putnam has called 'bonding' social capital, an excess of which is sometimes held to get in the way of the 'bridging' social capital said to deliver community cohesion (Putnam 2000).

But this distinction is to underplay their significance. The informal activities organised around those centres are just as important as the formal ones. One young

Somali highlighted the way in which a football tournament organised by the Milton Keynes Muslim Association offered opportunities to move beyond the immediate community, because “they were not just Somalis they were all just Muslims. I think it’s a lot of mix because Muslims it’s not just one nationality it’s like all over the world...So you get to meet a lot of different people”. Milton Keynes operates as a stage, or a site, on which or through which these forms of relationship are able to develop, and is itself changed and redefined through the process. So, for example, here the meeting of Muslims from across the world is enacted through the limited and specific space of a football tournament, rather than any global rhetoric or global movement. Milton Keynes becomes a space of encounter between these groups, as well as a new town in the South East Midlands.

Representing Communities

The paradox is that the fluidity and complexity identified through the research seems to be accompanied by attempts to generate fixity of one sort or another through the identification of specific communities and forms of representation. A complex dance is apparent around the process of community governance, as communities seek to represent themselves to others and (above all) to agencies of government and those agencies themselves look for ways of managing the new communities. Making up communities is, in other words, a two way process in which members of communities look for ways of defining themselves so that they have an identity capable of generating some sort of political weight, while state managers and street level bureaucrats look for ways of defining communities so that they can more easily be

managed (and sometimes even supported) (see, e.g., Rose 1999 for a discussion of the role of ‘community’ in processes of governance).

Whatever the complexities of community building, the structures of community representation in Milton Keynes are familiar enough. Longstanding community associations exist for both the Ghanaian (Association of Ghanaians in Milton Keynes) and Somali (MK Somali Community Association) populations within Milton Keynes, professing to represent and offer a selection of services and methods of support to members of their ethnic (or migrant) group within the city. These services include but are not limited to, organising youth groups, coach trips for young people, locations for religious worship, immigration advice, social events, visits to care homes and bereavement support. The process of ‘representation’ is one of the ways in which communities are made up in practice.

Recently, in response to the on-going migration described above, there has been a proliferation of new, more ‘identity-specific’, associations within these communities (such as the ‘Ewe Association MK’ⁱⁱ; the ‘Over 10 years group’ⁱⁱⁱ; the ‘Tepa Association’^{iv}; the Unity Group^v; the ‘Horn of Africa Welfare Association’^{vi}; the ‘Somali Community Council’^{vii} and ‘AdvantageMK’^{viii}), highlighting the newfound complexities of migrant communities and processes of engagement within Milton Keynes.

The Somali community associations in particular are complicated and fragmented. Originally there was only one community organisation but this has splintered – largely divided along ‘clan’ lines, with the Somali Community Council established

with the goal of bringing all of the groups together, with varying degrees of success. Access to funding has been a significant factor in the establishment of new groups, and competition for funds has also helped generate animosity between them.

In terms of community representation the Ghanaian community appears less fragmented, with the Association of Ghanaians in Milton Keynes continuing to present itself as co-ordinating body and being recognised by official bodies in this role. However, this masks the extent to which divisions are emerging, between the relatively more established and better off residents and the more recently arrived and less secure. These divisions help to explain the creation of the Ewe Association Milton Keynes, as well as divisions between the various church congregations, and the formation of more informal groups (several of which are listed above).

The research process highlighted some of the problems associated with 'formal' attempts to define the Ghanaian and Somali communities, whether by those acting as representatives or those – government agencies - seeking representatives (and representative organisations) with whom to work. In many cases the 'gatekeepers' – the people who provided research access to organisations and focus group participants - went to great effort and made significant personal sacrifices to support the research (in one case driving around Milton Keynes picking up new participants to ensure a focus group could go ahead after several participants dropped out at short notice). Representatives or leaders from religious and migrant centres and associations clearly took these roles very seriously (despite most holding their positions as unpaid volunteers) having taken on the duty of promoting their community and organisation

as much as possible spread out. In several cases the associations themselves were clearly struggling to keep up with the pace of population change within the city.

In other cases, particularly with Ghanaian churches, the ‘gatekeepers’ were keen to represent their organisations as dynamic, vibrant and eager to work with Milton Keynes Council, with its stated interest in supporting communities. Actively participating in the research and fulfilling the role of ‘gatekeeper’ offered these individuals the opportunity to champion their cause and attempt to shape the portrayal of their group or association. In some instances it was apparent that their involvement was mobilised to serve to reinforce their position as community representatives, as they carefully explained their involvement with the research project to their group members. Because the project was sponsored by the council (as well as being conducted through a university) it was assumed that co-operating with the research might also help confirm the position of the organisation within the local policy world – whether as a source of finance or influence (e.g. on planning matters relating to the building of religious centres).

Nor were these expectations entirely misplaced. One council officer directly asked the researcher for help in accessing the Somali community, while indicating that similar problems did not exist for the Ghanaian community:

“it’s a question of getting the contacts really, anything you can do to help I would be grateful. ...an awful lot of the Ghanaian community have got links with the Council, there are a lot of Ghanaians that work in the Council, Police etc.. They are a much better established

community. I didn't mean that as a qualitative term – a longer established community”.

The researcher was seen as a possible source of contacts in communities that had so far proved ‘hard to reach’. The continued assumption was that it should be possible to identify community leaders of one sort or another and so to work with them. But the problem identified was that “...the population changes here quite rapidly so you don't really have a mass of people who have established themselves and organised themselves that you need to respond to, you don't have that here”. One council officer explicitly contrasted his experience in another city, where it was said community organisations and their leaders remained stable enabling the local authority to manage relations across time with little difficulty. In the case of Milton Keynes the implication was that the absence of fixed communities with clearly identified leaders was in itself a problem for policy makers.

Conclusion

Britain is becoming an increasingly multicultural society in sometimes unexpected ways and with often unpredicted consequences. Until recently, however, most research (and policy attention) has tended to concern itself with the experience of inner urban areas or that of England's northern towns, with their experience of industrial decline. Despite some significant questioning of the way in which these models have been interpreted and mobilised, in a sense they have provided the iconic representation of multiculturalism in the policy imagination, generating concerns about ethnic division and encouraging a drive to community cohesion. This has made it

difficult to reflect on some of the more prosaic ways in which multiculturalism is experienced in practice.

Here, by contrast, an attempt has been made to explore the issues through a review of experiences in what might be understood as an ordinary – even boring – place, one in which it might also be expected that social relations would be less explicitly racialised. Whatever its history as a new town, Milton Keynes can no longer be dismissed as monocultural, with a population overwhelmingly dominated by those categorised in an undifferentiated fashion as ‘white British’. On the contrary, not only is its population continuing to grow (through migration as well as a high birth rate) but it has an increasingly diverse population, within which the ‘Black African’ proportion is significantly above the national average.

The insights of commentators such as Back (1996), Amin (2002) and Clayton (2009) provide a valuable basis on which to build research which allows for the exploration of relationship building (however uneasily) in practice in particular spaces, rather than starting from expectations defined by attempts to identify pre-existing (and socially bounded) communities. It encourages a focus on the micro-geographies of prosaic interaction. And it is on these and their relationship with local governance regimes that this paper has sought to focus.

The evidence begins to point to some of the processes of negotiation that take place as ‘communities’ are defined and redefined, define and redefine themselves in practice. It indicates some of the ways in which individuals – young people in particular - negotiate their way through familiar forms of everyday encounter and interaction, in

the spaces of a new town. It highlights some of the opportunities that exist as they do so, as well as reflecting some of the obstacles that they face. The process may be uncertain and the outcomes problematic, but these young people are not living parallel lives – on the contrary they are actively negotiating difference. There is evidence of practical conviviality, alongside evidence of the limitations, difficulties and tensions. The spaces of prosaic encounter stretch from football tournaments to schools and churches and take specific local forms, on occasion bringing together the transnational (and the material expression of complex patterns of migration) in place.

What is also apparent is that the formal (local) politics of multicultural face substantial difficulties as they seek to engage with these sets of relationships. In part this is because they generally focus on the identification of representative forms of ‘community’ organisation, to the extent that without representatives with whom to negotiate it is no longer possible to develop policy. However, the very identification of such representatives tends to ossify the changing relationships associated with the ‘communities’ being represented. Yet these communities are both more differentiated than this suggests and less clearly bounded. Governance structures make effective engagement difficult, since the need to be responsive to funders (and the initiatives of national government) means that the policy world (of community cohesion strategies or preventing violent extremism) operates quite separately from the daily practices of multicultural exchange (and conflict).

The challenge is to find ways of opening up spaces of encounter in ways that generate positive opportunities, rather than seeking to manage ‘communities’ as more or less fixed entities. The paradox (which is particularly apparent in the case of a place like

Milton Keynes) is that the communities themselves are in a state of flux, being made and making themselves in part in response to the expectations of the state. In other words, in the context of increased fluidity and uncertainty, governance drivers (both within and beyond the communities) continue to search for fixity. It is this that needs to be questioned.

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ⁱⁱ A recently formed Ghanaian community group for those from the 'Ewe' ethnic group of Ghana.

ⁱⁱⁱ A recently formed Ghanaian community group for those who have lived in Milton Keynes for over 10 years.

^{iv} A recently formed Ghanaian community group made up primarily of those from the Akan ethnic group from the Ghanaian city of Kumasi.

^v A recently formed Ghanaian community group, incorporating those who have migrated to Milton Keynes from Europe.

^{vi} A recently formed Somali community group within Milton Keynes

^{vii} The Somali Community Council was established to bring all of the new Somali community groups together to promote unity and to speak with 'one voice'.

^{viii} A recently formed Somali community organisation, legally a Community Interest Company.