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‘The best borough in the country for cohesion!’: managing place and multiculture in local government

Abstract

In the interface between national and local levels of UK government, narratives of place are made to fit particular tropes of 'success' or 'failure' at multiculturalism. Thinking through 'community cohesion' policy in England between 2001 and 2010, this article shows how (reputations of) relative success at 'living together with difference' become a medium through which local government practitioners negotiate the space between national and local priorities, needs and ambitions, by examining how practitioners in English local authorities negotiate narratives of 'failed multiculturalism' associated with the places they work, and, in doing so, how they re-inscribe or subvert local reputations and their 'elsewheres'.

Key words: community cohesion; multiculturalism; place; local government; white working class

Introduction

> Mark: [Community cohesion] doesn't... seem to me to be a big issue [in Hackney]. Now I've no doubt that in the Peterboroughs of this world... they sit in the pubs and they worry about all these East Europeans flooding in, picking all our tomatoes or carrots, or in Dagenham, they think that this is the final straw, Ford closes down, and nobody cares about us, and now they're dumping all these foreigners on us, and so on... but I think that that's an atypical perspective for London. Now I've no idea whether it's

> appropriate for Oldham, clearly where there's a very different geographical mix of the ethnic groups kind of thing. And, yeah, you go to Bradford, you think, oh gosh, that's – this is – you know, it's quite different really!
>
> Hannah: Yeah [both laugh]
>
> Mark: [laughs] I can see why the Asians don't wanna live on some of the estates there...

In the discussion above, Mark is speaking as a senior local authority manager in Hackney, an inner London borough with a complicated history of poverty and wealth, exclusion and conviviality, radical progressive politics and violent racist discrimination. As he frames Hackney, and London, as comfortable in their present multiculture, Mark is aware of those complex histories, at once acknowledging, disavowing and remaking them with reference to 'other places'. Those other places he references – Peterborough (as agricultural East Anglia unused to immigration); Dagenham (as depressed and post-industrial suburban outer London); and Oldham and Bradford (as ethnically segregated northern ex-mill towns) – are not only geographical reference points. They are also contrasts, constitutive outsides, for the Hackney of convivial multiculture which Mark narrates. Similarly, they are sited elsewhere in time – as problematically caught up in their post-colonial histories and unable to adapt to modern transnational identity and mixity in the way that Hackney, with its histories of change and difference, is seen by Mark to have done.

By examining such narratives, this article expands the idea of 'relational geographies' (Massey 2007) to think about how local government managers and politicians knowingly reframe place against and through one another's 'reputational geographies' (Parker and Karner 2010). This is not simply a regional geography of antagonism between, as Massey (2007, p.116) puts it, 'London' and 'the Rest of the UK'; rather it is based on relations between local units of governance, around which ideas of responsibility, shared belonging, and history have grown (or are sought). In practising local government, a key technology is the narration and re-inflection of histories of place and identity in relation to multicultures present, past and future; experienced and imagined; local and national.

Constituting multiculture through place, and vice versa

The phrase 'community cohesion' became common in UK local government after riotous disturbances in the north of England in 2001, and has gone through varying attempts at definition and redefinition since then (see also Rashid, this issue). Broadly, community cohesion can be seen as either a challenge or a redefinition of government attempts at 'multiculturalism', with an emphasis on shared values; a sense of shared belonging; and 'bridging' links between separately 'bonded' communities (Cantle 2005). Though in practice the policy direction has been adapted to fit local circumstances, and over time, the main critique of national policy statements themselves is that there tends to be an emphasis on meeting and mixing which belies structural inequalities that underpin separation on ethnic or other lines (McGhee 2005; Flint and Robinson 2008).

Community cohesion policy in the UK is closely linked to arguments over ‘multiculturalism’ in both academic and political debates. From one angle, these are arguments over whether multiculturalism stands for a recognition in public life of differences in culture, ethnicity, religion and language; or whether it emphasises the right to such differences in private, with the subscription to a ‘neutral’ or dominant shared set of values and culture in public (Keith 2005, pp.53-4). From another angle, the ‘multicultural question’ is whether multiculturalism should aim for a spot on this spectrum, but fixes a straw man of multicultural policy at one end or another of the spectrum and argues either that it threatens national solidarity (e.g. Goodhart 2004) or that it obscures goals of social justice (e.g. Kundnani 2002). Definitions and redefinitions of the goals of multiculturalism as a political project abound (e.g. Parekh 2000; Modood 2007; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010), as do attempts to reconceptualise the debate (e.g. Lentin and Titley 2011; Amin 2012; Alexander 2013).

Some have tried to clarify the debates by making clear the distinction between multiculturalism as a normative project, and ‘multicultural’ as a descriptive term for actually existing, ethnically complex societies (Hall 2000). Vertovec’s much quoted term, ‘super-diversity’ (2007), drew attention to a particular aspect of increasing complexity, arguing (initially for Britain, though the phenomenon has since been recognised in other parts of the world) that previous understandings of ethnic diversity relating to large ethnic minority communities with migration histories from Commonwealth countries were outdated. New demographics of migration meant that multiculture was more complex with smaller, more scattered groups of migrants or migrant heritage groups, from around the world, with different legal statuses, socio-economic characteristics, and internal heterogeneity. His argument was that government would need new structures to engage with current populations, and social science would need new tools to understand them.

Much work has developed since to examine the empirical reality of everyday multiculture in contexts of superdiversity (e.g. Valentine 2008; Wise 2010; Hall 2012; Leitner 2012). Similarly, the shifts that the definition of community cohesion and community cohesion policy have undergone in the years since 2001 have been documented elsewhere (e.g. Fortier 2010; Husband and Alam 2011; Jones 2013). This article pursues a different question, examining how short-hand for ‘community cohesion problems’ has become closely associated with the reputations of particular places, and how local government managers and politicians understand and negotiate that shorthand. It does so in the realm of local government in England, where local authorities are responsible for services including public housing, education, libraries, leisure centres, waste collection and planning; but have no independent tax-raising powers. While local property and business taxes are collected, these form only a small proportion of local authority spending, the majority of council budgets being funded through national taxation. Likewise, while there is some flexibility in deciding local priorities, much policy is set by requirements at a national level.

Massey’s (2007) concept of ‘relational geographies, through which meanings and experience of a place are not bounded in a single geographical territory but made through interactions and relationships with other places, can be extended to understand how places are constituted through the interaction between local and national policy conversations. Parker and Karner’s term ‘reputational geographies’ which highlights how ‘the symbolic capital signified by an area’ can be ‘a shorthand for location in a social hierarchy’ (2010, p.1458) is relevant here. Whereas they apply this to residents’ experience of reputational geographies, I am interested in how this symbolic capital circulates and is reinvested by actors working on the relationships between government bodies.

I am not concerned here with measuring ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of particular policies, or ‘good’ or ‘bad’ experiences within actually existing multiculture. Rather, the judgement is that of the managers and politicians of whether the stories circulating about their locality are ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. As such, I am focusing on the adaptations people working within government make to shifting policy terms and fashions, particularly around changing languages of multiculture, equality and cohesion (Ahmed 2012). Using an ethnographic approach, the broader research project of which this is part (Jones 2013) drew on interviews not as a mode of drawing out ‘expert informants’, but to pay attention to the understandings and practices of individuals who make up part of specific organisational formations.

The data quoted in this article is drawn from a larger research project (Jones, 2013). Between 2005 and 2009 I conducted 81 semi-structured interviews with 85 people working on community cohesion policy in local and national government in England. I also drew on an archive of 57 separate government reports, speeches or letters; 52 separate media or news items; and 12 additional policy documents. This was complemented by my own participant observation as a local authority officer engaged in policy work in the London Borough of Hackney. In this article, the data quoted directly is all from interviews, but the analysis benefitted greatly from my ‘insider’ position within local government, which provided me with a 'feel for the game' of policy practice and institutional life within the organizations of local government and experiences of the negotiations similar to those being described by participants.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using the qualitative data analysis programme NVivo as an organisational tool. Thematic codes were identified as they emerged from the data, recognising sociologically important connections (Mills 1999 [1959]) and returning to these in an inductive process, rather than imagining that the use of a computer programme would create a precise and automated process

(Fielding 2002).

The project began as a study of how community cohesion policy was negotiated by policy officers, managers and politicians in Hackney, inner London, and at a national government level. Aside from my existing position there, Hackney was an important starting point for this project precisely because it did not fit the existing narratives of ‘community cohesion problems’ (see below). Yet there was increasing pressure nationally for all areas to consider their approach to community cohesion locally. It became clear that to tell the story of how Hackney didn’t fit the community cohesion story, practitioners referred to other places which more naturally seemed to have community cohesion problems. This at the same time as they spent much energy disputing the negative image Hackney was seen to have for other aspects of life – crime, fear, lack of facilities – which they contrasted with a reality of it flourishing.

The question then emerged of how people in these ‘other places’ identified with community cohesion problems dealt with their own reputations. Thus 6 policy practitioners (councillors, local government managers, or workers in partnership organisations) were interviewed in each of the three ‘other places’ to which they most often referred – Oldham, Barking and Dagenham, and Peterborough. The amount of work done in Hackney was much greater – 45 people were interviewed and extensive participant observation undertaken (the remaining 22 people interviewed worked at national policy level). This was not a comparative study, and does not claim to be. It is a demonstration, not of the lived experiences of the places in question, but of the ways their governance is shaped by relationships between government organisations, and how frameworks for understanding multiculture shape these reputations and relations. I begin in Hackney, and work outwards, following the narratives of community cohesion problems against which Hackney interviewees characterised their local experience, to the places where they were anchored, to understand how the reputational geographies were received and reciprocated in those elsewheres.

Happy multiculture

In 2006, David Miliband (as Cabinet Minister for Communities and Local Government) stated that 'All countries are multicultural and there is no going back' (Miliband 2006), resonating with the often-quoted (but difficult to source) New Labour mantra 'we're all middle class now'. The implication is that if 'we' are all middle class and multicultural, the struggles with poverty and racism are over, as are persisting power inequalities and struggles over ideology, in a post-political age (Mouffe 2005).

The claim that ‘we are all multicultural now’ seems to contrast to more recent, and more often-quoted, speeches such as UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s (2011)’s to the Munich Security Conference, in which he argued that although ‘terrorism is not linked exclusively to any one religion or ethnic group’, and that ‘Islamist extremism and Islam are not the same thing’, terrorism based in Islamist extremism is a major threat to Western Europe, and such extremism appeals to people struggling with ‘a question of identity’. This identity trouble was attributed to ‘the doctrine of state multiculturalism’ which had ‘encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream’. Cameron argued that as a result, ‘we’ have become ‘fearful’ of challenging ‘someone who isn’t white’ when they hold ‘unacceptable views’. He goes on to call for ‘clear sense of shared national identity that is open to everyone’, and ‘less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism’.

Cameron went on to link a version of ‘cohesion’ to his government’s central ‘Big Society’ idea of a reduction in government and state welfare for vulnerable people, to be replaced by voluntarism and philanthropy, which he claimed would:

> ‘help build stronger pride in local identity, so people feel free to say, “Yes, I am a Muslim, I am a Hindu, I am Christian, but I am also a Londonder or a Berliner too”. It’s that identity, that feeling of belonging in our countries, that I believe is the key to achieving true cohesion.’

Here, Cameron suggests cultural difference is acceptable up to a point defined by the majority, and shared national identity, culture and ‘purpose’ should be emphasised. Cameron’s text (as opposed to the interpretations of it) did not outright reject difference (and nor, according to close readings, did the text of the German Chancellor’s similar speech (Piller 2010)). It is not a vision which completely rejects lived multiculture. Whilst the coalition government has not used the language of community cohesion at all, and has tended to support images of Britishness that call on majority culture (particularly dependent on the royal family), it has increasingly recognised that Britishness might incorporate minority influences and may not be an unchanging, homogenous mass (Uberoi and Modood, 2013). In this sense, Cameron’s speech could be seen in the same light as Miliband’s ‘we are all multicultural now’ and the more often-quoted claim by then Labour Foreign Secretary Robin Cook that chicken tikka masala was the British national dish. That is, they imagine a form of civic multiculture, in which conflict, contestation and inequality are not visible, where discrimination on racial or other grounds are not discussed, but where some difference is present, and people ‘rub along’.

This is the ‘happy multiculture’ characterised by Sara Ahmed (2008), and in the frame of community cohesion, it is where my interviewees thought Hackney fit, and where community cohesion *policy* is unnecessary.

> I've lived in Hackney thirty years. And I think it is an amazing place, culturally speaking. I mean I'm a gay man. So I have that perspective on it. And I just think it's incredible that you go to Springfield Park on a Sunday afternoon, and you see all these different communities using cultural space and as I say, rubbing along, it is impressive.
>
> (Evan, senior policy manager, Hackney)

Of Hackney's population of 246,270 people, 36 per cent are White British compared to 45 per cent in London and 80 per cent in England (2011 Census). Hackney is superdiverse, not just in the complexity of cross-cutting differences in ethnic origin and migration status conceptualised by Vertovec when he coined this term (2007). As Evan’s description of ‘Springfield Park on a Sunday afternoon’ suggested, it is a place where sexual, religious and other minorities also coexist and ‘rub along’, and have histories of doing so. In the 1980s, political mobilizations by ethnically identified communities subject to harassment, discrimination and violence coincided with a movement of left-wing radicals in many British inner cities (Lansley, Goss and Wolmar 1989). Many urban local authorities at this time developed anti-racist and multicultural policies; many of the same authorities also had systematically discriminatory policies at this time. Hackney was one, where action by the Commission for Racial Equality and pressure from local black communities led to a review of housing allocations and management practices

(CRE 1984). Such complex histories of political struggle are part of today’s ability to claim Hackney as a site of ‘happy multiculture’ (see also Kulz, this issue).

> I mean there's such bad images, stuff about Hackney, isn't there, every time you read in the paper…

The extract from my interview with Siv, a local government manager in Hackney, gives another perspective on local identity construction in Hackney: an awareness that it had, and continued to have, problems in both experience and image. These problems included crime, on which Siv focused here, but also racialised inequality and histories of both deprivation and mismanagement (Lansley, Goss and Wolmar 1989). Inequalities which do not fit easily into the imagination of community cohesion policy persist; for example, 43 per cent of Hackney's housing is social housing, for those on the lowest incomes (compared to 24 per cent in London and 18 per cent in England) (Neighbourhood Statistics, 2011), yet the average price of buying a home in Hackney is much higher (£434,226) than either London (£370,819) or England (£162,606) averages (Land Registry, 2013). Riots across England in summer 2011 included some incidents in Hackney, but inequality, exclusion, consumerism, police-community relations and criminality were the frames through which were viewed, with little reference to community cohesion policy (RCVP 2012).

Interviewees were acutely aware of these negative experiences, but the questions that community cohesion policy appeared to ask – about parallel lives, inability to cope with new migrants, electoral support for fascist parties – seemed to focus on the quiet, everyday multiculture of ‘rubbing along together’, which didn’t ‘seem to be an issue' for Hackney. The issues local practitioners *did* recognise as salient, and pressing locally – like socio-economic inequality and racialised inequalities in education and employment – did not appear to them to be what the national community cohesion agenda was asking about.

Community cohesion (its lack)

Parallel lives

> Like in Oldham... you know, when they had the riots... people didn't even go to school together, the kids in the different areas in Oldham didn't even know, that it was a no-go area and you start getting that apartheid. (Siv, senior local government manager, Hackney).

The first narrative of community cohesion *problems* elsewhere, against which Hackney practitioners distinguished their own narrative of successful local multiculture, centred on 'parallel lives', also stemming from policy responses to violent disturbances in 2001. That summer, violence broke out on the streets of northern English towns, most notoriously in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. Government reports into the disorders identified a number of contributory factors, including economic deprivation, provocation from far right groups, crime and political disenfranchisement (Denham 2001, p. 8). But their greatest emphasis was on a diagnosis of 'parallel lives', that is, that 'Asian' and 'white' communities were living separate existences and rarely meeting (Denham, 2001 p. 13). The prescription was that 'parallel lives' needed to be addressed by developing greater 'community cohesion'.

It wasn't just in Hackney that Oldham was used as shorthand in this way. Erin, a manager of a community centre in Peterborough, explained to me how her project had gained funding by deliberately using such reputational geographies:

> [We said] we need some funding from government to deal with this before we have a Oldham and Bradford riot.

Andrew, an equalities manager in Barking and Dagenham, used exactly the same imagery to explain the necessity of his own work:

> We would have had another Bradford riot if we hadn't have done this community cohesion work.

'The Oldham and Bradford riots', 'no-go areas', 'that apartheid', 'parallel lives' were stark images that stuck to Oldham. It represented a fate to be avoided, not just in Hackney but also in Peterborough, and Barking and Dagenham.

Racism and 'the white working class'

Similarly, the absence of any electoral success of far-right parties was emphasised in Hackney as in stark contrast to the experience in Barking and Dagenham:

> Obviously you know, you just go in Barking and Dagenham and that [housing]'s gonna be THE election issue... come next May, that people are moving in and taking... our birthrights to housing... in the local area. I

> mean it's funny that you know they're what ten miles up the road, here in Hackney, it just doesn't feature.

Sam, an elected politician in Hackney, suggested that claims that ‘people are moving in and taking our birthrights to housing’ would be an issue in Barking and Dagenham in a way that it wasn’t in Hackney. This refers, in part, to repercussions of the Thatcher government’s housing policy in the 1980s which allowed social housing tenants to buy their homes from the local authority where they could afford to do so. Without any option to replace these properties, the social housing stock diminished, and this led to greater competition for public housing which could then only be let to those most in need. In many areas, including Barking and Dagenham, shortages of public housing have led to racialised competition, with ‘immigrants’ blamed for increasing the numbers needing housing, and more often receiving it (Williams and Keith 2006).

This resentment is perhaps particularly pernicious argument in a place like Barking and Dagenham, an outer London borough once reliant on social housing and dependent historically on manufacturing jobs which have now severely declined – and which elected 12 fascist BNP councillors between 2006 and 2010, the most of any local authority in the UK. Anne, a politician in Oldham, described how their council received a phone call from Barking and Dagenham, the morning after the election of their first BNP councillors in the London borough:

> and said they'd like to come and talk to us about our experiences of dealing with the BNP, to which [we] replied well that's all well and good and we're happy to speak to you, but we have never actually had a BNP councillor!

Anne, who was quite angry about the way she was ‘constantly batting off’ the ‘question about the BNP’ because ‘there was this assumption’ that the far-right must have had some electoral success in ‘the riot town’. She was proud that Oldham was not ‘like Barking and Dagenham’ (although the BNP did subsequently gain the European Parliament North West of England seat).

Barking and Dagenham has many similarities to northern towns which experienced disturbances in 2001. An important difference is that Barking and Dagenham's population continues to grow. Much of the new population is made up of ethnic minority families moving outwards from inner London boroughs, particularly to family-sized former social housing (Williams and Keith 2006, pp. 3-4).

The argument that the ‘white working class’ reacted to growing uncertainties of employment and housing by turning to far right political parties in Barking and Dagenham, and the rejection of the borough as an electorally racist aberration, allows the rest of the UK to imagine itself as non-racist by comparison. The phrase 'white working class' undermines the solidarity of 'working class' by suggesting that only white people are working class; it confuses understandings of the reasons for exclusion as being associated with ethnicity or race, rather than class; the way the term is used taints those who do identify as white and working class as being innately racist or misguided; and importantly, it allows 'the white middle class' to suggest that virulent racism is not their responsibility. This framing demonizes and homogenizes a section of society as backward and violently racist outsiders from the body politic and the national 'shared value' of 'tolerance' (Haylett 2001), and allows racism to be situated outside or on the outskirts of London, and definitely not in the capital city's middle-class, multicultural, metropolitan centre (Skeggs 2005).

'New arrivals'

> Hannah: How this discourse on cohesion... [has] affected your work? …
>
> Michelle: I think it's something I'm aware of in terms of newspapers and actually I'm from Peterborough. I don't know if you're familiar with the issues in Peterborough and everyone is saying that all the Polish are taking their jobs and they've had lots of bad press about that so – and I guess as a councillor if you were in there or maybe Brad – or somewhere... you'd be asked to comment on it, I've never been asked to talk about it, explicitly
>
> (Michelle, senior elected politician, Hackney)

Another sort of nostalgia was attributed to the semi-rural residents of Peterborough, when imagining it as a place unused to migration or ethnic difference. This occurred even in comments from people familiar with Peterborough themselves, as in these comments Michelle, who suggested if she had been a councillor in Peterborough she would have been ‘asked to comment’ on community cohesion in a way that didn’t happen in Hackney, because in Peterborough ‘everyone is saying that all the Polish are taking their jobs and they've had lots of bad press about that’. Despite her familiarity with Peterborough, Michelle emphasised perceptions of the place, rather than immigration patterns or labour market dynamics themselves.

Media and political responses to the increasing presence of asylum seekers and refugees outside the main metropolitan conurbations of the UK (as a result of government dispersal policies) from 2000, and 427,000 migrants from new EU member states registering under the UK Worker Registration Scheme between 2004 and 2006 (Vertovec 2007), many of whom took up agricultural work, mobilised ideas of ‘invasion’ of a previously stable, white rural Englishness (Chakraborti 2010).

Similarly, Sam, another Hackney politician, when asked if he saw community cohesion policy as linked to immigration policies, responded by saying that it did – but that this was more relevant in East Anglia than in Inner London:

> I can see it does nationally... hugely, particularly on Eastern Europeans in East Anglia and all that kind of thing, on the farms and stuff, but Hackney [pause] it's never really come up in those terms.

Here, Peterborough and East Anglia get linked with ideas of rural nostalgia and attachment to fixed, white Englishness. This is despite the empirical town of Peterborough not readily fitting this caricature even in basic geography or demography. Peterborough is a city, but one that sits at the centre of a subregion of market towns; the local authority covers both rural and urban areas. The city itself has had established ethnic minority communities for decades, was a national reception centre for asylum seekers and attracted new EU migrants to work in agricultural and food processing industries. Having experienced early difficulties associated with the arrival of asylum seekers (according to one Peterborough practitioner, for a period the city featured in the national police community tension team's monitoring report every week because of the potential for a riot), Peterborough deliberately sought government support and embedded itself in the regime of community cohesion policy; the city's experience has been used as an example of good practice from which other localities can learn (COIC

2007). Still, like Oldham, the association with ‘community cohesion problems’, means it remains, in the local government imaginary, a marker of those problems.

Reactions: the relay of reputational geographies

Local government managers and politicians in each of these places referred to one another as navigation points within the map of community cohesion policy. They recognised their own area was shorthand for a particular type of ‘community cohesion problem’, but tried to recuperate this reputation by turning the attention they had gained into a ‘success story’. In Barking and Dagenham, Phil, a senior manager, emphasised the importance of reputational geography to local fortunes:

> [we] spent a lot of time... getting quite a good reputation on the national stage around policy, developing innovation and free school meals, and pre-schooling... to say that actually Barking and Dagenham is much more than just 12 BNP councillors... if it gets us some attention great, and then we can use that attention positively.

Phil explained how there was no option but to recognize that his local area had become embedded in narratives of 'community cohesion problems', but he tried to turn the attention they had gained to local successes instead. Where Barking and Dagenham focused on trying to gain a reputation for their work to address aspects of deprivation and exclusion, Oldham and in Peterborough aimed to gain attention as ‘good practice’ authorities within the grammar of community cohesion. Erin, directly involved in promoting Peterborough as a site of good practice in national community cohesion policy discussions, explained that:

> I think we've been seen as a city that has had massive change but has tried to find ways of dealing with it... whereas a lot of cities have had massive change but haven't really woken up to the fact.

This resonated with the comments of Jim, a senior elected politician in Oldham:

> Now and again it creeps up when I go to meetings about cohesion... Where do you come from... Oldham, and half a dozen people said, oh, riot town! I said, No! Not the riot town! The best borough in the country for cohesion!

Having been asked to represent Oldham at national events because of its reputation as a 'riot town', Jim argued that Oldham could instead represent a case study of best practice. But even talking about community cohesion continued to raise the spectre of the troubled past and worked to retain Oldham’s problematic reputational geography:

> If [community cohesion]'s the only thing that we can talk about, well bloody hell we can't be doing a very good job, can we?... For a long time unfortunately, we were only famous for that.

A senior manager at Oldham Council, Ron suggested that promotion of good cohesion practice has run its course as an effective strategy for creating a positive image of Oldham; Oldham should normalize its image by talking about issues other than cohesion. He cited positive aspects of Oldham that could be promoted, like the 'fantastic countryside' and famous local figures. Similarly, Ahmed, a local authority manager in Peterborough, suggested that that local authority had also decided to move away from framing itself simply as being good at working with new migrants.

> The first top priority now, is socio-economic impact on communities, particularly vis-a-vis migration, economic downturn, and homelessness... we're also trying to change it around [so] it's not looking at the migrant worker and the issues they cost... it's as a social impact on the wider community.

Yet images of prominent local figures or the surrounding National Park and countryside are *not* regularly used in the media when talking about Oldham. Peterborough continued to be referred to by local and central government colleagues as a place that had had problems receiving new migrants, but 'had found ways of dealing with it'. While these other aspects of Peterborough, Oldham and Barking and Dagenham exist and are 'every bit as much' a part of the places, they were *not* so in the national policy imagination, where they remained markers of community cohesion problems, from which others can measure their relative distance.

Conclusions: characterising local multiculture by contrast

This article has shown how policy practitioners in four places understood and negotiated relational geographies. Each of these places have developed reputations which situate them as external markers against which others can measure, and constitute, their relative ‘success’ at living with diversity. Local government practitioners in this research were acutely aware of the potential impact of such reputational geographies for their locality, and found ways to construct new narratives of place, distinguished by their contrast with other places and other times.

This re-positioning was within policy practitioners' professional circles, the arena in which 'community cohesion policy' is a topic of most interest. It is where reputational tools such as performance indicators, league tables, inspection reports, beacon status, achievement awards, sharing of good practice, conference appearances, case studies and toolkits are currencies of reward, both institutionally and individually. Such tools rely on persuasive narratives, removing more challenging discussion of the limited power local government has over decisions about its territory or of nuanced exploration of experiences of multiculture.

Nevertheless, it is also true that there *is* a version of successful multiculture in Hackney, and that Oldham, Barking and Dagenham and Peterborough *have* had successes in developing ways of living in difference. By re-framing narratives this way, policy practitioners at once complicate and re-simplify their reputational geography. They do not necessarily do so cynically. In the quasi-market of UK local government performance and reputation, where local authorities are almost entirely dependent on central government for funding in particular, it is necessary to strike a balance between place-narratives of success and need in order to secure support for local services and populations. The question is – is it possible to articulate forms of multiculture and multiculturalism *without* depending on the failed 'elsewhere' as contrast?

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