



# Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this *Progress in Human Geography* annual lecture I reflect on geographical contributions to academic and policy debates about how we might forge civic culture out of difference. In doing so I begin by tracing a set of disparate geographical writings – about the micro-publics of everyday life, cosmopolitanism hospitality, and new urban citizenship – that have sought to understand the role of shared space in providing the opportunity for encounter between ‘strangers’. This literature is considered in the light of an older tradition of work about ‘the contact hypothesis’ from psychology. Then, employing original empirical material, I critically reflect on the notion of ‘meaningful contact’ to explore the paradoxical gap that emerges in geographies of encounter between values and practices. In the conclusion I argue for the need for geographers to pay more attention to sociospatial inequalities and the insecurities they breed, and to unpacking the complex and intersecting ways in which power operates.

**Key words:** encounter, inequality, intersectionality, power, prejudice.

## I The contact hypothesis

Stuart Hall (1993: 361) has argued that ‘the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the 21st century’. This question – framed in the more specific terms of how we might forge a civic culture out of difference – is something that has come to preoccupy a number of geographers recently through diverse writings about new urban citizenship, cosmopolitanism, hospitality and activism (eg, Amin, 2002; Yeoh, 2004; Barnett, 2005; Binnie *et al.*, 2006; Chatterton, 2006; Iveson, 2006; 2007; Bell, 2007). While Geography might seem to us to be a natural disciplinary arena for such concerns given

the implicit role of shared space in providing the opportunity for encounters between strangers, the importance of contact in mediating difference has a longer tradition in the discipline of psychology.

Here, seminal work in the 1950s on prejudice by the social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) developed what became widely known as the ‘contact hypothesis’. His thesis – which was influential across the social sciences more widely – was that the best way to reduce prejudice and promote social integration was to bring different groups together. The basis of his argument was that people are uncomfortable with the unknown

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and so feel anxious about encounters with difference. He argued that contact is an effective prejudice reduction strategy because it lessens feelings of uncertainty and anxiety by producing a sense of knowledge or familiarity between strangers, which in turn generates a perception of predictability and control. This behaviourist approach fell by the wayside in the 1980s as the focus in the social sciences shifted away from a concern with majority prejudice, towards a concentration on the experiences of minority groups and a focus on recognition and rights as the basis for social change. With this emphasis on the specificities and validation of 'difference', the issue of contact between majority and minority populations, alongside a concern with prejudice as a concept, became somewhat obscured (Valentine, 2007a).

It is a matter, however, that has recently rematerialized within Geography and Urban Studies. After a decade or so in which the city was characterized as site of crime, conflict and withdrawal (eg, Valentine, 1989; Davis, 1990; Smith, 1996; Mitchell, 2003), the city of the twenty-first century is being reimagined as a site of connection. Iris Marion Young was one of the first commentators to celebrate the city as a site of difference. She described city life as 'a being together of strangers' (Young, 1990: 240). More recently, Doreen Massey (2005: 181) has referred to our 'throwntogetherness' with others in the city; Laurier and Philo (2006: 193) describe the city as 'the place, above all, of living with others'; while Sennett (2001) argues that: '[a] city is a place where people can ... enter into the experiences and interests of unfamiliar lives ... to develop a richer, more complex sense of themselves'.

Much of the writing that is associated with what might be regarded as a 'cosmopolitan turn' in thinking about the city celebrates the potential for the forging of new hybrid cultures and ways of living together with difference *but* without actually spelling out how this is being, or might be, achieved in practice (Sennett, 1999; Bridge and Watson,

2002). Rather, it is implied that cultural difference will somehow be dissolved by a process of mixing or hybridization of culture in public space (eg, Young, 2002). For example, Mica Nava (2006: 50) describes the everyday domestic cultures in many of London's neighbourhoods as signalling 'increasingly undifferentiated, hybrid, post-multicultural, lived transformations which are the outcomes of diasporic cultural mixing and indeterminacy'. She further argues that, what she terms the 'domestic cosmopolitanism' of London represents a 'generous hospitable engagement with people from elsewhere, a commitment to an imagined inclusive transnational community of disparate Londoners' (Nava, 2006: 50).

Focusing on the micro-scale of everyday public encounters and interactions, Eric Laurier and Chris Philo (2006) claim that low-level sociability, for example, in terms of holding doors, sharing seats and so on, represents one 'doing' of togetherness, one facet of mutual acknowledgement. Laurier *et al.* (2002: 353) write: 'The massively apparent fact is that people in cities do talk to one another as customers and shopkeepers, passengers and cabdrivers, members of a bus queue, regulars at cafes and bars, tourists and locals, beggars and by-passers, Celtic fans, smokers looking for a light, and course ... as neighbours.' Ash Amin (2006: 1012) refers to such civil exchanges (after Lefebvre) as 'small achievements in the good city'. Likewise, Nigel Thrift (2005) has argued that the mundane friendliness that characterizes many everyday urban public encounters represents a baseline democracy that might be fostered. He talks about overlooked geographies of kindness and compassion and about the potential for leaching these practices into the wider world (Thrift, 2005). Richard Boyd (2006) goes one step further to suggest that civility has a vital place in contemporary urban life and should be understood as form of pluralism predicated on moral equality. However, I want to argue that the extent to which these everyday

spatial practices and civilities truly represent, or can be scaled up to build, the intercultural dialogue and exchange necessary for the kind of new urban citizenship that commentators (Isin, 2000; Staeheli, 2003) are either already celebrating – or at least calling for – needs much closer consideration.

Some of the writing about cosmopolitanism and new urban citizenship appears to be laced with a worrying romanticization of urban encounter and to implicitly reproduce a potentially naïve assumption that contact with ‘others’ necessarily translates into respect for difference. In this paper, I therefore draw on a wider literature review, and original material from a research project about white majority prejudice, to think more closely about what Sennett (2000) refers to as the importance of the ‘collectivity of space’. I begin by critiquing some of the work celebrating urban encounters through using empirical examples of where contact with difference leaves attitudes and values unmoved, and even hardened, before going on to consider debates about what kind of encounters produce what might be termed ‘meaningful contact’. By this I mean contact that actually changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for – rather than merely tolerance of – others. In doing so, I identify a paradoxical gap that emerges in geographies of encounter between values and practices.

The empirical material employed in this paper comes from a qualitative research project funded by Citizenship 21 as part of a two-stage investigation into the nature of prejudice. This study addressed negative social attitudes towards a range of minority groups, not just minority ethnic and migrant communities. In the first stage, MORI (a social research company, now known as MORI IPSOS) conducted a nationwide questionnaire survey about prejudice for Citizenship 21. The survey asked respondents which groups, if any, they felt less positive towards. It was completed by 1693

adults who were interviewed across 167 constituency-based sampling points. The data was weighted to reflect the national population profile. The results of the poll were published in a report titled *Profiles of Prejudice* (Citizenship 21, 2003).

The subsequent qualitative study upon which this paper draws was funded by Citizenship 21 to understand some of the patterns identified in the national survey. It involved nine focus group discussions and 30 in-depth autobiographical interviews with white majority participants. The research design included both group and individual methods because previous research has shown that some individuals feel more comfortable expressing particular attitudes in a social context with others, whereas others may only talk freely in a private, one-to-one situation. The focus groups were used to look at shared values and general issues, whereas the individual interviews were designed to examine the particular processes that shaped individuals’ biographies and the development of their social attitudes. Like the survey this qualitative research focused on the white majority informants’ attitudes towards a range of minority and marginalized social groups (including, for example, disabled people, lesbians and gay men, transsexual people, gypsy and travellers, women, children and young people, asylum-seekers, minority ethnic and faith-based communities). In this sense, this research extends much of the writing about geographies of encounter because it focuses on a complex range of intersecting differences rather than adopting the more common bipolar approach of considering only relations between white majority and minority ethnic groups.

The qualitative research was based in three contrasting UK locations: London, the West Midlands, and the southwest. Details of the specific locations are withheld to protect the anonymity of those who participated in the study. The quotations presented in this paper are verbatim.<sup>1</sup>

## II Parallel lives?

There is increasing evidence that contact between different social groups alone is not sufficient to produce respect (eg, Valentine and MacDonald, 2004). Indeed, many everyday moments of contact between different individuals or groups in the city do not really count as encounters at all. In a study of social interactions in urban public places in Aylesbury, UK, Caroline Holland and colleagues (Holland *et al.*, 2007) found that, although their research sites were frequented by a range of different groups, this did not necessarily mean that there was any contact between the diverse inhabitants. Rather, their observations suggested that while different groups coexisted and even observed each other, none the less there was little actual mixing between different users who self-segregated within particular spaces, carving out their own territory. A similar study, by Dines and Cattell (2006) in east London, UK, found that good relations tended to emerge in spaces such as a park attached to a school where the parents' interests and attachments to place were able to converge and evolve. Likewise, Ash Amin (2002) has observed that city streets are spaces of transit that produce little actual connection or exchange between strangers. A process exacerbated by the emergence of a mobile phone culture, which Deborah Cameron (2000) has observed, contributes to incivility in public space as individuals move in and through locations while locked in the private worlds of their conversations with remote others. Other studies have also provided evidence that low-level incivilities still persist, with so-called 'respectable people', including the middle-aged and elderly, being most likely to be rude to strangers in interpersonal encounters (Phillips and Smith, 2006).

Beck (2002; 2006; see also Beck and Sznaider, 2006) argues that, although an internalized globalization of society has occurred, not everyone sees themselves as part of this cosmopolitanism or will choose to participate in interactions with people

different from themselves. Spatial proximity can actually breed defensiveness and the bounding of identities and communities (Young, 1990). Both the Home Office (2001) and the Chair of the UK Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips (2005) [now head of the new Equality and Human Rights Commission], have raised concerns about self-segregation within some UK communities. A report by the Home Office community cohesion independent review team describes, for example, a picture in which '[S]eparate: educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. Their lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchange' (Home Office, 2001: para 2.1). Indeed, Debbie Phillips (2006) has recently demonstrated that, contrary to popular stereotypes of British Muslims as self-segregating and culturally inward-looking, her research participants had a range of housing aspirations and neighbourhood preferences, and some had sought to live in mixed neighbourhoods. However, these preferences for greater interaction with people from other backgrounds were frustrated by white self-segregation in the suburbs, institutional racism in housing markets and racial harassment. This quotation from one of the focus groups captures a sense of the persistence of divided communities (albeit in relation to other ethnic groups):

R1: Like the Jew boys ... I mean I wouldn't go to Stamford Hill (a Jewish neighbourhood) and I wouldn't be allowed to go in their community ...

R2: You would be allowed but.

R1: But I wouldn't feel right in their community ... and they wouldn't feel right in my community.

(London, focus group)

Indeed, it is close proximity which often generates or aggravates comparisons between different social groups in terms of perceived or actual access to resources and special treatment. The West Midlands site where this research was conducted is an area of relative social and economic deprivation. Many of the informants were in comparatively low-income or unstable forms of employment and had either housing or health concerns relating to themselves, their children or older parents. They told community-based narratives of injustice and victimhood, for example that migrants are stealing jobs, that minority groups such as Muslims, lesbian and gay men and disabled people are receiving unfair cultural support or legal protection and so on. In both forms of account – of economic and cultural injustice – minority groups were represented as dependent on the State. This position of parasitism was contrasted in these narratives with the perceived unacknowledged rights and contribution to society of the white majority community. The research in London was conducted in one of the most culturally diverse boroughs that has an indigenous white working-class population as well as significant Afro-Caribbean, South Asian and Turkish communities and a growing number of refugees and asylum-seekers. This area has also undergone a process of gentrification in the past 10 years and so is also socio-economically diverse. Here, the white majority interviewees' accounts were also laced with examples of perceived economic and social injustices. These included claims that minority groups were taking advantage of the welfare system and receiving preferential treatment in terms of benefits, housing and health care as well as receiving financial and political support for their own faiths, languages and wider cultural practices. In each research location such narratives provided the basis for the interviewees' justifications of their openly held prejudices towards minority groups in

the local neighbourhood (Valentine, 2007a), as these quotations demonstrate:

They forget that they've been born and bred here [referring to British minority ethnic groups] but they're not putting anything into the country ... you know they're taking ... you know people who haven't worked for over 20 years and they're getting this, that and the other, to me they're not putting anything in ... Because most people round here they're workers, they've always worked and everything and everybody works. (Woman, 60s, West Midlands)

If there's an English bloke, or a white bloke let's say and you get one of these coloured ones, these immigrants coming in the country. They struggle between them and it's always the white bloke's fault, not the other's fault, they always take the side of these immigrants which they shouldn't. (West Midlands, focus group)

R1: To be truthful, it's like they had a mosque put on Station Road and on a quiet day, like a Sunday morning you will hear it, yeah.

R2: Wailing.

R1: To be truthful when I hear it I do, I will say I feel like I'm in some other country, do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: It's cultural strangeness?

R3: Yeah it is strange.

R4: It doesn't mix.

R1: No, it don't feel right to have that on your doorstep anyway. But they've built that when they should I think have other important things to build ...

R2: There's schools and hospitals that are needed and they build a mosque. They closed the Children's Hospital ... that children's hospital had been there for years and years.

Interviewer: So the mosque you're saying?

R2: It was taken from taxpayer's money.

R1: It came from the council it shouldn't have ... it's a grievance.

(London, focus group)

In the context of such personal and community insecurity, it is possible to see why some find it hard to have mutual regard for groups they perceive as an economic or cultural threat. Indeed, being prejudiced can actually serve positive ends for some people, for example, by providing them with a scapegoat for their own personal social or economic failures (Valentine, 2007a). This means that prejudiced individuals can have a vested interest in remaining intolerant despite positive individual social encounters with communities/individuals different from themselves. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, everything from hate crimes and violence to discrimination and incivility, motivated by intolerance between communities in close proximity to each other, is commonplace. The geography literature documents many examples of socially mixed neighbourhoods that are territorialized by particular groups and rife with tensions over different ways of 'doing' and 'being' in shared space (Webster, 1996; Watt, 1998; Watt and Stenson, 1998). These include power struggles and conflicts over the ownership and control of public space not only between different ethnic groups but also between people of different ages – particularly between teenagers, who often feel unjustly marginalized in public space by adults, and the elderly who are commonly fearful of groups of young people in what in effect are often age-segregated neighbourhoods (Valentine, 2004; Vanderbeck, 2007). Indeed, contact with any manifestation of difference – in the neighbourhood or elsewhere – can breed frustration and generate different scales of resentment, from rudeness in one-to-one situations to the threat of vigilante action. These quotations illustrate some of the everyday tensions in neighbourhoods and workplaces:

You know they have come from a country where they chuck their rubbish in the street and that's it, that's the end of it. Dogs come and eat it whatever, and the cats, and it rots away and it stinks and everything. And they seem to think that they can still do [it] here ... they

don't abide by our rules. (West Midlands, focus group)

I can remember at least on one occasion, working with a colleague whose got a physical disability and I guess getting pissed off with his immobility in the classroom. Cos I was kind of like ... well I was kind of running what was going on and he would be, kind being slow or immobile or whatever. (Male, 30s, London)

Even where contact is instigated between different social groups, for example, in the institutional space of the school, rather than generating intercultural exchange it can actually be socially divisive. Here the social studies of childhood and youth literatures includes evidence of the repetition of gender, sexual, class, and race practices among young people which cement, rather than challenge, animosities (Valentine, 2004). This interviewee describes how divisions between his peer group at school have persisted beyond the boundaries of the institution:

There was a time from about, probably at school, when we left school about sixteen or something, for quite a few years, when people. Different groups established their identities and didn't mix with the other groups. We might not even kind of acknowledge each other if maybe we saw each other in the street. (Male, 30s, London)

Nonetheless, despite the often parallel lives of different groups within the city, it is true that people do – as Laurier, Philo, Thrift and others have observed – generally behave in courteous ways towards strangers in public space including the performance of everyday acts of kindness. Nigel Thrift (2005: 147) characterizes these everyday moments as providing 'resevoirs of hope'. However, the evidence of my research on white majority prejudice is that we should be careful about mistaking such taken-for-granted civilities as respect for difference. As Tim Cresswell's (1996) seminal book *In place/out of place* demonstrated, the production of space is shaped by normative codes of behaviour. Encounters in public space therefore always carry with them a

set of contextual expectations about appropriate ways of behaving which regulate our coexistence. These serve as an implicit regulatory framework for our performances and practices. As Mick Smith and Joyce Davidson (2008) argue – echoing in some respects the classic work of Elias (1978) – urban etiquette matters because ‘publicly reiterated performances of social mores define an individual’s persona’. Since the enlightenment, dominant western discourses have associated civility and etiquette with notions of moral and aesthetic development. Individuals therefore regularly act out mundane and ritualized codes of etiquette such as holding open doors for, or exchanging banalities in queues with, ‘others’ because these conventions are sedimented into public modes of being and are constitutive of our self-identities as citizens. Indeed, for some of my informants, behaving in a civil or decent way in public, regardless of your privately held views and values, is what Britishness is all about. As such, this urban etiquette does not equate with an ethics of care and mutual respect for difference. For example, Jim, who admits to holding openly, in some cases quite extreme, prejudices, none the less describes the civilities he exchanges with new migrants in his neighbourhood:

All these ... have come over, you don’t know if there’s a terrorist amongst them ... There’s one, there’s a college up here, and he comes home and comes [past] here, and ... he talks pretty good English. At first he didn’t want to talk English, you know what I mean? I don’t know why, I’m talking. Then all of a sudden he got to know me like. Cos I used to clean the car outside there sometimes, outside their house, clean my car, you know what I mean. He’d stand on his step and he used to watch me, like and talking and I used to go ‘alright’. And I go out now, since I started saying hello to him, and they come out to chat ... like we’ve all, been neighbours for years [laughs]. (Male, 60s, West Midlands)

Such civil encounters represent a tolerance of others in shared space. However, tolerance is a dangerous concept. It is often defined

as a positive attitude, yet it is not the same thing as mutual respect. Rather, tolerance conceals an implicit set of power relations. It is a courtesy that a dominant or privileged group has the power to extend to, or withhold from, others. Waltzer (1997: 52), for example, writes: ‘toleration is always a relationship of inequality where the tolerated groups or individuals are cast in an inferior position. To tolerate someone else is an act of power; to be tolerated is an acceptance of weakness.’ The danger of everyday civil encounters therefore is that they obscure or leave untouched this question of who has the power to tolerate, and therefore wider issues of equality and mutuality (Weymss, 2006).

Moreover, some of my informants argued that encounters in contemporary public space are regulated by codes of so-called ‘political correctness’ to such an extent that they feel obliged to curb the public expression of their personal prejudices and negative feelings. Their actual attitudes are only allowed to leak out in ‘privatized’ spaces, such as at home or when part of a ‘closed’ group of friends. These are spaces where they know their opinions will be shared and validated, and, even if challenged, will have no wider public or personal consequences for them. In this way, anti-discrimination legislation regulates public civilities but not private moralities; while prejudice-reduction initiatives rarely address spaces like the home. These quotations capture the privatized nature of many prejudices:

R1: ... you can’t ask for black coffee you have to ask for coffee with no milk [edit].

R4: And baa baa black sheep you can’t say that now can you?

R1: It’s the Government bringing these laws in isn’t it?

R2: Well that’s going back to respect, the Government aren’t gaining respect because they’re changing things so much [edit].

R4: Gollywogs ... That’s not doing anybody harm is it? [edit].

R1: I think the Government personally have gone over the top, I think now the white person is sort of discriminated against a lot more than any ethnic groups. (West Midlands, focus group)

I don't think we'll change people's attitudes. I mean I know just from like doing my job in working for the Council, they've got a policy of you know fair discrimination [sic] ... I think it makes people in fear of it ... it makes people think more before they speak, be more careful about what they say about minority groups, so you know you can't sort of like, voice your opinions, so I think it makes people tread on egg shells. (Male, 20s, West Midlands)

You feel that whatever you say about colour, race, gender whatever, you say something wrong, you can get picked up and you can get sued, you know they'll call you something ... or someone takes it the wrong way and [you'll] end up having a fight ... because people say it's a free country, to say what you want, but it isn't ... like they [minority ethnic groups] could call us [white people] racist, but we can't call them, it's a one way kind of thing, and that just really irritates me ... [edit]. Yeah, it's renowned that you know they can you know get us arrested or whatever [for] being nasty to them, but it's never the [other] way around. They can assault us, but we can't assault them. (Woman, late teens, West Midlands)

Moreover, some informants who identified themselves as holding liberal values and of having a conscious desire to be non-prejudiced nonetheless described themselves as being fearful of contact with minority groups because of what Sennett (2003: 22) might term the 'anxiety of privilege'. They talked about being aware of, and uneasy about, their own economic and cultural positions of power, yet did not know how to show respect across the boundaries of inequality. Fearful of being condescending or 'getting it wrong' and causing offence, they eschew encounters with difference (an option in part facilitated by their privilege) and in doing so produce the very effects of which they are fearful, as this woman describes:

If you see someone in a wheelchair I do think oh there's someone in a wheelchair and you

know how people say you know all the bad things that happen to disabled people, like people talking to the person pushing them or shouting or whatever ... All this flashes through my mind and I think act normal, act normal ... My brain automatically goes onto things you shouldn't do and the things you are told are bad ... and I get paranoid that I'm going to do one of these things ... I can't act natural. (Woman, 20s, London)

In both situations – where a person holds prejudiced values and yet behaves in a polite way in public encounters with minority groups, and where a person holds liberal values and yet behaves in an implicitly disrespectful way towards others by avoiding encounters with difference – a clear gap is evident between individuals' values and practices in public space. If we are to produce meaningful contact between majority and minority groups which has the power to produce social change, this gap needs to be addressed. We need to find ways in which everyday practices of civility might transform prejudiced values and facilitate liberal values to be put into practice.

### III Space of interdependences and cultural destabilization

Writing in the aftermath of race disturbances which took place in three British cities (Oldham, Burnley and Bradford) in 2001, Ash Amin (2002) recognized that proximity on its own is not enough to bring about social transformation. Rather, he argued that we need to create spaces of interdependence in order to develop intercultural understanding. If, as Sara Ahmed (2000: 279–80) argues, 'collectives are formed through the very work that we need to do in order to get closer to others', then the question for geographers is what work needs to be done – and in which kinds of spaces – to generate this interdependence?

For Amin (2002: 959) this is best achieved in what he terms the 'micro-publics of everyday social contact and encounter' rather than engineered through larger-scale events like public festivals or policies framed in terms of



rights and obligations at the national scale. These 'micro-publics' include: sports or music clubs, drama/theatre groups, communal gardens, youth participation schemes and so on. They represent sites of purposeful organized group activity where people from different backgrounds are brought together in ways that provide them with the opportunity to break out of fixed patterns of interaction and learn new ways of being and relating (Amin, 2002). Leonie Sandercock (2003) shares Ash Amin's characterization of micro-publics as sites of not only cultural exchange, but also cultural destabilization and transformation. This analysis is extended further by Mica Nava (2006) who uses the term 'domestic cosmopolitanism' to signal that she understands cosmopolitanism to emerge from engagements with otherness, not just in the micro-publics of the city (which she defines somewhat differently from Amin to include more abstract sites such as the street and the shopping centre, as well as spaces organized around purposeful activity like the baby clinic, the gym, and the dance floor), but, also in the space of the home. Here, she argues: 'the intimate albeit mediated form of TV must also be included here insofar as, cumulatively, it generates in the familiar domesticscape of the living room an increasing deterritorialisation of the globe by normalizing difference in the spheres of music, fashion, even politics, although often against the message of individual programmes' (Nava, 2006: 49–50).

Rather than leaving to chance the emergence of openness to otherness, some writers have argued that the commercial hospitality industry (Bell, 2007) and also design (Rishbeth, 2001; Fincher, 2003; Fincher and Iveson, 2008) can play important potential parts in fostering integration and interaction between different groups. Bell (2007), for example, argues that hospitality should not merely be seen as an instrumental or economic exchange but might also offer broader possibilities for transforming urban public culture; while Fincher and Iveson

(2008) suggest that the creation of conviviality as a state of encounter should be an intent of planning. Here, they identify the characteristics of particular spaces where they believe this productive activity can be produced or facilitated. Libraries, they argue, are spaces of encounter that have a *redistributive function*. They offer free and – facilitated by design – equal access and a safe space for individuals and groups. The information resources and provision of areas to sit and read or drink coffee can enable users mutually to negotiate their common status as library users and to build social capital. Community centres in contrast are spaces which emphasize *recognition*. Social encounters in these spaces are relatively informal and can quickly become familiar or home-like through repeated visits. As such, these encounters are not completely incidental like meetings on the street, but neither are they as organized and purposeful as 'micro-publics' such as sports clubs and drama groups. They can also operate as therapeutic spaces because they provide the chance for individuals to show an interest in or support for the well-being of others (Conradson, 2003).

These diverse accounts of how we might begin to build what Ash Amin (2004: 43) has called a 'politics of connectivity' through specific spaces, however, need to be treated with a degree of caution for two reasons. First, intergroup contact – while potentially beneficial in reducing majority prejudice – can be very stressful for minority groups. They may be unsure of how they will be received (Crocker *et al.*, 1998), may not welcome the burden of representation (Bassi, 2003), and may even dread such encounters because their experiences of marginalization and discrimination taint their willingness to engage in relations with majority groups. For example, Deaf people's everyday experiences of discrimination in public space – as a cultural and linguistic minority – are so negative that they have developed separatist spaces of withdrawal from hearing society and are

often reluctant to engage with hearing people unless it is on their own terms (Valentine and Skelton, 2003; 2007), whereas other studies have identified *gendered* and *generational* divisions in terms of opportunities for, and types of, encounter between respondents from minority ethnic communities and the white majority population (Uitermark *et al.*, 2005; Valentine *et al.*, 2007). For example, different generations have their own normative values and practices because of the particular socio-economic and political contexts within which they are born (Vanderbeck, 2007), while the voices of women are often underrepresented in formal 'community' consultation processes and organizations. We need to think more carefully, therefore, about which types of encounters are sought, and by whom, and which are avoided, and by whom. The same contact may be read and experienced very differently both between, and within, majority and minority groups (cf. Bell *et al.*, 1994) and may have unrecognized negative outcomes for particular individuals. As such, we need to pay more attention to the *intersectionality* of multiple identities (not just to ethnicity), and particularly to consider which particular identifications these purposeful encounters with difference are approached through, and how these encounters are systematically embedded within intersecting grids of power (Valentine, 2007b).

Second, if a common ethics of care and mutual respect emerges from these particular kinds of purposeful, organized micro-public encounters – which I am not necessarily sure it always does – then how can this connectivity be sustained and scaled up in both space and time beyond these moments?

#### **IV Scaling up a politics of connectivity**

Ash Amin (2002) argues that 'micro-publics' are spaces that can transmit wider intercultural understanding and social transformation because they are sites of cultural destabilization. Taken at face value, this

expectation appears plausible. Research (Allport, 1954) on the causes and transmission of prejudice suggests that when an individual has a negative experience with a member of a minority group as part of routine everyday encounters this moment is often mobilized to produce and justify powerful negative generalizations about the whole population that the minority individual is seen to represent. We might expect, therefore, that positive encounters with individuals from different social groups in micro-publics such as the sports club, drama group or communal garden might also produce correspondingly powerful positive changes in attitudes towards minority populations in general.

However, the evidence of my research is that this is not the case. Positive encounters with individuals from minority groups do not necessarily change people's opinions about groups as a whole for the better with the same speed and permanence as negative encounters. In other words, in the context of negative encounters minority individuals are perceived to represent members of a wider social group, but in positive encounters minority individuals tend to be read only as individuals. In the following quotations, informants describe friendships and family relationships with individuals who are lesbian and gay, and who are of dual heritage, yet they then go on to articulate homophobic and racist comments, respectively, demonstrating the limits of encounters with difference:

I'm an open guy, I've had some gay friends and lesbians. I got on very well with them, and I find them funny. I find them, in the most part to be quite well educated as well, you know. They know how to party, I'm all for that. I just think there could be people out there that well, it's [social change] going ... just a wee bit too fast ... I mean when you see the [lesbian, gay and bisexual pride] rallies at Parliament Square and places like that. I mean I've been working in my van and I've been sitting parked up, and you see two guys ... and then they're really camp and they're trying to get their message across. They're going about it in completely the wrong way, because all they're

doing is disgusting people. When you have families and mothers and kiddies walking along the pavements, and they're camping it up and two guys kissing and ... they're going over the top, they're not going to get much of a sympathy vote there. (Male, 50s, London)

R1: I've got blacks in my family, my grandson's half baked. I'm not racist but they've let them all in, they're taking over the country.

R3: I think she's got a very good point.

R2: My son can't even get a flat [edit].

R1: There's nothing worse than when you're standing, especially in the street, and walk to the bottom and you walk from the bottom to the top and you haven't heard an English word spoken. (London, focus group)

These examples of the failure of individual contact to produce generalized respect for difference explain why there was no contradiction between Jim's story (quoted earlier) of exchanging everyday civilities with his neighbours who are asylum-seekers while cleaning his car, and his support for a right-wing, anti-immigration political party.

The reason that such individual everyday encounters do not necessarily change people's general prejudices is because they do not destabilize white majority community-based narratives of economic and/or cultural victimhood. It is these narratives (which have a geographical dimension, differing in their focus in different places according to specific local socio-economic contexts) which enable people to justify their prejudice – and indeed, therefore, not to recognize their own attitudes as constituting prejudice, because they believe their views to be predicated on well-founded rationales (Valentine, 2007a). This informant explains when prejudice is not prejudice but fair comment:

Obviously there's prejudice in the world that we live in. [It's a] prejudice society. But obviously prejudice is a logical response to sort of phenomenon and so therefore if it can be explained, if you have a certain doubt or a certain feeling about something then if, if it can

be explained you know logically then therefore then it isn't prejudice. (Male, 40s, London)

The certainty in respondents' justifications of their prejudices makes them hard to challenge, especially where groups feel they have little ability to control events and that they are being treated unfairly. I would suggest, therefore, that more emphasis needs to be placed not just on immediate contact experiences, but on how people's accrued histories of social experiences and material circumstances may also contribute to their feelings about urban encounters from both sides (ie, from the perspective of participants from both majority and minority groups). In particular, how do 'real' and 'imagined' feelings of injustice (here, I refer to imagined injustices in the sense that some identified threats are symbolic or future orientated) inhibit an emotional bridge being made between people's attitudes to particular individuals and their attitudes to wider social groups?

Encounters never take place in a space free from history, material conditions, and power. The danger is that contemporary discourses about cosmopolitanism and new urban citizenship, by celebrating the potential of everyday encounters to produce social transformations, potentially allow the knotty issue of inequalities to slip out of the debate. Yet the informants who participated in my research who had the most cosmopolitan and non-prejudiced attitudes were those who considered their own lives to be full of opportunity and who were most optimistic about their own futures. I argue, therefore, that we need to scale back up from recent preoccupations with contemporary manifestations of the 'contact hypothesis' to acknowledge the relationships between individuals' prejudices and the processes through which communities become antagonized and defensive in, first, the competition for scarce resources, and, second, in the debate about conflicting rights. Here, I use resources to refer not just to work, housing, benefits and

so on, but also to the provision of financial and legal support for cultural practices and different ways of living. I use rights to refer not only to the rights of groups to social and political equality and to live free of discrimination, but also to the rights of individuals, for example, to freedom of speech. Such an approach also requires the need for researchers to reflect on the research tools that might provide the most effective ways of exploring and understanding the transmission of values and practices. This might include, for example, employing methodological techniques that are not commonly used in researching geographies of encounter, such as life histories, biographical interviews or intergenerational studies.

### **V Conclusion: difference matters**

In this lecture I have sought to reflect on progress in human geography in relation to the question of how we might live with difference. In doing so, I have traced emerging geographies of encounter, making connections with a longer tradition of work in psychology on prejudice.

On the one hand, the positive focus on social transformation that characterizes much of this writing about cosmopolitanism and new urban citizenship provides a welcome antidote to a previous emphasis on cities as sites of social exclusion and conflict. On the other hand, however, I remain wary about being too quick to celebrate everyday encounters and their power to achieve cultural destabilization and social transformation.

Specifically, the evidence of my research is that proximity does not equate with meaningful contact. While taken-for-granted normative codes of behaviour in public space mean that people do commonly behave in courteous and sometimes kind ways towards others, this is not the same as having respect for difference. Indeed, there is often an uncomfortable gap between some people's professed liberal values and their actual practices, and *vice versa* those who hold prejudiced views can none the less willingly

exchange public civilities with individuals from the minority groups despite their politics. Rather, everyday convivial encounters often mark instead a culture of tolerance which leaves the issue of our multiple and intersecting identities (including generational differences) – specifically, the identifications through which these encounters are approached and the differential capacity of particular voices to participate – unaddressed, as well as the question of who has the power to tolerate.

Even if a respect for difference can be produced from particular kinds of purposeful, organized micro-public encounters (ie, if the contact is meaningful), it still leaves the question of how this can be scaled up beyond the moment given that white majority prejudices appear to be rooted in narratives of economic and/or cultural victimhood, which themselves are a response to a risk society, in which old securities and certainties are continually being eroded by unprecedented socio-economic change (Beck, 1997).<sup>2</sup>

As such, we need an urban politics that addresses inequalities (real and perceived) as well as diversity, and recognizes the need to fuse what are often seen as separate debates about prejudice and respect with questions of social-economic inequalities and power. Here, the respondents' resentment towards what they dubbed 'political correctness' suggests that there is a general lack of understanding of diversity, difference and rights, as well as misunderstandings about resource allocations which have important implications for the work of equality bodies. In particular, there is a need to address issues about the perceived fairness of resource distribution between majority and minority populations. Policies to develop meaningful contact also need to build the capacity to participate of those who are commonly marginalized within purposeful organized groups.

While this paper has focused on white majority attitudes towards a range of minority groups, thus extending previous

studies which have concentrated on relations between white majority and minority ethnic groups, it nonetheless did not have the scope to explore prejudices and bad relations within, and between, minority groups themselves. Yet these are clearly neglected tensions (at a range of scales) that are particularly worthy of attention given competing values and rights claims that are beginning to emerge in contemporary equality debates (Valentine, 2006): to give just one example, between faith-based communities and lesbians and gay men (eg, Crilly, 2007).<sup>3</sup> In sum, this paper reiterates calls by Philo (2000) and others for a rematerialization and re-socialization of human geography: a return to focusing on sociospatial inequalities and the insecurities they breed, and to trying to understand the complex and intersecting ways in which power operates.

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which have directly or indirectly shaped my thinking about prejudice, meaningful contact and intersectionality.

#### Notes

1. Three ellipsis dots are used to indicate minor edits of a few words. Where [edit] is used this is to indicate that a more significant chunk of text has been edited out.
2. It also leaves the issue of whether the home – as a space where values are contested and reworked between intra-familial generations – might also be a potentially important site of social transformation.
3. These competing values and rights-based claims are currently the subject of an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded study being conducted by Gill Valentine, Robert Vanderbeck and Kevin Ward at University of Leeds.

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